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CRAFTING IRON AND OTHER STORIES

by

Bryana Michelle Fern

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School  
and the Department of English  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SOUTHERN**  
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## ABSTRACT

### CRAFTING IRON AND OTHER STORIES

by Bryana Michelle Fern

December 2016

The stories that follow in this collection attempt to reveal studies in characters facing loneliness, and to do so by following Alice Munro’s conception of plot—the notion that characters shape the plot according to their position in the various “rooms” of the story. Feelings of loneliness look different for everyone, and necessitate many different methods of filling that hole. In these stories, many variations of loneliness are explored. A Vietnam veteran struggles to find healing through the adoption of his young godson, whose father was his best friend in the war; a lady in Surrey, England, takes a trip in magical realism when her childhood woodland sprite appears and accuses her of abandonment; and a young lady attempts to find her identity in a local Renaissance festival with an artisan blacksmith. A college girl helps a socially awkward, intellectually brilliant roommate and learns the instinct for and gratitude of loyalty, and a woman from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, questions her sense of belonging and her childhood troubles when she takes her girlfriend to see her hometown. In Florida, a therapist in Tampa finds herself falling for her client, a musical genius, and abandons her principles for the daring possibility of happiness, while, finally, a horseback riding instructor in Ocala has old wounds of chronic depression reopened by the visit of her troubled sister and the guilt-ridden attempt to help her.

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Finally, I would like to thank my peers in the Center for Writers. Their help inside and outside of workshop, their experiences with writing, and their instruction in the constant art of publishing, not to mention their friendship and personal encouragement, have kept me hopeful and determined.

## DEDICATION

To my fellow writers who encouraged me the most—Andrew Gretes, Todd Gray, Joe Holt, Nick Rupert, and Tom Holmes—this one's for you.

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## INTRODUCTION

“That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.”

This line of F. Scott Fitzgerald's to Sheilah Graham was something I had not read until recently, yet it was a concept I felt I had always understood. As I reflected on my favorite novels and characters, I realized exactly why I had attached myself to them: that it was for this very reason of hesitant association, which made me feel like I belonged somewhere. Fitzgerald suggests what I believe is the most important thing to remember about writing fiction: we have a job as writers to tap into the thing that makes characters real people, meaning that they are not only believable, but that they embody the very essence of humanity that allows so many different readers to identify with them. No matter the genre or the literary movement, this requirement is crucial. Character makes the story. Characters create the beauty of literature that Fitzgerald teaches. Broad and simple though the job of creating characters may sound, it is one that requires the most specific attention to detail. It is a job that never ends, and one at which we often fail.

A contemporary fiction writer who I believe does this sort of character study very well is Alice Munro. My first real experience with her was in the Readings in Fiction course with Steve Barthelme, where we read her collection, *Friend of My Youth*. I instantly connected with her stories because I liked the way she balanced small, simple environments with the complexity of the female psyche. Munro focuses more on characterization than on plot, on how the concept of plot is a house with many rooms that you wander through. Sometimes you sit down in one room for a while, and then maybe you go upstairs or outside—it doesn't matter when or where you go. It's not about the

linearity, but about the way the character's needs and development shape the plot. I realized that this was a way of storytelling I could connect with, a philosophy of narrative that fit the way I thought about the importance of character. Lydia Davis also does this well in "The Seals," a story where the narrator speaks mainly through reflective exposition about the relationship with her sister and her family. She switches between past tense and present progressive, with hardly any lines of dialogue, yet with a voice that is incredibly clear and believable. This story was in *Best American Short Stories*, and it stood out as one of the most influential for me in that 2015 edition because it showed such depth of interiority, and because it let the narrator's reflections steer the story instead of the plot. In talking about the story, Lydia Davis said that it was originally much shorter, but that she revised it and "let it grow quite freely" (361). When she did that, she discovered that other characters entered the story without her realization, and that it took its own new form. "It is most moving to me, as a writer," she says, "when a piece of writing goes in its own direction, of its own volition" (361). I have experienced moments like this, on both the sentence level and the overall workings of a story in general, when the writing seems to finish itself. I would not go so far as to say that the story takes on a mind of its own when this happens, but rather that there is an element of surrender on my part when the characters have become so fully realized that I do not have to work as hard to complete their thoughts.

If a story is focused on an aspect of character study, it becomes more personal to me—it takes off the pressure of trying to think about what's going to happen in the plot, and instead lets me think about what needs to change about the character, whether it be a way of thinking, a realization of something in the past, or an interaction with someone

that brings out something new. During the past two years, I began to put more of myself into my stories, snippets of memories from my own childhood, and this alone was more rewarding than anything because it allowed me to explore elements of myself that I never realized were subconsciously important. There are aspects of my own character in every story I write, whether I am transposing those aspects onto my main character, my narrator, or even a minor character. It's a way that allows me to put a part of myself on the page. Munro herself discusses this tendency in an interview from her 2013 Nobel Lecture:

As I got older the stories would be more and more about myself, as a heroine in some situation or other, and it didn't bother me that the stories were not going to be published to the world immediately, and I don't know if I even thought about other people knowing them or reading them. It was about the story itself, generally a very satisfying story from my point of view. (1)

Munro shows here that her characters stem from a part of herself, from an aspect of her own personality she wants to play out, and because that is her focus, she is not overly concerned about whether people end up reading the work or not. The act of putting herself into her stories in the beginning was solely a way of exploring herself, of discovering what sort of people she finds interesting to write. She explores the female psyche in a way that impressed me when I first read her work, because her heroines are quite normal and relatable—something that gives her a springboard to dive even deeper inside their minds. When asked how she turns a story around that she's not satisfied with, she brought it back to the characters:

You have characters that you haven't given a chance, and you have to think about them or do something quite different with them. In my earlier days I was prone to a lot of flowery prose, and I gradually learned to take a lot of that out. So you just go on thinking about it and finding out more and more what the story was about, which you thought you understood in the beginning, but you actually had a lot more to learn. (2)

For a long time, I also had to question the same flowery prose that Munro describes. I initially tried to fix my characters by adding more narrative, not realizing that the harder I tried to explain and describe, the less I ended up actually saying. While I have always had a proclivity for high language and extensive phrases—and was often praised for it in my undergraduate program—the challenge became the practice of abandoning this tendency for something greater. I needed to retrain myself, to reevaluate everything I had learned about shaping language effectively. This is the task of every writer: to experiment with the sounds and orders of words that do the most work on the page. I remember Steve Barthelme's words to me after my very first workshop. He said that, while my writing on the sentence level did a lot of work and would serve me well in the academic arenas, I needed to strive for *more* in my creative work. Do better by trying less. This type of retraining was very diligent and purposed; I needed to reread my drafts multiple times—beyond the normal amount of review that should go into every draft. I began using word searches to see how many times I used a term; I took each sentence word by word and went through the filtering procedure of whether or not that word was essential to the sentence. Adjectives had to be removed, dialogue had to be trimmed, and unnecessary filler words had to be factored out of the phrases. By allowing my characters to be more

direct, I empowered them to do more work on the page—to get their point across without having to seem like they were trying so hard to find the right words. Ultimately then, this method of reevaluating the way I shaped my characters allowed me to make my stories stronger.

This practice led to another that became one of the most important lessons I learned: I needed to cut things that were not only unnecessary, but that were also unoriginal. My stories tended to be ones that had already been told, and my characters those who had already been portrayed. I needed to do something to make them different, to twist expectations and outcomes. I may have included aspects of myself in my stories, but that was only the first step. When a reader recognizes a part of herself in a character, and it's easy to anticipate what that character feels and thinks, it's a good opportunity for the writer to do something new, to flip the tables somehow and make that character completely unpredictable but no less relatable. Madison Bell says in the Introduction of *Narrative Design: a writer's guide to structure* that the middle of a story is “where mediocrity flourishes” (7). This idea is largely true—we often have the beginning and the end of a story figured out, but we don't know how to get the character from where they are to where they need to be. And the way we end up getting them there is the same way other writers have already gotten their characters to the same place. This observation helps determine that we are usually writing the wrong type of story. Bell goes on to say that it is more productive in workshop “when the talk begins to shift from flaws in realizing the story's apparent intention to the idea that the intention itself ought to have been different—i.e., that the writer should have written some different *kind* of story” (6). For my own stories, I realized that when I found myself overwriting, it was usually

because I was trying to force a scene that did not need to be there in the first place, or trying too hard to justify my characters if they were doing something predictable. The effort to stop overwriting was still largely a stylistic one, but it was aided once I began analyzing what kind of story I really needed to tell, instead of the kind of story I was attempting to force. Once I had a better grasp of who the characters were, and what they were doing, the phrasing became more organic and authentic on its own. I did not have to reinvent the wheel, but simply reimagine it.

Tim O'Brien was always an important writer for me because when I was reading "The Things They Carried," it was during the same time in high school when I was taking a history course about the Vietnam War and hearing stories from veteran after veteran who came to speak to our class. O'Brien's theory of happening truth versus story truth is interesting because he suggests that an emotional truth can sometimes be more powerful than actual fact. Even though I could never replicate any sort of happening truth of the war, I had established my own sort of story truth by sharing the emotional experience of reliving these veterans' memories in the classroom environment. And I could then replicate that emotion onto the page, adapting it to characters of my own. The story where I attempted this in particular was in "Learning Chess," in which a veteran named Andrew takes custody of his godson, and has to cope with raising a boy and dealing with the memories of serving with the boy's father in Vietnam. This story is an example, also, of how I completely started over in the process of revision. The final draft looks nothing like the original one, and it took an entire re-envisioning to get it closer to where it needed to be. I realized, as Bell describes, that I was trying to tell the wrong kind of story. The plot was far too central in the original draft, and I had to understand the

character better instead. Andrew was lonely and tired, and he tried too hard to control how his godson was influenced. He was over-protective and overcritical. That much I understood. That was where I identified. That was what I needed to use to shape the story, instead of the action of the plot. While it didn't fit my theme that I came to develop, of strong female characters, I believe it still fit in a different way because it showed the complete absence of female characters. Andrew never had a wife, and Benjamin had lost his mother, and how they learned to cope with that by relying on each other became more important to me than if I'd included a female presence. While I couldn't put a part of myself into any female characters, as Alice Munro describes herself doing, I could still insert aspects of my personality in Andrew. And in this story, as in the others that follow the theme of loneliness, I worked more on the sentence level to show how loneliness looked for each of these different characters instead of coming out and saying how lonely and unhappy they were. The way the theme grew was through the idea of looking at how differently loneliness manifests itself in people, how differently it forces people to compensate for that emptiness, how differently they come to justify their coping mechanisms, their desperate attempts at normalcy.

A different example of writing about what I know is the story where I combined Shakespeare and pastoral Britain in "A Midspring Night's Dream," an obvious pun of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I created a scenario of Nicole, a lonely young woman living in Shere, Surrey, who is in the flux of dealing with failed relationships and the death of her father. Nicole used to share her father's love of poetry and plays, but when he dies, she locks all the books away and shortly thereafter comes across a young girl in the woods. The girl, who calls herself Marigold, tells Nicole that she is her sprite, the

childhood friend she once had. In a tone of magical realism, I tried to show Marigold as the embodiment of everything Nicole had once experienced as a child and with her father, of everything she loved but had forced herself to give up in an act of self-preservation. She craved the simplicity of her childhood, the magic of it. I believe that we as adults still miss the way we used to see the world when we were younger. I believe we still long for the fantastic, no matter how old we get, and I recognized and latched onto the part of Nicole who tried to convince herself that shutting out childhood interests would help her survive as an adult.

The story “Those Who Wander” encapsulates this idea even more fully when a young college girl, Margaret, goes to a local Renaissance festival. She used to go every year with her father, but when he died, she found it difficult to return. On this, her first year back, she tries her hardest to embody the spirit of fun and improvisation that makes the festival so magical. She meets a young artisan who helps his father in their blacksmith business, and they bond over their mutual love of everything fantasy. Even though they realize that everything in the festival is just for that one day, an essence of permanence still exists and offers comfort from the real world. For this story in particular, I used many personal experiences from Renaissance Festivals and Celtic Highland Games, and from my own connections to the atmosphere at those special events where people really can pretend they have stepped into another world for a day.

Another aspect of loneliness I explored was that of the college-age girl in general, one who struggles to fit in, is naturally quiet, but who is extremely loyal and encouraging once she has made one or two close friends. In the story “A Study in Friendship,” a piece I worked on revising during the last year and which was published in USM *Product's* 29<sup>th</sup>

issue, I explore the relationship of three very different girls who come together in college. The main character, Jane, is someone who tends to go along with the flow, yet who still finds herself lonely. Her roommate, Samantha, is socially awkward, yet is a brilliant mind. And Samantha's friend, McKay, is one who operates as the middle ground between the two girls, and who offers a sense of stability. Jane begins to grow close to Samantha and becomes extremely loyal to her, defending her in social situations and relying on her companionship. Sometimes it is the people who we never expect to become close with who come into our lives and make the most difference. Loyalty is a trait I have always admired in characters, and something I look for in others. I wanted to show in this story how naturally it can be developed and how important it is to the people on the receiving end:

Sometimes Samantha was silent for days and I never bothered her; other times she practically begged me to come to the chemistry lab so she could show me a breakthrough she had made. I always pretended to be annoyed, but I was secretly touched that she considered my opinion valid when she obviously didn't need it, and I got the impression that she was just as secretly pleased that someone actually cared to spend time with her and show interest in what she was doing.

Jane and Sam found that they filled each other's loneliness in ways they had never anticipated they would when they first met. Friendship can be incredibly powerful when it is discovered in unexpected places. As Alice Munro shows in her work, however, loyalty can be shown to more than just people. Often times, loyalty to a home or to a physical place can be just as potent.

In “Amish Country,” I created a narrator who struggles with her secluded upbringing in her hometown in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, coupled with her secret desire to live life as simply as people in the Amish community, to hold a sense of family as deeply as they do. My family on both sides is from Lancaster County, so I wanted to use my knowledge of the area to show something others don't often see. Abby wants to take her girlfriend, Miley, to Lancaster, to show her where she grew up, but when she finally does and Miley is immediately fascinated, she realizes she never really knew what kind of reaction she wanted from Miley to begin with, or what she wanted to prove. This struggle of not knowing what you want others to say about your past when you open up to them is something that is very tangible to me. There are so many risks you take when you confide in someone. This story is also an example of a moment where I realized a pattern in my writing of which I had been previously unaware. “Amish Country” is the most recent work I have completed, and in compiling it with the others in this collection, I noticed a developing subtheme of absent father figures and poor parental relations in general. Abby tries to justify her flat refusal to bring Miley to her home: “I didn’t want to take her to my family because I considered them under quarantine. I didn’t want her to get drawn into that deception and compromise until even she turned into one of us.” Family can contribute to a person’s sense of loneliness and isolation more than any other social factor. Everything about our upbringing, both the positive and the detrimental circumstances, stays with us into our adult lives and shapes the way we see ourselves. If there are major holes in that upbringing, major areas of absence, then those holes also transfer until we can find ways to fill them, to replace what we’ve lost or what we never had to begin with.

For one of my favorite stories, “Magnum Mysterium,” I took my experience with music knowledge and counseling sessions, two seemingly unrelated topics, and combined them in what to me is a familiar setting of downtown Tampa. Rachel is a young therapist who struggles with her infatuation with a client named Jim. Jim is the conductor for the Tampa Orchestra, and is a Gatsby-type figure—he is very confident in his ability to attract attention and to forge his own way in life. He’s also extremely passionate about his music, which is something Rachel finds attractive. With Rachel, I wanted to explore the emotional tension of doing something you know is wrong and immoral. Rachel understands her actions: “Looking back now, I realized I’d known the entire time, ever since that first meeting. I’d seen the temptation, and I’d claimed it. I’d known that I was jumping off a cliff, and that every session that followed would be one of policy violations, of transgressions we both knew we would keep secret.” She knows her extreme loneliness is no excuse to obsess over Jim and to confide in him—even if he returns her favor. I enjoyed placing them in Tampa for this story because I was also able to use my experience with the Tampa Theatre and of the University of Tampa. One of my favorite moments in the story is the late night on the Hillsborough River, when the air is chilly and there is a mist that makes the grass wet, and they can see the Moorish spires of the University through the haze. It seemed to reflect the uncertainty of their future, the way that Rachel could see an outline of a possibility of being with Jim yet could not quite bring herself to go through with it. I found her interesting in the way she tried to assuage her guilt by justifying it and acknowledging it head on. They were both intelligent characters, and they knew full well what they were playing at. I wanted to see what they

would do when they realized they couldn't take it any farther. At the end of the story, Rachel still considers her actions:

I don't know if he ever went back to Brandon. He never saw me again after that night. He remained the director of the Tampa Orchestra for nearly ten years. I never expected him to stay in one place for so long. Every now and then I'd go to a concert and watch him from the back, and let myself think about the time I'd almost ruined everything, and about how badly I still wish I had. More than anything, I think about that night.

This ending also makes "Magnum Mysterium" an example of a story in which I did not know the resolution when I began writing. For some works, I understand the ending before I know how to open the first scene. I see a clear resolution for the characters, and the challenge then becomes figuring out where to get them started. With this story, however, while I had some ideas about possible endings, I felt that I really needed to understand Rachel in order to see what would end up occurring. Like Alice Munro's example of the house, I simply let her and Jim wander around Tampa for a while until they couldn't avoid the situation any longer. This story is also an example of one I enjoyed writing so much that I could go back and pick up a thread of an alternate ending I had imagined at one point, of a plot twist I could easily envision Rachel and Jim carrying out, and re-envision the story entirely. While I am content with the present version, these two characters are so embodied to me that I feel I could revisit them at any time if I wanted, and give them that second chance that Rachel still thinks about at the end, reframe the plot so that there is no room or time for hesitation between them.

The last piece in this collection is one that I feel is the most successful overall in that it was accepted for publication by *Sou'wester*. The reason it was successful, though, is because it is one of the most personal pieces I've ever completed, and so, one of the most difficult and rewarding to craft. I combined two of my most intimate sources of knowledge for the project in the form of experience with horses and equestrian sport, and living with hereditary chronic depression and struggles with self-harm. By reflecting on these things in myself, I hoped to show readers who are just as debilitated by their depression that their isolation does not mean they are invisible. Once again set in Florida, this time in Ocala, I still made the setting work with the characters. Ocala is beautiful in that it is one of the only places in Florida where you will find actual rolling hills and beautifully shaped oaks. It is also horse country, second only to Lexington, Kentucky, so it was practical to use for that reason. The unnamed narrator's younger sister, Anna, who is struggling with ulcerative colitis and a time of depression herself, comes to Ocala to visit. Anna doesn't know that her older sister has continued her addiction with self-harm, and she's hurt by the distance that's grown between them. The narrator finds solace in being alone in riding and giving lessons. She has tried to keep Anna from following her example, from becoming what she is. Part of the reason, though, is that she knows Anna will never appreciate the attraction found in chronic depression. In nearly every way, this story is a picture of me and my own younger sister. The heart of this story is the relationship between a person and her mental instabilities, in the power and control it gives. It builds up like a haystack:

If you could see how the pieces were being added, you would have stopped them.  
But you didn't know what you were doing. How could you? So, one day you

wake up with a weight you can no longer lift, a weight to which you've become accustomed. A weight of which you've become rather fond. If you could burn the whole stack—you wouldn't. Because it's the one thing that's always been there. While feelings of isolation and loneliness do not necessitate invisibility, there is still an aspect of identity tied up in those feelings, an identity that becomes less and less shameful the more it lives with you. "Crafting Iron" is a story that represents a problem that cannot be immediately solved, and a coping process that could very well take a lifetime to discover, as I have personally come to learn.

In all these stories, and more not included, I have explored what it means to connect with someone on a deeply personal level, and what it looks like in particular for those who cannot do it easily. I have shown that character is the most important aspect of a story, and I have learned that overthinking the characters renders them powerless on the page. It is my hope that within my eclectic range of characters, there is a commonality of buried sense of purpose and secret strivings, of a desire to be better than your past, and a promise that each journey requires its own timing and direction, as well as its own mistakes and lessons. Loneliness is very real, and it looks different for everyone—it requires different coping mechanisms and methods of association. It's about a relationship with a part of yourself. It is an individual complex that offers an individual identity for those who live with it. If we can appreciate the universality of individualism, of how loneliness expresses itself, and if we can identify with characters, then it means we can realize how much purpose we have after all. We can, in fact, realize that we belong.

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## LEARNING CHESS

Benjamin was a small boy, even for a ten year old. He pretended he wasn't. He stood tall and straight when he was angry, and had a way of flaring his nostrils that made his sharp cheekbones and chin angle even more. The dark messy hair didn't help. It parted naturally on the side and waved over his head like a hat that was too big for him. His eyes were what really got me, though. Even when he was a toddler, he would stare at me with those large round eyes, as dark as his hair, and look around him as if he was taking everything in and storing it away for future use. I never had to say much to him when he was little—he looked at me and I could see the understanding, the nonverbal “copy that.” And I was never able to lie to Benjamin. Whatever question he asked—and he asked many, random ones at random times—I found myself answering as honestly as his father would have. Perhaps more, honestly.

Benjamin's parents, two of my closest friends, had been killed nearly a month ago. A bank shooting, a late, sunny afternoon. I thought I had known FUBAR in 'Nam. I, as Benjamin's godfather, had taken custody of him and begun the adjustment process that seemed to affect me more than it did him. Yes, I had been a part of his life since he was born. I was “Uncle Andrew,” the one who was at his house all the time, who slipped him a brownie from the kitchen before dinner, who saved him from being discovered by his father when he was out in the hallway at night, trying to sneak back to bed while the adults were up talking. I was the one who, when watching him while his parents were out, made grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner instead of vegetable lasagna. And I was never sure who I surprised more—him or me. I was a police chief, after all, not a kindergarten teacher.

I watched him now, sitting on the leather couch in the study, bent over his homework on the coffee table. I had put him back in school this week and I was glad to see it was helping him to have his normal schedule back, to keep him busy and distracted. He was working on a multiplication worksheet now, which was more enjoyable to him than any other kid in his class he had said. He noticed me enter the room, but he kept his head down, his eyes and his pencil each flying over the paper at different speeds. I smiled and set down a tray of snacks. Milk and graham crackers, his favorite. I turned on the lamp beside the couch. He hadn't noticed the fading light outside the tall windows, but I hated the short winter days. He took a cracker without looking up from his paper while I put another log in the fireplace, poking it until it took in the embers.

“Andrew, did you quit the police force to take care of me?”

“No, not just to take care of you.” I stood and brushed off my pants, smiling. “I'd been doing it for over twenty years. And that was even after the war. I decided it was time to retire. I think I'm old enough. I deserve it.”

“Where did you and Dad fight in the war again? The fucking place?”

I tripped on the corner of the couch and looked down my nose at him. “No,” I said. “Don't ever call it that.”

Benjamin chewed on a cracker. “But that's what you and Dad called it. I heard you.”

“You shouldn't have heard anything because you shouldn't have been eavesdropping. You've been told before that's rude. And besides, the country was called South Vietnam.”

“That's right.” Benjamin nodded. “I'm sorry for eavesdropping.”

“I know. It’s all right.”

“I’ll try and be better.”

I nodded, not wanting to go any further with it. I took the tray from the table and went to the kitchen to start preparing dinner. I stopped at the door.

“By the way, Benjamin,” I said. “You’re going to have a visitor tomorrow after school.”

“Jeremy?”

“How did you know that?”

His head ducked. “I heard you on the phone.”

#

Jeremy Kent was a young officer whom I’d been assigned to mentor a few years ago. He had recently returned from Desert Storm and, like me, his military service was all too present in his police work. He was tall, with dark brown hair that was beginning to grow out of its buzz cut, and eyes that reminded me of Benjamin’s with their intensity, but with a light blue stare instead. He had a way of grimacing almost, and wrinkling his brow when he was told something he didn’t agree with, or saw something that disgusted him. He shared my low tolerance for stupidity.

He was also more psychologically sound than many of the new recruits, despite his war past. He had a stubbornness to get to the bottom of everything, especially things he wasn’t supposed to be digging in, and he had a way of noticing real quick when something didn’t smell right. He had the ability to see the best in people, to believe that the good of the system would prevail in the end. It was an ability I’d lost a long time ago.

Still, he looked up to me and he made it a point to come out to my place whenever he could now that I'd retired. He wanted to come over tonight mainly to check on Benjamin. He had been there as part of the first response team. I'll never forget coming up on that scene after I'd received the call and broken every speeding limit in town to get to the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Elliot. The four people I cared about most were all there together—two lying on the asphalt under white tarps, and two sitting on the sidewalk, heads bent low. Jeremy had put a wool blanket around Benjamin's shoulders and was making him drink some water. I'd expected to see Benjamin reduced to a puddle of tears, but he was actually talking with Jeremy despite his trembling. He was looking at Jeremy the same way he often looked at me, and I knew he was searching the man. Jeremy was resting his arms over his knees, but his posture was indicative of the same manner I'd seen him use to question witnesses on many cases.

I realized in that moment that my two students had formed a connection that I couldn't seem to make with either. Benjamin would always associate Jeremy now with that event. Jeremy would be the one who had made that initial offer of strength and authority that Benjamin needed. He would be the one to receive the respect and admiration over the next few months. I just didn't realize how much at the time. I was the one who was the closest thing Benjamin had left to a family. I never suspected that he would latch onto anyone other than me.

But I didn't fully understand when I opened the door for Jeremy that afternoon.

Benjamin came dashing up the hall behind me, then stopped, peering around my leg. He stepped out when Jeremy kneeled down and held a hand to him. He returned the

smile and took the cop's hand, shaking it. I led them both into the study and they were soon engaged in conversation.

"You like this stuff?" Jeremy was looking at Benjamin's math homework. "I wasn't so good at math. History was more my speed. No? You don't like history?"

"Very analytical, this one," I said.

Benjamin smirked as he took a cookie from the tray I'd brought. He handed one to Jeremy.

"What, Andrew doesn't get one?" Jeremy asked.

"No, it's fine," I said as Benjamin blushed. "I snuck one just now in the kitchen."

I watched them sitting together, Benjamin closer to Jeremy than he ever sat with me, both looking so alike in their jackets and pants. Benjamin hadn't changed out of his school uniform today like he usually did.

"How have you been doing since the funeral? I know that's probably not a question you want me to ask."

Benjamin stared at the rug for a moment. "I just don't understand."

"There are a lot of things that don't make any sense. That doesn't mean you should try and figure it out. It's not as easy as a math problem."

"No solution."

"Exactly." Jeremy flipped the cracker in his hand and pointed it in Benjamin's face. It touched his nose and the boy laughed in spite of himself.

"You remember what I told you. Things are going to be okay. Andrew's going to take care of you."

"Are you leaving?"

I found then that I had somehow slipped the emotion from my face the way I used to. I had fallen into parade rest, hands behind my back, eyes blank. Couldn't remember the last time I'd done that. I'd forgotten how easy it was.

"I'll be here if you need me," Jeremy said. "But Andrew is your family. He knows how to take care of you. He and I were both in wars, did you know that? Yeah, we've seen a lot of crazy sh—stuff. And that was before I joined the police force and met him."

"He trained you, right?"

"He tried." Jeremy laughed and glanced at me while I closed my eyes. "He worked me hard, but you know what? He always had my back. Took good care of me."

"All right, all right," I said. "That's enough. You sure you won't stay for dinner?"

"No, boss, but thanks. The missus knows I'm off duty tonight, so I have to get my tail home. She's cooking." He pulled a face behind his back and Benjamin laughed.

We shook hands and he told me he'd call me soon. When he held his hand out to Benjamin again, the boy took it and then wrapped his arms around him. He seemed surprised by the hug, but he smiled and patted Benjamin's shoulder.

My hands folded behind my back.

#

Benjamin had been struggling with nightmares for the past week and a half. I'd lived alone in this house nearly all my life. It had been in the family for a few generations and I got the letter while I was still overseas that my old man had died, found dead in his hotel suite on Wall Street with the .45 still in his hand. The life of a stock broker. Mother had left us long ago, back when I'd been about Benjamin's age. I didn't expect to see her

come knocking. So, the house was mine and with it, all the wonderful childhood memories.

Mark Fellers, Benjamin's father, was an old friend of mine from ROTC and after Nam, he came over from time to time. We'd drink mostly, talk about the war, as we continued to do even when he married Catherine and had Benjamin just as the two of them were nearing forty. And I, with all my familial issues, had consented to be Benjamin's godfather. Because Mark had asked me. And because when I held Benjamin in that waiting room, I couldn't imagine anyone else looking after him if something was to happen. He had been two months premature, so he was tiny even then.

So when the screams woke me now, I thought I knew what to do. I knew nightmares. Waking from them was worse than having them. Once awake, the thoughts linger, the visions keep flashing. And your body tells you it was real in your racing heart, slick skin, and swollen eyes that can only come from some real and tangible thread of memory.

Best to keep him asleep. Best to let the body relax the mind, push away the thoughts so that when he woke it might only be a dream. Instead of a nightmare.

Would this become a weekly occurrence? A nightly routine? I had seen men die, good men, friends. I had seen the nightmares take all of us, from the most experienced down to the drafted FNG who was seventeen and just out of high school. I saw their faces and imagined them a few years younger. Benjamin wasn't in a war. He should never have seen what he did. How was I supposed to bring him back from something that I knew had no return.

Because then, there were my nightmares on top of his.

It was usually the same scene. Mark and I on watch, sitting back to back in the dark with our M-16s across our knees. Lately, though, Benjamin was sneaking in. He'd come and sit by me in his scarlet pajamas and ask what I and his dad were doing. I'd try to tell him and then a grenade would explode. Or the bush would light up with rifle fire. Or I would lock eyes with a gook and raise my barrel too late and Benjamin would fall into my lap, eyes open, leaking hole between his eyes. Sometimes I could feel Mark sliding away from my back and then his head would be there too, by my leg. When I woke, I always had to sit up and pat the bed around me in the dark, feeling to make sure they weren't there. I usually spent the rest of the night sitting against the headboard unless I could force myself to go downstairs. That's where Benjamin would find me, like he used to.

Tonight, he set up the checkerboard while I made the hot chocolate. We sat in silence in front of the fire, and I watched for his eyes to grow sleepy.

"Watch yourself. That wasn't a good move." I jumped three of his red pieces and set them in my pile.

"I know. I'm not playing the pieces. I'm playing you."

"Very good. Someday, we'll move on to chess. I think you'll like it. Your dad and I used to play when we were overseas. We collected little objects to use as the pieces and had a board drawn on the back of a map."

"Really? What did you use for a knight? That's one of the only pieces I know. It's my favorite."

I smiled. “We used two little wooden horses, actually. Tiny carvings. Your dad bought them in one of the villages we passed through. One for you and one for your mom.”

“I never got anything like that!”

“No.” I shook my head. “He lost them. Lost the whole chess set. His gear got wet and the mold chewed a hole in the corner. We had to start all over.”

Benjamin fiddled with one of the black pieces on his side, rolling it in his fingers. “I wonder if Jeremy played chess when he was in his war.”

“I’m sure they played some sort of game, Benjamin.”

“When is he coming back?”

“I don’t know.” I jumped two more of his pieces, smacking the board. Benjamin threw down the one in his hand, and jumped to his feet. He didn’t expect me to catch it. Red and black scattered off the edge of the table and sent spinning circles in the firelight shadows. I watched them twirl on the hardwood floor like coins while Benjamin’s own shadow passed me on the way to the stairs. One by one, they fell still until I could hear the last one settling. It echoed in the room and then there was stillness, just like before.

#

The week passed slowly until Saturday came, and with it, the rain. Benjamin had been in another one of my nightmares the previous day. This time I was sitting back to back with Jeremy, and when Benjamin crawled toward us, he sat next to Jeremy and asked what we were doing. It was as if I knew that I was dreaming and I recognized that he’d asked that before. Knowing what was about to happen, I pulled him down and covered him with my body, arms over our heads. Jeremy raised his rifle instead of me

and the shot brought him down beside us. It was raining this time, and the blood ran with the water. Benjamin stared at it on his hands.

“You killed him! What did you do?” He grabbed my uniform in tiny fists and pounded on my chest, screaming. “Why did you let him die?”

I let him hit me as I sat there in the rain and waited to wake up.

I stood on the veranda now, watching the raindrops out over the lake, trying to forget his voice in my head. Ripples spread over the surface of the water, mesmerizing. I kept watching the lake, the ripples, the reflection of the black clouds. Behind me through the tall windows, the fireplace was going strong in the study and Benjamin was lounging on the leather couch, reading some comic book. I bounced my fist against my thigh and took a deep breath. I left the rain behind, knowing the dream would still follow.

Benjamin was wearing a deep red sweater nearly the shade of his pajamas in the dreams. He had moved closer to the fireplace and was staring into it, chin on his hand. The comic book lay across the room by the wall where it had been thrown. I went to pick it up and my eyes fell on the canes in the holder by the door. My father had been an avid collector. I'd broken more than one when I was younger. Some were lying in the bottom of the lake. One week I'd been so mad I started taking one out every day and hurling it as far as I could into the water. If a drought ever came, they would probably all turn up, rotted and moldy. Broken, like me.

My fingers traced the curved handle of a black mahogany cane, then a smaller one. Then I smiled and shouted a heads up as I tossed the lighter one across the room. Benjamin looked up just in time, fumbling to catch it as his eyes widened. I twirled my own and motioned with it for him to get up. He groaned.

“Andrew, I don’t want to do this.”

“Up.” I whacked him on the backside and he scrambled to his feet.

“Hey! I said I don’t want to do this.”

“Stop whining and entertain me.” I brought my cane up and he blocked it, flinching at the wood on wood contact. He sidestepped and parried another blow.

“I’m not whining!”

“Don’t lower your guard.” I thrust my cane out like a fencing sword. “Watch yourself.”

“Stop. I mean it.”

“C’mon, you used to be good at this.” I turned it up a notch and moved faster, catching his cane with mine and circling it out of the way to tap him again on the ribs.

“Ow, that’s got to hurt.”

Benjamin let out a yell and put all his weight behind his attack. I was on the defense now, parrying his blows and letting him circle me around the room. The crack of every strike on wood echoed in the study and broke a piece of the nightmare loose, carrying it away.

“That’s it, Ben. Keep your feet moving. Watch me, now. Think about the next move I might make and beat me to it. Good.”

“You’re trying to go easy on me.”

I raised an eyebrow and took a swing near his head. He ducked and grinned, returning with a swing near my knee that I blocked at the last second. His attacks grew faster and I let him back me into the corner near the fireplace before I took over.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” I dropped my cane and held my hands above my head. “I surrender.”

His startled face split into a grin and he laughed. It was the first true smile I’d seen in a month. I smiled and hooked my thumbs around my suspenders as he tossed his cane in the air and caught it. He’d just needed to let it out. So did I. The nightmare was gone. For now.

“Wait till I show him!”

“Who?”

“Jeremy, of course!”

I turned my back so he couldn’t see my face as I picked up my discarded cane. After I heard Benjamin race up the stairs, I snapped it over my knee and tossed it in the fire.

#

I was still sitting in front of the fire, watching the last piece of the cane burn and crack into the logs when my phone rang. I set my cognac down and reached into my pocket. I saw the number and sighed before flipping the phone open.

“Everything all right?” I asked.

“Not sure. Is Benjamin still up?”

“No. We had dinner and I put him in bed an hour ago.”

“Good. I need to talk to you. In person.”

“Fine.” I ran a hand through my hair and stood up. “Come on over.”

“I’m already here. Can you open the gate?”

I waited for him by the front doors and watched him pull his unmarked car up the drive. When he got out and straightened his jacket, I saw a face that was still on duty. The face I'd taught him to wear. His brow crinkled as we walked through the hall to the study where he turned and faced me.

"I got a call from the mayor today. The city council's appointed me as commissioner."

"That's a very prestigious position—"

"Boss, I didn't apply."

"No. No, you didn't." I took up my cognac again and poured another glass for Jeremy while he stared at me, mouth gaping.

"Wait a minute. You recommended me?"

"I did. You were always the best officer I ever trained. My word carries a lot of weight uptown."

"Well, what if I didn't want the job?"

I raised my eyebrows. He shrugged his shoulders and sighed, sitting down in the chair and staring at the drink in his hands.

"Of course, I want it. We just found out Clara is expecting in August, so we could use the pay raise. I'll have a lot more work on my hands. It's good. There need to be some changes in the department."

I nodded. "And you're the only man I see on that force with the know-how."

"You really believe that." He stared at me and worked his jaw. "It's not the only reason you did it, though. You know I, uh, I won't be able to come by and see Benjamin as much now."

I said nothing and Jeremy waited. Then he set the drink down and threw up his hands.

“Damn it, Andrew, you could have just told me!”

“And said what? That I don’t know how to handle this? In my day I could shoot a gook 700 yards out without flinching, but now I can’t get through to a kid I’ve known since he was born, and it scares the hell out of me.”

“Well, it scares the hell out of him, too.” Jeremy stepped closer to me and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Andrew, do you know how I found him in that bank? He was huddled behind a desk. His mother was lying dead on top of him. And he was staring at his father from under the desk. Just staring. Frozen. Glassy-eyed. You know what that’s like. From what we could tell, Mark had stepped out to confront the robber.”

“I read all that in the reports, Jeremy. If you have a point you’d better get to it.”

“The point is that maybe he’s scared of losing you too. Did you ever think about that? I’m a friend. You’re family. You know the three of them were supposed to go see a fucking movie afterward? He told me while we were sitting out on the curb. They just had to swing by the bank before it closed, but Benjamin said he wanted to go in with his dad, so they all went. Maybe, Andrew, he’s scared to get any closer to you than he already is because the same might happen to you. Maybe you just need to show him that you’re not going the fuck anywhere. And then make sure you damn well don’t.”

At some point we must have sat down again. I hadn’t noticed. I was seeing that day again, replaying the moment I stepped onto the scene and Benjamin caught my eye from the curb. I remembered the fear that crossed his face, the realization that for the first time I was more than just an uncle. In that moment, I was everything because I was all he

had. I remembered the way he bolted toward me, the shock blanket landing in Jeremy's face, and leaped into my arms. I remembered the way he held me tighter when his feet touched the asphalt again, like he didn't want to be standing on it so close to his parents.

"You two need each other," he said. "You'll be fine without me."

"You're leaving?"

"Benjamin!" I said. Jeremy stepped aside and I shook my finger at the balcony where the boy was standing, rubbing his eyes. "What have I told you about eavesdropping? And what are you doing up?"

"I had a bad dream."

My face fell at the same time my hand did and I gestured for him to come down. Jeremy was pressing his lips together beside me, rocking on his heels as if I wasn't kicking myself already.

"I'm sorry," I said before I forgot.

Benjamin looked back and forth between us. "Why are you going, Jeremy?"

"I'm not really going." Jeremy smiled and ruffled Benjamin's already mussed hair. "I just got a really big promotion at work. So I'm going to have a lot of homework, like you."

"I hope it isn't math."

"Nope, I'll leave the math to you. And I'll still come by every now and then when I can. As long as it's okay with you and Andrew."

He held out his arms and Benjamin ran into them. He pulled on Jeremy's sleeve and whispered in his ear.

"You want what? Oh, okay. Like little ones? I think I can help with that."

Once we'd walked Jeremy to the door and watched his taillights fade away, I asked Benjamin if he wanted me to go back upstairs with him. He traced circles on the banister railing with his finger and shook his head. I waited for him to at least look up at me, and I sighed when he didn't.

"Good night, then, Ben."

"Can you read to me?"

I turned and smiled. His expression was tentative, like he expected me to say no. Did he feel guilty? Maybe we both did. Maybe we both just needed time to trust each other again. This was new for both of us.

"Sure, I can," I said. "But first, hot chocolate."

When we both had our cups, he asked me to hold his so he could crawl up in the chair beside me. There, he leaned against my side and waited for me to start reading *Oliver Twist*.

"Do the voice, Andrew."

"What voice?" I teased.

"When Oliver says, 'Please, sir, may I have some more?' You always do it funny."

So I did, and I kept reading even when he watched the fire and blinked to stay awake. Then his head started sagging and I paused. He popped his eyes open and I couldn't tell if he was awake or dreaming when he said, "I'm going to get those little knights for your chess board. And then we can make all the other pieces just like you had them, and you can teach me to play."

"Okay." I kissed the top of his head and smiled.

“But don’t tell Andrew,” he mumbled. He shifted in his sleep and buried deeper into my shoulder. “It’s going to be a surprise.”

I wrapped my arm around him, and for a while I listened to the quiet sound of his breathing, the crackling logs, and the last band of light rain on the windows. Then I picked up reading where I’d left off, knowing there would be no more nightmares tonight whether we finished the book or not.

## A MIDSRING NIGHT'S DREAM

Shere, Surrey was a beautiful place to live if you wanted to lose yourself. It was a small village nestled among quiet towns an hour from London. Winter was breathtaking with its rolling white hills, grey streets, and candlelit windows. In springtime, villagers said, fantastical things had been known to happen. Nicole knew this all too well.

Nicole Pemberley had lived in Shere all her life. She was her father's only daughter and, her mother having been dead since she was four years old, she had developed a genuine father-daughter relationship. She was his helper and his companion, and he was her refuge. He taught her from a young age all about their town, about its secrets, its surrounding woods, its people. But years had passed and time seemed to speed the way it only does when you grow up and feel that your life is really beginning, and the things of your childhood lose importance.

She had attended King's University in Cambridge and met Bethany Miller in her accounting classes. They stayed close and found work together after graduation at a large advertising firm in East London, where they rented a flat together for years. Bethany was everything Nicole wasn't. Her dark hair was curly and buoyant while Nicole's hung flat. Her smile was effortless and sparkling, and she attracted men from every floor of the office. She embraced her personality, her need for attention, her social prowess. She was confident and outgoing, even brash at times, and would rather drag Nicole to a Manchester United football game than stroll through the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. But she was not unkind. Bethany was always there for Nicole and admired her quiet resolve, her love for the old arts rather than popular society.

Nicole convinced Bethany once to go to The Globe to see her favorite production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Bethany couldn't see her fascination with the faery queen, Titania, or her amusement with the mischievous Puck. Nicole didn't mind. She went to the Globe herself after that, or to other theaters like the Old Vic. She brought her father up to London sometimes to see shows with her and they talked for hours afterward on the books and stories Nicole had grown up with while she drove him back home.

She still enjoyed nights out with Bethany, where she ruined the woman's attempts to set her up with one of her friends. For as interesting as Bethany was, Nicole couldn't understand how the men in her life could be so dull. She played along every now and then and let one of them buy her a drink, but she found her thoughts drifting toward home. She'd dated her fair share of men in Shere, like Mark who worked at the William Bray pub, but she'd broken it off with him, using her move to King's College as an excuse.

Nicole hadn't just been thinking of home lately when she was out with Bethany trying to remember the name of the man she was sitting next to. The stress of working at the large firm was beginning to wear on her. She'd researched different opportunities back home and submitted several applications. She also wanted to be near her father. Neither of them had spoken about his failing health, the chemotherapy treatment he'd declined. Still, Bethany showed genuine surprise when Nicole announced she had turned in her two weeks' notice and was moving back home. They promised to stay in touch.

So with all her training and work experience, Nicole found herself in a small real estate business handling claims for the growing tourism and property interest in Shere. She figured she handled calls on a daily basis of people asking if the woods at Shere were

part of Robin Hood's Sherwood Forest, and she had to explain that no, that was in Nottinghamshire, almost four hours north. In the evenings, she would come home to her father and bring a bottle of his favorite pinot noir from the nearby Denbies Vineyard, one of the largest vineyards in all of England. She read to him by the fire from whatever book he wanted, ranging from *Macbeth* to *Great Expectations* to a longer project like *Anna Karenina*. And she counted the days.

She still remembered the night he slipped away. She still remembered the way she held his hand. She still remembered the funeral, the hours she'd spent standing there afterward, and the fury with which she had locked away all his books they'd once shared. She remembered the cold mist settling over the house.

#

Nicole continued her work at the office for almost ten years. She rode her bike along the narrow dirt roads, past the wooden fences covered with vines and bluebells, under the trees at the edge of the wide fields, around the muddy puddles and wet gravel. She fell into the monotony she had known in London, except with no Bethany to draw her out. She called Bethany and spent long nights talking with her, even coming to London for weekends where she attended football games. But that only lasted for a day. Then she was back to the place she felt she could never move on from. She passed Mark from time to time, and they exchanged a few niceties, but never picked up where they'd left off. They both knew it was over.

Even with spring nearing its peak, she couldn't muster the happiness she'd always felt before. Her father always loved spring. He would have quoted something from C.S. Lewis by now like, "Aslan's on the move." He always said she reminded him of Queen

Susan with her long dark hair, serious gaze, and strong wisdom. She'd always felt more like Lucy, the youngest sibling who was prone to clumsiness and naivety. And she had locked all of that away, now.

At the end of a long week, Nicole leaned her bike against the side of the brick house and pulled her hair back from her face. The days were growing longer now this time of year, and she didn't feel like going inside yet. She needed a walk. Something. She opened the front door and tossed her purse somewhere inside before stepping down the brick steps and back out the front gate to the path. When she went on walks like this, she tended to stuff her hands in her coat and let her feet carry her. She always ended up at the same place—along the Tillingbourne stream in the woods.

Passing the fields at Albury Manor, she heard the bleating sheep and the bells around their necks, and came upon them near the bottom of the hill. Puffs of white ran around the field, chomping at the grass and the bluebells. The smaller ones chased each other and leaped over nothing, bounding carelessly while the older sheep ignored them. Nicole spotted a figure running around with them, calling and laughing. The shepherd she figured, until she approached and the person turned with the sheep to stare at her. It was a girl. She stared at Nicole with wide blue eyes between her curtain of scarlet hair. Her white limbs were frozen, knees bent as if she was waiting to bolt at any second. Nicole frowned and watched her, trying to remember where she'd seen her before. She opened her mouth and took a step forward. The girl gasped and ran.

Nicole stared after her for a moment, feeling a sudden urge of wonder and excitement rise in her chest. Then she too broke out in a run, scattering the sheep in a dissonant chorus of bells and angry bleats. Her boots carried her easily through the woods

and she laughed at the rush. The cool wind stabbed at her face, flushing her cheeks and tossing her hair. Her arms swung out at her sides, balancing her as she parted branches, leaped over logs, and swerved through dry leaves. The girl was ahead of her, skipping through the trees so quickly it looked as if her feet hardly touched the ground. Nicole heard a splash of water and, as she turned the bend and slid to a stop near the riverbank, almost falling in the damp dirt, she realized the girl was nowhere to be found.

Her breathing came heavily as she turned this way and that, frowning amidst her laughter. The girl hadn't been that far ahead. She couldn't have just disappeared.

"Where are you?" she called.

The ripple of the stream alone answered her. She waited another moment and then threw her hands in the air, letting them slap against her thighs. The shadows were growing longer through the trees. She needed to head back. Nicole turned and started back up the bank when a flash of scarlet hair swung from the tree limb in front of her. She jumped back and swore as the girl hung upside down from the branch, giggling before she flipped and landed on her bare feet. She stood up in front of Nicole and crossed her arms over her chest, looking her up and down while Nicole did the same.

Dressed in a plain tan dress that hooked over her left shoulder and ended just above her knees, the girl wore no shoes. Her curly mane fell in long waves around her shoulders and matched the freckles on her cheeks, her arms. Her deep eyes peered at Nicole in curiosity and fearful hesitancy. They widened when Nicole reached out to her.

"Wait, no it's okay," Nicole said. "I won't hurt you. What's your name? Where are your parents?"

The girl raised a strawberry eyebrow, but gave no reply. A smile was playing at her lips. She waved her hand and Nicole followed her over to the stream where she picked up a stone and handed it to her. Nicole took it, feeling the water drip from the girl's fingers. She frowned.

“Yes. Very nice. Listen, my name is Nicole. What's your name?”

The girl pointed to the stone and Nicole sighed, tossing it back in the water. The girl's face fell with the stone and Nicole leaned down to her.

“Look at me. Do you live out here?”

The smile reappeared and she nodded. She lifted her hands and wiggled her fingers in the sunlight that was left to peek through the trees. Her eyes moved to Nicole as if watching for her reaction, waiting. Nicole shook her head.

“I can't just leave you out here.” She sighed. “Look. I have a sofa in the living room you could sleep on tonight. And I have food and clothes and a hot shower if you want it. Will you come with me?”

The girl tilted her head to the side and nodded. Nicole took her hand and felt a sense of calm wash over her. She led the girl out of the woods and back up the hill through the fields. They took the back path to avoid going into town. She crossed the ford and the girl followed her over the bridge, though she looked at the water trickling over the surface of the road even after they passed it and about rounded the curve. They crossed behind St. James' church and the old graveyard, and when they finally came to Nicole's house, the girl stopped in the middle of the road and stared at it, smiling. Nicole couldn't tell if she was looking at the cornflower blue door or the shutters on the window or the brick chimney.

“Don’t just stand there, you daft thing, you. Go inside.” She ushered the girl through the picket fence and up the path where she unlocked the door.

Nicole lit the fireplace in the living room and went to the kitchen where she turned on the stove to warm a kettle of water. She took off her coat and began to slice a block of cheese while the leftover brisket was being warmed. The girl watched her from the table. Nicole supposed now, as she studied the girl in the warm light, that she was more of a young woman, really. Her frame was tiny and her face still looked young, but her blue eyes showed maturity far past that of a girl. They seemed to peer out of the frizzy curtain of hair as though seeing beyond the surface of things, and aware of a world that others overlooked. Nicole worked the loaf of rye bread into bite-size pieces while she mumbled to herself.

“Incredible. Absolutely incredible. Hasn’t spoken a word, won’t say a thing. Just wandering around the woods. Doesn’t even have a bloody name.”

“Marigold.”

The soft voice held Nicole, as gentle as a whisper through the trees. She opened her mouth to say something when the kettle whistled and she had to turn away. The girl was still waiting for her after she poured the tea and brought the food over. Nicole sat in front of her and folded her hands.

“Now. Say that again.”

“My name is Marigold.”

“Right. Where do you live, Marigold?”

“Here. The same as you.” She smiled and sipped the tea, her delicate fingers wrapped around the cup.

“Where is your family?”

“Gone.” She said it simply as though there was nothing more to the matter. “I’ve been here a long time, though, just like you.”

“How would you know that?” Nicole asked.

“I know many things.”

Nicole wanted to laugh. “Who are you?”

“You would not believe me if I told you, I think.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

The girl sipped her tea again, studying Nicole, contemplating. Then she sighed and set the cup down with a smile, pretty teeth showing under her natural lips. “I am a sprite,” she said.

“Beg your pardon.”

“Sprite,” she repeated slowly, a touch of impatience evident. “Tree spirit, faerie, elf, water nymph, pixie—you may pick any name you like. We are all the same. Let me explain. We can be found anywhere in the woods of native England. Do you not wonder how people like Shakespeare were able to write about us so easily? Why do you look so shocked? See, I told you you would not believe.”

“Right. I’m just a little rusty on my Shakespeare, that’s all.”

“But it’s not just him. We’ve been here forever, as long as the Britons and the Celts and even the Romans. There is nothing unnatural about it, only in your perception of what is natural. People have simply forgotten how to see us.”

“But I see you. I see you sitting here at my fucking table.”

“Relax, Nicole. Please. I was the only one you needed to see. I didn’t think you would follow me. I was afraid of you at first. It’s been so long. But it will all make sense, soon. Don’t worry.”

“You cheeky little gi—”

“Do not insult me.” Marigold stood from the table and her eyes flashed. Her features hardened in warning.

“Fine.” Nicole stood too, and let her presence tower over the girl. She raised an eyebrow. “Have it your way. But first things first. You’re going to wear some normal clothes.”

The light dimmed in Marigold’s eyes and she followed Nicole without complaint to the bedroom where she sat on the edge of the bed, hands folded in her lap. Nicole rummaged through her wardrobe and pulled out a few tops. She looked at them, then at Marigold, and put them back. Then she lifted a bundle from the top shelf and handed it to her.

“Here, you’ll have to try these. There are some jeans and a few jumpers that don’t fit me anymore. I was going to take them to charity. You can try some of my trainers, too. Your feet aren’t too much smaller than mine.”

“No shoes.”

“Fine, no shoes. Just try this stuff on and then come back out to the living room. I’m going to set some blankets out for you on the sofa. Loo is down the hall on the right if you need it.”

Nicole was tucking the sheets into the cushions when Marigold reappeared in light steps. She had chosen a hunter green shirt that she had buttoned only halfway, and a

pair of grey leggings that almost seemed baggy on her. She had not brushed her hair, but it appeared a little more tamed in the way she had tied some strands at her ears back behind her head with a rubber band.

Nicole sighed. “That wasn’t from anything I had laid out for you, but that’s fine. Looks better on you anyway. Please come here and sit down.”

Marigold perched in front of her again. Her eyes roamed around the living room, the bare walls, the shadows of the fire. Nicole snapped her fingers in the girl’s face.

“Look here. I’m very tired. I’ve had a long week and I want to go to bed. I don’t want to hear you running around the house. I will let the fire burn and you can put another log on if you get too cold. Please just try and go to sleep. We’ll talk more in the morning.”

Marigold only nodded. Her face had softened again and Nicole felt a strange desire to reach out and pat her on the shoulder, this young girl who was so lost and confused and in such obvious need of help. Maybe she was just that desperate for company.

“Right. Well, good night then.” She paused and then added, “Marigold.”

Nicole didn’t know how long she lay in her bed before she finally drifted off. She kept listening for noises in the living room, holding her breath when she heard the house creak or the twigs snap from the branches in the wind. She wondered what Bethany was doing in London right now, if she had found another man since their last phone call. She wanted Nicole to come up and see her this weekend. She’d even offered to take her to a showing at the Globe, shocked when Nicole had declined without an explanation. Nicole

was going to have to call and reschedule for next weekend with the promise of an unbelievable story that even Bethany would find fascinating.

She thought she heard quiet singing of an old, sorrowful tale, and she dreamed of the forest the way she had known it as a child. She dreamed of running along the Tillingbourne, racing through the cemetery behind St. James's, playing hopscotch along the dirt path. Marigold was in the dream, drawing the game out in the dirt for her, leaping out from a hiding spot by the tombstone, skipping stones across the waters, hanging from the trees. Then Nicole saw her older self, chasing Marigold in the forest and watching her swing from the tree. She shivered and rolled over, pulling the duvet over her head.

#

The next morning, while it was still dark, Nicole awoke to the sound of burning cinnamon. She lay in bed for a moment and then she remembered. Her eyes flashed open and her feet touched the cold floorboards. She threw on her robe and slid into the living room just as she finished tying the sash. She rubbed her eyes, forcing herself awake.

“Bloody hell.”

If she hadn't just seen the room six hours ago, she would have sworn she'd been transported to someone else's house during the night, like the place near Albury manor where the old lady sold incense, herbs and copper bracelets. The soft yellow of the walls had been changed to a natural gold. The baskets on the walls were no longer empty, but filled with bluebells, lavender and ferns. Other flowers hung upside down in the kitchen window to dry. Candles were burning on the shelves and a fire was blazing in the hearth. Nicole stepped out slowly, blinking and sniffing at the cinnamon, pine spruce, and sage. The blankets she had laid out for Marigold were now draped along the sofa along with

other blankets from the linen closet that had been placed on the armchair, and a heavier one that sat in the middle of the floor like a carpet rug.

The books were out, too. All her father's books, all the Shakespeare and Wordsworth and Dickens and Tolstoy and everything else—it was all out, back on the shelves, piled on the end tables, stacked in the corners. Nicole's mouth turned dry. Her hand reached for the wall. Finally, she focused on the thing dancing in front of the fire.

Marigold had discarded her earlier clothes and now wore a costume that Nicole recognized as her own from many years ago when she'd played Titania in a secondary school performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She was playing a wooden flute that Nicole's father had given her as a Christmas present. Nicole knew the song, a village dancing ballad of the sea called "Molly on the Shore" that she had once tried to learn. The white silk sleeves draped from Marigold's arms as she swayed. A chain of white flowers stood out in her hair, but stayed still as she swayed in front of the fire.

Nicole pushed down the joyful music, the surreal excitement and warmth from everything that had been changed in her house. She strode across the room, grabbed Marigold's shoulder, and yanked the flute out of her hands. Marigold gasped and showed the genuine fear that Nicole had seen in her yesterday. Then her face stilled and her eyes became hard. Nicole's voice shook as she gripped the girl.

"What the bloody hell have you done?"

"This is the way you used to have it."

"Yes, but how the fuck do you know that? And how do you know that song?"

"I told you. I know many things. That was our song, Nicole."

"No. There's no way you could know any of this."

“It’s the truth. I am a sprite. I’m your sprite. Don’t you remember? Has it been so long?”

“How dare you.” Nicole shook the flute in her face. “How dare you lie to me after what I’ve done for you. And this,” she gestured around. “All this shit. You had no right.”

“How dare I?” Marigold’s eyes changed in the fire. Nicole took a step back, holding the flute out like a knife as the girl advanced, head lowered, shoulders hunched. “You’re the one who forgot, Nicole. You’re the one who left me. And when you returned, you no longer looked for me. When your father died, you shut me away completely.”

Nicole pressed her hands on the sofa, but she couldn’t remember sitting. She could feel the flute making a row of circular impressions on her palm. The fire seemed to reach across the room, stroking her eyes, her chest, her head. She closed and opened her mouth, trying to loosen the knot in her throat. Her mobile phone vibrated from her bedroom nightstand through the hall, offering her a lifeline back to reality. Bethany. She’d never called Bethany to tell her she wasn’t coming. Nicole hung her head, Marigold’s shadow and voice stretching over her.

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.”

“No.”

Nicole stood and pushed past Marigold into the kitchen. She ignored the flowers and the smell of apple cider and the time of morning, and reached in the icebox for the bottle of Jameson. If there was one thing Bethany had taught her at university, it was how to handle liquor. She poured the drink, splashing it on the counter, and threw back two

shots before she held her head back and sighed. She felt Marigold standing beside her and she laughed at the ceiling.

“Don’t you quote Robert Frost to me.”

“You remember it, then.”

“Yes, I fucking remember it. I remember my father loving it. Said it summed up his philosophy on life. Still didn’t keep him from dying. From leaving me.”

“And do you still not see, Nicole? That was us. All those years ago. I am the part of you that took the road less traveled, who remained here while you went away. I am the spirit of you that was born here and was left behind. That’s all that a sprite really is. You see, the name comes from the Roman, ‘spiritus,’ the Celtic ‘spriggan.’ They mean spirit.”

“I absolutely do not need an etymology lesson from you, you git.”

“No. You need much more than that. Please come with me, Nicole. Let me show you.”

“I can’t believe this.” Nicole poured another shot and then closed her eyes with a sigh. She removed her hand from the bottle one finger at a time and set her palm on the wet counter, tapping her fingers, splashing in the drink. “I should have stayed in London.”

“But your problem was here. Your life was here. You are searching for it again. You couldn’t have stayed away even if you wanted. You are as much tied to this place as I am.”

Nicole glared. “Get out of my house. Just get out. We’re done.”

“You can’t get rid of me, Nicole.”

Marigold's hand came into hers, taking her wet fingers. She tried to fight it, to pull her hand away, but Marigold's fingers tightened. Nicole felt once again the calm wash over her at the touch. Her breath shook. Marigold's voice whispered in her ear.

"Come with me. Everything will be as it was. Trust me as you once did."

The phone buzzed from her bedroom again, echoing in the quiet of the house. She needed to talk to Bethany. Bethany was worried about her. She needed to talk to her. She was in London waiting for her and Nicole had never called her. She needed to call.

"I can't."

"If you do not come, you will never understand."

Nicole was aware of Marigold leading her through the kitchen, past the fire, past the lavender and the candles. She didn't hear the door open, but they were outside now, passing under the trees, stepping through the grasses toward the wood that was shadowed in the dark. The first light was glowing beyond the forest. All Nicole could see in the early dawn was Marigold's hair in front of her as she was led.

A breeze came through and she smelled everything from the house once more, though they were passing the trees now. She felt the serenity that she knew had long been waiting for her, the serenity her father had always spoken of and had finally found. She couldn't say if she was awake or if she was dreaming again. Nothing else mattered. She could finally let it all go.

The light from the house had faded and now a new glow, brighter than the dawn, seemed to rise from the forest along the sparkling line of the Tillingbourne. Distant words came to her on the breeze. She recognized Puck's closing speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

“If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended,  
That you have but slumb’red here  
While these visions did appear.”

As she finally let herself laugh in the last dream of the night, she thought she heard her father’s voice calling to her from somewhere in the forest. Marigold laughed with her and their voices rang together once more.

## THOSE WHO WANDER

A worker in a medieval peasant costume was tying off the rope to the entrance of the Mermaid Tank exhibit, while a little girl cried and turned red in the face, pointing at the man with a slobbery fist like she was trying to make him vanish on command and let her in. The attraction was the newest at the Renaissance Festival, and had to close frequently while the women changed shifts and the tank was cleaned out and refilled. The exhausted mother was rocking the child, who couldn't have been more than four years old.

I took a deep breath, stepped up to them with my best expression of surprise, and pointed at the glittery wings strapped over her pink dress. "Are you a real fairy?" I asked.

She glared at me through her tears, but stopped mid-wail to stare at my dress, leaning out of her mother's arms to look where the blue fabric trailed at my feet in the leaves and dust. She rubbed at her eyes.

"Are you a real fairy, Isabella?" her mother asked. She bounced the little girl and we smiled together in sync. Slowly, refusing to play along, the girl shook her head.

My face of utter despair. "Really? Because my friend the Fairy Queen gave me a very special present, and she said I could only give it to a true fairy."

The girl's eyes narrowed, and I held out my hand, adorned with rings and henna and glitter. I opened my fist one finger at a time and gave a dramatic gasp when I revealed a blue stone. It was a simple pebble from one of the art stands, a light teal color that sparkled when I held it to the sun. The girl hiccupped and bit her lip, trying not to smile.

“Tell you what,” I said. “Can you keep this safe for me, and give it to a fairy when you see one? It’s very important.” She took the pebble without a word, showing it to her mother who mouthed a ‘thank you’ to me.

“Try the glass blowing exhibit,” I called as they strolled away.

I had started out the morning with a leather pouch of ten pebbles, and had already given them all away. The bottom three inches of my dress were stained with a level of dust. So many people walking, so many feet stirring the dry ground, raising an invisible haze of respiratory nightmare. If you had bad allergies, you would be blowing black mucus for the whole following day. Every year it was like this. And every year, people had assumed I worked there.

I had worn a different outfit for this, my first time back. Before, years ago, it had been a short Pocahontas-type dress that I’d altered to look more like a wood nymph. I’d piled my hair on top of my head and used green body paint all over. The flowers I’d pinned onto my crown circlet served as the treasures I gave away one by one. This time, I’d switched to a medieval floor length dress with a girdle and long, parted sleeves. My red hair reached down my back, draping over the baldric that held my sword. It was plain longsword, two-handed hilt, but I loved it.

A balding man in a Journey shirt and horrific face burn the outlining shape of sunglasses stopped me and pointed at his map. “Can you tell me where the joust is?”

“Central Field, my good sir,” I said. “Go back the way you came, make a left at the Pirate’s Cove, and you shall see it yonder on your right. If you hurry now, you may yet make the 1:15 show.”

His eyebrows fused together, and I gave a royal wave as he mumbled a thank you and tripped off in the wrong direction. I rolled my eyes as soon as he was gone. Coarse chuckling came behind me, and I turned and saw an older man, probably in his late forties, working at a tent that bore the sign, King Richard's Armory. He was polishing a Persian sword, and he dropped it on the rack as I approached.

"Idiots," he said, shaking his head. He wore a plain tunic and breeches, nothing else to the costume. He pushed his eye-glasses up his nose. "I never talk to them like that. I know we're supposed to, but I just can't make myself do it."

I shrugged. "I think it's fun. You get to be someone else for a day."

The man scoffed. "There's no pretend in this. These tools are my life. It's an art, and it's how I make my living. It's how my father made his. I travel the world selling these things, and nowhere else do I have to make a fool of myself. I would give up coming here altogether, but it's a venue I can't afford to quit. It's too big a profit."

"Maybe you shouldn't look at it that way."

"You're just a staff worker. You're probably in college, am I right—yes, of course, and you're just here as a weekend job. A gig."

I started to reply that it was far from a gig, but he threw up his hands and shuffled to the back, disappearing through the tent flap.

#

In the valley by the Three Sirens concert stage, the wood nymphs settled in a circle with the queen. Blankets and baskets were spread. The girls sat cross-legged, crafting flower chains, while a boy juggled glass balls, vying for their attention. Three others had a lute and violin and a small, round harp. The queen sat with her chin in her

hand, watching them while the girls put the flowers in her silver hair. Like everyone, they showed signs of dirt and messed attire from the day. Blue skirts had ruffled, glitter brushed from shoulders, hair slipped down, and feet were nearly black.

They waved at me, and I waved back when something tickled my shoulder. Buzz ran past me and flopped into the middle of the group, laughing and buzzing away. He was my favorite fairy; a new character, he wore blue body paint and green stockings, shirt and vest. His hair was a brown mop with specks of glitter and blue paint, and he had giant goggles on his head, spray painted and decorated to look like bug eyes. He had knitted gloves on his hands, and layers of scarves and belts and trinkets. He carried a little jar of “buzzes,” miniature kazoo-like toys that he handed out to children and taught them to play.

Earlier, I had heard the queen looking for him, asking guests if they had seen him. No one had, of course. A little boy had lost his buzz, and they were all searching for the giggly fairy who never gave any greeting other than “Buzz-Hi!” and “Buzz-Bye!”

A tiny girl in a princess Aurora dress walked by with her father. The queen reached out a slender arm and twisted a flower toward the girl. A flower woven of reed, intricately simple. The father encouraged the girl to take the offering. The queen and faeries bowed to her as she did.

I was aware of people passing me, of the way that I couldn't feel my feet. It occurred to me that I should have been a human statue that year instead. Between the archery field and the Stage of Fools there was always at least one, sometimes painted all in gold, sometimes in silver, and he would stand frozen in poses all day long while people came and took selfies with him, never leaving anything in the tip jar stationed at his feet.

I could be a statue. People could just walk by. They wouldn't even want to take a picture. The village idiot was chasing the faeries, now. I could be the village idiot, too. Why hadn't I been the village idiot?

Even as I stood there, thoughts more and more disjointed came peeking after years of solitude. And in the center of it, a woven flower, the yellow reed faded, lying in a taped-shut shoe box in the back of my closet, buried with other tokens from my childhood in this place. A brochure with the map, a ticket receipt for a turkey leg and kettle corn, a Polaroid of me and the winning knight at the joust. A smaller one of me and my dad.

My face met the ground as someone bumped into me and tripped over my dress. I crawled forward a few paces, head ducked, hoping no one else would step on me. There was no real sense of direction—people walked both ways without looking. Then a hand took my elbow, and I was lifted. A blue hand appeared, gentle, and the dusty mulch was brushed off my dress, arms, and hair.

“Buzz-Hi!” he said. He reached up to my forehead and straightened my circlet, clapped his hands under his chin, and blinked at me through the blue paint. His face was wide up close, and the way he smiled reminded me of Robin Williams in *Hook*. He gave a mischievous grin and held up a small kazoo. When I took it, he brushed a tear from my eye. I could feel the moisture steal the paint from his finger. He blew his own buzz between his lips and danced a jig. I couldn't help the laughter that burst from me, had me closing my eyes, tilting my head back as a weight I couldn't express was lifted from me.

“Buzz-Bye!” He bounced away. When I opened my hand, I held six more pebbles.

#

When I neared Central Field, the jester's comedy act was just finishing with the reluctantly clapping audience, the drunken men in the front row who had enthusiastically been called up on stage. One was still wearing a yellow bra over his t-shirt from the act. The crowd for the joust was filling up. Stadium seating was made up of hay bales set up the hill on either side. They had talked for years about building wooden bleachers. The only empty bale I could find was near the back, where the sounds of the show blended with those of the concession stand and the man who always stood in the same vendor spot shouting, "FRIED PICKLEEEEEEEES!"

My dress was hot, and I was trying to air out the front when someone dropped down next to me. The hay bale was small, and I had sat in the middle of it on purpose.

"Mae g'ovannen," he said.

"Yeah, hi. Look, I'm sorry but...wait, did you just—?"

The young man wore a white tunic with a black leather jerkin, coffee brown trousers, and dark boots. His belt held a scabbard, and the sword was on the other side of him, resting on the hay. He was taller than me, long hair pulled back at his neck, and he was leaned forward with arms over his knees.

"I saw you earlier," he said, "and I wanted to apologize. My father was rude to you."

I frowned. "Your father."

"He and I work the blacksmith stand. I was in the back, and I only saw you as you were walking away, so I didn't get a chance to say anything to you."

“It’s quite all right. I—did you say you work the stand with the swords? I’ve not seen you there before.”

He laughed and looked at his feet, twisting his hands. His eyes, sitting above high, tanned cheekbones, were the same shade as his pants. Shouts and cheers rang on below us amid the sound of splitting wood and metal and pounding hooves in sand. The man hadn’t shaved, and he looked like he either should have, or should have grown the rest of the scruff.

“No, this is my first year. My father needed help, so I came away from the shop. He’s getting older. He thinks he can still do all this, but I’ve had to take on more and more orders for him. That’s a nice sword you’ve got yourself there, though it’s no Hadhafang.”

“Hadhafang?”

“Well, you are dressed as Arwen, aren’t you?”

“So you did speak Elvish earlier!”

“You caught that, huh?” He laughed and gave a shrug. “I was acting on a hunch.”

“What if I hadn’t been Arwen? Or known what you were saying?”

“Then I would have pretended I sneezed.” His grin seemed fueled by my clear excitement, but I couldn’t keep the joy from my face.

“Shut up! You’ve made her sword? What about Anduril? And Glamdring? Oh, and Sting! What about Sting?”

“My dad has made Arwen’s sword. The curvature is tricky. Aragorn’s sword is pretty popular, yeah. Gandalf’s, not so much. Bilbo’s sword, now that’s very popular. We end up getting more orders for Sting than anything else.”

“That’s a shame about Hadhafang.” I’d leaned toward him more, bumping his knee. The jousting was louder, and I wouldn’t realize until later that I’d been shouting at him in exuberance.

“You know that Arwen really didn’t have that big a role in the books. Glorfindel came from Rivendell to rescue Frodo and the others, and he let Frodo ride his horse. Frodo took Asfaloth himself all the way across the River Bruinen, but Peter Jackson wanted to make Arwen a bigger character, so he gave her that role. I don’t mind, obviously. Other things I mind.”

He squinted. “Like the fact that Frodo never banished Sam on the Stairs of Cirith Ungol? That bugs me.”

I opened my mouth and closed it. “What is your name?”

“Stephan.” He laughed and held out his hand. It wasn’t as rough as I’d imagined it to be for a blacksmith.

“I’m Margaret.”

“Well then, Margaret. Tell me what a walking Tolkien Encyclopedia is doing at a place like this all alone.”

“I…” I hesitated, took some of the kettle corn he offered, and sucked on it. “I used to come here a lot, actually. My dad took me. He used to dress up, too, buy me dresses and flowers and all that. We did it every year when he was home. It was really special. He liked these things. Said it was good for the imagination. Can you picture a Navy SEAL walking around in leather armor with a fairy princess on his shoulder? Mom never came. She’s all I have left now, but we still don’t get along on a lot of things. It’s okay, though. I’m majoring in biochemistry, so I keep pretty busy.”

I don't know why I was telling him so much. I couldn't stop myself. I knew nothing about him, but there I was talking about my father as easily as I'd gushed about Arwen. I could have lied and he wouldn't have known. Perhaps that was the release—the fact that I could say anything for the first time, yet felt I had nothing to lose by telling the truth. His eyes were amused, and I realized I was still talking too fast.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Well, there was this one biology lab in high school where—”

“No.” He laughed, then seemed embarrassed. “I mean your dad.”

“Oh. Well, the last time I spoke to him was over five years ago. He was in Afghanistan at the time. He was telling me to take good pictures that year, and pick a new leather-bound journal for him. When Mom and I got the news about his unit, I just sort of decided not to go. This is the first time I've come without him.”

Stephan was quiet for a moment. Then he put his hand over mine. This time, I felt callouses on his fingers and palm.

“Hannon le.”

“Thanks for what?” I asked.

“Just for coming. I was supposed to come last time, but I didn't. Guess it's a good thing I did this year, or I wouldn't have met you.”

“I may be a nerd, but that's pretty bad.”

He laughed. “It is, isn't it? It's all I've got. Oh here, take this.” He shoved the rest of the kettle corn at me. “I told my dad I was going to get drinks, so I'd better get them and run back. Come find me after the joust.”

He looked like he was going to do something else, but then he smirked and gave my hand a quick kiss instead. I tried to say, “Namárië,” but he was already weaving through the crowd at the concessions. I huffed and faced front again, clinging to the popcorn.

#

When I found Stephan later, he was teaching sword fighting to a small group of boys in an effort that seemed to have been long going. Filthy and sweaty, they all had wooden swords and an affinity for knocking Stephan on his back. Their terms for peace apparently included the keeping of the toys, because they hollered and ran off cheering while Stephen pulled himself off the ground and shook leaves from his hair. Still smiling, he tucked back the strands that had fallen against his face, and resumed his work cleaning the weapons. Most had been packed away already—all that were left were the daggers.

I walked up, realizing I had been standing back for nearly ten minutes. As soon as I came near, he straightened, beaming, as if he had been waiting the entire time. A few pine needles fell from the folds of his tunic. I reached over and plucked a hidden leaf. He put it in behind my ear.

“Dad, I’ll be right back!” he said. There was a rumbling shout from the back of the tent. Stephan laughed silently as he tossed the rag, and ran around the table, taking my hand.

We dashed to the last venue to close, the Ivory Tavern. Clouds cooled the still heavy air. Dead leaves flew as we ran along the ground, slipping. A tall pirate made room for us, and we squeezed through the dancers to a stool near the stage. Stephan ordered two ales in clay tankards, and we watched the musicians and dancing gypsies while we

swayed back and forth. He was standing behind me, his arm wrapped loosely across my shoulders. Nothing fancy, nothing drastic. Nothing that would go beyond that day. I felt completely safe with him. There in that space of time, people who had never seen each other before were family.

Other people were doing the same, slowly dancing, or sitting with faces of contentment and raised drinks in cheer. Outside the tent, the faeries were doing circle dances with the children, and Buzz was in the middle of the ring, jiggling his jig and buzzing his buzz. The queen was off with the king. Everyone was in costume. Everyone was pretending for the day. Outside cares, pedestrian life fifty feet outside the parking lot, had no reach on us here. There was no judgment—only utter acceptance.

“Dad would have loved this.”

“I’m sorry.” Stephan murmured in my hair against the noise. “I know you must still miss him very much.”

“I do, but it’s alright. I should have come back long before now. It’s like I still feel him when I’m here. I think this will always be our place.”

“You’re a lot like the other people here. For many of us, this is the only place where aspects of ourselves can exist. Here, we don’t feel so lonely.”

I was smiling, but facing away from him, he couldn’t see.

The tambourine raced faster. The violin matched its pace. Wenches were stomping their feet, whacking men with their aprons. A wizard was tapping his staff in the corner, smoking the longest pipe I’d ever seen. A child darted between the tables in a hobbit costume, complete with furry feet and a waistcoat and buttons. And a full armored

knight was twirling a princess in some sort of Spanish tango. None of it made any sense.

And yet, I realized, it all made sense.

A glitter of pink fairy wings passed, and I thought of the girl from that morning and the one from years ago, and if they would ever wander and find each other again in their wanderings.

## A STUDY IN FRIENDSHIP

“So, I guess I’m your roommate.”

I dropped my suitcase in the doorway of the room and planted my hands on my hips. The tall girl inside gave a half turn from where she stood in front of a high bookshelf. Her hands balanced a couple of books, as though she had been arranging them on the shelves. She looked me up and down, her azure eyes fixing on mine for a moment from under her straight dark hair before she gave a small smile.

“Yes, welcome,” she said.

Her voice was deeper than I had imagined from her thin frame; its timber matched the dark waves of her hair, extending over her shoulders. The tone of her words came across as short and distracted, but not unkind. It matched the smile she had given—one of personal effort unrelated to me. She had already returned to her books before I could try and engage her further in conversation.

I lumbered inside the small room, dragging my suitcase and backpack, admiring how her side of the room already appeared so meticulous and organized. A navy blue throw lay spread across the bed, smoothed of every crease and rumple, holding a Union Jack pillow at its head. The bookshelf held volumes of all size and thickness, though most looked like textbooks and binders. Folders, sheet music, album records, and even small boxes also filled the shelves in perfect arrangement. A music stand by the window in the middle of the dorm room accompanied what looked to be a viola beside it, near her nightstand. I glanced to my empty side of the room and heaved my suitcase up onto the bed. The mattress gave a loud groan and my roommate glanced over at me with only her eyes until she caught me looking at her. I paused, trying to take my opportunity again.

“I’m Jane,” I said. “Jane Wilson.”

“Samantha Howe.”

“Nice to meet you.”

The girl glanced over again, this time with her whole head, hesitant as if she did not know how to respond. She simply nodded instead and returned to her organization.

“So,” I said. “You’re a chemistry major, too?”

“Yes.” Samantha rolled up the sleeves of her white dress shirt and set the books aside when a quiet bubbling sound came from inside her closet. She opened her nightstand and removed three porcelain white tea cups and saucers, before walking over and throwing open the doors to the closet. Inside on an empty shelf next to a pile of scarves sat an electric water kettle, which I noticed for the first time ran by cord to an outlet right outside the closet. She unplugged the kettle and brought it over to the cups.

“I hope you like tea.”

“That’s sort of irrelevant, considering you can’t have that in here.”

“Says who?”

“Really?” I laughed and pushed my hair behind my ear. “The RA will write us up.”

“Oh, that’s doubtful.” She waved a hand and continued, unconcerned. “Here you are.” She brought a cup over to me and I hesitated, but then took it with a shrug. She raised her cup and sipped it slowly, a look of complete contentment washing over her face.

I shrugged again and set my cup aside, continuing to unpack my suitcase. I didn’t have much with me, but I had taken it all, leaving hardly anything at my stepfather’s

house. My mom would notice in a few days that the folded flag from my dad's funeral was among those items. Maybe a few weeks. I tucked it gently in the top drawer of my nightstand and smoothed it over like Samantha's bedspread. My clothes found a home easily enough and it wasn't long before I had everything set up the way I wanted. About that time, a knuckled rap sounded on the doorframe. I looked up in surprise, my eyes immediately darting to the closed closet doors. Samantha remained where she was, reclined across her bed, her back straight against the head board and the long legs of her dark jeans crossed casually at the ankles.

"Hell, I couldn't believe it when they told me which floor I would be covering this semester. If it isn't Samantha Howe."

Another girl leaned in the doorway, curly brown hair tied into a loose knot over the sage crew neck sweater she wore. I looked to her nametag pin, seeing her title as Bakerson Building RA. Her smirk seemed pleasant on her face, if not mockingly directed at Samantha.

"Why don't you come in, McKay?" Samantha asked. She had turned back to the book in front of her and spoke with light sarcasm as she sipped her tea. A stream of the late morning sun fell through the blinds of the window across the floor.

The girl at the door crossed her arms across her chest and smiled, pleased with herself as she wandered in the room. She looked around and nodded, then sniffed. I groaned internally as she rolled her eyes and looked directly to Samantha, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, have some tea." Samantha reached out to the nightstand and presented the third tea cup without looking up from her book.

“Where did you get that?” McKay accepted the cup and sat down on the bed next to Samantha. “No, don’t answer. I don’t want to know.” She sighed and smiled up at me. “I’m McKay Lewis. You must be Jane.”

“Yeah, yeah, I am.” I sat down slowly on my bed when I realized Samantha and I weren’t about to be busted after all. McKay held the teacup in her lap and looked around the room as if she was searching for some form of distraction. Samantha kept reading on in her book.

“I wanted to stop by and check in on this one.” McKay jerked her head toward Sam, who raised her eyebrows, but did not look up. “I hope she doesn’t give you too much trouble. Feel free to put her in line or come get me if you don’t want to do it yourself.”

“I…” I glanced between the girls and shrugged. “I don’t see why there would be any trouble.” I swung my legs back and forth off the edge of my bed.

“Tell you what,” McKay said. “Hold onto that thought. I’m going to come in next week and ask you again.” She laughed as Samantha sighed and closed her book with a snap.

“McKay assumes there will be a problem because you are not my first roommate,” she explained. “She’s even taken bets on how long you will stay before asking her to be moved.”

“I have not!”

Samantha peered at her from under a dark eyebrow and McKay rolled her eyes. “Okay, maybe I did.”

She sighed as Samantha looked back to her book. “You can’t hide anything from this one. Take it from me. Just don’t even bother.”

“Why not?” I asked. “How does she know?”

“I know everything.” Samantha was studying the back cover of her book, sniffing it.

“She does. It’s scary, but brilliant.”

I nodded, beginning to wonder what I had gotten myself into. Maybe I could catch McKay later in the evening on my way to dinner and ask her what I would have to do if I ended up wanting another roommate after all. “How do you two know each other?” I asked.

“High school—”

“Hell—”

Both girls answered at the same time and I raised my eyebrows as they looked at each other, McKay shaking her head with a disgusted expression.

“High school,” she said. “We met years ago in high school. We’ve had a few classes together since then. I’m a criminal studies major, so I have to do things like forensics and chemistry.”

“Yes, yes,” Sam said from her book once more. “As you try to sound impressive, please note that I’ve posted my schedule by the door for you. During my free hours I can be found here, in the library, or in the chemistry lab. Please plan your consultation appointments accordingly.”

“Oh, right. Thanks. She helps me with some of my assignments and what not,” McKay said at my confused look.

“If by some, you mean all, then, yes.”

McKay laughed nervously and gave a sheepish grin. She shrugged as if she had been embarrassed by this fact at one time, but no longer cared to deny it. “I run one of the student chemistry organizations and I usually find Sam’s help...insightful.”

“Well, if it’s too much trouble, why not get Samantha to help you run it?” I asked.

Both girls looked at each other before bursting into laughter. The look of genuine amusement on Sam’s face did more for my nerves than anything so far since entering the room. I laughed with them, though still not sure what they found so amusing about my remark. I had wondered if the girl really smiled at all, the long, sharp features of her face seeming like they were carved from marble. The laugh lines of her face swelled up over her raised cheeks, meeting the light that flashed in her eyes.

“Hell, the students would mutiny,” McKay said. Sam nodded, the light still dancing in her amused eyes.

“I’m not exactly a people person,” she said.

“No, it’s not her division. Not really mine either, now that I think about it.”

McKay sipped the last of her tea and placed it back on Sam’s nightstand. She plucked a string on the girl’s viola and looked around the room again. She scoffed at Sam’s huff of annoyance before turning to me.

“So, have fun with that, then.”

#

I found the first few weeks to be interesting indeed, if not fun. I quickly learned that my roommate had the manners of a five year old, but yet would show the greatest insight of clarity in matters I found utterly confusing. I discovered that I learned more

about chemistry and the science of deduction from her than from any of my professors. We shared a few classes and sat together off to the side near the back of the room. A good vantage point, she had said. I gave up trying to take notes after the first week when Sam eagerly showed me all the ways in which the textbook was inadequate in its explanations.

“Shhh! He’s talking!”

“He’s an idiot.” Samantha waved a hand and several students near us turned to stare. I smiled at them as Sam continued rambling. When I ignored her, she began writing on a scrap paper. I snickered when she passed me the note that corrected the past five comments the professor had said and ended with an sufficiently supported theory on how he was having an affair with our TA sitting a few seats away from us.

Sometimes Samantha was silent for days and I never bothered her; other times she practically begged me to come to the chemistry lab so she could show me a breakthrough she had made. I always pretended to be annoyed, but I was secretly touched that she considered my opinion valid when she obviously didn’t need it, and I got the impression that she was just as secretly pleased that someone actually cared to spend time with her and show interest in what she was doing.

McKay would come over at times just to pop in and say hello, or to invite us to go grab a bite of dinner somewhere on a Friday night. These evenings usually ended after a few margaritas and Sam driving us back to the dorms. One time I woke up to music and found myself on the floor, tucked up in the blanket from my bed. McKay was sprawled out on her back a few feet away, her mouth hanging open. I blinked and realized Sam was standing over us playing her viola, dancing slightly with eyes closed and a light

smile on her face. McKay had groaned and lobbed a pillow at her, cursing at how late she'd let them slept in.

“You didn't sleep in. You were passed out.”

One time we had even watched *Pride and Prejudice*, forcing Sam to stay by putting her on popcorn and wine duty. She enjoyed the prospect of calculating our alcohol intake and we convinced her that it would be more interesting if she added herself into the mix. We may have gotten halfway through the movie—I don't even remember. McKay, unbeknownst to me, refrained from the wine and captured everything on her phone. Laughing at us, she showed us the video the next day in which Sam sat huddled on the bed, crying at Darcy's proposal and asking me why Elizabeth was so cruel. I said something to the effect that Sam was a lot like Elizabeth. She pulled a face and started to say something, but then slumped over on the bed and fell asleep. I giggled and spilled my wine as I asked McKay if she had seen it. Then I looked into the camera and started coming toward it. The video wobbled and quickly ended. We never did get through all of *Pride and Prejudice* together.

#

I woke up late one morning, having decided to sleep in since my biochemistry class had been cancelled, and pretended to keep sleeping when I heard Sam on the phone. I had never eavesdropped before, curious as I had always been for ways to get inside Sam's head and try and see things the way she did, from that outside perspective she always seemed to give.

“Come on, Mary,” Sam said. She sounded like she was pacing in the room and I heard a whirring in the air—she was twirling her viola bow. She played with the bow

sometimes when she was aggravated. I remembered one night how furious she was when administration changed the passcode to the security on the chemistry lab and she could no longer get in past regular hours. The bow had turned into a fencing sword, slashing at the air.

“Don’t lecture me,” she said now. “Don’t you lay this on me again. You are just as guilty as I am.”

I listened closer, trying to figure out who she could be talking to. A friend? A sibling? She had never mentioned her family before. The pacing stopped and she let out a long sigh.

“You remember what our childhood was like. For God’s sake, Mary, I’m still ostracized! I no longer care what others think of me and I would have stopped caring a lot sooner if you hadn’t pretended to be friends with everyone we met... No, don’t try and deny it. Mom and Dad always favored you more. They thought you could be the normal one.”

The bed creaked and I heard her sit down. I tried to breathe slowly, counting the pauses to seem like I was still asleep. Every second Sam stayed silent was another second I thought she would discover me.

“I know she worries,” Sam said. “What? When’s the last time—I don’t know. I think I called her last month. Yes, I talked to them both... Because, Mary, my roommate is sleeping and I don’t—if I wanted to go outside, I would— ... Yeah. Yeah, I know. Maybe, maybe we could all do Christmas this year. Could you get off work?”

More silence followed and I listened, but found myself trying to go back to sleep. The thought of Sam’s parents and the home life I had never known filled my mind. I tried

to imagine her as a child. What was she like then? Throughout the semester, I had never experienced her in such a vulnerable way, and my guilt increased as I knew she wouldn't want me to know. She had been quiet for the past few days, but I thought maybe she was just in one of her brooding moods, thinking over something. As I drifted off to sleep again, I made a mental note to pay more attention to her.

I love them too," she said. "You know how hard that is for me to say."

#

Sam never showed much change after that morning, but I noticed she continued to act more quietly than normal. She spoke less often and stayed late at the chemistry lab until they kicked her out. The viola also took up more practice and I saw her scribbling up a composition every now and then.

"She gets like this," McKay told me. "Just keep an eye on her and let her be."

One time I woke up and she was in her bed with her laptop, in the same position I had last seen her six hours ago. I sighed and climbed out of bed, lumbering across the room to her. She didn't look up and I reached out slowly, closing the laptop. She didn't move, didn't blink, didn't say anything. I couldn't decide whether to laugh or feel concerned, and I was reminded of our initial meeting when I sensed the same tug. I put the laptop over on her nightstand and pushed gently on her shoulders. Her eyes drifted closed and I was able to lay her back down into bed, pulling the blanket up over her.

"Mary, where's the dog?" she asked.

"I don't know, Sam."

“You never do. You never play with me anymore...” She smacked her lips and rolled over, snoring. I waited a moment to make sure she was asleep. Then I moved over to the closet to brew a cup of tea.

I sat with a cup on top of my chemistry textbook, and studied the flashcards Sam had written for me. Every now and then I came across some that held deduction notes on different students who sat around us. I shook my head, finding ones that had been written early in the semester, ones that had ended up coming true. Sam let out a loud snore in her sleep and I glanced up. She seemed so like a child at times, so innocent and unaware, so independent in her own intelligence, yet so trusting in the friendship I offered. I realized I had not even been truly upset with her yet during the semester. Annoyed, yes. I had more than once snapped at her for playing her viola at three in the morning, quiet though she kept it; for standing on her bed and pounding on the ceiling at the disruptive students above us; for going into my mini fridge because she was too lazy or too unaware to keep her own stocked. A few weeks ago, she had even walked in on me and my boyfriend at the time, Michael.

She had said she would be in the library all night if the chemistry lab was locked again. So, I had invited Michael over. He sat a few rows ahead of us in chemistry—he was one of the ones Sam had studied. I asked her what she knew about him, but she never told me.

Michael and I had just about fallen asleep when the door opened and the light flicked on. The rest of it sort of blurred together. Sam came in the room and made a comment, and Michael retorted with an insult. I remember hearing him say the word psychopath. I think I surprised all three of us when I shouted at Michael and threw him

out of the room, screaming at him never to call her that again. Sam handed me his clothes and I chucked them into the hall after him. One of his brown shoes hit him in the head and he groaned out a curse before I slammed the door. Then, wrapped in my bed sheet, I sat on my bed and put my head in my hands. Sam stood where she was.

“Library was locked, too. Scheduled cleaning.”

“I know,” I said. “They posted that notice last week.”

“Oh.” Sam sat down on her bed, too and stared at her hands. “I didn’t see that.”

“I know.”

“Um... sorry about that.”

“I know.”

A few weeks later, I learned that Michael had been seeing another girl, the same TA from our chemistry class. I asked Sam if she had known and she became quiet. She asked if she should have told me and I just remember smiling, pulling her into a hug that she awkwardly returned.

“Thanks for that night,” she said. “When he...and then you...well, that was nice of you.”

I peered up at her, not sure if I should let my surprise show or not. “Of course,” I said. “You’re my best friend.”

“I’m your best...friend.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Of course, you are.”

#

Finals week came and passed, and I climbed the stairs to our floor one afternoon, prepared to find McKay and asked her how much she had originally bet on my living

arrangements with Sam. Selling back my textbooks hadn't brought in as much money as I'd hoped. Most of the rooms were empty now for the break. Sam and I were some of the last few to leave and I wondered if she was planning to go home like I had heard her tell her sister.

Then I entered our room and found Sam sitting on the floor against her bed, McKay across from her against mine. Sam was twiddling her bow in her fingers while McKay leaned her head back, throwing a tennis ball up in the air. I closed the door and dropped my backpack, walking to the closet to start a brew of tea. I glanced at McKay and she shook her head. I lowered myself on the floor with a sigh.

"What's this about, then? Sam, you didn't eat anything for lunch. I'm assuming that means no dinner, either."

I watched Sam, but she didn't look at me. She simply stared. I knew she heard me, though, because her head had tilted slightly when I'd entered the room. I leaned forward over my crossed legs and folded my hands together.

"Sam," I said. My voice was softer than I expected, and I spoke to Sam as though I was right next to her and she and I were the only ones in the room. "Sam, talk to me. Come on, I'm here. Don't shut me out."

Sam closed her bloodshot eyes and opened them slowly before turning to me, her hair falling over her face. "It's my mom," she said. Her deep voice was also so quiet that I almost did not hear her. She swallowed and repeated her words. "She's in the hospital."

"And?" I asked. "How is she? What's wrong?" I spoke practically, hiding the emotion I was feeling for her, the emotion I knew she was trying not to feel herself. "Sam, look at me." I noticed McKay had risen from the floor and walked over to the

closet, where she was pouring our tea. She returned and handed two cups down to me. I placed one in front of Sam, positioning it so the handle was right in the grasp of her limp fingers. Her light eyes lifted to mine.

“I find this sort of thing difficult,” she said. “I don’t know how to...my sister and I always struggled with it and...my parents are great. They’re normal. They love us. But they don’t notice things like my sister and I, so they never understood. And Mary doesn’t really bother anymore with m...”

Her tone and the lack of the answer itself told me the severity of the situation. She had not even said that Mary was her sister, even though I would have no reason to know. Was she aware I had listened to her on the phone?

“I don’t know what to do, Jane.” She laughed and she brought a hand to her mouth, though I knew it was not the laugh she was trying to stifle. “I’ve never said that before. I’ve always known what to do. Everything always made such sense. I look at a situation, at a person, and I see everything. Yet, I look at this and I see nothing...absolutely nothing.”

“You always find a way,” McKay said. “Hell, half of what I’ve been able to do is only because you’ve been there to help me. You always find a way. You’ll figure this out, too.”

“This isn’t some case, Lewis!” She slammed her fist on her knee, and I was taken aback by the dangerous light in her eyes, the snarl on her lips. She had never called McKay by her surname and in my peripheral vision I saw McKay lift her chin.

Unsure if what I was about to do would help, I placed a hand over Sam's free one, which was shaking slightly on her knee. "I uh, I've never really told anyone this," I said, "but my dad died overseas."

McKay glanced at me in the corner of my eye, but I continued. "He wrote to me, called me, tried to stay in touch. But I was mad at him. I...I don't even remember why. I can't even remember the last words I said to him. But I know they were horrible. And that's how I felt for years. Horrible." I gripped Sam's fingers without realizing it and she returned the gesture. I felt her eyes on me, but I didn't look up or I knew I wouldn't be able to finish.

"My mom was too caught up in her own grief to notice me, and she remarried just over a year later. I never forgave her for that. And I never forgave myself. And I..." I swallowed. "Sam, you have to go. You just have to. I'll go with you if you want, but you have to do this or you'll regret it forever. Trust me."

McKay stood up. "Hell, I need to put on some more tea."

#

That night I had the first nightmare since the day I learned the news that my dad had been killed in a roadside bomb. I knew it would happen when I told Sam the story. I had even stared at his flag before going to sleep, the way it had always helped before. Not this time. This time, Sam was there first in the dream. She was there with that long face, those blue eyes, so sad and burdened in a light I had never seen before. She was there pleading for me to help her, asking why I didn't help her, asking why I didn't help my dad. I looked at her, puzzled at how she knew, and I told her my daddy was dead. Then I saw him, lying there in the sand, only a face and the top half of his torso, his remaining

arm reaching for me. I reached back, but then the sands blew over and I couldn't see. I didn't know where I was going.

Then, hands grabbed my shoulders. I shook them off; they were keeping me from my dad. But the hand pulled me still, and I realized the sands were calming. I hadn't noticed it before. But I thrashed, still. No one was supposed to know. It was my burden, my shame. A part of me had killed him. A hand pulled harder on my shoulder.

My eyes flashed open and I saw the hand still there. It led up to a face. I lashed out with a scream and heard a groan, saw a curtain of dark hair fly. I sat up and then Samantha's hands were on me again, grabbing my arms to hold me up. A bright spot of scarlet stood out in the corner of her mouth.

"Jane," she said. She shook me gently and I pretended to be half asleep again, too embarrassed to let her know. I pretended to cry, but that came easier than I wanted it to.

"Jane, wake up. It's just a dream. It's okay, it's okay. You're okay."

I shook my head and leaned forward into her sweater. She froze and held me awkwardly for a moment until she relaxed slightly and wrapped her arms around me, letting me cry against her. She patted me on the back, the motion slow and unsteady as though she was trying it out for the first time.

"It's okay. It's okay. What do you need? Do you need water?"

I shook my head against her shoulder.

"Tea? I know, I'll make tea."

I shook my head again.

"Do you need McKay? I'll get her. She'll make tea."

"I don't want tea, Sam."

“Well, tell me what to do. I don’t know what to do.”

I sniffed and sat up, pushing my hair behind my ears and trying to recollect my breath. Her wide eyes peered out of the darkness, the dim lighting of the street light through the window blinds falling across her face.

“You know what you need to do,” I said. Her eyes shifted as she realized I was no longer talking about myself. “You know what you need to do. You’ve known all along. I’m here. I’ll do it with you.”

Sam nodded slowly, a light flashing in her eyes so much like the one I had seen in my dream, a light of confusion and sorrow. A light of hope, buried beneath reason and the mask of practiced indifference. She bit her lip, wincing as her teeth hit the sore spot.

“We can pack in the morning,” she said. “Be on the road before ten. We might run into traffic. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Which direction are we going?”

“My hometown is about six hours east of here. Why?”

“I want to make a stop first.”

She glanced at my nightstand, where she knew I kept my father’s flag. She nodded and held my hand. I nodded back and crawled back down into bed, smiling as Sam pulled the covers up over me. She walked quietly back to her own bed and lay down. I felt her eyes on me, waiting to make sure I went back to sleep. The streetlight cast the shadow of her viola across the floor. I stared at it, letting the image permeate my mind and lull me to sleep with its melodies.

## AMISH COUNTRY

I never liked birds. I suppose it's because my father used to keep them in a shoebox in the freezer. He collected them as he found them, all dead in their individual Ziploc bags, waiting to be taken out and used as models for his wood carving fetish.

We lived in the mountains in Pennsylvania, just at the border of Lancaster County. You know, Amish people, horses and buggies, Whoopie pies. The Amish kids were adorable with the boys in their overalls and straw hats, girls in their braids—and I loved watching the young couples, the teenagers old enough to go out on dates. The girls in their long dresses looking like Laura Ingalls Wilder, walking hand in hand with tall boys down the road. I would stare out the window at them as we passed in our station wagon, sometimes catching the eye of that one girl who I thought always seemed to glance at me and smile, as if she knew my desire to be like her, even though I didn't.

Sometimes I still think about her, the one that stuck with me the most. The one who seemed to know me in those few seconds better than I'd ever known myself. She had long chestnut hair. I could tell that just from the bit that stuck out from under the traditional cap covering her bun. She had blue eyes, and high cheekbones that colored when she caught my glance and smiled. The heels and toes of her boots were caked in wet mud, but she didn't seem to notice.

“Bluebirds,” my father always said. “Bluebirds are some of the best birds to carve. The shading on the crown and tail are distinctive. And they're larger. Not so damn small like those finches.”

He tried to show me his work, get me to help even. But I was always out in the driveway playing basketball. I got more practice running than anyone else on my high

school team because I had to keep the ball from rolling down the gravel lane. It stretched for almost a half a mile down the hill. And if the ball went into the brush on the side of any one of the curves, it would have taken me forever to find. When I wasn't playing ball, I was up in the hunting stand my brother used during deer season. I climbed up there and read my books. In the winter, when the trees were bare, I could see all the way down the east side of the mountain. There was a dried patch of blood on the corner of the stand where my brother shot himself through the hand with his compound bow. He stayed in the stand all day, stubborn as all get out, apparently forgetting that the deer weren't going to come anywhere near the smell of blood. My father later threatened to roll his head down the drive. My mother's the one who actually stood up for him.

“You know good and well Charley wasn't going to come in until noon time. You told him if he came in early without a buck he'd have to sleep in the stand.”

She loved my brother. I was left to my father to be his favorite, and I rebelled. I actually think I was more stubborn than my brother in that way. I haven't seen him since he left for the Peace Corps. Booked a flight for Mongolia two weeks before my high school graduation, and never came back. Mom kind of shut down after that, and I left for college the next month.

#

I had a girlfriend for a while when I lived in Brooklyn. Her name was Miley, and she worked as a fashion design manager at a store downtown. She was a few years older than me, in her early thirties, but she said I had an innocence about me that made her want to love me and protect me. I guess that was a compliment. Except, I sure as hell didn't need protecting.

I was in graduate school, finishing up my last semester in child psychology—irony abounds. Miley had more than once sat cross legged in front of me as I graded papers and asked me to practice profiling her. I told her she watched too much Criminal Minds on Netflix, and asked if she had a suspicious past I should be concerned about.

She figured out real quick that I had this thing for birds. I was staring out the window one morning while she was getting ready for work. She could dress faster than anyone I'd ever seen, which was strange considering how closely she paid attention to selecting clothes. It was like she woke up every morning and ran through the mental catalogue of her closet, picking and swapping and finalizing. Me, I could walk around in sweats and a t-shirt all day and not think twice. A couple of times, I'd almost walked out the door in such attire until she stopped me, horror-stricken.

When she finished her ensemble for that day, she came to the kitchen and found me with my nose pressed to the glass, clutching the eggplant color drapes she had insisted on purchasing during a department store sale. I was sucking on a strand of hair, a habit she always reminded me was distasteful.

“You know that’s a distasteful habit.”

“Actually, it tastes like mint.”

She never appreciated my puns. “You used my shampoo again? Goddamit, Abby, I got that other stuff for you.”

“Yeah, I didn’t like it. Here, come look at this guy.”

She gave a half glance over her shoulder. “Look at what?”

“Don’t you see him out there on the railing?” I asked. “He’s beautiful. Purple finch, I’m almost sure of it. My dad never really liked them, but I think they’re perfect. What do you think?”

“I think it’s a bird, Abby. I’m sorry, but it looks just like all the others to me. We’ve been over this.”

“I don’t like other birds,” I said. “At all. Just finches.”

“So you’ve said. I don’t see what makes a finch so different.”

“That’s because you’re not looking.” I pulled her to the window, gently, I thought.

Miley jerked her arm free with a huff, and straightened her dress jacket. Her auburn hair was wrapped behind her head, held in place with two sticks I’d gotten for her in China Town one weekend while we were in New York City. She didn’t look at the finch, didn’t say anything at all. Just grabbed a breakfast shake from her corner of the refrigerator and left. Her heels clicked on the linoleum and she may have muttered something, but I had already turned back to the curtains.

#

Sledding down the driveway used to be one of my favorite things about winter. I had an old toboggan sled, always cold on the backs of my thighs. I’d sit at the bottom of the hill by the road, feel the sun on my face where it was free to shine without the cluster of pines obscuring it. I got pretty good steering with the rope over the years, and soon I could maneuver the turns with ease going down. Charley stank at it, but he liked to show off for his jock friends, and they’d laugh at anything. I tried to hock loogies at them from

the tree stand until they dragged me down and shoved snow inside the fur hood of my coat, and Mom yelled at me from inside to stop annoying Charley and his friends.

One year while I was parked at the bottom of the hill, I saw a minivan drive by with a Christmas tree strapped to the roof. The family inside was singing, no doubt to some carol, and everyone was laughing. The kids in the backseat were even wearing ski hats and scarves. I wondered where they lived, who they were, and why they didn't even see me as they passed.

I sucked on a tassel on the end of my scarf, clamping the knot of yarn between my molars. Eventually I spit it back out and pushed myself up, frozen knees cracking and popping, and began the long hike with the sled back up to the house.

I remember once while I was down there I found a dead bird lying in the snow. It must have fallen out of the tree or something. Maybe it froze to death and just decided it just didn't want to live anymore and keeled over. But it was lying there, rock hard. I picked it up and held it in my gloves, stroked a talon, lifted a frozen wing out as far as I could. I held it up to my face and made chirping noises to it. It was a female cardinal, brown and large. No crest on its head. It seemed especially large because of its puffed winter plumage and it being bloated and all. I dug through the snow and into the frozen dirt with my numb fingers, and pushed aside earth until I could lay it down. Then I smoothed its feathers and covered it back up, patting the snow over it where it would be forever safe against my father.

“What were you doing down there?” my mother asked me when I came back inside. She was mixing Hamburger Helper on the stove, wisps of hair sticking to her

forehead. I glanced at the melting snow on my gloves, then at her, and then back at my clothes. The warm air in the kitchen hurt my face.

“Smoking pot,” I said, and went up to my room, stomping my muddy boots on each carpeted step. I passed Charley’s room and pressed my ear to the door, listening. He had a girl in there again. Sarah, a sophomore in the FFA. This one was different, Charley had told me. She lived just down the drive from us, and she often took the cut through the woods to slip up to his window.

I imagined a number of things I could do to embarrass them in that moment. Instead, I drew a hot bath, grinning a few minutes later as I slipped in and heard my mother downstairs yelling at my father about how I was taking all the hot water again, and how was she supposed to wash the dishes without hot water. I sank to my nose in the bath and closed my eyes. If my legs weren't so long, maybe I could have floated. But my head just leaned against the rim of the tub, and, under the water, I could still hear my brother going to town with Sarah. The sound was all warped, the way it is when you're underwater in the pool and someone is saying something and you come back up and try to repeat what was said. I could even hear down below where my parents were still yelling and throwing things around.

I reached up and pounded on the wall to Charley’s room. The bed stopped squeaking for a few seconds, and I pounded again.

“Abigail! I know you’re up there, young lady!” Mom shouted. “Stop banging on that wall! Your brother’s trying to study!”

I believe it was right then in that moment that I decided I didn't care if Charley left for the Peace Corps. I'd seen the pamphlets in his backpack. I knew he wanted out. And

he was actually going to do it before me, without Mom ever knowing who he really was. I felt like asking Sarah if she knew he was leaving. She ought to know. She at least knew the real him.

#

I never did tell Sarah. When Miley came back from work that evening, I asked her about it. We were finishing a dinner of eggplant parmesan, her favorite. I'd bought cheap merlot from the liquor store on the corner, knowing she might complain but that I would be the one to drink most of it.

‘What brought this up?’ she asked.

I shrugged. ‘Was just thinking about him, that’s all. Wonder what he’s up to. Haven’t called home in a while to ask about him.’

‘You haven’t called home to ask about anything in a while.’

I chewed around a lump of eggplant. ‘This is true.’

‘Sounds like you had other things on your mind at the time,’ she said, ‘other than Sarah, I mean. Why did your mom favor your brother so much anyway?’

‘He was the firstborn.’

She scrunched her nose at the way I'd said it without any hesitation, any confliction. It was factual. I didn't need to think about it. Thinking about it wouldn't change it.

‘That shouldn't matter.’ She shook her head slowly and began twirling pasta around her fork, letting half of it unravel just to start again. I considered telling her the habit was distasteful.

“It matters when she never wanted another child after him. When she tells you that her mother never wanted a daughter either.”

Miley’s horrified face snapped up from her food. The pasta slipped completely from her fork. “She what? How come you never told me that? Abby, that’s the biggest load of shit I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s alright,” I said. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Sweetheart, yes. Yes, it does matter.” She pushed the plate aside, and reached for my hand. “Look, I’m sorry. I’m sorry about what I said this morning about the bird. It wasn’t fair of me.”

“No.” I drained the wine from the clear tumbler. Hers sat full in her wine glass still. “No, it wasn’t fair,” I said. “But that’s alright, too.”

“Oh, knock it off, Abby.” Her tone immediately flattened, along with the worry creases on her forehead. She dropped my hand and took her plate to the sink. “I’m big enough to admit when I’m wrong. The least you can do is stop deflecting the issue.”

“I thought you said that’s what you like about me,” I said into the kitchen. “That I’m innocent.”

She made a face. She didn’t have to turn her head for me to see it. I saw it in the way her shoulders hunched while she scoured the dishes with the brush wand, in the way she turned the faucet louder. She had done it before, when I promised and failed for the third time in a week to have dinner ready when she got home.

“Innocent.” Miley shook her head. “That was a poor choice of words at the time.”

“Very poor.”

#

My father stopped me once on my way out to a Saturday night basketball game. Mom was asleep on the couch with another migraine. She got them frequently, she said. She liked to compare herself to Mrs. Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, always complaining about her nerves, though I knew she had never actually read the book.

Charley might have already been at the gym. I sometimes saw him in the upper bleachers with his friends during the game. He was the only one in the family who ever came. I remember once when I scored a shot from near center court, and I looked to him through the noise and faces just in time to see him leap to his feet, fist pumping the air, mouth open. I wondered if he would have cheered had he been alone, or had his friends not known that I was his little sister.

My hair was in a high ponytail, and I was dressed in my shorts and jersey, all except for my sneakers, which I didn't like to wear through the mud. Instead, I wore my pull-on ropers, Justin knock-offs. They were Dad's hand-me downs. Kind of gross, but I'd practically saturated the insides with Lysol spray and tried not to think about it the rest of the time.

"Sorry I can't be at your game tonight, kiddo," he said.

"Dad, you haven't been to a game all season. Why are you apologizing now?" I shifted my sports bag over my shoulder, hand half turned on the doorknob.

His face colored. I thought about telling him he needed to shave. With his amber beard growing full, he was going through the lumberjack stage again, where he only wore flannel shirts and thought no one noticed. I suspected he thought it went with the trade of his carving. A man's look for a man's work. Man glitter, he always called it when he came in from the shop covered in sawdust.

He pushed up the rim of his glasses, and scratched his head. “I just thought—I wanted to tell you, that’s all. You’re a good player. I follow the scores in the paper. Maybe I’ll make a game, yet. They call you the ‘Super Soph,’ you know that?”

“Yeah, Dad, I know.” I took a half-step out the door.

“Hey.” He seemed to be searching for words. “I’m working on something for your birthday.”

“I don’t want a bluebird,” I said.

“No, it’s not a bluebird. I know you don’t like those.”

“Dad, I gotta go. If you’re going to come, that’s fine. I don’t care.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” He nodded, his chin resting near the top button that was missing on his shirt—though I knew for a fact Mom had already sewed it three different times. As I finally slipped out the door, he reached through and gave me a one-armed hug. He was wearing the Tim McGraw cologne either Charley or I had given him for Christmas.

“Have a good game, kiddo.”

I wanted to tell him later that we’d won, that I’d scored over half the points in the game. But I suspected he would find out sooner or later from the papers. I still made it home earlier than Charley, who stayed out all night with his friends at the hole in the wall on Main Street. It was an underground club, below the level of the sidewalk. Wranglers. Real original name. It was a glorified basement is what it was. I told myself that I would go at least once, the way people say you have to go to a high school dance at least once. Yeah, I never went to Wranglers or prom.

#

Miley put forth an effort to be extra nice to me the next few days after my dinner confession. She called it a confession anyway, but I tried to insist it was just another factoid of my life.

“But think about it,” she said. “How horrible of a childhood must your mom have had. To treat you like that means she’s—”

“Continuing a cycle of maternal neglect, yes. I know it’s not my fault.”

“Do you? Then why won’t we go to your place? Why won’t you take me to see where you grew up?”

I opened my mouth and closed it, thinking that if I said anything I would say too much. That it was for me and no one else. She couldn’t go there. She wouldn’t understand. She even pronounced it the wrong way, the way everyone who wasn’t from there pronounced it, hard on the consonants: Lan-Kaster County, instead of the fluid, one-word Lancaster, where the n is almost silent. The vowels were always more prominent in the Dutch communities.

“Abby,” she said, “just the other day you were telling me that I hadn’t seen real Amish until I’d been to Lancaster. And when I said I knew what a cow looked like, you dismissed me.”

“Because you’ve never seen a Lancaster cow. It’s true.”

“Well then, get in the car. Let’s go.”

“No,” I said. “I think I’ll pass. It’s too hot.”

“You get in that car, or I’m going myself and I’ll just drive around Ephrata all day waving to random people and stopping to take pictures of every damn cow I see.”

#

I found the carving on my dresser the morning of my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. It wasn't wrapped in tissue paper or wearing a ribbon around its neck or anything. Didn't even have a card with it. It just sat there, the shaft of sunlight from my window nipping the end of its tail.

Staring, as though it might come alive and take flight, I crawled to the edge of my bed and leaned over, nose to nose with it. He hadn't been lying when he said he'd been working on it for a while. Finches weren't even his favorite, but I hadn't seen more intricate detail even on the ones he sold at the farmer's market. Sometimes, I could tell when he was rushing a job, when he messed up and worked around the mistake to fit it in. Every stroke here looked like it had been made with careful purpose—no shakiness in the lines, no extra pressure on the curves where he overestimated the turn blade and had to take the tip back over. The burn work was perfectly shaded. I knew from my own practice—he never knew I tried it when he wasn't home—it was hard to keep the coloring so even. Sometimes the heat of the burner just eroded too much wood. Good wood is soft, the bumpy grains almost nonexistent. It's harder to ruin. This, however, was flawless.

I reached out and stroked the left wing, petted the head and the beak. I could almost see how the sandpaper had rubbed over it, smoothing every single crevice and nick so that nothing remained but seamless art. I could have run my lips over it and never caught a splinter. I just stared at it, soaked in the detail, and traced it. It was just big enough to nest in the palm of my hand, but I let it sit where it was as I examined it.

Dad never asked how I liked my present, but I suspected he knew. When I saw him in the bleachers the last game of my senior year, sitting on the visitor's side because

he had come too late and the home side was full, I knew. And yet, it wasn't enough. It had all come too late. It wasn't really anyone's fault—just the way the cards had fallen in our family. No one had taken the time to stack the deck. I had already moved on, and I knew would leave Lancaster itself for good as soon as I graduated.

#

I was miserable for most of the drive from Brooklyn. It was hot and muggy, and, just as I promised Miley, it reeked of sweltering bovine as soon as we passed the Pennsylvania line. Miley wore a salmon pink tank top and white shorts, expression veiled behind large designer sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat. As I drove, her hand rested atop mine, shifting the gears with me.

It was a favorite habit of hers, to keep her hand on mine as I maneuvered the gear shift. She loved going from second to third, how my wrist flattened from its angle when it thrust forward. Sometimes at a stop she would grace her fingers around my knuckles, barely touching the skin until I flinched and ground the gears between first and second at the green light while she laughed. Between the lights and the cresting hills of the disappearing city, there was plenty of opportunity for low gear traffic—she insisted I take the long scenic route. Abandoned lots turned to fields, stray establishments to silos. Black ground to green, grey sky to blue.

As we entered the town I hadn't visited in nearly ten years, I became aware of one thing instantly: Miley loved the Amish. They were in full dresses and overalls as always, the only difference being that they actually had their sleeves rolled up while they worked outside. I felt sweat rolling between my breasts just watching them. It was the first time I

could ever distinctly remember not wanting to see these people I had grown up envying. As Miley grinned and laughed with interest, my face grew heavy.

“What are they doing?” Miley asked as we passed a large gathering of people working on a barn.

“It’s called a Barn Raising,” I said. “It’s something the Amish do together, usually to help out a family in need. There was a big one my senior year when a fire took out the Harris’ land.”

“Were there ever any Amish at your school?”

I thought about my father, who had gone to the same high school I did. In his day, he used to engage in “yonni-bopping” with his friends. It was a game where you’d drive up beside an Amish boy on his bike, roll down your window, and shove out the back end of a hockey stick that had a boxing glove on the end, effectively “bopping” the kid off his bike. I’m pretty sure Charley and his friends used to do it, too.

I pointed to the pasture out Miley’s window.

“What is it?”

“There,” I said. “See that? That’s a Lancaster cow.”

She laughed and made me pull over so that, true to her word, she could get out and take a picture with her phone. A horse and buggy came up and had to go around us. I shielded my face with my hand, but I still saw through the gap in my fingers the two little girls giggling at us. Just as I was about to roll down the passenger window and yell at Miley to get back from the fence, she opened the door and slid in with a wide smile and a peck on my cheek.

“Next stop,” she said. “Ooh, is that an Amish buggy or a Mennonite buggy? Let me take a picture.”

I pushed her phone down as I pulled away from the shoulder. “No. No pictures of the kids.”

“I wasn’t going to take a picture of them—”

“Not any of them. They don’t like it. They get it all the time from tourists.”

Miley crossed her arms. “I never knew you were this defensive.”

“I’m not.”

I watched the road between glancing at my speed and out my window. Over the hill to my left was the stretch up the mountain. I thought about climbing it, straining in low gear just as I’d done five years ago when I went home for the last time. When I’d packed my bags and said I was going up to New York for school. When, even as I left, I made sure that before I zipped up my backpack Dad could see the finch carving nestled near the top. Suspecting that he knew I never hated him was no longer enough—not for this step. I had to tell him in the clearest way I knew how that, while I’d come to care, while I’d forgiven him, I wasn’t coming back.

At the stop sign, I waited a few extra seconds. Then Miley and I turned right.

#

As I left Lancaster for good that night, I happened upon the same Amish girl I always looked for. I’d come up with a name for her. Melanie. It was stupid, I knew. She was still with that same boy—I couldn’t believe it. They were walking out of the Denny’s restaurant, the lights from the parking lot bright on their clean clothes. It was late for her to be out. I wondered if she would get in trouble.

When I drove along that same street with Miley, I glanced at the Denny's, thinking for some reason that I would see Melanie leaving with that boy, both of them older now, maybe even with children tugging their hands.

I could never nail down why I was so obsessed with her, why I'd dreamed that her life must have been so perfect, so simple and clear. Sometimes, when I still thought about her hesitant smile, I imagined I saw it on Miley's face. Maybe I'd been looking for clarity. In a home where insults were traded as readily as heartfelt gifts, there was a lot I couldn't make sense of. Miley was clear and straightforward. Sometimes too straightforward, granted, but it fit. I didn't want to take her to my family because I considered them under quarantine. I didn't want her to get drawn into that deception and compromise until even she turned into one of us.

And even then, I thought about the dress she had always pointed out to me while we lay in bed. It was from a new line she was promoting at work. She'd said how much she wanted to see me in it, how well it would look on me. I didn't tell her that I'd already bought it and had it hidden in the back of the car, and was planning on wearing it when I took her to a surprise anniversary dinner. And yet I thought, as we drove, that I would never end up wearing that dress after all. I would take it back to Brooklyn and give it to the college-age girl across the hall from us, or donate it to a thrift store. Miley had already had her way with enough.

While Miley flipped through the pictures on her phone, I saw a young mother hanging laundry in the yard from the corner of my eye. She shook out a white bed sheet, let it roll and flap in the wind before clipping it to the line leading from the side of the house to two different poles far out. This sheet didn't have a single stain. I imagined

taking a sheet that white, taking all the frigid birds out of that shoe box back home and wrapping them in it. And then maybe I'd release them all off the side of the mountain, and see if they'd fly.

## MAGNUM MYSTERIUM

The first time I met Jim as a patient, he sat in my yellow armchair like he'd been coming into my downtown Tampa office for months. He was the most troubling client I ever had, because he wasn't really a client at all.

He would prop his leg over one knee, elbows on the sides of the chair, his fingers interlaced. He used his hands to talk more than anyone I'd ever seen. Every annunciation had a corresponding hand wave, eyebrow gesture, finger twirl. Before long, I lost track of the sequence of sound, and focused on his body language, minute shifts, muscles along the jaw, veins in the neck, hesitant tightening disguised in a laugh. He laughed nearly every other sentence, in what I had at first noted as a possible defense mechanism, an air of nonchalant indifference. Twist everything to humor. Laugh at everything so you cry at nothing.

But now I knew I was wrong. Now I knew that the way Jim had looked at me so directly that very first afternoon, as if he was the one who was going to be asking the questions, had been insight on his part, and perhaps a lack of control on mine.

He would nod and smile as we talked, trade off faces of seriousness and sarcasm, tipping his head back. He was Florida's version of the California beach boy. Dark blonde hair, deep cerulean irises, a surprisingly pale face, and tall—not too tall. I'd known a boy back in high school who was six-seven, and he had been my mental measurement for men ever since. But Jim was young. Youngest music director ever of the Florida Orchestra. Jim was a prodigy at music, with a perfect ear for pitch and an uncanny knack for theory. If I would have let him, he would have steered the conversation into classical

composition history and the nature of augmented triads for hours. It became a pattern of traded-off doubts and compromises.

“I wish I didn’t so frequently get the feeling that this is all a game to you.”

“Never,” he said. “I wouldn’t use you like that. Besides, you’re having as much fun as I am.”

“I wouldn’t call it fun. You’re very adept at hiding what you’re thinking, yet you speak candidly and with complete confidence. I’m actually quite envious. Maybe you should be sitting in this chair instead of me.”

He flashed a grin, the same one he always gave. It was a silly look of mischievous innocence that made his eyes transform. “You have secrets you need to spill? Everyone does.”

“You know, you may be good at reading people, but it’s how I make a living. Few people make me feel as rotten at it as you.”

“Aw, you’re not bad, Doc. Not at all. You know what your problem is?”

“Humor me.”

“You’re cooped up in this office.”

“This office is my second home. I’ve worked hard to make it that way.”

Jim glanced around the room. I had recently repainted the walls to a dark latte color so that they matched the brown curtains. The furniture was soft grain wood that I’d thought worked well with the yellow fabric in Jim’s armchair and the accompanying sofa seats. At first, I’d tried a few paintings on the walls, some light decorations and accents, but I realized they provided too much distraction for clients, too many opportunities to

stare at little details and ignore me. Open questions, but direct attention. Let them choose the direction, but make them commit.

“It’s your haven, isn’t it?” Jim’s eyes circled once more and settled on me. I wanted to tuck my hair behind my ear. It was a nervous habit that I frequented, especially when a man was involved. But there hadn’t been a man in many years.

“It’s supposed to be yours as well, if you choose,” I said.

“I do feel at ease, Doc. Truly. Few people can pull that off. I’m usually always restless. I never talk this much.”

“Somehow I don’t think that’s true.”

“No, no I guess it isn’t.” The laugh again. “See, you’re figuring me out already. What’s my diagnosis?”

I ignored him. “Do you feel like this is helping? Us meeting?”

Jim fixed me with the same look I’d just given him. “Would I keep scheduling sessions if it didn’t?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure. You said Brandon makes you come, but I don’t sense that you would surrender so easily if you didn’t want to.”

“Well, Brandon and I are...complicated.”

“As are most people.” I didn’t press to know more about Brandon. Not yet. Maybe I should have. Maybe it would have prevented me from making a bad mess even worse. Maybe it would have saved us both from a lot of mistakes. Though, I’m still not convinced they were entirely mistakes.

“Are you going to see family next week for Christmas?”

“Are you?”

“I asked you first, Doc.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “No. No, I’m not.”

He gave a now-was-that-so-hard smile, and stood up, pushing his long arms through his leather jacket. “How about that. Neither am I.”

I remember watching him leave from my second story office window. He popped on his aviators and cast off the bundles of Spanish moss that had fallen over his windshield, and a small bunch connected to an oak twig in the car’s leather seat. A blue Mustang convertible. The rev of the engine was muted through the window pane, but even over it I could hear the music blaring from the stereo. He tilted his head as if he was going to look up at the window, to where I might be, but he smiled to himself and pulled onto Kennedy Blvd. to the sounds of Mozart’s “Marriage of Figaro.” Each week it was a different piece, and it became a ritual of anticipation, of watching through the slit blinds to see what he would leave me with.

Looking back now, I realized I’d known the entire time, ever since that first meeting. I’d seen the temptation, and I’d claimed it. I’d known that I was jumping off a cliff, and that every session that followed would be one of policy violations, of transgressions we both knew we would keep secret. The excitement had silenced the guilt.

#

The first time I went to one of Jim’s concerts was the week of our last session before the office closed for Christmas. I rushed out of the office after my last client and hurried onto Kennedy, pressed the clutch with bare feet, shifting between first and second as I maneuvered through rush hour. The sun shone on the Hillsborough River. I

remembered a few years ago, meeting with a man who had to be talked down off the bridge by police. It wasn't even a good location to choose, but he had been determined.

Cars moved slowly, no doubt from people leaving work to head downtown to the mall for last minute Christmas shopping. I turned down the visor, swearing when I saw my face in the mirror. It only took me three red lights to fix my makeup and hair, but I had to park in one of the last spots on Franklin Street and hurry as casually as I could to the theatre.

The lights spelling the vertical "TAMPA" lit like a beacon, even as the sun was still setting. There were other people still loitering in the lobby, and I was able to blend in with the older couples in tuxedos and sequined dresses, little girls in Christmas outfits, ushers handing out programs.

The Tampa Theatre was one of the oldest in the city. Flicks of stucco peeled from the wall reliefs and the textured ceiling. Bust statues in the wall arches showed dark weather marks. The chandeliers cast a gentle glow that offered shadows for the audience while embellishing the heavy scarlet curtains. The musty smell of the velvet and the air of the entire theater was wonderfully nostalgic and fitting.

I wanted a seat close to the front so I could see him, but far enough to the side as to be anonymous. I found one, but I was in the middle alley and had to go through the aisle. Patrons of the theatre grumbled as I began the line of apologies, and they no doubt wondered why I couldn't just go around the front by the stage where the musicians sat waiting. But I didn't want to be seen. Some stood to let me by, others just shifted their knees. I almost fell into an old man's lap, and I definitely stepped on a girl's toe. Like moving a line of dominoes down in reverse, the row finally ended and I was able to take

my velvet seat. I wanted to smirk and burst into tears at the same time, so I focused my attention on the program in my lap until the concert began.

Soon, a voice came over a microphone. A young woman with dark hair was announcing the program, the light turning her face white. I could see her red lipstick from my seat. Then he appeared from the side of the stage.

I saw the same smile that he apparently flashed to everyone, but not the goofy one he saved for me. It was confident, somewhat arrogant, and unbearably charming. His hair was swept to the side, light gel holding it in place. The tuxedo definitely worked to make him appear more distinguished, but I found I preferred the jeans, button up shirt, and brown boots he always wore in my office. Fewer people probably saw him in that relaxed attire—it helped foster the opinion that I saw a side to him no one else did. Still, the bow tie and cummerbund suited his lean form, and his dress shoes shined the stage light all the way to my seat. He reached the podium and bowed low to the audience. Hands clapped, and I came in late with my applause just as they stopped.

I thought I wouldn't hear much of the concert—that I would be too focused on him—yet I couldn't seem to watch him without hearing the music. I found myself keeping time with his hands, brushing my knee with every downbeat. I was leaned forward slightly in the chair, my back off the velvet. He was leading a rendition of “O Come O Come, Emmanuel,” and it was only then that I noticed the wreaths and gold garland adorning the sides of the stage, matching the gold ties that held the red curtain. At the final coda of the piece, the violins picked up a repeating riff of sixteenth note runs, while the violas and cellos carried the main theme steadily underneath. The interplay was flawless, his baton tying the interlinking measures together.

During the final choral movement, Morten Lauridsen's "O Magnum Mysterium," I don't believe I blinked a single time. I knew it the same as I knew every song Jim played me from his Mustang. His sweeping arms and graceful stance seemed to will the sound rather than the musicians watching his every movement. It rolled over the theatre, stroking chills up my spine. He seemed ten years older since he'd stepped up on the podium. I'd seem a glimpse of his passion when we discussed his work, but to see the intensity of his resolve to music, to the obvious salvation which it was to him, was enthralling.

When the last note faded into silence, it was like he was giving me permission to breathe again, and when he turned to bow once more to the audience along with his orchestra, I saw the boyish face beaming right at me.

#

Brandon was Jim's best friend, as well as the assistant principal clarinet for the Orchestra. They'd both met at the University of Tampa. Jim had loved telling me the story, how he literally ran into him in the dining hall, spilled both their plates, and shook the man's hand right then and there as they stood covered in food, Brandon cursing up a storm.

He was slightly taller than Jim, a fact he apparently never let Jim forget. He had dark hair, hazel eyes, and a horrendous southern drawl when he was drunk or irate. He was loyal to a fault, and however much trouble Jim landed them in during their undergraduate years, he'd always gotten Brandon out. The year they'd met, Brandon had been in the College of Engineering, but had unfortunately bragged that he was very good

at the clarinet, at which point Jim coerced him into auditioning for the Wind Ensemble he was currently first chair in. At that point, Jim had told me, the rest was history.

“Did you secure a spot for him in the Orchestra?”

Jim turned serious. He paled, and I saw lines on his face for the first time, around his lips, under his eyelashes. He seemed tired, stressed. His shoulders sagged. I’d hit a sore spot.

“No, Doc. That I don’t do. He had to work for it same as me.”

“You pressured him to audition.”

“Well, sure. He has talent. But he’s lazy. He’s unmotivated. He does badly on one audition and he gives up. It’s not like he had another career lined up and waiting. So I pushed his ass, yeah. In college and later on, too.”

Jim leaned back in his chair, squinting at the ceiling. He scoffed. “I think I even threatened him that he’d have to move out if he didn’t at least try. I’d been away traveling for a bit after graduation, working with various music groups and concert halls, visiting guest performers, that sort of thing. I met up with him again when I got back and was applying for the director position in the Tampa Orchestra.”

“When you got it, that’s when you made him audition?”

“Yeah.” Jim rubbed the back of his head. “He told me the same thing, that since I was the new director people would think I was bringing him in on favoritism. But—and I tell him this still—he almost didn’t make it. I gave him last chair. He’s still bitter. How’s that for you? Didn’t want to do it at all, and then when I convince him to, he’s mad he didn’t place better.”

He said he knew people questioned his merits, his experience and talent. He was fine with it. Nothing had ever come of it, and he was certain nothing ever would. The attention around him would fade soon enough once people found something else to gossip and speculate about. People could think whatever they wanted. As long as they didn't question his coworkers, his friends. He and Brandon had been living together since college. He did everything for his friend, his partner.

To this day, I'm not sure if I believed it to be noble humility or the self-degrading sacrifice that it was, the kind that comes with feelings of personal inadequacy and the secret, never-ending need to prove oneself.

#

The following week, on the night I would have normally met with Jim, I wandered down Franklin Street and made my way to Paddywagon's, an Irish pub there on the corner that I liked. It was low key, with pool tables and dart boards. No cover and no coat check. Cheap draft prices. The outside patio was full of people taking advantage of the cold nights that Tampa rarely saw, even in December. I went in and easily found a chair at the bar, for once, hooking the heels of my sandals on the stool rung.

When I was handed my drink, I took up my favorite hobby and pretended to scroll through my phone while I studied the other people there. My eyes were just wandering from a man with a cowboy hat, huge belt buckle and boots when I saw the pool table across the room and nearly spilled my drink.

Jim was laid out over the table with a pool stick. The leather jacket stretched over his shoulders as he lined up the shot, and the dark grey t-shirt that seemed one size too small was riding up over his jeans. Another man, who I knew from Jim's description to

be Brandon, stood on the other side, long legs spread, resting his hands over the pool stick while he waited. Jim must have said something because Brandon rolled his eyes. I spun around on the stool and buried my face in my phone in earnest, not before asking for another drink.

I soon gave up and watched one of the final playoff games on the screen above the bar. Locals were upset once again that the Buccaneers hadn't made it in, but they still had team memorabilia strung around the restaurant, along with that of the Bulls, Gators, Noles and Knights, and, of course, UT Spartans. I tried to listen for the pool table, and I jumped every time I heard a ball smack another and give a thick bounce off the wooden side. Then the sounds of the television, the crowded atmosphere, the soft jazz music, the pool tables all faded.

I had taken a curling iron to my hair that evening, and was glad I had let it loose, trailing down my back. I hoped it would hide me. Feeling nostalgic for a reason I couldn't place, I'd worn a long denim skirt like the kind I used to wear in high school and later in college. I'd survived dorm mates in undergrad and, once I'd moved upstate for graduate school, had managed to find a one room apartment that I was actually sad to leave a few years later. Tampa was home, though, and with the ever-rising population, I knew I wouldn't have trouble securing a job.

I'd never been so stumped in my career before Jim, and I never have been since. He danced in a strange void I'd never known existed in my life.

“Fancy seeing you here, Doc.”

I spit my drink back into the glass. He laughed. That adorable, stupid laugh. I was just thankful I didn't leave a trail of saliva up to my lips.

“At ease! Did I startle you? Sorry—whoa, straight whiskey? Damn.”

“Jim.” I smiled and left it at that. I imagined myself cocooned in the ice cube of the woman’s gin and tonic beside me, willing the heat in my face to subside.

“It’s kind of late for you to be out, isn’t it?” He was leaning against the bar, squeezed between me and the other woman. His back nudged her and she looked over at us, her expression quickly losing its annoyance as she scanned Jim up and down and raised a questioning scarlet eyebrow at me. I smiled and tucked my hair behind my ear, folding my hands under my chin.

“How would you know what kind of social life I have?”

He glanced around. “Well, considering you’re here alone, it looks like a very empty one.”

“That’s low.”

“Well seriously, Doc.” He propped a foot on the ledge under the bar as he leaned over and motioned for two drinks. “Do you come out like this all the time by yourself? There’s no boyfriend, girlfriend, any friend?”

“A drink, Jim? Really? I’m not 21.”

“No, I’d say you’re more around 31. Oh, pretty close? I’ve got a thing with numbers. But you’re avoiding the question. Isn’t there anyone?”

“Maybe there is, maybe there isn’t.”

“So, no.” He slid a beer toward me and took his own, clinking the glasses together in a toast. “To loneliness.”

I watched him drink. “Jim, why aren’t you over with Brandon?”

He made a noise through the bottle. “I told him to give me a sec. He’s setting up for another game.”

“Yes, and he’s waiting for you. What exactly are you avoiding, Jim?”

Color touched his face. I’d never seen it before, and though I didn’t show my surprise, he seemed to notice he’d given me pause. He took another swig of beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“I, uh…”

His foot was tapping the ledge. The bottle had become an object of fascination, and I was afraid he might break it in his hand as he stared at it, grinding his teeth. I took it away. His fingers were wet and cold, but heat burned under the skin. He let go of me and shoved both hands in his pockets, stepping off the ledge and plastering on a smile. I swiveled toward him on the stool, reaching with my gaze even as I saw Brandon far behind him, arms crossed, tense.

“Jim, don’t do this. Just tell me.”

“See you later, Doc.”

#

That night hadn’t been the first Jim had tried to weasel out details of my own life. He took the hint from our first meeting, about the fact that perhaps he should be the one asking questions, and he tried to run with it every now and then. I liked to twirl my pen in those moments, raise my eyebrow, and pretend I was writing something down. I feel like he knew I was always just doodling, that he frustrated me, and that I liked it.

I never told Jim about the one time there had been a real man, a real relationship. I never told him about the time before grad school when I’d taken a week long cruise out

of the port at Channelside, met a man from New Zealand who'd been working in Orlando and wanted to see the Caribbean. How we spoke all through the night on the top deck of the ship, counting stars, him telling me the different constellations you could see from the other side of the world.

How we circled the Bahamas for a few days, went snorkeling in the afternoon and crawled up on a remote corner of the beach, peeled the swimwear off of each other, and made love in the wet sand that plastered over us, melded in our hair, grinded between our teeth until we went back in the water, naked bodies intertwined. How we almost missed the ship leaving dock, stood panting on the railing of the bottom deck, watching the white water churn in the teal shallows. How we regretted being back on board, how we held hands and almost jumped off, swimming back to shore in gleeful abandon.

I never told Jim about our meetings after the cruise, how I visited him in Orlando before moving in with him, how I spent the next two years together before finally separating because, does there ever need to be a reason? How I ran away to graduate school and found what I'd been missing in my studies and solitude. Behavioral psychology—what a trip. The mind is a fickle thing. You can help others figure out theirs, but you'll never understand your own. If you can save enough people, though, help enough minds, maybe it will give you solace. Maybe.

#

I stood outside Paddywagon's for a little while, contemplating where to go. Soft jazz spilled out behind me, tempting me back inside where I wondered what Jim was doing. I looked down Franklin Street, saw the lights spelling "TAMPA" above the

theatre. I should have grabbed my coat out of my car, but I hit Twiggs Street and turned west toward the park on the river.

The air was unusually misty. My feet slipped as I walked through the grass, and I removed my heels, walked barefoot with dew between my toes. When I made it to the water, I sat on a wooden bench and watched the fog roll through. Across the Hillsborough River, the lights from the University of Tampa tried to push through the haze. The spires on the Moorish architecture could just be seen, the outlines of the towers, a wayward seagull. I sat without breathing, listening to the water, the breeze, the cars on the street. If I closed my eyes, I could cypher through the sounds and hear the jazz from the speakers back up the block.

“Are you going to turn around this time or do I have to scare you again?”

I sighed and shifted my chin in his direction.

He dropped his jacket around my shoulders and sat on the bench next to me, huffing into his hands and rubbing them together. “It’s one in the morning, Doc. I’m not about to let you walk around here by yourself.”

“Where’s Brandon?”

“He went back to the apartment.”

I studied his face in the misty light. He ran a hand through his hair and it stood on end. He was squinting at the water, but when he turned to me the cerulean of his eyes shone through. I wanted nothing more than to release everything, to let him see all of me, to let myself go for the very first time in a very long time. I wanted him to take me in his arms and lay me down on the bench and trace every goosebump on my arms until the night faded.

When his warm breath reached through the mist, I shifted. Why, I'll never know. But his nose touched my cheek instead. Cold. He sighed into my ear, pulling back. For a while, we said nothing.

“Did you enjoy the concert last week?”

“Yes,” I said. “‘Magnum Mysterium’ was particularly well done.”

“Thought you might like that one. I played it for you the other week. Stayed there in the parking lot for five minutes so you could hear it and recognize it later.”

“You didn’t need to play it for me. I used to play years ago. Violin.”

He turned on the bench. “No shit. How come you never said?”

“Our meetings are about you, Jim.”

He took up my hand and studied my fingertips, tracing his thumb over them. “No callouses. It must have been years ago. You never picked it back up?”

“Some things are best left where you drop them.”

He dropped my fingers and began pacing, hands in his pockets. His shadow darkened the grass at my feet.

“Why do you want me?” he asked. His words were soft, broken. “What is it that you see in me?”

I faced him and waited until he sat down, to force my words to convey more emotion than my expression. “Jim, I have come to realize that you are perhaps the most—the most hopeful person I have ever met. You’re contagious. I want to be around you. All the time. You have a childlike wonder, an intelligence that defies your experience. Yes, I’m analyzing you, dammit.”

I sighed and tried again, slower. “You are the only one who has returned any sort of effort. I work myself to the bone trying to help so many clients, and you’re the first one who has shown that you actually give a shit about me. You care about people. You care more than I do.”

“Damn, Rachel.”

“Damn is right. A good therapist is supposed to keep distance between herself and her clients. Empathy will be the end of you. Sympathy will be the end of them. That’s what we’re taught. And I threw it all out the window for you. If I met you for the first time tomorrow, I’d do it all again.”

“Are you saying you don’t want me to keep seeing you?”

“You’re in a relationship. Brandon loves you, Jim. Can’t you see that? What are you doing here with me?”

“I don’t know if I feel the same way about him anymore.”

“You’re not putting me in the middle of this.”

“You put yourself in the middle of it, Rachel. You know what you’ve been doing, same as me. We accepted it right off without a word, just like you said. It’s as much my fault as it is yours. I don’t even know what I wanted.”

“No one ever knows what they want in life, Jim. One moment you’re lying on the beach with someone you think you’ve been waiting a lifetime for, and then you’re standing in an empty apartment wondering how the fuck you lost him, and what a miserable piece of shit you are to have fought so hard in the first place.”

I threw myself against the bench, buried my face in my hands. His mouth touched my hair and he just whispered over and over, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.

“Well, I’m not. What are you going to do about Brandon?”

He nuzzled my cheek again and just let his head rest against mine. “To be honest, I’m not sure.”

We listened to the water, mist veiling our eyes. He wrapped his arms around me until I relaxed and let my head onto his shoulder. His hand rubbed my upper arm as if trying to keep me warm. I can’t say how long we stayed that way, or when we made our way back along the river to Franklin Street, where he held my car door open for me and I studied the lights of the theatre behind him that made the outline of his hair glow.

I don’t know if he ever went back to Brandon. He never saw me again after that night. He remained the director of the Tampa Orchestra for nearly ten years. I never expected him to stay in one place for so long. Every now and then I’d go to a concert and watch him from the back, and let myself think about the time I’d almost ruined everything, and about how badly I still wish I had. More than anything, I think about that night.

I think about the music. I remember forcing his jacket into his hands, and the acknowledgment that I was taking up the baton once more, distancing myself for good. I remember the smile that didn’t meet his eyes as he whispered a “Merry Christmas, Rachel.” But even more than that, no matter what would come to pass, I remember the time that was by the water, where we simply existed in that strange continuum where our places were reversed, and I sought comfort of my own without shame or guilt or thought.

## CRAFTING IRON

Anna follows me as we step off my back porch. She had agreed to come up from Tampa to stay with me over the weekend. Didn't have to fight her as hard as I'd thought I might. I've come to think that she actually enjoys being in this place as much as I do. I cross the gravel, Ariat boots shifting pebbles until I hit cement of the stable alley.

These stalls always lift me out of myself. Stimuli surround with oiled leather tack, fresh hay, velvet noses greeting me if not just for food. Some people go for a drive when they're mad. My friend from high school used to take her brother's beautiful specimen of a Ram 1500 and trash the pasture, scatter the steers. I don't trust myself with my truck when I'm angry. I literally fire it up and let the horses run.

The girth gets cinched tight today. I pull up through the loop, wait for Maggie to let out the breath she's deliberately holding, then pull it tighter, slip the excess through the notch in the saddle. Beside me, Anna's tacking up Bella, a palomino mare who has a knack for laziness such as I've never seen.

There's a mist of golden haze over the fields that's normal on steamy mornings in Ocala. Here, people can forget they're in Florida if they don't take note of the scrub palms and Spanish moss. Here, mist hugs the hills that bulge from the ground, that reluctantly defy the curse of the Sunshine State's flat topography. The humid mist reminds me of clouds I once watched envelop the peaks of the Smokies on an old Gatlinburg vacation. It's what quiet means to me.

My skin sponges a layer of humidity as we step out of the barn. I hold the reins and mount in one fluid motion, right leg settling over the saddle and boot into the stirrup. I never feel more in sync with myself than when I'm sitting a horse. Spine immediately

stretches into natural alignment, chin lifts, shoulders and hands relax. Mind clears.

Maggie is ready. Her ears are pricked, listening to mocking birds, morning doves, crickets. Her hooves glimmer in the dew. She side-prances while I lean over the horn of the saddle to open the gate, maneuver her through, wait for the putzing palomino to follow before latching it with a hollow metal clang. Anna reaches to help and her sleeve shifts. I pretend not to see her arm, but tears are already fogging my eyes, mingling with the water that hangs in the air around us. To my right, Anna walks Bella, having secured her sleeves once more. I'm sweating even in my tanktop.

Maggie side prances again, but I keep the reins tight, pull her head in. My little sister, blonde hair waving on her shoulders, stares off like I used to when I had too many voices in my mind to isolate and contain. She is looking for distraction. Maggie tosses her head, begins backing up a few paces against the reins. She wants to run. I give her a hard nudge with my heel, then a kick. She knows better. They both do.

“I feel like I have no one left,” Anna had said to me yesterday.

I don't want to ask her about it. I don't want to break the silence and give my hypocritical it-will-get-better speech. I haven't done that since Dad was going through surgery for ulcerative colitis, the stress-induced, hereditary disease that carves open craters in your intestines like acid, bringing unimaginable weight loss and twisting pain that makes you cry for death while your daughters hide behind the door listening to you with salty fists in their mouths.

No, I haven't pulled a motivational speech in a while. But Maggie snorts and throws her head again.

“Fine, shut up.”

“Huh?”

“I said, what else has been going on?”

She shrugs and closes up, like I knew she would. “I don’t know.”

“Right. I’ve never heard that before.”

“I’m being serious. It’s like all of this just came out of nowhere.”

“Colitis doesn’t come out of nowhere, Anna. Not even a minor case like yours.”

“You don’t have to remind me. But it’s not just Colin getting me all worked up. I thought I was doing alright. I thought—”

“That it wouldn’t happen to you? Ha. Welcome to the family.”

#

I wonder later when I sit in the living room if that had been the best thing to say. I cradle a mug of coffee—a handmade clay tankard covered in dark swirls of blue and green and brown that I’d gotten with Anna at the Renaissance Festival in Orlando one year. Anna has never been into coffee, but I drink about three to four cups a day easy. I don’t even think it’s for the caffeine.

Anna comes out of the bathroom and heads to the kitchen. She has her hands in her jeans, forearms hidden. I hold back a long sigh and consider going into the bathroom to study my shaving razor and see if it’s wet from rinsing off evidence, see if there are Band Aids missing from those I’d left in the box after last night. I tap my tankard resting on my knee, gritting my teeth as I listen to her rummage in the kitchen like nothing’s wrong. She has no idea what she’s doing, no appreciation of what she’s getting into, what she’s signing on for. Not one fucking clue. I’d gathered that much from our conversation yesterday.

“He doesn't even care that I've been hurting myself,” she said. “I told him and he doesn't care. He doesn't give two shits about me.”

“How have you been hurting yourself?”

“How did you used to do it?”

“Right... Did you use your knife from Yellowstone?”

“What? No, it wasn't sharp enough.”

“Well, what did you use, then?”

“A razor.”

“Like a box cutter razor, or a shaving razor?”

“My shaving razor.”

“And how many times?”

“Twice.”

“When was this second time?”

“About an hour ago.”

“Well, I think that should probably be enough for today, don't you?”

My forefinger moves faster on the cup. It wobbles on my knee and I shift, feeling the inner seams of my jeans tug against the fresh scabs. Being in the saddle had hardly irritated them at all. She has no idea the guilt I hide in telling her to stop, the fury at her attempt to copy me. This is not the game she thinks it is. I move my thigh again, waiting and holding my breath for the expectant twinge. The flutter of excitement swells in disgusting pride, stabbing me into reality as my eyes focus once more on the room.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“Right. Like I’ve never heard that before. What were you smiling at?”

My hand shakes as I take the coffee back to the kitchen. Anna has her head back in the refrigerator, hand tapping the door. My eyes fall shut, and I set the mug down carefully, while inside my mind I smash it on the edge of the counter for my sheer stupidity. Ulcerative colitis, despite the Prednisone and Lialda Mesalamine she’s on, requires a particular diet of gluten and dairy free products to avoid inflammation.

“I have to go for groceries, don’t I?”

“I can find something.”

“No, we might as well go. Dad will kill me if you have a flare up on my watch.” I move to the door and sling my leather purse over my shoulder. The scabs pull, and I take a longer stride, wishing they would crack even a little as Anna follows me with her head bowed.

Maggie watches us from the pasture as I pull the Silverado along the drive. And I ignore her, avoiding the gaze through the rolling cloud of gravel dust that spurs us farther on our way.

#

Maggie is a Quarter horse I bought at a sale here in the county. We breed the best horses. To hell with the Kentuckians and their Thoroughbreds. A good Quarter horse will work for you your whole life. Maggie was about five when I bought her. She still had a ways to go in training, but I knew her type the moment she stuck her chestnut head out of that stall and stared me down as if to say, “What the hell are you looking at?”

Anna enjoys Maggie, too. She loves that I was able to get the barn I'd always wanted. Used nearly every penny I had from savings and the job I'd been working after

graduating from UF, but I did it. I hadn't let Mom and Dad stop me. Sure, there may have been some connections made while I was still in college, some recommendations and a helping hand here and there. But now I have things going. I'm focused in my distractions. And I do well enough with the lessons that I'm able to make ends meet. There are some folks around here who pay out the nose for their charter school kids to have a good riding instructor. Anna gets rides for free.

She used to come up every now and then from Tampa, where she was working on her music degree at USF. Anna told me about her classes, her ensemble rehearsals and theory workshops, how her roommates never shut up at night. We'd go trail riding together, she on Maggie or Bella, and I on Rowdy, a bay gelding that lives up to his name. Maggie is a lead mare, always has to be in front, and if she's going slow I let Rowdy up in front so she'll pick up the pace. Then I have to pull him back, and when I see him turn his nose toward a hanging oak limb, I let him take a swipe at the Spanish moss. He knows this is a treat, the Spanish moss, and so he forgives me for keeping him behind.

Anna and I talk about the upcoming holidays and our time back at home with Mom and Dad at Englewood. She'd tell me about Colin, her then long-distance beau in Dublin, where they had met at a study abroad program. His ruffled hair and gentle wit complemented Anna's harsher sarcasm. Her hair had been dyed lime green at the time. They stood out like a match made at some Glasgowbury or Bonaroo. I never really took a liking to him. I thought he wasn't good enough for her. Turns out I was right.

#

I am five years older than my sister. We did everything together when we were young, as I imagine most siblings do. I had long dirty blonde hair, and hers was short and wavy. She sucked her thumb, and I did this weird-ass thing of twisting around the middle and ring fingers of my right hand and sucking on them upside down. I picked up daddy long leg spiders to make our dad proud, and she cried when we went to see Minnie Mouse. There are pictures of us sitting on the riverbank on summer evenings, my arm around her tiny shoulder. In others we are rolling around on the carpet in the living room, both in our long john pajamas, the kind with the feet and the full zipper, she pinning me to the floor while I good naturedly let her crush my back.

I don't remember exactly how old I was when I caught a glimpse inside the depression of my dad's family tree. Almost like a Narnian wardrobe, except to a much wilder world. Fantasy was a grounding force for both me and Anna. I don't remember when it stopped being enough. I just remember Mom asking me why I was crying, and me whimpering behind my hands that I didn't know.

Teachers constantly told her that I had an issue of daydreaming in class. I didn't stare out the window at the trees or the playground like normal second graders. I stared at my desk, or the wall, passive as a statue. And when they tried to gain my attention and ask me what I was thinking about, I never had an answer. She should have known then. Dad especially. But he was against me going on medication like him. Maybe he thought I could be better than he was. Maybe he thought I could beat it. I guess he forgot the whole sins of the father thing. But it didn't matter because I would go on Zoloft in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and never quit, only adding Xanax closer to high school graduation. That was after a few interesting seasons with a behavioral psychologist who offered to call our doctor herself.

When I was starting high school, Anna and I took riding lessons from a lady down the street. Her son, Will, was in the band with me. He played the bass trombone, and I the flute. Beautiful instrument, the trombone. To say I had an infatuated crush on him would have been an understatement. And I, like every young teenage girl, saw what I wanted to see, and he took me along for the ride. While I was making out with him in his pick-up before the football game, little did I know he had just had a turn with freshman Katy Knights a few hours earlier. And had been for a few weeks, as every kid in the band knew except me.

Last I heard, he's living in Kentucky with his wife. Probably with the damn Thoroughbreds.

#

The local Publix is crowded. But I should have figured that for a Saturday. I steer the cart down various aisles, throwing in boxes of organic mac and cheese and gluten free cookies. Anna follows in relative silence, shrinking behind me and ducking her head when an employee passes us and greets us, asking if we're finding everything alright.

"Fine, thank you." I flash a smile and keep moving.

I am not one of those shoppers who takes her time and browses. I have a method, and I'm in and out. Anna is shorter than I am, and hurries to keep up. As we near the checkout line, we take a shortcut through what turns out to be the first aid section. She glances at the Band Aids. I scowl at her and grab a box, nearly crunching the cardboard as I chuck it in. I think about her first pocketknife, the one bought a few years ago while we were hiking with Mom and Dad in the Grand Tetons. The Yellowstone knife. She spent over an hour picking it out and was so proud that once we got home she kept it on

her dresser beside her watch so she could put it in her jeans every day. If I'd suspected, I would have stolen it, told her she must have lost it while we gallivanting around with the bison. She was always the copycat.

"Hi, how are you?" I smile at the cashier while I unload the cart and go through the routine. "I'm doing wonderfully. Yes, plastic bags are fine. No, I don't have any coupons today, thank you for asking. No, I'm sorry, I can't give to Food for Sharing today. Maybe next time. No thank you, we can take the cart out ourselves. I appreciate it. You as well, have a great afternoon."

I practically race through the parking lot, all smiles gone. I open the back door to the Silverado so Anna can pack the bags in. There's hay in the bed, and I don't want everything rolling around. I let her take the cart back to the drop-off corral. I already have the truck running by the time she climbs in beside me. She slams her door shut as I pull out.

"What the hell is your problem?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why are you in such a hurry to get out of here? It's not like you're going to go back home and do anything."

"We came out here for you. I didn't need groceries. You're welcome, by the way."

"Yeah, and what was that in there? All smiles and niceties. How can you do that? Turn it on and off so easily?"

"I don't."

"Don't what?"

"Do it easily. Giving riding lessons has helped a little. Forced me to open up a

bit.”

“Giving riding lessons hasn’t helped jack shit. They all come to you and you still don’t even have to leave the property. You’re a recluse. Just admit it.”

“I don’t have to admit anything to you.”

“Exactly. So what, you’re nice to everyone else, but when you ask me to come out here you can’t even talk to me?”

“Well, what do you want me to say?”

She opens her mouth and closes it, turning to stare over the dash instead.

#

When we get home, I go straight inside and start unloading the small amount of groceries. The kitchen is compact, but I still find room for everything. Probably because I don’t have that much. I usually spend my food money on the horses.

“I’m going to the barn,” Anna says.

“That’s fine. I’ll be out there as soon as I’m done.”

“Don’t bother.”

I close the cabinet and lean my forehead against it, drumming my fingers on the counter. I open the drawer to search for a clothespin for something and my eyes land on the box cutter lying among the twisty ties, flashlight, and batteries. Something in my jaw ticks and I stare at the tool, painfully aware of a sudden silence that fills the house. I know I’m still standing, but on what I can’t tell, and I feel strangely disconnected, as if someone could walk in and not even see me.

By the time I come out of it, over an hour has passed and the milk, still sitting on the counter, has begun to spoil. I dump it out, watch it swirl down the drain in a creamy

cascade. Out the window, I see Anna sitting on the petrified log I fashioned as a bench there by the bonfire pit in the pasture.

She doesn't look up as I meander toward the barn, supplies for s'mores bundled in my arms. I load the logs on myself, shake out the last of the lighter fluid. Then I pause, and hand her the match. She returns my small smile and takes the peace offering, tossing it into the pile. I sit beside her and watch the flames, feel the heat against my face, my shins and knees under the jeans. She starts the s'mores and occupies herself with the task of keeping the marshmallow from lighting on fire. I deliberately torch mine to a crisp. She pulls a face as I slide it on the Hershey bar and clamp it between the gluten free graham crackers.

"It does get better," I say.

"Is that what Dad told you?"

I raise my eyebrows. "No. No, he never said that."

"I don't want to end up like you and him."

"I'm nothing like him."

"That's the second lie you've told me. You're just like him and you don't even see it. You pretend you're fine and shut everyone out."

"I asked you to come up here, didn't I? How is that shutting you out?"

"You only did that because you feel guilty."

I chomp on a graham cracker and grind it between my teeth. The fire is white at the base of the flame, pure only at the hottest part. For a moment, I feel as disconnected as I did back in the kitchen. She has no idea what she's done by coming here. And I had let her come.

Anna's hand suddenly finds my back and rubs small circles. "It's fine. It's okay," she says. "I'm sorry."

#

More than a few years ago—longer than I'd like to think—when we were both still living at home and I was getting ready to graduate high school, I had started pushing that wardrobe wider. The family tree on the smooth surface outside was fascinating enough, but I needed to see more. So I carved my own branch, added my own name, went inside. And then I kept going inside again. And again. Except Anna, like Edmund, followed me into this hellish Narnia. I wouldn't realize until later that she kept coming back for the Turkish Delight, herself.

She walked in on me, just walked right in while I was carving the inside of my upper arm with a box cutter that we kept down in the kitchen in a cabinet under the phone. It wasn't that there was a lot of blood everywhere. That's actually a common misconception. It's only Tim Burton scary if you slice vertically, parallel with the veins. Then you run the risk of bleeding out before you can stop it. Years later, I would actually have to stitch myself up in the bathroom. The skin on my inner thigh had parted, gleaming white underneath when I cleared the globs of blood away. Would have given me another keloid scar, but I decided to take a sewing needle and a string of dental floss, pull the skin back together and see if it would work. Like an experiment. It worked, the stitches.

But I hadn't mustered up enough courage at that time. I was still fairly basic. Just came in the house, set my backpack by the kitchen table, took the box cutter out of the drawer, and headed up the stairs to part a few lines. I could have gotten away with it. I

should have. What gave me away was that I quickly hid my arm when she came in, instead of the damn box cutter. Just sat there with it in my hand like a fucking wand, brandished at the intruder.

Anna never said much at the time. Just turned real white and walked over, took the thing away. We never discussed it later. I knew she wanted to ask me why I'd done it, but I think she knew as well as I that I wouldn't have an answer. That's why I never asked her when her own time came, even though Colin was clearly the smoking gun. Or slippery blade in this case.

And, as she never told on me, I never told Mom that she'd joined me and Dad in the wardrobe.

#

The rest of the year passed awkwardly, and at Christmas we all went out on the boat the day after, as usual, and enjoyed the traffic-free bay. Windbreakers, sunglasses, hats, and leftover ham sandwiches. But this was the last Christmas I would spend at home. I had just sent off my application to UF and was leaving whether I was accepted or not. Dad put some ham on his fishing line, but Anna and I would never have sacrificed the best part of Christmas dinner for a mullet or redfish. Mom, meanwhile, was lying on the stern, trying to catch some sun through the clouds.

Dad set his baited rod in the holder and prepared to throw the shrimp net over the port side. It was a big deal, the throwing of the net. I had tried once and thrown myself in with it. It's heavy, and awkward to hold, and takes a great deal of patience to go through the steps carefully and precisely and in a way that makes you look like you know what you're doing. The idea is to get a wide area cast, for the net to open like a flag, reach up,

up and out, and descend around the water like a sail falling from a mast might settle around the air.

You wait a few seconds, count as it sinks, as the weights bring it down like a cage. Then you heave and pull. Timing is crucial because you have to close the weights in together to tie off the net as you drag in the catch. Rope sings the puffy parts of your fingers between the knuckles. Dad had actually become quite the pro. The bait fish came in, floundering silver in the threads like scatters of coins. Anna and I opened the folds of the net, scooped up the fish, and deposited them into the bucket of water. No more wasting ham on the hooks.

So then I perched with my rod dangling off the front of the boat, bobbing with it as the gentle waves rocked us closer and closer to the mangroves. I hated the acrid sulfur odor of the water. A blue heron watched me from the top of the grove, neck craned down, waiting to snatch my fish should I be so lucky as to acquire one.

I had a vision of snatching the heron by its rope-like throat if it came too close, strangling it and wringing it until the bone snapped. Then I would drop it into the water and watch it sink beneath the murky, smelly surface. You only needed a few inches of water to drown, anyway, I had once heard. If I leaned down and watched it, and put my face close enough to the water, to the entrance of another world, I could smell the death of it—the heron, the roots, my breath. The water would lap up to my nose, around my mouth. I would close my eyes, my ears still above the surface and able to hear the wind, the gulls, Anna's cry.

I caught a snag on my line and saw the bobber splash. I reeled, only to find the hook snagged in the mangroves. The clear line disappeared somewhere in a tangle of

branches, probably dangling like a toy for fiddler crabs to climb as they ate my bait fish and left his miniscule bones among the roots. Little buggers. The heron squawked a laugh and flew off.

#

The sun sets as we sit by the fire, the s'mores having been finished an hour earlier. I would have been fine to go inside, but Anna keeps loading more wood on the flames. She seems to need it, so I let her. She is hypnotized by it, the same as I am, and she plucks blades of grass by her boot and chucks them into the fire. I watch them curl in the abyss of the embers. I wiggle my toes in my boots, waiting. But Anna still isn't ready to go.

She plays with the iron pokers, and takes stabs at the embers. They're the same ones we had when we were little, when we huddled around the campfire on the deck Dad had built behind our house, when we rocked in frigid metal chairs that left imprints on our legs, when we watched stars between wispy trails of smoke. Dad's great grandfather had crafted the pokers. Another legacy of our family tree. Wrought iron art and anxiety depression.

Iron depression.

People like to treat depression as if it's some illness to be cured instead of a disease to live with. You're told that you could really get better if you wanted to, that you should step back and look at things in perspective and realize how much worse other people have it. After all, it's just a guy, you're told. But see no, no, it isn't. The guy is the last straw on an invisible haystack you've been building all your life.

If you could see how the pieces were being added, you would have stopped them.

But you didn't know what you were doing. How could you? So, one day you wake up with a weight you can no longer lift, a weight to which you've become accustomed. A weight of which you've become rather fond. If you could burn the whole stack—you wouldn't. Because it's the one thing that's always been there.

And when you're sitting in the counselor's office being addressed like you're five, you find that you're suddenly more interested in the cinnamon apple candle burning on her table beside you. All you want to do is watch it destroy something, consume a substance until there is nothing left but a curl of smoke dancing in soft, shameless victory. You have the urge to place your fingertip above the very point where the flame disappears into air, into nothingness. Urge turns to will, sees skin blistering before your eyes without pain, only pleasure. Ignores her as she tells you to stop, reaches for your arm, shouts for someone out in the hall to help. Has a talk with your mother while you sit in the waiting room.

There's power in that sort of destruction. That's what they don't see. That's what Anna will never see.

There's power in depression.

#

Anna glances up when I lead Maggie and Rowdy back out of the stalls. She never noticed me leave. No tack this time, only bridles. I'm tall enough to swing over Rowdy's back, but Anna, after giving me a do-I-have-to look, uses the fence as a step. She follows me silently out into the pasture, past the fire, past the soft crackling. We walk the horses and, when they stop to steal grass stalks, lay back with our heads on their rumps and close our eyes the way we did so many years ago it now seems.

We sway as they walk on, like in the cabled rope hammocks hanging by the water back home. The crickets jump beneath us and air is cool out here in the open. The same stars we watched as children watch us now. Anna straightens first, and Maggie leads us on to the far end of the pasture where she and Rowdy gaze out past our land, down the road where a loan car is heard if we strain our ears. They say that horses have a way of rescuing broken people. I should know by now if that's true, but I don't. It doesn't matter. I just take them as they are: animals with a special kind of character living among humans with equally special characters. It's hard to ever really say who helps whom.

The road to my place dips into a shallow valley between two rows of high land. It's always the first part of the property that floods in thunderstorms that come every afternoon during Florida summers. I've tried to pack it up, but even the strongest gravel has pockets of space that fill when the rain comes. And soon it washes away.

My sister closes her eyes and stretches her arms, head back and fingers reaching to stars, to life beyond this one. Her brow creases. She lets her hands fall as if trying to drag the sky's light down around us, to find us here in the spaces beneath the gravel. If she ends up following me in this, understanding what it means to live with something instead of push to get over it and delude the mind with thoughts of hopeful grandeur, then so be it. She's copied me in everything since she could walk, so I guess it doesn't matter now if that never changes.

We stay for a little while, the horses content to watch and listen, while we savor what little comfort we can from each other. You take what life gives you. You don't get to hand it back and ask for a different one when you fuck up, when you find that you missed pieces somewhere along the way even though you look back and scratch your

head and scream and shout and wonder how it could have happened when all you want is to pretend it never did. Those lonely places will always be there, no matter how hard you pack them.

You don't always get to go back.

Maggie hears a noise, probably an owl or a tumbling piece of wood on the fire far behind. She twists her neck and blows her lips and looks at me.

“But what if we do race back.”

“What? Why?” Anna asks. And I no longer talk to myself.

“Why not?”

“No, not anymore tonight. It's too dark out.”

“Not for them. They can see just fine. C'mon.”

I turn Rowdy with my leg and Maggie spins around to get in front of me. Anna curses under her breath, but I can't hear because I'm already leaning over Rowdy's neck and tearing earth. I feel in vibrations that Maggie is close behind, giving Anna a hell of a ride.

Rowdy's mane slaps my face. My knees are tight around his ribs, my arms relaxed against his withers. Wind fills my mouth, my eyes. I hear a roar. I am balanced perfectly, and in this moment as we race back toward the fire, as I lead her in futile toward the light that always evades, I am enraptured by a rush that filters my body and strips away all that I couldn't release on my own.