

Abstract

FISTFUL OF DEBRIS

by

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Fistful of Debris is a collection of fiction aimed to explore the varied dimensions of familial loss. Each piece focuses on the personal growth and intimate details of a female protagonist's life, as she attempts to rebuild and heal. In a society that sensationalizes tragedy, this collection aims to humanize loss by focusing on the aftermath and not the event itself. All stories provide an opportunity to view a life in the reconstruction phase, whether that be of a young adult slowly saying goodbye to her grandfather, a lesbian couple dealing with the loss of their baby, or a child's introspective look at death after her father passes away.

This collection establishes that tragedy does not discriminate; it is an equal-opportunity affliction. What defines a person is not overcoming the initial grief, but having the fortitude to sift through the wreckage of their life, and steadfastly rebuild with what is left. Only then can they begin to heal.

FISTFUL OF DEBRIS

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by

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For Thomas M. Winar Jr., and the indelible
blaze of sunshine he left on this earth.

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TOBOGGAN TRAILS

Marina waited as the car growled, struggling to wake. The gravel driveway was frozen, with clumps of snow piled on either side. She put the car in neutral and let the tires crunch slowly down the hill away from her parents' looming grey house. The austere glow of a light post was her guide, as she slipped away in the night down Bostock Road.

The car skirted over the frozen pavement, alongside soot-encrusted clumps of snow. The engine rattled, unable to heat the small, beat-up Chevy. She alternated her grip on the wheel, sticking a hand between her legs for warmth. Her thin red gloves were useless, as if merely painted on. More snow continued to fall, the flakes dissolving on her fogged windshield.

A vibration jostled Marina, and she fumbled inside her jacket for her phone.

“What do you want, Derek?”

“I just want you to listen. Don’t hang up again,” the gruff voice answered. She squinted, trying to see through the fog on the dark road. Her car began to pick up speed around the bends of quiet, snow-dusted lawns and sleeping houses.

“Marina?”

“I’m listening,” she sighed, and leaned back into the worn seat. She eased on the brake pedal, her car shaking.

“I, uh...I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Marina’s eyes burned, her chest tightened. She rolled down the window, attempting to see around the foggy windshield. Closing her eyes for a second, she breathed in the frozen night. She could almost feel the wind piercing her cheeks, racing down hill after hill with her brother. The thick plastic sled obeyed to the shift in body weight, the snow smooth and hardened from practice runs

“I don’t know what came over me. I was...I was mad.”

She opened her eyes, jaw tight. “Mad? You don’t have the slightest...” The phone was sandwiched between her cheek and shoulder. Her hands clenched the steering wheel, the way she had once held onto the thick handles of a sled. “That’s all I had left. You knew that.”

“It was an accident.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t tell me in person. Who sends a fucking email...wait, what?”

“It was an accident—”

“An accident?” she yelled.

“I got upset, about your ex showing up. I started drinking, and I, I freaked. I don’t know. It was an accident. We’d talked about how you wouldn’t—”

“He came into my work! You were really that worried about an ex-boyfriend? You’re insane. Who are you?”

“If you could just see...”

“I’m on my way actually, you fuck.”

“Mar, it’s snowing like crazy out there. I don’t think it’s safe.”

“Safe? You’re concerned for me now? Don’t fucking clean it up either. I can’t believe you, Derek.”

“Well I tried to. Get most of it. I mean, it’s still...I shut the door. So the dog wouldn’t go in there. I’m sorry.”

Marina repeated the word in her head. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. She pulled off one of the gloves with her teeth. She could grip the steering wheel better now, the road curving up and around a sharp bend. There was no sorry for this; not this time.

“You’re not perfect either, Marina.”

The bent stop sign popped out around the corner, and Marina slammed on her brakes, lurching forward. To her right sat the YMCA Park she and her brother used to go to in the summer years ago. The area was lifeless and frozen now, the 'Y' hanging upside down, held by a single rusty nail. The line was silent. She had tears in her eyes. "I will be there soon."

"How soon...."

She dropped the phone into the passenger seat and put her face on the steering wheel. It was warm and smelled like rubber bands. To the left was the logging plant that had been mowing down the mountain for years. A large truck was parked out front like always, filled with huge oak trees, shaved of their branches and cut from their roots. They were stacked, one on top of the other, like naked, peeled carrots.

"Look at those big trees!" Joe exclaimed on their way to church one morning, her dad slowing at the stop sign.

"Those are the same trees we pass every day!" Marina declared.

"Nuh-huh."

"Yup. Big machines come and plow them down. For the giants."

"The giants?" Joe whispered.

"Yeah, you know the ones that live on Indian Rock? Well big machines grind and shave trees, like those," she said, pointing to the pile. "Then, they sell them to the giants."

"But why?"

"Toothpicks, duh."

"You're lying,"

"Shhhhh, don't let them hear you." She bent her head. "They have bad tempers."

“Well someday I’ll go there and meet that giant.” Joe grinned, showing a gap of three missing teeth.

~

A slight smile creased her face. The clock blinked “3:42AM,” and she breathed heavily, creating a fog in the car. There was a buzzing noise; Derek was still on the line.

Marina rolled through the stop sign onto the main road. She picked up the phone off the seat. “Derek, I said I’d be there soon. Can you just leave?”

“It’s storming out. I...you’ve been at your parents’ for three days—”

“They needed me,” she cut in.

“I’m not saying—”

“You’re not saying anything worth listening to. Just go to the neighbors, go get a fucking hotel room. Whatever.” Marina sucked in the cold air, and yanked the other red glove off her hand. No words could excuse his actions, nor make the broken shards and scattered dust disappear from the floor. She was about twenty minutes from the house. The sky was a dark grey. The road narrowed once again to two lanes, and the trees were swaying. Snow started blowing in through the window.

Derek was probably pacing around the room. He’d be in just a pair of boxers, the kind that holes formed in the wrong places. His white tube socks were probably dirty and gathered around his thick ankles, hiding little of the dark, curly hair that covered his body like a film of grease. She frowned, as if watching him having a temper tantrum. Damn fool.

“I’ll be there in a few minutes,” she said. He was silent now. The scattered flecks of snow melted into puddles on her dashboard. She tried to roll up the window, but the side of the door was frozen. “Shit,” she mumbled, hanging up the phone. The car sped through the night down the frozen road while she yanked at the handle. She slid over the yellow double line, and quickly jumped in her seat to correct. It jolted Marina’s nerves, her left hand numb from the open window.

Everything looked so different, years after leaving home. The Hobo-Deli on the corner of Highway 64 and Dowel Street, was boarded up, its parking lot completely covered in undisturbed snow.

~

“What’d you get?” her dad asked. He unlocked the doors.

“I got a MoonPie and a root beer,” Marina said loudly. She plopped down in the seat, pigtails bobbing.

“What about you, Joey Boy?” There was silence for a minute. Marina rolled her eyes and answered for her brother.

“He didn’t get anything, Dad. He kept the money.”

“Well if you’re not gonna buy anything with the money, you have to give it back, Joe.” Her father outstretched his hand. Joe was three years younger than Marina, but sharp and feisty.

“No. She spent hers. I’m saving up for the Shamzer Toboggan.” Joe crossed his arms. He’d always been frugal. Their parents wouldn’t buy him the new z75 Shamzer Toboggan, a sled that

the commercials said could go sixty miles per hour, so he was saving up for it. Always so stubborn.

Even when they were in high school, Marina a junior and Joe a freshman, she would see him scavenge the cafeteria. He would pocket his lunch money, snacking on his friend's leftovers and schmoozing the cafeteria ladies for a cheeseburger or side of fries.

He'd been a big guy. Broad shoulders and a thick waist. Looked funny in her tiny car, seat all the way back, tilted so far no one could sit in the back seat on his side. He'd always say he'd get a big truck when he could drive. Fit all his friends and wood and whatever he wanted.

"Wood?" Marina said, laughing. "When's the last time you needed wood for anything?"

"Hey, when a guy gets older, he needs to be handy. I gotta get a truck if I ever wanna start building things."

"Like what?"

"Oh you know, stuff."

Stuff. That's what it had always been, always "stuff." Stuff kept her from seeing Joe a lot once she went to college; stuff kept him from focusing on school. Stuff.

~

The grey sky looked lighter to Marina. The snow began sticking to the asphalt, and she couldn't see the very far ahead. But she was almost back to the house, and knew the way. She'd been driving to and from her home, to her parents' house in Kingston, NY for what seemed like every week over the last year. To cook them dinners, and steep a thousand tea bags for her mom. To bring her dad cigarettes, and sourdough from Bread Alone. To shovel the driveway.

~

The house sat tucked back in the cul-de-sac, barely noticeable in the snow. She was unable to differentiate between her feelings, between the heat of her face and the frozen limbs of her body. It was a blur. She parked and released her grip from the wheel. Derek emerged from the house and her body tensed. She scrambled out of the car. Her red gloves dropped into the snow. He stood at the front door, clutching his bare arms around his chest.

“Hi.” His face cracked a weak smile.

He smelled like firewood and whisky. She could feel her curls fall out of the loose ponytail as she stormed past him and through the foyer. A series of barks echoed through the house.

“Max is in the garage, I kept him out of, well...”

Marina stopped in the hallway. She stared at the kitchen table, the teal pottery shards on top of a sheet of newspaper. Marina stood at the table, unbelieving.

“I uh, all the pieces are—”

“Where did it land, Derek?” she snarled.

“Uh...in the living room. Right there, the rug. I got all of it I could up. I ...”

Marina walked and bent over the rug. Grey dust was scattered all over. Flecks of green, chunks of white. “You asshole. You fucking asshole. How could you.” She backed away from the rug, mumbling to herself. “This was my part of him. I was supposed to bring him to Sanibel.” Marina’s head felt light, her heart beating at a furious pace. She didn’t know what to do.

“You still can. I got almost all of it.” Derek motioned to the table, to a chair, where a plastic container sat full of grey dust.

She turned, stiffening. “Tupperware? Tupperware?” She shook, throwing her hands up and down. “You put my brother in fucking tupperware? Who the fuck are you, Derek!” She had no control of herself. “Get the fuck out of my house, you piece of dog shit.”

“I was mad, Marina. We all make mistakes. God, I love you.” He stood in his boxers, dark hair like scribbles all over his body.

“Do you hear yourself? Mad people get drunk, Derek. Not get mad and throw urns! Get the fuck out of here!”

He didn’t move, but shut his eyes, like an ostrich with its head in a hole.

“I went to my parents’ to help them for three nights. Three! You piece of frozen dog shit. That’s what you are. Doesn’t smell or look like shit till you get close enough to it for awhile.” She walked towards him and picked up a piece of the broken urn. She hesitated, before lunging at him.

The shard sliced his arm. Marina was breathing hard, the bloody plaster pointed at him. He stared at her, with a shocked expression. No sound but the ticking of the old clock behind her. She stepped forward, strands of brown hair in her face.

“I. You...” Derek grabbed his arm, the blood streaming down his pale skin. She took another step forward.

“Hey, get away from me, crazy bitch!” he shrieked, grabbing a kitchen towel. He ran out of the house in his bare feet and bare chest. Marina breathed hard, watching as he ran like a scared child, across the street to Mark’s house. She turned back to the ground, the table, the plastic container of her brother’s ashes. She couldn’t leave him there, on the rug, on the table, in *this* house.

Marina carefully rolled up the rug, the scattered dust trapped neatly inside. Minutes later Marina was back in the car, plastic container and rug in the passenger seat. She left the house as it was, the bloody shard of pottery on the ground, her red gloves in the snow. The drive back to Bostock was calmer now, as the sun began to peek up over the horizon. The land on all sides was blanketed in white, the lofty mountains seemed glazed in icing, sugar crystals on top. Even the winding road seemed smoother, calmer somehow, with her brother next to her in the car once again. Countless trips they'd taken; to school, to friend's houses, to hills Joe claimed would have piles of snow, even in July.

She could almost see him still, filling the car with his large body and strong voice, shouting out the window at the neighbors as they drove past.

“Hey Hal, shoot BBguns later?”

“You gonna come over and shovel the manure? Then maybe,” their old neighbor Hal would always reply, to everything Joe said, no matter what.

Marina drove past the YMCA, the forlorn trees, and came up to the grey looming frame of her parents' house. She made a sharp left and followed the gravel tracks up another drive, another snow-covered trail. When the road got too steep, she parked the car. Gently taking the massive rug in her arms, she tucked the plastic container under her arm and began her ascent. It was difficult to maneuver the treacherous hill. Fallen trees and rocks hid underneath the snow, as if playing hide and seek.

Her face was frozen and her hands numb, slightly purple. She slipped on a rock, cutting her jeans open, and sat for a moment, laughing. As if the pain was funny, as if the snow wasn't soaking through her jeans. “You stubborn boy. You tricky bastard. Found a way back here,” she

mumbled under her breath. Her brother had always somehow convinced her to do what he wanted. Somehow.

She reached the crest they used to sled down as kids, and paused a moment to catch her breath. “You wonderful, wonderful boy,” she laughed this time, standing over Indian Rock, looking down at the river and hills below. She hadn’t been up there in a long time, not since the Christmas before he died. The frozen land was white and serene, and the world looked pure. On the opposite side of the peak, large black rocks jutted out of the sides of the river, its waters rushing towards the reservoir at the edge of town. Fresh snow covered it all.

Marina spread the rug down on the hill carefully, making sure not to shake it. Joe would have loved a morning like this, when the snow was untouched, the light powder making a swishing noise as he sledded down the hill, somehow curving around the densely populated trees and roots, rocks and branches. He was the only person she’d ever known that could read the land buried in white.

She took a deep breath and sat down. It was surprising how slick the rubber bottom of the rug was. She slid forward and planted her feet in the soft snow, the tupperware container in her right hand. This would actually work. She breathed in the scent of charcoal and wet evergreens. Squinting, the mountainside seemed to sparkle, flicker with prismatic illusion. No wonder the giants lived up there. Marina stared over the edge, where a glistening, white path clear of many trees was waiting for her. The wind blew gently, and with a hearty heave, she launched herself on the rug, plastic container

It had been a long time since they’d gone sledding.

A LOSS STAINED BLUE

April's wrath had set the tone for the remainder of Amy's year. It was considered a pollinating summer month down in North Carolina, and Amy had a love-hate relationship with it. On the one hand, it was nice to get outside for long runs and barbeques, but golden flecks seemed to flood and clog the air like a swarm of bees. Her throat dried out while her eyes dripped and itched all day and night. She coughed, continuing to run. This year, pollen was at its worst.

"You ok?" her neighbor Jim teased, slowing his pace on the greenway.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Well, I can go as slow as you need to, pumpkin—"

"Shut up," Amy jabbed him in the ribs, sprinting ahead.

"Damn woman. Fists of steel."

"Yeah. You keep talking," she said.

"So alright, let's talk relationships then? Things better this week?" He trotted alongside her. The two were out for their Wednesday run, placed right in the middle of their busy work week as a way to release, and exhaust themselves.

"About what? Cheryl?" Amy paused, sucking in air. "I don't know, she's so difficult sometimes."

"You know, my mom dragged my old man to couples therapy a few times. He'd go with her, and the therapist and mom would both lay into him. Stayed together a long time though."

"Gee, sounds great, Jim—"

"I'm serious. People get tired of each other. It happens. You gotta be creative."

Amy huffed, and ran to the side of the path. Her lungs felt tight and sticky, like they were

covered in syrup. “Ugh,” she coughed.

“You ok?” He ran in place.

She nodded a reply. “So, you get tired of Adrian?” She reached around her waist for a water bottle.

“What?” He stopped running. “Well shit, I don’t know, sometimes maybe. I was with Adrian three and a half years before we got married, and only then did things become interesting again. For awhile. It took having little Anna to *really* change things.”

“I know,” she laughed. “Can’t be a pseudo-bachelor with a baby around.”

“No, I know. But sometimes you just wake up one day wondering who that person is laying next to you. The shit of it is, the only things you can think about are so dumb, like her dirty socks on the floor, or the damn chicken pot pie that always tastes like stale saltines.”

She cracked a smile.

“I’m serious,” he continued. “I keep telling her that my mother just makes southern food better, but she won’t hear it. She keeps trying.”

“At least she’s trying,” Amy mumbled.

“Yeah, that’s what I said. Maybe you just need to step it up a notch, make a real commitment. Have a kid or two. You gotta make an effort too. Figure out what’ll make her happy.”

“Come on, Jim, we both know I’ve been trying my hardest.”

“Really? You think so?” He laughed. “What’s the hardest thing you’ve ever done?” He stretched his arm, and began running in place again.

“I don’t know. The season leading up to NCAA tourney maybe?”

“What did you play again, softball?” Amy flared, but wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of a correction.

"Ohhh right, soccer." Jim smirked. He slowly jogged away, luring her to follow. "Dating a woman is like training for a lifetime marathon, babe."

"Hey, you forget I'm a woman too," she shrieked, running after him.

~

The room was bleach-white and everything in it smelled like vanilla. Amy shivered, rubbing her legs covered in goosebumps. Nothing hung on the walls but a clock, the slow, monotonous arms creaked. On the countertop by the sink were boxes of gloves and a jar of tongue depressors that seemed wide enough to look inside a horse's mouth. Cheryl repositioned herself in the chair again, arms tight against her stomach.

"You ok?"

"I'm freezing, impatient. You know, the norm." Cheryl smiled, glancing at the stock photos of babies that adorned the clinic walls. "I just can't believe we're finally doing this."

"I wish I had thought to bring jackets. Kind of hard to think about it in June though."

"Nonsense, we've been here like six times, we always forget. It's our nerves."

"Next time, we'll be prepared," Amy rifled through a stack of papers in her lap.

"Work?"

"No, bills actually."

"Oh..." Cheryl drifted off. She rested her head on Amy's shoulder. Her hair was soft and bounced when she moved. Amy leaned her face into the blonde curls, breathing her in. Cheryl always had a sweet, alluring scent to her. It filled Amy's nose, and warmed her chest. "I wonder what she'll look like. I can't wait to see her."

“Babe, you’re not even inseminated yet. Let’s hold off on naming *it*, ok?” Amy chuckled.

“And just for the record, it’ll be a boy.”

“What!” Cheryl nudged her. “You stop it, with your tomboy nonsense, I want a girl, and that’s that.”

“They say the odds of multiples increases using all that fertility stuff.”

“Well good, a boy for you, and a girl for me,” Cheryl joked, lifting her head up. Her face was still wrinkleless and smooth, full of freckles and sunshine.

“Oh, this is why I love you,” Amy said, wrapping her arm around her.

There was silence for a minute, the clock creaking, the trees blowing against the windows.

“What if it isn’t effective the first time we try? Can we afford this all again?”

“We have some money saved up. It’s doable.” Amy rustled the papers.

“I know, it’s just hard, you know...you never think of stuff like this. Regular couples, they just do it and boom, a baby. No ovulation monitor or cryobanks. I feel like a lab rat at home, and in these offices sometimes. And that last doctor—”

“Hey, we said we weren’t going to talk about him again.”

“Asshole,” Cheryl muttered.

“I know, babe. It’s fine. Even doctors are allowed to have personal opinions—”

“We still had to pay for the visit though.”

“No one ever said this was going to be easy.” Amy squeezed her close. The clock on the wall seemed sluggish, as the minutes passed slower and slower. Sounds of footsteps outside raised her pulse each time, but the door never opened. She felt trapped in an icebox, as the June heat raged outside the window. The pile of bills felt heavy in her lap. She shifted in the chair, and checked her watch. It was the same as the clock on the wall.

~

Taking the web-team out for someone's birthday had become a tradition in Amy's office. Her assistant Will turned thirty-five in August, and she'd delayed solidifying the plans. The last three months had been consumed with mornings of tracking her girlfriend Cheryl's daily basal body temperature, making fertility appointments, and having arguments over sperm donors. Amy was weary of ovulation talk, and frustrated finding her Cheetos in the trash. She was hungry after seeing nothing but health-food in the refrigerator, and numb to the hormonal mood swings. She was almost relieved when they'd inseminated Cheryl, because despite the day of discomfort she'd experienced afterward, Cheryl was hopeful and radiant. Amy was just fearful of the results.

She picked The Big Oak, Will's favorite bar, for the birthday drinks after work that following Thursday.

"I'll get the next round," she yelled over the music, motioning towards the bar.

"What can I get ya?" A young looking bartender leaned towards Amy, small patches of acne on his cheeks.

"I need three Jim Winter Lager drafts, a captain and coke with lime, a Cosmo like you made last time for that tall woman in our group, a LIT and..." Amy placed a hand on her hip, turning to face the small group. "Oh, and whatever bourbon that gentleman in the blue suit is drinking."

"And for you?" the bartender yelled, coming back with three beers.

"I'm good for right now, but how about two red-headed sluts for the birthday boy."

"Shit, don't we all wish..." he drifted off, and winked, as if the joke hadn't been made

before.

Amy loosened her blouse and rolled up her sleeves as she waited. “Ramble On” blasted overhead, and the darkness of the bar put her at ease. She felt slightly guilty drinking a beer while Cheryl was home, but Cheryl had insisted on it tonight, with an odd twinkle in her eye.

An old man sat in the corner, playing the game machine that sat on the bar. His hand shook as he raised the glass of dark liquid to his mouth, cigarette hanging from his lip. A woman with crimson hair sat a few seats away, the leg across her knee slowly bouncing, slicing the air with her black stiletto. Amy watched the woman out of the corner of her eye. Her skin was a stark contrast to the dark-stained hair, the tight emerald-green blouse like plush grass.

“Cosmo, captain, woodruff on the rocks, you already have your beers...what are you missing? Right! LIT and your sluts.” He whirled around to grab the silver shaker from the sink.

He was throwing bottles and cups around. Show off. The woman giggled.

“Ok, you want to start a tab or just cash out?” He was breathing hard.

“Just start a tab.” She motioned for the group to get their drinks, but there was an extra one left on the bar. “Uh, excuse me. I didn’t order this.”

“Thanks for the drinks,” Will said, coming up behind her.

“Hey, birthday boy. Here, for us.” Amy motioned to the two shots on the counter.

“What are they?”

“Red headed sluts. I heard you liked those,” she laughed, handing him a glass.

“Ha, funny. I do see one I might talk to later though.” He bumped her with his arm, motioning toward the crimson and cream woman.

“Stop, you have kids. And a gorgeous wife I might add. Don’t even think about it.”

“Hey, I wouldn’t. No harm looking though, right? You musta given her the eye already.”

Will laughed, pouring the shot in his mouth.

“What, no. I also have a wife at home, remember?”

“Right, but you’re not married, you technically can’t. There’s a difference.”

“You’re drunk. Stop.” Amy threw back her own shot and the bartender walked up to them.

“Refill?”

“No thanks. I think you poured me an extra drink though.” She pointed to the dark glass as

Will walked away from the bar, beer in hand.

“From the lady at the bar.” The bartender motioned with his eyes to Amy’s right, to the woman in green.

“Oh, why?”

“Crown. On the rocks.” The bartender threw a hand through his dark hair, and grabbed a towel to wipe bar down. “She said you didn’t seem like you took your liquor softly, like those shots.” He smiled, and winked at her, before walking away.

Amy turned from the bar, approaching the woman. “Ahem. Hey, thanks, I typically don’t drink crown straight though.”

“Veronica. And you’re welcome.” Her eyes were dark green marbles.

She wiped her hand on her pant leg. “Amy.” She shook her hand. The woman’s hand was soft as her smooth face looked, and she felt a jolt of warmth, the way the crown burned her throat.

“Quite a crew you’ve got there,.” Veronica laughed, tilting her head toward Amy’s co-workers.

“Oh, yeah, right. Just out for a couple of drinks for my BA’s birthday.”

“BA?” Veronica scrunched her face, sipping on a glass of beer.

“Yeah, I’m a project manager for an IT group. That BA, the sweaty one, attempting to dance over there...” Amy drifted, chuckling. “He schedules meetings, researches, does a lot for the projects I work with.”

“Sounds fun.” She smiled.

“Can be...” Amy paused. Her face warmed, and she smoothed her ponytail. “What about you?”

“Me? Oh I’m a personal trainer at EquanoxX.”

Amy thought it was strange that whenever a person mentioned working out, she found herself critiquing them in her head. Thin arms, muscular calves, graceful collarbone....

“You know the place?” Veronica hijacked Amy’s thoughts.

“Oh. Yeah, that’s uh, the gym that looks like a cinderblock with windows. The one on Rt. 183?”

“Yup, that’s it. It’s a bit intimidating. Private.”

“I just joined a gym. Just doesn’t seem the same though.”

“Hm?”

“I used to play soccer. Ran outside. Worked out with my neighbor.”

Veronica sipped on her drink. “I think that’s the healthiest way. I try to convince my clients to work out in groups, join sports teams.”

“Hey! More shots? It’s still earrrrlllyyyy!” Will yelled, slinging an arm around Amy.

“Who’s this?” he smirked, turning toward the woman.

Amy coughed. “This is uh, Veronica.”

“Ohhhh, lovely. Nice to meet you, Veronica.” Will took his hands, and bowed, tipping over. Amy grabbed him by his side. A bit too sloppy is what she wanted to tell him, but it was his birthday.

“Told you,” Will whispered in her ear before walking away.

“Ehhhhhhhhyyy!” he yelled, the group of co-workers erupting in laughter.

“Birthday boy, huh. “ Veronica shook her head. “I couldn’t tell you the last time I went out with any of my co-workers.”

Amy caught herself staring at the woman’s mouth again. Her thin lips were almost abstract, the lack of flesh intriguing. She wondered if they were as smooth as her hands were. She blushed, Veronica placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Where’d ya go. You ok?”

“Oh, yeah sorry. Long day at work.” Touch barrier broken, Amy panicked. “I think I’m going to head home soon. Nice meeting you.” She slid the glass on the counter and turned abruptly to walk away.

“You drinking still?” Tim, the software lead asked, as she approached the group.

“No, I was. I think I’m gonna go home, guys.” She looked around the small bar, pushing her shirt tighter into her slacks.

“Oh come on. Another round? On me.” Tim grinned, taking a step forward.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’d watch birthday boy if I were you.” Amy motioned toward Will, who was dancing by himself under the dim lights.

Once outside, the fall air felt crisp and cool on her face. The bar had been too warm, and smoky, and intoxicating. Amy stood for a moment, regaining her balance. She’d only had a few drinks, and had been bought plenty of drinks in her time. Women approached her, perhaps

because she had an edge of masculinity and sharpness to her, perhaps because she was friendly, perhaps because she exuded a feeling of loneliness.

“Hey, sorry about that,” a voice called, and Amy turned, startled. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” Veronica said, her green eyes wide, lips pursed.

“Oh, not a big deal. No, I wasn’t uncomfortable. Just a lot of things—”

“You don’t have to leave your friends. I’m on my way home actually, so you stay.”

“Oh, I probably should be getting home as well.” Amy was attracted to this woman, a feeling that burned in her chest, something she hadn’t felt in a long time. She wanted it to last, but at the same time, needed it to end.

“Are you this way? I’ll walk with you.” She smiled, adjusting the large bag on her shoulder.

“My car is just around the corner.” Cheryl was home. Probably asleep already, but she was her constant at the moment. They’d been working on things, working toward things.

“Well, here.” Veronica slipped something into Amy’s pocket, and leaned towards her ear. Her hair was soft against Amy’s face; she smelled like cranberry marmalade. “If you want to ever take a walk, or get a coffee, or, I don’t know. I don’t usually....” Her smile faded as Amy’s face fell.

“You forgot your...” Will yelled from behind.

Veronica stood up and turned, smiling, her face bright red.

“What, Will?” Amy smoothed her shirt down.

“Your credit card. You forgot it at the bar.”

“Oh I, oh...damn. Thanks.” Amy grabbed the card out of Will’s hand, and dug in her pocket.

“Here, give the bartender this for a tip, tell him I’m sorry.” Amy’s face burned, handing Will a

twenty-dollar bill as she turned to walk away. “Happy Birthday, Will.” Amy walked away, her head down. Tears began to form on the edges of her eyes. It hurt to feel.

~

The lights were all on when Amy came home. It was after midnight, and there was singing in the kitchen.

“Baby, is that you?” Cheryl called.

“Uh, Hi...yeah it’s me. Hi Goosey!” Amy said, as the dog came charging towards her. She made little bits of barks and cries as she spun around to get stroked. “Babe, it’s like midnight, what are you doing awake still?”

Cheryl came out of the kitchen, practically crashing into her. “We did it!” she yelled, wrapping her arms around her. In her hand she held a small red spatula, and smelled like chocolate.

“We, what?” Amy was startled, slowly hugging Cheryl back.

“We did it, baby. I took the test today. Six times. We did it.” Cheryl turned and pointed to the kitchen table, where six white sticks were crammed into a box. “We’re pregnant!” Cheryl laughed, hugging Amy again. “Look!” She took the box and dumped it on the table.

“Oh baby, that’s gross. Not on the table,” Amy began.

“Look. Six times. Positive. I’m pregnant.” Cheryl’s voice calmed a bit, as Amy walked towards the sticks. All positive. Positive.

“I...wow. Wow!” Amy had so many thoughts swimming in her head. They were pregnant, though. Second try, second insemination. A baby. Her face lit up and she gripped Cheryl by the waist, lifting her up. “Pregnant? Well why didn’t you say so in the first place!”

“I did, silly,” Cheryl laughed, a laugh Amy hadn’t heard in a long time. It was loud, and echoed throughout the vaulted ceilings like a bell tower ringing a joyous announcement. Cheryl was in the kitchen, baking. With music on. She was singing, too. She looked happy, as if the empty void Amy had seen in her eyes for so many months had disappeared. Maybe they’d made the right decision after all. Maybe Jim had been right, a baby would change things.

Cheryl went back to stirring her bowl. “I’m making cupcakes to bring to the daycare tomorrow, for the kids, to celebrate.” Cheryl smiled, moving her hips side to side. She wore a thin purple shirt and khaki skirt. Her blonde hair was down and loose around her face.

“Baby, I love it.” Amy went behind and hugged her, “But maybe we should wait a bit before we tell people. Don’t want to get our hopes up, or disappoint anyone, right?” She turned Cheryl towards her. “It’s what the doctor suggested.”

“Oh. Oh, you’re right I know. But I can still celebrate on the inside! So much to do!” Cheryl leaned up and kissed Amy on the cheek. They looked at each other a moment, and Amy dug her mouth into Cheryl’s. She tasted like chocolate and flour. Amy raised Cheryl up slowly to the counter, spatula still in her hand. Kissing her face and nose and neck, she lifted up Cheryl’s shirt, moving her hands around to unlock her bra.

“Oh,” Cheryl moaned as Amy pulled the bra up and began to kiss her breast gently, then harder, gripping her sides. She began to kiss her thighs, lifting the skirt slowly and Cheryl dropped the small red spatula.

Amy couldn't think, or breathe; she ached to touch every part of her. Consumed in the moment, every memory of the night slipped further and further away.

They were pregnant.

~

“Mr. Dee, what's today's date?” Amy stood at the counter, filling out the dry cleaning form.

“It's February 1st, you not know this?” He squinted at her.

“Hm. Just checking.” She chuckled to herself. “Can you have the slacks done by Wednesday?”

“Yes. Of course, all of it. Why so much, Ms. Amy?” Mr. Dee turned his head, shaking and smoothing the large pile of shirts and pants.

“I know, I know. I had a slew of dirty clothes in my trunk I finally brought in. So much going on—”

“Oh, I see. Yes,” he interrupted. “Well, Miss Amy, you not check all your pockets. Tsk Tsk.” His round face was glossy from the warm room. He handed her three pennies, a receipt and piece of napkin. “Have nice day. See you, three days.”

Amy thanked him and turned, opening the folded paper; it was a gas receipt. The three pennies she put in the console of her car, and unfolding the scrap of napkin, revealed *Veronica 805-4705*.

~

How was that still in her pocket? Amy calculated the months since Will's birthday, since meeting Veronica, since finding out they were pregnant. There it sat, in her cup holder, the reminder of the pain and fabricated joy all in one night. Of shots and chocolate icing, crimson strands and blonde curls. Amy shoved the piece of napkin in her pants as she parked the car. She was early for work, and got herself a coffee in the lobby before heading upstairs.

"Morning, Tim. How are things?" Amy paused at the conference room, where he sat, his balding head slumped over a pile of papers.

"Oh, I'm fine. Things are good. Not sure about how they'll turn out though, we're supposed to hit the deadline but I'm not convinced everyone's on task. Looking at meeting notes myself to see where the gaps are," he said, leaning back in his chair.

"You are always Mr. Overachiever. Making us all look bad." Amy grinned, sipping her coffee.

"True, but you're here early this morning. I like to get in and out before all the crazies." He clicked his pen. "Hey, how are you anyways. You know, don't take this the wrong way, but you seem a little down lately."

"Oh?" She straightened her back. "I guess. I mean, sometimes things don't work out the way you..." She took another large gulp of coffee. Amy didn't speak to Tim on a personal level very often, or anyone for that matter. "You know?"

"You'd be surprised. We've been through our share. If you ever—"

"Yeah, ok. Thanks, Tim."

"How is your uh, how's Cheryl." He blushed. He wiped his cheek with a hand.

"She getting through it. One day at a time they always say, right?" Amy stuttered a bit, blushing herself. The napkin scrap in her pants seemed to burn her hand as she gripped it.

Tim looked at her, his eyes soft. “Well, if you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.” He coughed, and Amy nodded, quickly exiting.

~

The blue ink was smeared on the wrinkled napkin. *Veronica 805-4705*. Amy’s pulse quickened. She picked up the phone.

“Amy, can you take the meeting at eight tomorrow?” Will Burran emerged around the corner, his slick hair blaring under the fluorescent bulbs.

Startled, she slammed the phone down. “Hey...you.” She palmed the napkin scrap.

“Sorry, were you in the middle—”

“I just was just finishing up some emails before I left,” she interrupted. “So, you can’t do the proponent conference call tomorrow?”

“No, I mean I could from my cell. It’s just that Sam wants me to drive him to school tomorrow. It’s show and share day. He wants to bring our dog.”

“Cute. Guess you can’t leave the dog there all day.”

“No, but I’ll be online by eleven. I can still run the software tests tomorrow,” he said, looking up.

“Ok, well I think the business proponents want more specific feedback on the websites we’ve altered this time. You get all of the data from Lisa yet?”

“Yeah, she’s behind though...” Will drifted off.

She squeezed the space between her eyebrows, and sighed. “These deadlines are creeping up. I’ll look into it.”

“I can send you the data—”

“No,” she waved a hand at him, “I’ll take the call.”

Will opened his mouth, like he was hesitating to speak. “Yes?” Amy asked, straightening her back. Her palm was sweating.

“Oh, uh, nothing. Thanks.” He threw a hand up and walked out of the office.

Her palm was sweaty, the napkin crinkled. She slid it into the top drawer, and eased back into her large leather chair. There was stillness in the room and offices around her after six o’clock. The typing slowed, the phones stopped ringing, and the chattering lulled. She usually felt like she could relax and focus, knowing no one was about to call or approach her. Yet the silence began to breed a lonely feeling in her lately. Since Cheryl would be waiting, Amy took her things to go.

~

The house was dark. Lights still hung on the trees above the Christmas decorations that sat deflated in the yard. A red Honda sat in the driveway, untouched snow behind its tires.

Amy opened the door, and Goose began barking and jumping on her.

“Hey, down! Down, Goose!” she yelled, pushing the eighty-pound dog off. Her khakis had dark lines of red mud on them. “Cheryl?” She hung her jacket and scarf in the closet, removed her boots, and smoothed her ponytail. A mirror hung on the wall, and she stared at it for a moment. Her eyes were puffy tonight.

Cheryl was sitting on the couch, covered in a green blanket, a hardback book in her lap.

“Hi baby.” Amy kissed her blonde curls. She smelled like mint and rice cakes.

“Oh, hi. You’re home early.” Cheryl looked up at her. “How was your day?”

“Lisa’s behind again; there are so many gaps in her research about these websites. The project could be in red by the end of the week if she doesn’t get done,” Amy sighed, rolling up her white-pressed sleeves in neat creases to her elbows. She wiped the chair off and sat, her hand covered in black dog hair. Cheryl hadn’t cleaned.

“So what’d you do today? I see the dog went out.” She frowned, motioning to her dirty pants.

“Oh darn—I tried to wipe her feet; it’s just so muddy out there.” Cheryl creased and un-creased a page of her book. “It was kinda gross out today, cold. Jim called again. I left the message on the fridge.”

“Did you go meet with Mr. Larrimore about getting some hours at the daycare?”

“I was...” she drifted, turning back to the television, “but I’ve been so tired.”

Amy didn’t want to argue with her, but they needed the extra money. “I know it might be hard for you to go back, but it’s the closest thing you have to a job right now. Mr. Larrimore is still willing to have you.”

Cheryl listlessly stared into her lap, as though she was concentrating on the pages, but Amy knew better.

“I’ll make you some tea.” Amy stood, startling Goose who had settled on her feet.

“I’m alright for now,” Cheryl said.

At least everything was orderly in the kitchen. Spotless countertops mimicked the bare shelves of the pantry and fridge. Christmas towels still hung on the oven, the poinsettia brown and wilted on the table. Amy’s stomach hissed and whined at her. She filled the kettle with water and searched for something to eat. Goose sat on the kitchen tile, her eyes big and ears upright.

“Has Goose eaten dinner yet?”

“No. There’s some soup in the cabinet if you’re hungry,” Cheryl yelled from the living room. A bottle of white wine sat on the stove, its contents almost entirely emptied. A bright-pink sticky note was stuck to the fridge. *Jim called again. Not returning his calls, wants to know if you’ll sign up 4 that Monster Race 05/15 w him. 486-7709*

Amy took the note off the fridge, and threw it in the garbage. She poured the rest of the wine into a cup, and scooped Goose some food. “I’m going to order out some food from Briggs I guess. What do you want?”

“You see Jim’s note?”

“Yeah.”

“Amy, you really need to call him. He came over here the other day, just checking up.”

“I know. I will. I will.”

“You haven’t run with him in months.”

“What do you want to eat?” Amy called again from the kitchen.

“I’m not really hungry.”

“You need to eat, babe.”

“Who says?”

Amy walked back into the living room, keys in hand. “Maybe I’ll just order you a salad—”

“I’m not eating for two anymore. Besides, it’s embarrassing. Look at me,” Cheryl huffed, slamming the book closed.

“What have you had to eat today?”

“I’m carrying around this extra weight, with nothing to show for it. No baby, nothing. Just thighs and stretch marks.”

Amy bristled, and gulped the wine. “I know, babe—”

“No, you don’t know. We lose a baby, and you just go back to work. No tears, no anger. Acting like you’re fucking numb or something.”

“But I—”

“I’m the one sitting at home, still wearing my maternity clothes. It’s—it’s pathetic.” Cheryl’s voice quivered.

“I signed you up for the gym.”

“You are no goddamn help, Amy. Can’t you see? I don’t want to go back to work, I can’t. I won’t. No matter how much in debt we are... I won’t go back, looking like Ms. Cheryl that got fat and all the kids askin’ where the baby is.”

“You’re not being fair.”

“Fair? You want to—”

“I lost the baby too. We both did,” Amy interrupted, her voice stern.

“But you didn’t! You didn’t *lose* it. I did.” Cheryl began to cry.

Amy put down the cup, and smoothed her hair. There had been so many days, and nights, when the easiest thing triggered an argument. “I’ll order the food on the way to Briggs,” she said, turning to the door. “Your tea kettle will go off in a minute.”

~

“Hi Will, Tim, you know Cheryl.” Amy introduced her to the group. Cheryl wore a dark blue dress, with a thin black shawl that draped around her shoulders and rested gently around the midsection.

“Hey! Amy just told us a few days ago, held out for 4 months!” Will shouted, jabbing Amy in the shoulder.

“We had to make sure everything was ok before we told people. Plus it was perfect timing, now everyone knows what to get us for Christmas.” She grinned.

“Well congratulations on the baby!” Will laughed, hugging Cheryl tightly. “Oh shit, sorry.” Will looked at Amy, who gave him an eye.

“Be careful, Will, she’s pregnant, remember?” Tim said, laughing as he shook Cheryl’s hand. “This is my wife Monique.” He motioned towards his wife who stood back from them in a black suit. She wasn’t smiling and nodded her head hello. Andy turned a slight shade of red as Amy smiled and extended her hand.

“Hi again, Monique, nice to meet you. This is Cheryl.” Amy grabbed the woman’s hand softly and then turned from the group. “Let’s go get some food for you,” she said, holding Cheryl’s hand. “Talk to you guys later. Nice meeting you.”

They walked away from the group, and Cheryl sighed. “Maybe I shouldn’t have come, you know, to your work Christmas party.”

“Don’t be crazy. Most of them know about me; about us. There’s no point in hiding it.” She led Cheryl toward the refreshments. “I love showing my baby off.”

“I wasn’t saying anything wrong, I just didn’t want to make it harder for you at work. Monique didn’t seem too friendly.” Cheryl shuffled in her shoes across the floor.

“We’re having a baby. ‘We’ are real now, love. People who can’t recognize that, well, they’re just fools. It’s nice, this life we’re gonna have together.” Amy turned Cheryl toward her.

“I know. We’ve been so distracted with the baby that—”

“It’s the best distraction in the world, I wouldn’t change a thing,” Amy interrupted. Cheryl’s cheeks were glossy and plump, her clipped-back hair slightly flat, but it was her eyes...fresh like spring water. The freckles splattered around them like a flock of geese wanting a drink. Her painted lips protruded out, glossed and tempting.

“Amy, Amy. I like the suit, you’re looking sharp,” a voice behind them called out. It was her boss.

“Oh, oh, Mr. Scranton, hello, this is my...this is Cheryl.” Amy turned, releasing the grip on her hand.

“Ah, this must be your lady, you mean.” He turned to shake Cheryl’s hand. “I hear we’re expecting in a bit. Good luck with that. Amy’s a hard worker. I’m sure she’ll be diligent in all areas of childrearing as well.” He laughed, raising his glass before walking to the bar. “Get something to drink. We’ve got hot tea and seltzer too, Cheryl.”

“See, you’re fine.” Amy mumbled, turning toward the food. “Everyone knows we’re gay. I told Will we were trying to get pregnant months before it happened.”

“Well you just seemed kind of nervous back there—”

“What, no, just startled. He’s *the* boss, you know?”

“I know, babe, I just don’t want to overstep. You know that.”

“Then be yourself. Let’s feed you two good tonight, eh?” Amy wrapped an arm around her, pulling Cheryl closer still. “You two gotta eat.”

~

Amy sat in the far corner of Briggs parking lot, and waited as time went by. Ten minutes till the food would be done. Her pants felt tight around her waist, and she leaned the seat back. Although the February night was cold, she had the sunroof open. Cheryl's words echoed in her head. The loss wasn't hers.

She turned the radio on, but it didn't help. The yelling voices, the whimsical melodies, hearty twangs—they were all unbearable.

Leaning back once again, she tried to focus on a spot through the open sunroof, on a speck of a star, that million miles away, was burning itself nonexistent.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,” Amy bellowed, banging her fists on the leather steering wheel. She screamed, tilting her head back. Her face became red and hot as she pounded on her car, on her thighs. She stared at the starlit sky, yelling till the white specks began to blur and move, her eyes filling with tears.

She crumpled, her head slipping to the side, sobbing uncontrollably till she couldn't breathe. Gasping for breath, she continued to pound and pound the steering wheel, bruising her hands and wrists. The gut-wrenching pain devoured her, and she curled up in a ball, helpless, trying to calm herself, till no tears could escape her eyes any longer.

The phone buzzed, a text message from Briggs indicating the food was ready. Amy pressed herself firmly into the seat, slowing her breathing. She grabbed a tissue out of her pocket, and rubbed her eyes, her nose, softly whimpering like an injured animal.

Looking in the mirror, she saw a blue streak on her cheek and across her eye. The tissue was a napkin, *the* napkin. She unfolded it. The letters had smeared, but the numbers were still visible. Barely visible, as the tears soaked into the ink...they would be blurred and gone soon.

Amy dropped the napkin, and hesitated for a minute to smooth her hair the best she could, the blue streak staining her face. She sighed, and picked up the phone.

It rang, echoing in the silence, her head pounding, her breathing shallow. It rang as her tears dried, the napkin damp, and shriveled. It rang as customers filtered out of the restaurant, the salivating aroma of steak and salad drifting towards her.

“Hello?” a voice chirped.

“Is it ok if I just bring home some Wendy’s tonight? I don’t feel like waiting for Briggs.”

“Of course, a number three for me.” Cheryl’s voice was warm, and Amy gripped the phone tight.

“See you in a few then,” she said.

DOUBLE PINOCHLE

Cuddles walked towards me, her pace more like a shuffle now. She meowed, screeching the way a rusty hinge struggles to bend. Thick black stains hollowed out her sunken eyes like a raccoon, her dingy coat clinging in patches to her slight body. A wounded moth flapped in frantic circles on the cement floor, yet her gait remained unchanged. Her gaze seemed fixed on the heating pad that lay under a deck chair, the faded, pilled fabric covered in white fur.

I ran a gentle hand along her back. Her fur clumped between my fingers. She was ragged.

My mother slammed her bags against the door frame, squeezing through. I glanced up, scowling.

“What?” She threw her bags down.

“Have you taken her to the vet?” I said.

“Oh Ava, really? Not this again.” She launched a bag into the old green truck.

“Mom, look at her.”

“We’ve taken her. He said as long as she’s eating on her own, and there are no signs of chronic pain, she still has a life.”

She shut the tailgate, giving it a hearty nudge for good measure.

“I’m just saying,” I quipped.

“Are you ready to go?” She pointed to my bag still on the ground. Her dark brown and gray hair was wet, and brushed back into a temporary pompadour. She wore a faded creamy-green sweatshirt, and black sweatpants that sat low on her petite frame. I nodded, reaching for the duffle. Cuddles had made it to the heating blanket, her body already curled into a ball. The loud and raspy breathing was rhythmic, like branches scraping against each other in the wind.

~

When we arrived at my aunt's house, Pop Pop appeared to be sleeping. It'd been so long since I'd seen him. His wrinkled hand was almost translucent with age, yet was warm and smooth like a newborn's. His hand showed no evidence of the coarse life he'd led. I squeezed it once, to pull his attention away from the massive television that hung like a clock in the center of the room. Its flashing scenes dwarfed the large carved crucifix hanging below, and for a moment I thought he was asleep.

I squeezed the hand again, and his head turned, eyes widening as he gasped. He opened his mouth, his lips puckering and releasing. It looked like he was attempting to speak, yet no words surfaced. I talked to him loudly, but his tongue was just rolling around inside his mouth.

The chair at his bedside was hard and antiquated; it creaked fiercely as I pulled it towards him. The brittle form seemed like a stage prop, created for appearances only, no true functional value. I speculated how long since it had been used, how long since someone had sat by Pop Pop's side.

The deck of Pinochle cards in my pocket pressed against my thigh, my jeans tightening as I eased into the chair. I could hear the clinking of cups and plates through the doors as my mother and aunt prepared breakfast. I looked into my Pop Pop's eyes, and had seen that look a thousand times. He was smiling. He squeezed my hand slightly when no words or sounds surfaced from his mouth, and turned back to the television.

~

Back in the late eighties, pregnant women were told not to have cats, so my Aunt arrived with the present named Heidi for my 5th birthday. Heidi scrambled through the door and skirted under the parlor table where a circle of dinner and picnic chairs were set. I was a pushy one even back then, and when the music started so did the competition. The petite girls were no match for me. I butt-slid for my chair, and pushed whoever occupied it to the ground. Heidi, I imagine, watched that victory with active terror. Hiding under the table, little did she know she was home.

Heidi thrived in our home for six months, surviving a plate of spaghetti landing on her head, my brother's insane idea she'd enjoy a bath, and even a run-in with the neighborhood dog we used to feed Pop Rocks. Yet one cold morning, she hid for the final time, in the warm confines of my Uncle's exhaust pipe. His visit was short, and with it, so was Heidi's.

~

Pop Pop groaned and squeezed my hand a little. The slow, low moans with patchy gurgles were similar to monster's howls, like that mysterious creature in *The Quest*. At the end my brother Reece and I realized the "monster" was nothing more than an abandoned machine in a lagoon. Just a rusty machine.

It was a cry foreign to all of us.

A black and white movie was on AMC. Pop Pop didn't look too interested, but what did I know. He stared at it all the same. The scent of French toast and strawberries drifted through the doors into the small, bleach-white room where we sat, side by side, my hand in his. I wondered

what source of agony that was for him—for the man who introduced me to the concept of gooey buns, bratwurst sausages and sweet wine we pretended was cranberry juice.

~

Black coffee always accompanied Pop Pop to breakfast. He'd sneak around the kitchen, making Reece and me our own cups after our parents told us coffee was for adults. I later discovered what he gave us was mostly warm milk and sugar, but we'd sit and dip our baked goods in the steaming cups, and were happy sharing a secret with him. He used to tell us the most fantastic stories there at the breakfast table during the summer weeks he visited our home in upstate New York.

"Always with the damn animals. What's this one's name?" he grumbled one morning, the calico cat purring against his leg.

"Haven't named him yet. We just got him, Pop Pop." I smiled toothlessly.

"I used to kill cats for a nickel." He grinned, chomping down on another slice of coffee cake. I'd heard the story before, on a walk down the road to the gas station to pick up Ritz crackers and beer for my Pop Pop. Reece perked up from his Nintendo at the far side of the table, and paused the game. Blonde hair covered his eyes. Pop Pop had his attention.

"Yup, back then cats ran through the streets of Cranford as though they owned the town." Pop Pop shook his head. "The ladies on my block, would ask me if I'd kill some of the cats that were eating their garbage and pooping on their flower beds. I'd catch the cat, and bring it into the basement. Then I'd put it in a pot on the stove and I sat on it—"

“Oh Dad, nonsense,” my mother interrupted him, her curly hair bobbing as she washed dishes.

He looked up, and laughed quietly, sipping his steaming coffee. His sideburns were dark brown, but the hair on his head was gray and thinning. Clear plastic glasses sat on the bridge of his nose, giving him an venerated appearance, the way I’d always imagined all history professors were required to look.

“I’ve told you this a hundred times, it’s true! Boiled them, the only way to do it back then. The ladies wouldn’t care much to see them. They’d just hand me a nickel and I’d go buy gum and sugar sticks...” Pop Pop stared out the window.

Reece’s face scrunched, as he discretely put the gray Nintendo on the table and walked to the kitchen, where I saw him scoop the calico cat up, and run upstairs.

That cat lasted one weekend and two school days. When we walked back from the bus stop, my father had chips and root beer waiting for us on the picnic table in the driveway. We never had soda in the house.

“How was school, guys?”

“Fine!” Reece and our neighbor Keith yelled, dropping their backpacks as they grabbed chips and sodas, already running down the hill toward the river. I sat on the small blue and yellow table, cracking open a drink. My father was tinkering with the engine of a car he’d just bought. I don’t remember what kind, there’d been so many. This one was blue.

“What about my princess?” he clucked, wrench in hand.

“Oh, it was ok. Nothing too great.”

“Ava, he ran away.” My dad didn’t even hesitate, didn’t even lead up to it, didn’t cushion or explain. He just rubbed his balding head and turned back to hover over the old car. His jeans

were torn and covered in dark patches of oil stains. I sucked on the can of root beer, letting the tiny bubbles swish between my teeth and make laps around my tongue.

“What do you mean?” My chest felt heavy, the way I define disappointment today. We’d already had another cat run away after the “Heidi incident.” This one made three.

“I don’t know, Ava. I’m sorry.” He shook his head. “We’re not having much luck getting a cat to stay.”

I took another sip of root beer. It was almost creamy.

Eventually, my father found me another cat. Discovered it in the paper that morning, and woke us before the sun. “If you get here before nine, the cat is yours,” he recounted to Reece and me, our sleepy heads wobbling side to side in the front seat of his truck. A cold whoosh of air entered as he plopped her in my lap minutes later. I remember her sweet face, petite pink nose and jagged claws. I held my little legs straight up as she slid into the nook above my knees and quickly fell asleep. I kept my legs out in front the whole way home, my thighs beginning to shake alongside the bumps in the road. The small white puff slept undisturbed, cuddling into me.

I named her Cuddles.

Over the years, Cuddles developed defense mechanisms to survive through my brother’s schemes. She’d begun snapping at anyone who tried to pet her, anyone besides my father. Yet as many times as we moved, she never got lost or ran away. She never hid in the wrong place, nor encountered a malicious plate of spaghetti.

One of our moves was to a small town outside of Austin, Texas. My parents bought an eleven-acre lot of yucca plants and cacti, fire weed and fire ants. Not having time to build an

entire house, my father constructed a lofted three-car garage. We lived in the 650 square-foot space while they built the rest of the house.

Once we were settled in, my Pop Pop dropped into town for a visit. He comfortably spent three weeks in the garage of our home, in a make-shift bed surrounded by boxes and tools.

The morning after Pop Pop's first stay, he was grumbling over his coffee.

"How was your sleep, Dad?" my mother asked, squeezing his shoulder as she moved across the room.

"Something bit me. You've got mice down there." He flipped the newspaper open; it was crinkled like the weathered edges of his eyes, tired and grey.

"Mice, huh?" my mother chuckled softly. "We've never seen a mouse yet, Pop. The house is only two months old. The cat sleeps in the garage every night. She probably just gave you a love bite."

"I know when there are damn mice in a house. He was hiding in the shadows. In the boxes." He turned to me, lifting up his sleeve. Pop Pop pointed to a small spot on his wrist. It looked like a freckle, really. "Woke up, dead of night, to a sharp pain. It was a mouse, I tell you. A huge one, with red eyes and yellow teeth." His eyes got bigger as did his exaggeration.

"Oh, Pop Pop." I looked at him and laughed. He shook the paper again.

"We'll let the cat sleep in the house with us tonight, if that'll make you feel better." My mother leaned over to refill his coffee, which had been chugged moments before.

"The cat isn't the problem. What's it good for if it can't catch a mouse?"

~

That night, after a demand from my grandfather, Cuddles was put in the garage. When he'd beaten us at Pinochle for the eighth time, and we had to go to bed, Pop Pop took his thoroughly "topped-off" wine cup down into the garage.

Our mother smiled at us, her eyes wide as we finished brushing our teeth in the tiny bathroom. "I wonder who'll win tonight, the Pop Pop or the mouse!" Reece and I giggled as she raised her hands up like claws, curls bouncing, and chased us into the back corner where we slept, two twin mattresses crammed on the floor.

The next morning, two things are vivid in my mind. A, the amount of crumb cake we consumed, and B, the dark red scratch that appeared across my grandfather's chest and arm.

"Great cat you've got," said the man who claimed to dislike animals. "My hero," reiterated the man who supposedly boiled cats in his youth. "Look," he smiled, further exposing the scratch we were already staring at intently.

My mother glanced up at my grandfather, and shook her head.

"You see..." he began, clearing his throat. Reece and I sat eating cereal at the breakfast table.

"I'm sure the mouse was hiding in the room for hours, so the cat couldn't see him. Then he crept slowly till he reached my chest. It was my nose he wanted." He smiled and pointed to his flushed face. "Yet the cat moved stealthily, inching her way along the cold cement so the bell on her collar wouldn't jingle. And then, it happened!" He clapped, startling me. "In my dream I'd been in Florida, drinking wine at the Mucky Duck, when suddenly, Crash! Bang! A fight in the bar, as Cuddles leapt through the air, tackling my adversary, them both rolling onto the floor." Our Pop Pop grinned, his teeth grey and old like the wisps of hair he combed over the shiny part of his head.

We were excited, thrilled at the fight. My mother chuckled, and pushed us outside to play. I remember my father, later on when they were working on the deck, asked if he'd seen the mouse, but my Pop Pop was mumbling and humming to himself by then.

~

Absentmindedly, I searched for the scar that afternoon, his soft skin like squash left on the vine too long. He'd closed his eyes and drifted to sleep, after failed attempts to get him to respond. He had mouthed a hello to me the first day we'd arrived, but since then his eyes seemed cold, bothered by the fact he couldn't respond. The Olympics came on in the evening, and you could tell he liked watching the skaters zip around the ice, and fly off the mountain tops, the crisp snow falling like wasted memories, dusty flour from rolling out cookies.

My aunt came in later, to feed him lunch, and my mother and I sat in the living room, watching television and reading magazines. It was hard not to look over, through the door, into the room where he lay. The machines she used to suction his airway whirred as he gurgled and coughed. My stomach ached. Maybe I'd eaten too much French toast. "Time to feed you Pop," my uncle said, gently turning Pop Pop's body so he was on his side. My mother got up, and squeezed my leg. It must have been too much for her. The grey strands of her hair shone in the sunlight as she walked to the porch.

I looked out at my mother after a moment, her small figure a dull shape next to the glimmering lake. She was a figure painted into the backdrop almost. I turned back to my magazine, and kept my eyes shallow. The machines continued to make noises, Pop Pop on his side; it was lunchtime.

~

He loved Cuddles after the “mouse” incident. Pop Pop would even let her rub up against his black church pants, occasionally grumbling as he plucked off each white hair later. The summers he spent with us, left memories full of vivid images and balmy feelings. Even now as I hold his hand, his body no longer useable, and his mind cloudy. They were summers filled with lemonade and sunburns after a day by the pool. They were days comprised of morning swims, afternoon crafts and adventures, and evenings of stories and Pinochle games.

My father had pulled a large picnic table onto the concrete slab next to our driveway, so we could eat lunch in the afternoons when my mom was still at work. It was so he could watch us, but now I realize it was to watch Pop Pop too. There he sat, a big floppy tan hat on his head adorned with a single shamrock patch. He drank a two o’clock cup of wine and set up a game of Pinochle as we ate our sandwiches. Reece and I giggled as we peeked at each other’s cards.

My Pop Pop was a fierce Pinochle player who rarely lost a match. Yet he’d taught us well, tricks and all. We soon learned to bet high even if it meant coming out with barely enough cards, and that if we whispered quietly enough, Pop Pop couldn’t hear us comparing cards, or trying to figure out what was in the kitty. It all depended on the kitty, which was a three-card pile players bid on. Sometimes, if you went all in, the kitty was good to you. Yet other times, you went in the hole. Being in the hole, as you could only imagine, wasn’t good.

I vaguely remember that one afternoon, the day Pop Pop had a poor string of luck. The sun was beating down on us, and Reece and I were sweating, even in our bathing suits.

“I’m going to get a small refill. I’ll get you two some waters,” he said, easing himself out of the bench holding an empty wine cup. He touched my face with his hand, a hand that was rough and calloused like my father’s. “Your turn to deal, my dear.”

“Bring two waters for me, Pop Pop. It’s so hot out here,” Reece whined, wiping his forehead. Pop Pop nodded and walked to the garage, his khaki pants sagging off his thin waist.

“You want Dad to pull the table in the shade more? You could put on your hat, which might help,” I said, trying to concentrate on the cards. It was still hard for me to shuffle, especially on a table with little slits that let cards easily slip through.

“Ava, have you ever gotten pinochle?” Reece turned his head sideways, flicking his uneaten sandwich.

“You mean, the double pinochle? Like getting both jacks of diamonds and both queens of spades?” I looked up from the cards and paused, squinting.

“Yeah.” Reece smiled.

“No. Never.”

“Huh. How much is double pinochle worth?”

“It’s like 32 points, the highest score you could get to start. Why?” I put down the cards and looked at him.

“Hm.” He rubbed his blonde head.

“What?”

“Oh nothing. Just thinking. Pop Pop seems to be grumpy about losing today.”

“Yeah, maybe we should stop looking at each other’s cards then, Reece.”

“Why? He leans over and looks at mine all the time!” Reece shook his head, and sat straight up. “You think Pop Pop has ever gotten pinochle, Ava?”

I smiled after a moment. “I’m sure he has. He’s been playing for like a hundred years.”

Reece’s tan face crinkled. “What if we gave him—”

“Yeah,” I interrupted, already scooping the cards back into my hand. I dealt Pop Pop double pinochle, Reece watching for him to come back. I stuck one of the jack of diamonds in the kitty, so he’d have to take a chance to get it. But they were all there, waiting for him.

On his return, my Pop Pop shuffled and sorted his cards. We stared intently at him, ours already in order, already accounted for. Only for a brief moment did he react, his eyes widening like large silver dollars, like big blue ice cubes. He coughed, sipping wine, and fanned the cards out in his left hand.

Sly as ever, he started the betting low.

JU JU GREEN

Thousands of freckles decorated Lane's arms and hands, fingers and face. She had exactly forty-five freckles on her nose, and over a hundred on each hand. I know, because I counted them daily, sometimes while we sat on the deck, our *Strawberry Dream* nail polish drying in the mid-July heat.

At first it was a game, she would show me hers, the tiny specks that swarmed her body and multiplied in the sun. Some of her freckles were bunched so close together that their boundaries merged, edges blurred. Those I counted twice. Then I would show mine, the fifteen barely visible, rounding the edges of my shoulders.

I liked when my counting tickled her and she giggled. Her skin would ripple and rise with chills. My finger slipped sometimes, into the smooth groove of the scar above her lip. I loved the way it felt, how appealing it made her look. Sometimes I imagined in my mirror at night, squinted real hard—hoping to see what I'd look like with that perfect sliver that teased her mouth. I'd trace my finger down her nose, petite and tan from our summer months. She'd giggle and squeal about my hand tasting salty. We both jumped and yelled “gross!” our glasses of ice water clinking.

The nail polish came from Lane's mother's boudoir, and we chose the colors based on our moods. *Tangerine Bliss* was the selection the day after my tonsils were removed, and we ate an entire box of popsicles in my sunroom.

It was *Banana-Split Brown* the day her dad left for Berlin. He was supposed to be gone five weeks. But after a few months her mom growled every time Lane asked about him, so she stopped asking her, and I stopped asking Lane.

She slept over a lot that summer.

~

Lane stole gum once, and I was jealous for so long. She was the bravest person I knew, stealing gum like that. We both hated peppermint though, so we fed it to my rabbit, Pete.

At night we lay cuddled, facing each other, sucking on lollipops and whispering about the crazy old neighbor down the street, or the nature club we wanted to start. I emptied the box of Tampax my mom had stuck in my bathroom for “when the time came,” because *it* never came and I wasn’t even in fifth grade. I had heard the fifth graders talk about that video, but it was gross so I threw them in the trash. I hid my birthday lollipops in the empty box so my brother wouldn’t touch them. He was a teenager and growing, mom said, so he was always hungry and always going through my things.

We didn’t get to go to Lane’s house much that summer, on account of her mom always being gone and always being grumpy, so our toes stayed banana-brown for a month. We snuck in sometimes though, down into the basement that always smelled the way metal tasted. The carpet was damp on account of the leaky pipes that Lane’s mom could never figure out how to fix, so we’d scrunch our noses and open all the windows. We’d pretend we were locked in a cold castle tower, stomping our feet in the spongy floor, twirling around the room till we were dizzy.

~

The following June, when her dad was back and the pipes were fixed and the carpet replaced and the basement didn’t smell, we started our obsession with *Ju Ju Green*. And sometimes added

a sparkle gloss. “For kicks!” Lane would yell, “for kicks!” and I would kick, and the sparkles would dance.

That’s also the summer that Lane’s mother let us have the buttons. She’d collected them her entire life; some were even her mother’s. They were in the most gigantic jar you could imagine, like the kind at the gas station, full of pink pickled eggs. We’d spread the yellow and white picnic blanket on the basement concrete and dump the buttons out.

Suddenly, it was easy to imagine we were rich. The steel-gray buttons of our overcoats, and the slick red buttons for our dress-up pumps. There were pink butterfly and heart buttons we’d set aside for the future daughters we’d have. There were just hundreds of them.

The plain colored ones, Lane said, were for when our business blouses popped open because our breasts had grown so big. I’d tell her she was crazy, and grab the flat bathing suit top I always wore. I never put any of those buttons in my pile.

We’d sit, scrunched, giggling, and swimming in buttons. My favorite was the blue bird, with its tiny details like its squinty black eyes and thin yellow feet. Lane would sit, legs crossed in a skirt or jean shorts, a big t-shirt swallowing her tiny frame. She always tried to stay out of the sun, tried to keep the freckles from growing. I thought they were lovely, I’d tell her.

I stuck to my bathing suit and overall-shorts. I liked the overalls, because my Mom couldn’t argue if I ran around in them. I was clothed. It was as close to being naked as I could get, like the way my brother always wore gym shorts, and a tan.

Lane would sit real close to me in the basement. Sometimes she’d even take my hand in hers, always the right one, the one with one hundred and thirty-three freckles on it. She’d take my hand and put it on her back, where her skin was warm and smooth like mine. Yet somehow, it was pure white, and freckle-less.

Then, I'd tuck my hand down into her jeans, so my hand rested on her bum. She told me she liked that and it made us best friends, so I would always want to go to her house and play with the buttons and giggle on the yellow blanket, kicking our *Ju Ju Green* toenails. I'd take the blue bird button and rub it with my finger, concentrating on the amount of buttons and freckles, colors and sparkles that seemed to spin around the room.

ODD SHELLS & EVEN FACES

The beach was lifeless and gray, languid clouds hanging low like sea foam. The waves crashed, thundering, large bursts of white exploding out of the blue water.

Anna stood at the weathered white lifeguard stand, amused she could climb it without the scolding tweet of the guard's whistle.

The bright red buoy, normally slung across the chair's arm, had left with the season's last guard. The wood was dry and cracked with age, flecks of white paint peeling and sticking to her hands and jeans as she climbed the ladder. The November wind whipped from the east, burning her cheeks until they were pink. Perched atop the faded throne, Anna braced herself, peering across the endless sea. She wondered what was beyond that horizon—over the edge of what looked like forever.

She counted three other stands farther down the beach, stoic and erect like old, forgotten skeletons. The wind whipped harder. The crusty scent of fish and salt replaced her sunscreen and popsicle memories. Toby barked up at her, his brown eyes wide, pulling at the leash she'd hastily tied to the stanchion.

“What? Can't a girl be left alone for a minute?” Anna peered down at the retriever, who continued to bark and wag his tail. She quickly descended, skipping a rung in her haste and stumbling in the soft sand. Tugging at the leash, she clicked his collar to uncoil the green nylon, and he pulled away from her. “Hey! Toby!” she yelled, stretching out her small arms. He galloped towards the water's edge, his lean body kicking up sand. She watched as he ran, the surf dancing under his feet, pure joy of escape.

She knew he wouldn't run too far, but was also aware of the consequences if her mother saw Toby unleashed. Anna walked, sputtering and mumbling under her breath. She kicked large seashells she passed; they bounced and bobbed in the sand.

"Toby, Toby," she called out once again. Her red jacket swished. "Come! Toby, come!" Toby never ran too far down the beach, but the twelve seagulls she'd seen were enough to lure his attention. In a matter of months Anna had become mindful of keeping track of things like that, important things. Like a scanner in the grocery store, she knew Toby ate one cup of food, twice a day, and that it took two minutes to cook oatmeal. She could count five seconds before one of her brothers spilled something, seventeen minutes to get to school if mom left on time and thirty if she didn't.

Toby seemed further from her now, but he really never *ever* ran off. His paw prints, once deep pockets in the sand, were soon erased as the tide washed over them, the way an Etch-A-Sketch smoothes itself grey. She kicked another shell, but its ridge was sharp and hard this time. Her sneaker caught the edge and she flopped onto the soft sand. She flicked the shell with her thumb and index finger, tracing the large perimeter of it with her hand.

"Whatcha doin'?" A voice above her threatened the moment.

"Nothing. Get out of here." Anna did not take her eyes off the gleaming shell.

"But NnnnnAnna."

"Jameson," Anna looked up at her little brother, and squinted until she was scowling. "I want to be left alone. Get out of here. Please."

"But NnnnnAnna, I want to go with you." He stomped, throwing down his chubby hands. "I want to walk Toby."

“Toby!” Anna jumped up, alarmed. The dog had run farther down the beach now, and hadn’t stopped to turn around. “Jameson, call for Toby, will you?” She felt a slight panic at the thought of Toby dwindling to near invisibility, but still she turned back to the shell.

It was such a discovery.

“NnnnAnna, he’s so far. We can’t let him run away!” he demanded, dark eyes full of concern.

“He’s just chasing birds, they’ll change direction eventually.” She placed a foot over the large part of the shell, shielding it from her brother’s view. It was hers. “Look, why don’t you run down a little bit and call for him, isn’t Mom that direction?” She turned, the jacket pulling up off her waist.

He didn’t move, however; Jameson never moved with much urgency. He always stood there, staring at you, as if having a wordless conversation, silently processing his instructions. He was only six, after all. She was twice his age.

“Toby!” she yelled again, her voice squeaking. “Ugh, Jameson, he loves you, go after him.”

“But why can’t you go with me?”

“Because...,” Anna drifted off, stomping harder on the shell. “Because we’re having a shell contest. All of us.”

“We are?” Jameson gasped, his eyes wide. Anna looked to her right; Toby had become a distant speck.

“Yes. I haven’t searched that part of the beach yet.. Maybe while you chase Toby, you can find the biggest, bestest shells before I do.”

“Bestest shells,” Jameson said.

Her smile faded as she heard her mother’s approach.

“Anna, where’s Toby?”

“What? Um, right there.” She turned and pointed to the trail of paw prints that were barely visible now.

“Where’s Toby?” Anna’s mother grabbed her wrist, her voice quivering. The shock of it frightened her, her mother’s untamed eyes, her grasp tightening on her—the waves crashed.

“He was just running around. I didn’t think...”

“You didn’t think what, Anna?” her mother yelled. She didn’t loosen her grip, but instead lunged for the green leash that sat on the edge of the water, slithering toward the yellowed sea foam. “He doesn’t even have his leash on?” Anna bobbed as she was yanked toward the wet sand, the tide touching her sneakers. Her mother suddenly let go. She stood, water running off onto her white sweatshirt, clutching the leash. Anna was frightened.

“Mom, I’m sorry. He was pulling me and I tried to untie him.”

“We need to find him,” her mother whispered, head falling down. The word “crumpled” came to mind. That’s what her grandmother had said the other day, about her mother. This is what crumpled looked like.

“Find him. Yup,” Jameson repeated, spinning in a circle as he tried to pump his head from side to side. Off in Jameson world.

“He could be past the other pier by now. You know he likes the water; look how high the waves are today...”

Anna’s chest hurt, like she’d just eaten something that began to bubble and foam in her stomach. “I know, Mom,” she said, softening. “I’m so sorry.”

“Will you watch your brother and sister? I’ll take Jameson with me.”

“Yes.”

“Yes what, Anna? The ocean is dangerous. We can’t have anyone going near it. Jesus,” she said, looking up.

“Daddy saw Jesus! Jesus, Jesus,” Jameson quietly mumbled the familiar song.

Anna cringed, but there was no reaction from her mother, not this time. No turn of head, no scolding him, no change of expression. Anna twisted sharply, the red jacket making a loud swish, like tinfoil being ripped from the box.

They’d been waiting all month to go to the beach, waiting for everything to become quiet again. Anna just wanted the noise to stop.

“Shell contest, shell contest!” Jameson whined loudly. She listened for her mother, waited for a touch of her hand, but they turned to go after Toby.

“Shell contest!” he repeated once more.

“While we walk, honey,” her mother replied softly. “I bet the best shells are this way.”

“Bestest shells,” Jameson corrected.

~

Anna’s wrist had red finger marks on them, like spatters from a paintbrush. She revisited the count: She was one; the two specks in the distance, Matthew and Sydney, made two and three; Jameson made four; and Mom was five. An uneven number; she never felt secure with uneven numbers. Her thoughts drifted back to her father, six was so familiar, but the count was five now. Mom made five.

Anna’s stomach tightened and she kicked the buried shell. This time it shifted slightly. Kneeling down, she brushed away the loose sand, tracing the design with her finger. It was dark

and glossy, gigantic, and she could finally dig it out. The coolness of the shell tickled her fingertips, the smoothness was almost soft.

“Anna! Anna!” her brother Matthew shouted in the distance. “Aaaaaaannnnnnnaaaaaa!”

Ugh. “What?” She looked up. Her brother jumped up and down, just a blue spec, but her sister was approaching! Sydney was keener than Jameson, she’d notice the shell. “What?” Anna yelled again. Never left alone.

The shell wouldn’t budge. She began to panic, looking for a way to hide it. She’d scraped away so much sand already. It was almost entirely exposed! At the last moment, she yanked off her red jacket, threw it on the shell, and plopped down on top it. The wind blasted across her small arms, instant goose bumps shooting up to her shoulders.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Sydney peered down at her, hand on hip.

“Uh just sitting here, ya know, trying to be alone.”

“Why’d you take your jacket off? It’s freezing.”

“The sand is wet. Sydney, I thought Mom told you to watch Matthew.”

“Where is she?”

“Getting Toby. When she comes back she’s judging the shell contest.”

“Oh.” She paused. “Well duh. I knew that.” Sydney shook her bulging jacket pocket.

“No you didn’t. Don’t say duh.” Anna frowned.

“You’re not the boss. I can say duuuuhhhh if I like.”

“You’re watching too much Hannah Montana, Sydney. Mom forbid it.”

“I am not, you watch it too. Dad lets me anyway,” she huffed.

Sand flew up as Anna stood, shooting a cold look into Sydney's eyes. "He *lets* you?" The jacket flapped in the wind, her toe on the edge. They stared at each other for a moment. She felt a burn; it crept up her face, an anger that melted like wax, into her hollow heart, into pain.

"I mean...Dad *used* to," Sydney's face fell.

Anna turned, her cheeks warm and raw, and shoved her hands deep into her shell-filled pockets. "That's right. Go watch your brother."

Sydney hesitated, and kicked sand at Anna's feet. "You don't have to be so mean," she spat, before stomping off.

Anna watched the sea foam move forward and with the waves. It was a line, a boundary. A faded orange shovel bobbed in the surf, and she walked a few steps to scoop it up, the water soaking her sneakers. Its handle was smooth and thin: a tool, a forgotten joy.

~

Anna remembered the summers on the beach, when they'd fill their wagon high with shovels and buckets, sunscreen and snacks, and walk like a trail of geese, following their parents down to the water. Inseparable, they were. Her father used to call them his little ducklings, scooping the boys up in his arms and dancing, three brown heads bouncing around.

She rubbed the smooth edge of the shovel. The red jacket sat unmoving, a flash against the colorless sand. Sydney had run back to Matthew, and their specks seemed smaller now. The blur of Jameson and her mother faded into the grayness, and the clouds, now eclipsing the sun, made the beach dark, and desolate.

Anna was alone, and for a second, warmth washed over her with that realization. Finally, alone. Her anxiety subsided as she picked up the damp jacket, exposing the shell. She tied the jacket around her waist, and knelt. It didn't seem shiny anymore, or dull, but rough looking—like a rock, but its design was too pretty. Too real.

Gripping the orange shovel, she dug around the edge of the exposed side, using her weight as force. The shovel splintered and broke, piercing her palm. Anna's hand throbbed, but she dropped the shovel, and began to pull and grab the shell's edges. She brushed away more sand, the exposed part of the shell growing to the size of her mother's salad bowl, the one they used when friends used to come for dinner.

Her brother and sister were like lost balloons in the sky, just specks as they slipping farther from her up the dunes. She'd retrieve them in a minute. The shell was hers.

She stood up, grasping the shell, and planting her feet she began to yank. Her hands felt sliced open, her arms naked sticks. Grunting, she pulled with more force, hair falling in front of her face, fingers wriggling deeper under the edges. She sucked in her breath and yanked one more time. There was a release, as she fell, the large shell landing on her feet. The sand was wet, and she quickly sat up. Yet instead of excitement, she gasped. Horror passed through her, settling in her gut.

Anna frantically threw her hands in the sand, letting the grit rub-rub-rub against her palms. Her body shook as she stared at the shell.

“Mommmyyyyy!” she yelled, anxiously looking to her left. The beach was barren. “Matthew! Sydney!” Her brother and sister were no longer in sight. She was alone.

She choked for air, as the blur of the wind and cold and sand all took another form, landscaping the heavy shell. A shell, and a dead turtle.

She tried to cry, but it wasn't sadness; her breathing came in gasps as she yelled. The skin was wrinkled and gray-green, with tiny patches of soft yellow. He wasn't breathing, he wasn't moving; he wasn't tucked away in the safety of his shell. The turtle lay in the sand, limbs outstretched, as if napping, as if sunning himself.

She kept looking at her hands, expecting to see a change, a difference in the color, the shape, the shade. She'd been touching and feeling and groping at death, but they were the same, the same wrinkled palms, the same cold, thin fingers. She stared at her shoes, her feet, the sneaker that had kicked and stomped at the buried shell, but nothing. No blood, no ooze or remnant of death. Everything seemed the same, though Anna knew it wasn't. It wasn't the same when something died.

There was barking in the distance, and she turned in that direction. She counted, amazed, relieved, as one, two...three heads appeared on the stairs above the closest dune. Toby now poked his chocolate muzzle over Jameson's shoulder. Toby made four. Her mother motioned, and they obediently sat on the stairs, as she turned and walked toward Anna. Mom made five. Although blurred in the darkness, she knew the five faces were all the same as before.

Anna turned to face her tarnished prize, absently rubbing her palms against her jeans.

The wind blew a layer of sand on the turtle's back; he'd be buried by morning.

"Anna?" her mother called out, slowly approaching from the distance. She could see a soft smile on her face, as the worry faded. Even if just for a moment, the smile was nice. So Anna sighed, quickly untying her red jacket and blanketing the turtle.

"Coming," she yelled. She dug the collected shells out of her pockets, and spread them over the ridge of his back, weighing the jacket down. "So someone can find you," she whispered, her wet, stringy hair blowing in her face.

“Anna?” her mother called again.

“Coming” she yelled, taking nine big strides to reach her mother, before the smile faded in the hazy darkness. Her mother wrapped an arm lightly around Anna’s shoulder as they walked toward what remained of their family. Anna made six.

