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A Little Bit of a Breakdown

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A LITTLE BIT OF A BREAKDOWN

by

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ABSTRACT

A LITTLE BIT OF A BREAKDOWN

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Old Dominion University, 2017
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These stories have to do with a little bit of a breakdown. The characters are old, young, and in between. Some are men; some are women. Some are breaking, some are broken, and some are coming out on the other side.

This collection examines the lives of six people, their breakdowns, and what they do about it.

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This thesis is dedicated to the person who taught me about love and endurance:
my mother, Helen Marie Libby.

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I'd like to thank my family for their loyalty and support. I owe everything to my parents but particularly for teaching me that the only limits are those I place on myself. I wish my father were still around to see this.

And finally I'd like to thank Sarah Preteska, who has no idea that I still hear her voice pushing me ever onward.

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MARKED

My daughter, Ana, is near me, walking around the Formica tables of the half-full diner, softly singing a song about her apple. I'm not sure how many apples she's had before, but she knows the words for it in English and Spanish, singing, "I have an apple, a shiny manzana." She'll be five later this year, and she's always been comfortable in her surroundings, whatever they are. That trait has served her well given that I've made a lot of dumb choices these last few years, particularly when it comes to Ana's surroundings. Today, though, we are escaping my mistakes, and I suppose Tommy's too, and heading to a new state with Tommy, as a family, to start a new life, one that hopefully includes more apples. For most of Ana's life, we've lived on fast food – which is probably part of the reason I'm so big.

I wasn't always this big. I was the youngest of eight children – there had been nine, but one died in a car crash before I was born. Our mom prepared dinner for us every night after her shift at the nursing home. She was white, but she mostly cooked refried beans, carne guisada, and homemade tortillas that the Mexican women from church taught her to make. Our father was a Wheatie, the name used for the Mexican men who chased the crops. He was gone most of the time, following the work as it moved through southern Oklahoma and north central Texas - picking, plowing or planting cotton, grain or peanuts as the seasons changed. Mom tried to make our home a place he wanted to return to, making familiar food and even learning passable Spanish. And he did return, at least enough times to give her me and my siblings. She didn't do much to make it a place where her kids wanted to stay, but I don't blame her. We wore her out.

As much as she wanted to make home comfortable for our Mexican father, she wanted us, her kids, to be white. She worried our brown skin would make life harder on us, repeating things her own parents had said about “dirty Mexicans.” She loved our father, I was sure, but I never understood their relationship with her negative feelings about his heritage. I think she was confused, too, and maybe a little angry at herself for falling for a Mexican. So we wore Levis, took bologna sandwiches on white bread to school for lunch, and were to speak only English outside the house. But her kitchen was Mexican. And even though she used a lot of fat in the food, I was a pretty skinny kid. It wasn’t until she stopped cooking, around the time I was twelve, that I started getting heavier.

One of the last meals she cooked we didn’t even get to eat. My father was working about three hours south of us, where the cotton had just come into season. This left my mother home alone to take care of me and my brothers and sisters. My brother Alfie, who was sixteen, had been getting stoned in his room with three or four of his friends. When they went into the kitchen, my mom could tell they’d been smoking pot, and she was furious. She hated the drugs, and she hated that he was hanging out with other Latinos. I don’t know what she expected, but she’d always insisted that our family was not going to turn out like the other jacked-up families in our Rock Lake neighborhood. I think this was the day she realized she was wrong.

She yelled at Alfie, “You and your chulo friends can go somewhere else for food. I will not feed you.”

The boys all laughed and pushed around her to get to the pots on the stove – they were high and hungry. The boys’ laughter stopped when a pan of tortillas hit the wall behind my brother.

“Get out of my kitchen,” she yelled as she reached for the sauce cooking on the stove. “Worthless bastards.” She threw the pan, sauce splattering on the wall and on the boys who were ducking and running out of the kitchen. She pulled the wooden spoon from the beans and hurled it at the back of one of the boys. “Selfish.” She threw the beans. “And lazy!”

Most of the boys left through the front door, but one must’ve gone through the back because the dog got in. He followed the trail of food to the kitchen, eating as he went, until he stopped to lap at the beans and stewed meat sliding down the wall.

My mother slid down the wall too, putting her head in her hands. Food from the wall mixed into her hair, and the dog ate around her.

My other siblings who were still home went in search of an alternate dinner. I left too, even though I had nowhere to go. When I returned a few hours later, still hungry and tired from walking around, the kitchen was clean, the dog was in the back yard again, and my mother was in her room with the door closed. Except for a couple of dents in the wall, no one would’ve been able to tell that anything had happened earlier.

After that, Mom stopped cooking except to heat up canned soup with crackers when she’d actually buy any groceries. We’d finally done her in. I started collecting money from around the house to buy food for myself. I’d sneak into my mother’s purse, taking some but not all of the loose change. I started doing laundry for the family, figuring that any money left in pockets was fair game. Once my sister forgot she’d left a twenty in her jeans. When she remembered it, I stayed hidden on the front porch while she tore up the house looking. She yelled and scattered the contents of drawers, leaving a mess in her wake until she finally gave up and left. Back in the house, I cleaned up a bit and checked on my small stash of cash hidden in a crayon box. With her money, I had accumulated twenty-six dollars. I had almost ten dollars in

coins hidden in a baggie under the clumped root bound dirt of a dead plant on the porch. I didn't eat off of any value menus that week.

Alfie moved out the next time our father came home. Then a year later, our father stopped coming back. My mother was too worn out from all the other kids and cleaning up after old people to have much to do with me, maybe hoping my older sisters would watch over me, which none of them did. I cleaned up for them and stayed out of their way. If I called attention to myself, I gave them an outlet for their anger and frustration. If I stayed in the background, I could avoid their mean words and fists.

Mostly though they just weren't around. I spent a lot of time alone in that house where a lot of people lived. Long before I killed time with drugs, I did it with books – anything I could get my hands on – from the trashy magazines discarded by my brothers to the textbooks left over from the siblings who would one day just leave the house and never return. And then one day I left, only to return years later with a daughter and fiancé, leaving a brutal existence with an abusive boyfriend who will lose his mind when he figures out that the three of us are gone.

I don't know what he'd do if he found us, and I don't let myself think about it. I just want to get on the road and farther away.

Mom had stayed in Rock Lake. I found out she was living in that nursing home where she used to work, half a mile from the diner where Ana, Tommy and I are eating breakfast. Because Tommy's mom was dead, he wanted me to reconnect with mine, saying one day she'd be gone, and I'd regret not seeing her again. I didn't think I would, but it was a small compromise to make in order to get out of Texas.

When Ana sees Tommy walk toward us from the bathrooms, she heads toward him, holding out the apple. He sets his sunglasses and car keys on an empty table not far from the fruit

buffet, and Ana declares to him, “I’ll sit next to you, and the apple’ll be between us so it can see.”

She takes her seat, carefully balances the apple on the table between her chair and Tommy’s, and watches as he goes off toward the food. As I approach, bringing my plate and hers, she keeps her eyes on Tommy. The smell of the waffles makes her look down at the plate. I walk away to get coffee for me and juice for her, and she begins singing a song about the round ball of butter on top of her waffles. I suppose singing is how she gets by.

At seventeen, a couple of years before I had Ana, my then-boyfriend, Martin, and I took the bus out of Rock Lake to the big city of Grandy a hundred and fifteen miles away. Martin promised that we would have the good life because he had some family in Grandy who could hook us up. For us, the hook-up meant a place to crash and access to good weed.

About seven or eight others were living at his Nana’s house in Grandy at any given time. His grandfather was serving time for crushing Nana between a car and their garage door when he got tired of her yelling at him. She lost both her legs, but she received \$600 a month in disability because of it. The others staying there – mostly family - lived off of her and whatever they skimmed off the top of the drug deals they got. Nana always acted like she didn’t know about the drugs, but she knew that the boys were all in the Latin Disciples. That’s what they called themselves, even though I heard that’s a gang up in Chicago. I wondered how the real Latin Disciples would react if they knew these culeros were using the name.

A few months after we arrived, Martin split and left me in Nana’s house with just a backpack, a change of clothes, and six dollars. I had no way to get back to Rock Lake and wasn’t sure my mom would want me back anyway. To stay at Nana’s, I transferred my girlfriend status

to Martin's older cousin, Damon, who also lived there. At first, I thought he was nice enough, a little rough maybe. After a while, when it suited him, I realized he could be mean and that he didn't mind sharing me with others.

Tommy and I met a year or so after Martin left. Tommy was a different man then, but I suppose I was different then too. Martin never came back around, and I hope he died out there somewhere. I'd never say that out loud. In my new life with Tommy, forgiveness and peace are the preferred ways to get by.

"Are you married now?" Ana asks me as she leans in to smell her waffles.

"Not yet, Ana. That's later."

Tommy returns to the table with his breakfast, sits, and reaches for our hands. In unison we bow our heads, and Ana offers a prayer, "Dear God, thank you for our food and for the apple and for Tommy and Mommy."

I look up when an older white woman walks by our table who notices Ana praying. She slows to smile at Ana, probably thinking we've just come from church like she probably had. Ana smiles back and says, "Happy Fathers' Day!" I didn't realize it was Fathers' Day. Ana must've heard others diners saying it.

The woman laughs and says to Ana, "Happy Fathers' Day to you, too." She turns to Tommy to offer the greeting to him, and when he keeps his eyes on his plate, she awkwardly turns back to Ana and asks, "Are you celebrating today with your father?"

Ana explains to the woman, "I don't know who my father is. This is Tommy."

By this point the woman has already started to figure out what's in front of her. Me: half-Latina, fat and tattooed; Tommy: white, a buzz cut, stick thin and also tattooed; and Ana: sweet,

young and likely too dark to be Tommy's. The woman slowly backs away, nodding and smoothing down the material of her dress as if wiping the experience from her hands. She gives a weak smile while Ana is still speaking, "Tommy is going to marry my mommy today, and I'm going to meet my abuela, and-"

Tommy reaches for her hand that's flying around during her explanation and puts it on the table with his hand covering hers. She goes quiet while the woman makes her escape. Ana cuts her waffles into four quarters, pouring syrup from one square to another until it is soaked. She explains to the apple that it can't have syrup because it doesn't have any way to hold it.

Tommy eats his breakfast in silence. He never talked much unless it was just the two of us when we were at Nana's, and that wasn't until after he came back from jail, where I figured he didn't talk much either. But he seems to accept Ana's steady stream of chatter and singing, probably, I think, because it doesn't require a response. I chose to follow him out of Grandy because of that acceptance and because he promised he could get us out. I think he wants to take care of us, give us a normal life. I'm not exactly sure what that is, but I'm ready to find out.

After breakfast we are going to see my mother. She wanted us to attend the church service with her at the home, but Tommy prefers to do our own private service with just the three of us. I don't think he wants to be involved in group activities anymore.

I know my mom is excited to see us because she said so on the phone, even though the only time I've spoken to her since I first left was a couple of days ago. She'll be shocked to see me now, but I'm guessing most of the other residents there have such poor eyesight that they won't be able to see the prison ink tattoos on Tommy's arms and neck or the gang symbols he and I both have on our right hands.

Ana starts singing again and stacking cut up chunks of waffles. I don't think she's ever had waffles before, or if she has, I can't remember.

I suppose not remembering has been my way to get by. Lately though, just as I'm about to fall asleep or early in the morning before anyone else is awake, certain memories have been filling my head like a sink that's overflowing, and I can't shut the water off. Each moment pours on the next until my head is so full even shaking it doesn't help. I try to keep my eyes open and focused on the reality around me, but even then I still feel like I'm watching the memory happen over and over. Generally whatever I'm remembering was pretty crappy. Living through it again in my mind is no treat, especially since I know how the story goes.

One memory that haunts me more than the others is of Damon's old friend who was in town one weekend – he'd stopped by a few times, but only that once did he even notice me. I re-live his forearm on my throat, him doing me on the floor of the living room, while Damon watches from the couch, looking me straight in the eye, and repeating again and again, "You like that, don't you, puta," until his friend finally comes. Damon usually had the decency to make sure no one else was in the room while he loaned me to a friend, but for some reason, he liked to watch. About an hour after that one time, I found the used condom coming out from inside me. As a way to find what Tommy calls my power over my past, I tell myself that guy had a dick too small to keep the condom on, though I don't think that's exactly what Tommy had in mind.

Ana could be from that guy – I'm really not sure. Those days at the house, before her, I generally had enough of whatever was around that could be snorted, smoked or drunk to keep me numb. But when I had Ana, I started to get my shit together.

I always thought Tommy was just another one of the rats who hung around the house who mostly didn't notice me either. He was quiet back then too, before he went to jail, but he

used to be mean. The boys would take him with them when a lesson needed to be taught, or when a deal had gone badly and they needed someone to do some dirty work. I heard he had once electrocuted a man, using some crank-turned device he'd made, because the man had been taking some of the pot from the bags he was selling for them and selling it on the side. Of course, Tommy'd done the more standard things too, like cutting off an ear or a finger or holding someone's head under water just long enough to make whatever point needed to be made.

It was one of those situations that landed him in jail. Tommy and the boys had gone a few blocks over to get back some coke one of their sellers had been using instead of selling. Apparently someone on the street had called the cops after seeing Tommy break the guy's arm with a baseball bat. The cops showed up about an hour or so after Tommy'd returned back to Nana's.

When I heard the yelling outside, I set Ana, just two at the time, on the couch between Damon and me and went to the front door to go see what was happening, Damon told me to sit back down, saying, "You don't need to be out there, Mia. Ain't gonna help nothing, you go getting involved."

Ana leaned into him, holding out the hairbrush I'd been using on her. He placed her in his lap.

"Sit still, baby," he said as he brushed her hair, gently working the tangles out as she sang in her sweet voice, most words unrecognizable except "mama," "Damon," and what sounded like "burrito."

After all the commotion died down, and Damon said I could go outside, I was told by some guys on the street that Tommy had resisted arrest, and at some point, his head ended up

going through the back window of the cop car. The cops drove off with him, and I could see where they'd left blood and glass in the street.

I felt the anger of the boys who didn't get arrested this time but had enough experience to know it sucked. I was pissed, too, because Ana, a wobbly little toddler, played in that street barefoot all the time. So I called the police and told them to come back and clean up the mess they'd left, since so many kids lived on this block. The man on the line explained to me, "Look, lady, only gang babies live there, so why bother." Apparently he thought he could say whatever he wanted. It took five minutes for me to convince him to do the right thing, and that was only after I started threatening to go to his boss or the paper with his words.

Finally a fire truck showed and washed down the street with those big hoses. A lot of people were outside on the sidewalks heckling the firemen, entertained by this one-vehicle parade of men forced to clean up the street by the fat gang-baby momma.

When Tommy left prison almost two years later, he was completely clean. He explained to the boys that he'd found purpose in his life through religion. He couldn't continue doing the same work, so he asked for jobs he could do that didn't directly involve breaking a commandment. Tommy had been true to the boys even while in prison, never giving up any information on anyone. Plus the crew considered themselves religious, to the point of tattooing *Sonrio por Dios* on their necks, usually after injuring or killing someone from a rival gang. So they put Tommy in charge of driving on pick-ups and deliveries, and when he wasn't doing that, he worked at the Taco Loco down the street and lived at Nana's with us. I envied him having a job where he could make some money and spend time out of the house. What I didn't know at the time, and what he couldn't tell me then, was that he just needed a place to stay until he could save enough money from that fast food joint to leave town and start over.

He and I were in the same spot. By this time, Ana was three, almost four, and I had been stashing cash away, a quarter or a dime or – on really amazing days – a dollar at a time in zip lock bags stuffed in the back of the sofa. I had been clean for most of Ana’s life, except when I knew it would draw too much attention to me if I didn’t do the blow or pills or drinks that were offered. Luckily, meth and heroin were never shared; otherwise I’m sure I would’ve never made it out of there. There were times when Damon would try something horrible and new on me, and I would wish for just a minute that I was completely numb again. But then I’d hear Ana cooing or, as she got older, singing nearby.

It took Tommy almost a year to save up the three grand he thought he’d need to start a new life. By then he and I had been talking regularly. I told him about my family, and he shared Bible verses with me. I listened, eager to learn anything, to be talked to like an adult. I rarely had any real conversations with anyone, always trying to stay in the background.

One morning, Tommy walked into the front room while I was leaning behind the sofa, reaching for one of my coin baggies. He was dressed in his polyester work uniform.

“What’re you doing?” he asked, coming around to look over my shoulder.

I stood, empty handed. “I thought Ana might’ve dropped a toy back there.”

“Did she?”

“No.”

One of the girls staying at the house came in through the front door carrying a baby and a jug of milk.

“Close that door, yeah?” she said as she walked past us to the kitchen.

Tommy closed the door, turned to me and said, “Do you have a little time?”

“Aren’t you on your way to work?”

“Soon. Thought we could talk about Moses.” He walked to the sofa and sat down. “About leading the people out of Egypt.” He patted the seat beside him.

I sat.

He took my hand, something he didn't do often and something that would make Damon furious if he ever saw, but I liked it when he held my hand. He said, “Remember that story?”

I nodded and said, “They were led by the pillars of clouds and fire. I remember.” And I did, because I couldn't help wondering what the other people around who must've seen those pillars thought. Did they think they were their signs from God? Didn't it freak them out to have pillars of fire just randomly occur?

“I'm thinking those pillars might lead us to Arkansas.”

“What?”

Tommy took a deep breath and then explained to me about his own stash of cash, about his plans to leave Grandy, to start over. At first I didn't believe him, worried he was trying to get my stash, worried that if he knew about it then others might know too, but then he said, “You and Ana come with me. Leave this shit behind.”

“You think you're some sort of Moses?”

“You want to leave?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I got us a way out. In a week, maybe two, come with me. We'll get married, live clean.”

“Married?”

“We do it, we do it right. And Ana needs a dad.”

Damon walked in the front door with a man I didn't recognize. Tommy let go of my hand before Damon saw.

“What’s up?” Damon asked Tommy.

“Just heading to work.” Tommy stood. Looking down at me, he said, “Moses had to trust in God, and the Israelites had to trust in Moses. It wasn’t easy, but it was right,” and he walked past Damon out the door.

“Another Bible study, puta? You think God cares about little whores?” Damon grabbed my chin and shook my head.

Ana walked up to us and said loudly, “Damon,” as she reached her arms up to him.

He picked her up and made like he was chewing on her neck which set her off giggling. He kissed her forehead and handed her to me.

“Go put her with Nana. Me and my boy got plans for you,” he said.

When I came back into the room, Damon asked, “What’s going on with you and the Jesus freak?”

“Nothing.”

“You thinking you want a little white Jesus dick?”

“No”

His friend was sitting on a wooden chair in the corner of the room, watching our conversation.

“You sure? Because looked like you were getting real intimate.”

“No, Damon.”

“Don’t forget who you belong to.”

“I won’t.” And I wouldn’t. Any time I’d drawn any attention to myself in that house, Damon was sure to let everyone know I belonged to him, like a dog marking his property.

“Maybe she’s one of them Bible whores,” his friend said. “Gets all high on God. Turned on and shit.”

Damon looked me over, and said, “Maybe. You want me to read you Bible verses, baby?” He pushed me toward the bedroom, his friend following behind.

That night, Damon, his friend, a few others and I were sitting on the front porch when Tommy walked up in his work uniform.

“You bring us anything, man?” Damon asked. Tommy usually brought food back when he got off work, and I often counted on it for dinner.

Tommy tossed a bag stained with grease from the food inside. Damon caught it, rifled through it and pulled out a wrapped up burrito. He tossed the bag to his friend who pulled one out too. His friend tossed the bag on the chair beside him, and my stomach growled.

“There’s more in there,” Tommy said to me, pointing to the bag.

“Her fat ass don’t need that shit,” Damon said with a mouthful of food.

Damon’s friend laughed, but Tommy just stared.

“You got something to say?” Damon asked Tommy, standing up from his chair.

Tommy looked between me and Damon and then said, “No, man,” before he walked into the house. One of the other boys grabbed the bag and took out another burrito.

“That motherfucker isn’t long for this world, he keeps this shit up,” Damon said. He looked at me, “And Bible study’s over, puta. No more. I don’t want you hanging out with him.”

When I didn’t reply, he said, “Do you hear me?”

“Yes.”

I thought that was it for the night, that Damon and his friend would keep smoking and drinking and forget I was there, so I could go in, dig through the kitchen for some food, and go to bed. But about ten minutes later some random car rode up and the passengers looked our way too long. Damon yelled out at them as they drove by, “What, fuckers? You want a piece of this?” and then he turned to me. “Why were they looking at you? You know them?”

“They weren’t looking at me,” I said.

“Pretty sure they were,” his friend said. He grabbed his crotch. “And I think you were looking back.”

“Guess they don’t know who you belong to,” Damon said. He smiled at me as he unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned his pants and unzipped his fly. He pulled out his dick and showed the neighborhood what was his, showering my legs and stomach in urine. His boys all thought he was hilarious. He made me sit there until it dried saying, “Don’t wipe it off. Let it soak into your skin, puta. Then all those other dogs will know to stay away from what’s mine.”

The next morning, I told Tommy I wanted to go with him. It wasn’t a hard choice to make. I had to get Ana out of that house. The small amount of money I’d saved wouldn’t get us anywhere.

When it was time, we decided to leave at four in the morning, when most people in the house would have just gone to sleep, wasted on whatever the drug of the day was. Tommy had already purchased a beat-up Dodge Aries K car from some old lady on the other side of town. It was cheap, but it ran, and that’s all we needed. He’d parked it two blocks away so we could leave without anyone knowing, and no one would recognize the vehicle.

I was scared to go back to Rock Lake since so many people in Grandy knew that's where I was from. But Tommy said we wouldn't be there long since we were leaving town immediately after getting married at the courthouse and heading for Arkansas. Some of the Christians Tommy'd spent time with in jail said they knew a lot of people out there who would help us get our lives together, get Tommy a job and all. I would've been fine going straight to Arkansas and skipping the trip to Rock Lake, but Tommy insisted on us seeing my mom, and he wanted to be married when we started a new life together.

In the car on the way to the nursing home, Ana's eyes looked tired. Her sleep had been interrupted when we left Grandy so early this morning. Sometimes when she's stressed, she'll wet herself, so I made her put on those plastic underpants. She hates them, but she was worn out enough not to fight me. Plus I let her take the apple. I wish she didn't need those plastic pants, but today I'm not willing to deal with pee on her clothes. And if it happens in the car, we'll have to drive around with the smell.

I'm in no hurry to see my mother. I haven't seen her in over six years. When I called her last week to tell her I was coming to town, I felt like a dumb kid and a worn out adult all at the same time. She'd just cried, maybe with joy or relief or something else – I'm not sure.

I'm ready to get out of Texas. I'm nervous and excited about the future, something I haven't felt since the last time I was preparing to leave Rock Lake, which makes me scared, too, given my track record.

In the little reception area, my mom is in a wheelchair waiting for us.

"Mia?" she says as she wheels toward us.

“Hi, Mom,” I say. I introduce her to Tommy and Ana. She reaches for Ana, so I pick her up and put her in my mother’s lap.

“Hi, baby girl,” my mom says. “You are a cutie. Look at these big cheeks,” she says as she lightly pinches Ana’s cheek. “You have to be careful you don’t get fat like your mama.” She looks at me, “I almost didn’t recognize you, as big as you are,” she says, laughing.

I realize now why she’s alone in a nursing home. I had forgotten how mean she could be.

Tommy reaches for Ana who is squirming.

“Aren’t you a tall drink of water,” my mom says to Tommy. She looks up at me. “I’m so proud of you for not ending up with someone like your father. But I’m surprised at how dark Ana is.” She reaches up to Ana and rubs the skin at her ankle. “You shouldn’t let her spend so much time in the sun.”

“We have to go,” Tommy says. And right then I would have followed him back to Grandy if it would get us away from my mom.

“So soon?” she asks.

Tommy looks at me and says, “I’ll get Ana in the car. You say your goodbyes.” He nods to my mom and walks away.

“Well, that was a little bit rude, don’t you think? You just got here. I thought we could have lunch.”

“We have to go, Mom. It was good to see you.” I lie, but I don’t feel bad. At least after this I don’t think Tommy will push me to visit my mom again.

In a musty back room at the courthouse, Ana is in a seat near us while the officiant talks us through the marriage process. Tommy is repeating his vows when Ana starts whining and

shifting. Around the time Tommy pulled out two thin gold bands, my girl was getting full-on fussy. Tired and in a strange place, I know she'll start crying soon, so I reach down for her. She wraps her little legs around my big waist as best she can, plops her thumb in her mouth and rests her head on my chest, looking up at Tommy. He reaches around Ana to slide the ring onto my finger and helps me put his on. The man finishes the process and introduces us as husband and wife. I can't tell what Tommy's thinking, but I'm wondering if I just made another mistake, trusting another man to get me out of this city.

"You may kiss the bride, if you'd like" the man says to Tommy, smiling like we just made his day.

Tommy leans toward me, and I realize this will be the first time he will have ever touched me in that way. I'm trying not to think about it too much, although I can't help but wonder if he'll taste Damon's piss on me, if I'm so far gone that he'll change his mind and leave me and Ana there with nothing but a backpack with forty-eight dollars hidden inside, a shiny apple and the lingering smell of pee on us both.

He touches his mouth to mine quickly and kisses the top of Ana's head. He shakes hands with the man, we sign the papers, and Tommy leads us back out to the car.

Heading out of town, I look back at Ana in her booster seat, who is fighting to keep her eyes open. Tommy reaches for my hand and says, "She should call me Dad."

He thinks Ana needs a dad, and he's probably right. And while I'm taking a big chance with him, I'm not ready to give him Ana just yet. But we'll talk about that when we are safely out of Texas, and we'll see how it goes. Either way, I'll keep stashing money.

A TASTE FOR GOOD MERLOT

He woke to his wife kneeling over him, shaking his shoulders.

“Bill. Honey. Wake up.” Diane appeared frantic, her short gray hair spiking up, like she had just pulled a helmet off, her white cotton nightgown twisted around her body. The light outside the bedroom window illuminated a short scratch on her exposed shoulder that had begun to bead with blood.

“Did I do that?” Bill asked, mostly awake, reaching up to touch the scratch. In their almost fifty years of marriage, he’d never once even accidentally hurt her.

“Doesn’t matter,” she said as she slumped out of his reach, sitting back on the bed.

Bill struggled to sit up, the sheets damp with sweat and wrapped around him. He pulled the material until he was free, shaking the covers into some order, then brushing back the bit of hair left on his head.

“A bear,” he explained. “I was being chased by a bear. In Maine, outside Waterville. Somewhere near my parents’ old house. I was running through the trees, but I couldn’t figure out which way to go.”

He reached for her hand. “It was so real I could smell it. The bear. The woods. I didn’t know what to do, except keep running. The bear almost had me.” He shook his head, looking down at his lap.

When he looked up, she smiled gently at him and said, “I couldn’t wake you. When I touched you, you yelled and scratched at me.”

“I’m sorry, Diane.”

She scooted closer, wrapping her arms around him. “It’s okay, Bill. We’re okay, right?”

He nodded and returned her hug, his joints and back protesting the effort. They huddled in the bed until he felt her relax, and he nudged her away. She moved under the covers, onto her pillow. They had done this routine many nights over the past few months. He watched her while she watched him until she couldn’t keep her eyes open, drifting back to sleep. Unlike Bill, who’d retired years before, Diane had work in the morning, a job she had because she’d read that employment kept the brain sharp.

Bill worried about the toll his nightmares were taking on her, interrupting her sleep, making her anxious. He’d wondered when he decided to marry her how the 16-year age difference would affect her. For most of their marriage, it hadn’t.

Unable to find his cane in the dark, he used the edge of the bed and the dresser to balance, standing and shuffling to the worn recliner in the corner of the room. He pushed the cat out of the chair and lowered into it, his stiff joints complaining with the movement.

Thoughts of how much he needed Diane bothered him. He’d always been the strong one, the one all his girls could count on for protection. What kind of man had he become, needing Diane to save him from his nightmares?

He levered up the footrest, and the pain management device recently implanted in his back began to vibrate. He relaxed with the memory in the dream of running, something he hadn’t done in years, recalling the control he had over his body, of pushing for speed. At 85, his decline, physically and mentally, was the only thing not slow anymore.

Sleep came soon enough, and his dreams were limited to quiet shadows that left no marks in his mind.

“Hey, Dad,” Bill’s daughter said to him over the phone.

“Hey, Karen.”

He turned up his hearing aid as high as it would go, finding it more and more difficult to understand her, especially over the phone. She’d always been a soft talker, almost like she wanted to speak but feared someone might hear. Other than that, she took after Bill. He said he loved her and her older sisters all the same, but he had always favored her.

“I’m looking forward to seeing you and Mom. We’ll be in town in time for dinner. I want Tex-Mex. Any Tex-Mex spots around there?”

He laughed. She knew they had three Tex-Mex restaurants in their little East Texas town, and if she wanted variety, her options were the fast food served in the gas station and a flashy Italian chain Bill always forgot the name of.

“Might be some,” he said. “I’m glad Allen can come this time.”

Karen came home about twice a year, and her husband of twenty-something years came when he could schedule it with his work. Bill preferred him over his other sons-in-law who spent their time in town at the nearby Comanche Casino when they visited. Allen helped with odd jobs around the house, the last time stabilizing the guest bathroom toilet that had come loose. Bill wrote “sprinkler system” in the margin of the newspaper on his lap to add to the list of things to ask Allen about while he was in town.

“Is Mom going crazy with groceries?”

“We have enough food here to feed the whole town, so yes. And I have a list for more things I’m supposed to buy today for your visit.”

Bill and Diane had argued about it earlier. She’d called from work, asking if he’d picked up everything on the list, and Bill had said, “What list?” Then he’d found it in his basket by the

dining table, exactly where she'd said it would be. Instead of admitting this, he'd made Diane tell him what she needed and threw her list away.

"She's nuts. Anyway, how are you, Dad? How's your back?"

"Been better, but the device the doc implanted's been helping a lot. It just comes on when I feel pain, and, like magic, I feel better."

"You know what else will make you feel better?" she asked.

"Wine."

They both laughed. When Karen turned sixteen, after her sisters had already moved out, Bill began sharing a glass of wine with her at dinner, reasoning that taking away the mystery of alcohol might help her make better decisions about it.

Her mother felt differently, fluttering around, always worried that they would become alcoholics like her own father had been. Even with Karen now in her early forties and Bill twice that, he still couldn't convince Diane that they weren't likely to go soggy with drink.

For Karen's upcoming visit, he'd made his own list and driven thirty miles away to the nearest wine store to purchase a few highly rated merlots to share with his daughter.

"I'm here, Bill," Diane said as she gently shook Bill's shoulders.

She pulled the covers back from where they'd started to gather at his neck, allowing him to breathe easier.

The dim streetlight through the window outlined her body, but Bill couldn't quite see her face.

"Diane?" He reached for her.

"Expecting someone else?"

“Just making sure.” Bill smiled, hoping she could see his face, hoping she wouldn’t worry. “I need some water. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“I don’t mind. You want to talk about it?”

“No, honey,” he said. “I’m okay.”

Bill shifted out of the bed, found his cane and shuffled out of the room. He stopped at the door, looking back at Diane as she settled down in the covers. He couldn’t tell her about the dream, about the women in their silk gowns, dancing and touching him. About wanting to enjoy the women, their supple bodies, but not knowing what to do, unable to raise his limp arms, unable to find Diane to help him. He’d shared everything with her, but he couldn’t share this. He had very little pride left, but he still had shame.

“I love you,” he said from the doorway.

“I love you, too,” she replied, sounding halfway asleep already.

He sat at the kitchen table, a glass of water in front of him and the chimes of the clock in the living room calling out the time. He thought about what needed to be done around the house to make it easier on Diane when he was finally gone. He thought about his daughter’s arrival the next evening. Sometimes it seemed all he could do was sit and think, and even his thinking, he knew, became more muddled every day.

From his basket by the dining table, filled with bills, stamps and various lists, he found a clean sheet in his notebook and made a reminder to get the sprinkler system checked in the front yard. He’d installed the system fairly recently so Diane would never have to worry about watering the lawn, but a patch of grass had turned brown which meant a break or a clog in the

line. Maybe Karen's husband could figure it out. He jotted that in his notebook, too, so he wouldn't forget to ask.

Bill's eyes were closed, but he was no longer asleep. The noise of activity in the kitchen behind him had brought him out of a light snooze. He was warm. The cat, still asleep, draped over the blanket on his legs propped up in the recliner. Light from the setting sun shone in through the living room windows.

Diane and Karen's voices drifted from the kitchen. He let the sound in, his eyes still closed, thinking back to all the years he'd sat in many different chairs in different living rooms, with his girls nearby in a kitchen, sometimes arguing, sometimes singing and laughing, sometimes talking over a grade or boys or another of Karen's failed attempts at cooking. For all the time Karen spent in the kitchen with her mother, she'd never picked up that skill. He felt for Allen, enduring her many failed culinary attempts.

He wondered if Allen was in the kitchen too or tinkering on some fix-it job around the house. When they'd arrived the day before, Allen had taken a look around, made a list, and driven to the hardware store before dinner. Bill still needed to ask him about the sprinkler.

"Mom, it's almost six. Not too early for a glass of wine."

Bill could hear the tone in Karen's voice, the same as when she was eight or eighteen, sounding offended that anyone would question her.

"Well, then, stay in here with it," Diane said. "Your father doesn't need to get any ideas."

Too late for that, Bill thought. Before he could shout out that he wanted a glass, Karen replied, "Mom, I don't think it's as bad as you say. I haven't noticed anything. In fact, you're the one who forgot to put in the filter for the coffee this morning, not Dad."

That's my girl, Bill thought, grinning, but also thinking he should hide a note next to the coffee filters with instructions for making coffee, just to be safe. No need to give Diane more reason to worry unnecessarily.

"Sweetie," Diane said, "I got a call from the grocery store when your father forgot why he was there last week. He drove us right past the exit for home last Saturday. I had to tell him the way."

Bill hadn't known the grocery store had called her, but he'd since programmed "Home" in the GPS, so he wouldn't miss the exit again. He needed to make a note to call Chuck at the grocery store about any future phone calls he might make to Diane.

"Should he be driving? Do you need help?" Karen asked. "Do I need to move home?"

"No, baby, we're fine," Diane said.

Bill nudged the cat off his feet, pushed in the footrest on the recliner, and slowly stood. He'd heard enough. He said loud enough to reach them in the kitchen, "What's a man gotta do to get a glass of wine around here?"

The house was dark and quiet except the chimes from the living room clock. Bill sat at the table with the cat at his feet. The dream that had woken him hadn't woken Diane, so he'd left the bed to let her sleep undisturbed.

"Hey, Dad," his daughter said, walking up behind him.

"Hey. What are you doing up?"

She opened the kitchen cupboard.

"Couldn't sleep," she said. "Want some water?"

He nodded. She sat at the table and handed him a glass.

“Why are you up, Dad?”

“Bad dream.”

“Me, too,” she said.

“Does this happen a lot?” he asked, realizing that she might inherit more from him than a taste for a good merlot, that she might have a mind like his, destined to be unreliable.

She looked tired, hair disheveled, bathrobe inside out. Although Bill knew her, knew she was his daughter, he couldn’t recall her name. In his head, he listed names he knew, hoping the right one would come to him.

“Not too often,” she said. “It’s just stress. Work is backed up. This isn’t a good time to be away.”

“Then why did you come?”

“Because I barely get to see you guys. Work will be there when I return.”

She smiled at him. He smiled back. The chimes in the living room sounded.

“I’m glad you came, Karen.” Bill patted her hand on the table, relieved that her name finally came to him. “Your mom never lets me eat chili rellenos unless you’re here.”

She laughed. “We both know it’s the extra wine you get away with.”

“You got me,” he said. “And that was a good bottle tonight. I’ll have to write it down, so I can get it again.”

“Which one, Dad? That Phelps or the second bottle?”

“Either would do, I suppose.” He didn’t realize they’d had a second bottle. “What were you dreaming about that woke you?”

“Trying to get to the airport. I can’t seem to get to there, but, for some reason, it’s important that I do. And I have no idea why.”

He said in his best Dick Tracy voice, “Interesting. An action thwarted.” He swirled the water in his glass. “Do you want to move? Do you want to change jobs?”

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

They sat in silence. The cat shifted on Bill’s feet.

“What about you, Dad? What woke you up?”

“I was dreaming I’d been asked to prepare a presentation on missiles, you know, like when I was stationed at Sheppard. But I couldn’t figure out the slides – the words and the pictures. Even the letters didn’t make sense. It was all jumbled. I got so frustrated that I woke myself up.”

“Did you wake up Mom?”

“Not this time. I have been though. Sometimes my dreams get rough.” He paused.

“Sometimes I’m so afraid in my dreams that it carries over when I wake.”

“I’m afraid, too, Dad.”

He wasn’t sure what she meant. He sat up straighter, clearing his throat. “How long are you in town?”

She took a long time answering, looking at Bill, searching his face for some answer he doubted she’d find there.

“We leave tomorrow, Dad. You and Mom are taking us to the airport.”

“Do you think Allen can take a look at the sprinkler before you go? There’s one spot I have to water with the hose to keep the grass there alive, but I know the grid is supposed to cover the whole yard.”

“But he –” She looked confused.

“He what, honey?”

“Yes, Dad. Allen can look at it.”

She looked down at her water glass.

“He already did it, didn’t he?” Bill asked quietly.

“Yes. Last time he came to visit.”

Bill lowered his head, shifted the material covering his lap. The old thin robe had long ago seen better days.

He looked up and said, “What am I putting your mother through?” His voice broke. “I don’t even know how bad it is.”

Karen’s eyes watered, and her mouth strained in a tight line. She reached for his clenched hands resting on the table, pulling his hands to her, his weak fists against her closed wet eyes.

“Dad...”

The clock in the living room chimed. Whatever Karen said after that, she hadn’t wanted him to hear or maybe he hadn’t wanted to hear it.

He said over her soft voice, “I’m not ready to give up. I don’t want to go to a home. I’m not ready to be away from your mom.”

Karen moved their hands from her eyes, took a deep breath and said, “Then don’t give up, Dad.”

“I don’t think it’s my choice anymore, Karen. When I realize what’s happening. Your mother has so much life left. This isn’t fair to her.”

With a look as sweet as her mother’s she said, “Luckily you don’t have to make that decision. That’s Mom’s to make.”

He pulled his hands from hers and smiled at her. “Is it too early for a glass of wine?”

She laughed. “Probably. Plus Mom says it makes you forget.”

“I think I might like to forget.”

They sat in silence. The cat jumped onto his lap. The clock in the living room chimed.

When Karen went back to bed, Bill stood slowly from the kitchen chair. Using the table for stability, he took his notebook and a pen from his basket and wrote down three things: Wife-Diane; Daughter-Karen; and Merlot-J. Phelps 2006. He knew there was more he didn't want to forget, but these he wanted to remember.

SUNDAYS WERE GOOD DAYS

I had almost pieced together a fourteen mile running route for the following morning when a loud noise popped under my car, right before it lurched. I eased my way to the shoulder and put the car in park, unsure of what to do with my first flat tire. We didn't go over that in Driver's Ed.

No other cars were on the road, not that we ever had much traffic on the long stretch of highway between Ada and my hometown of Weaver, Texas. Out the driver side window, through the shimmering heat rising up from the pavement, brown and green mesquite fields mostly hid the state penitentiary from view, a place celebrated for bringing jobs. It also brought criminals, but no one cared as long as it brought jobs. On the passenger side, the best side, with the big uninterrupted blue sky, red dirt and grass pastures spread out for miles with the occasional watering hole breaking up the flat view. Few cattle were out, grazing or lazing by the small reservoirs.

The bag of pralines my boss had given me, like she did every Saturday after my shift at the Pecan Shack, had spilled in the seat, so I tossed the spilled pecans out the passenger window and righted the bag. I gathered the scattered contents of my purse from the floorboard. I found my phone between the passenger seat and door. My hands shook as I dialed my brother.

He answered, "What?"

"Seriously, Brian, that's rude," I said.

"What, Sarah?"

"I have a flat. I'm about fifteen miles from home, near the Pen, on 298."

“And?”

“And I don’t know what to do.”

“Try changing the tire.”

“I don’t know how.” I thought of myself as pretty smart. I made the Honor Roll in both my freshman and so far in my sophomore years. I could convert most measurements in my head, like miles to kilometers. But my mechanical knowledge ended with being able to tell the difference between a Phillips head and flat head screwdriver. In my defense, I’d only been driving for three months and even a used car like the one Mom bought me shouldn’t have required such information so soon.

Brian sighed into the phone. “You know I’m, like, at my job, working, right? Call Mom.”

She was at work, too, and her nursing job meant way more to our livelihood than his selling t-shirts at the mall. “What’s Mom going to do?”

“What am I going to do?” he asked.

“Can you just try to be helpful?”

“Okay. I’ll harness my super powers. If you pop the trunk, I can probably change the tire with just my mind.”

“Fuck you, Brian.” I was about to cry.

“Calm down, you big baby,” he said. “Call one of your friends. Maybe one of their dads will help you.”

Sure, I wanted to call a dad, but not someone else’s dad. My brother, at just two years older than me, filled in as the closest thing I had to a dad.

“Can you please help me?”

“Fucking hell.” He must’ve covered the phone because his voice was muffled when he said, “My sister has a flat. I have to go.” With his voice normal again he said, “I’ll be there when I get there,” and he disconnected.

Even after almost ten minutes, no cars had driven by. My mom always joked there were more cows than people in our county, and that’s why she loved it. My brother hated everything about where we lived. He already had plans to join the Army after graduation. He’d said, “I’d rather be stuck in some backwards camel pit than stuck in this shit hole.” I didn’t mind Weaver, especially on Sundays.

Sundays were my favorite because I could run long, even when winter brought harsh cold air that made my lungs feel frozen or when summer scorched the earth and melted the asphalt enough to stick to my running shoes. Nothing made me feel better than a long run.

And Weaver was made for long runs, made for running through the cotton and wheat fields, by the cows and horses who would watch me watching them, and through the three blocks of Downtown. I even liked running at the edge of town past the boarded-up high school and the new wind turbine farm even though I heard those big blades were bad for the birds. I never saw any dead birds, and the cows grazing around them never seemed bothered.

Given the way the temperature was rising in the car even with the A/C still on, I knew I’d have to start my long run early the next morning to beat the heat.

A knock at my window made me jump. A man bent at the waist looked in at me, his gray hair long under his cowboy hat. He touched the rim of his hat, smiled, and signaled for me to roll down the window, which I did.

"Hi, there," he lifted his chin at me and said, "Smells sweet in here."

I held up the paper bag of candied pecans.

He smiled. "You okay?"

"I have a flat, but I'm okay. You?"

He laughed. "Yeah, I'm okay. You want some help?"

"Yes, please."

"How's your spare?"

I'd never noticed if I even had a spare tire. I sat there thinking about it until he said, "Turn off the car, and pop the trunk," before he walked to the back of my car.

I did as he asked, rolled up the window, and followed him to the back of the car.

"Honey, how about you go wait in my truck. No sense in both of us sweating out here. I'll have this done in a jiffy."

I would've preferred to watch him work, in case I ever had another flat, but he was doing me a favor and I didn't want to bother him. I walked to his big red dually parked behind me. He'd left his A/C on high while his truck idled. His sage green button-up shirt darkened with sweat, and he wiped his face with a faded gray bandanna.

I had my phone out to call my brother when I saw him pull over, parking in front of my car. He looked around until he saw me waving at him from the stranger's truck, then he walked to the man, and I left the truck to join them. I couldn't hear what they said, but the man leaned the spare against my car, wiped his hands on his bandana before shaking Brian's hand, and headed back to his truck.

"That young man will take it from here," he said, walking by me.

I thanked him, and he touched the tip of his hat again before getting in his truck to drive away.

“What the hell, Sarah?” Brian said.

“What? Like I planned to have a flat?”

“No, dumb-ass, why were you sitting in his car?”

“He told me to. He had his A/C on.”

“Jesus. Seriously? Just don’t do it again, okay?”

I didn’t understand why he was being a jerk, but since he often was, I said okay. I stood by him and watched as he worked.

When he cranked the tire iron, it hit my leg. I took a step back, but he stopped, just staring at the tire.

“What’re you doing?” I asked.

“Go sit in my car,” he said to the tire.

“But I want to see what you’re doing.”

He turned to face me, clearly irritated. We stayed that way, looking at each other, until he said, “Go.”

I waited in his car, sweating but not wanting to bother him for the keys to turn it on. When he finished, he told me to drive to the service station where his buddy worked, and Mom could deal with the bill later. When I got there, I had to wait in the lobby while they put on a new tire even though I’d asked to stay in the service bay to watch.

Sunday morning, the cool air warming quickly, my legs burned through the first couple of miles, and I’d settled into a rhythm for the long run. My mom was probably sneaking into her seat next to Grandma at church, just ahead of the priest during the first chords of the processional hymn.

My family had attended St. Luke's since I could remember. One Sunday when I was six and my brother was eight, Dad didn't go with us. When we came home, Dad had left. I didn't know at the time Mom kicked him out. I'd asked Mom if we'd ever see him again. She'd said, "Not if we're lucky." Still, I'd hoped we would, that he might come back, just to see how we were.

When my brother turned ten, he stopped attending church with us, which meant Mom had been worried about his soul for eight years.

I'd stopped going in my freshman year. Sunday mornings were perfect for long runs, so I'd argued with Mom that I could best celebrate God by running through his land. She'd finally agreed, though she'd never understood why I, or anyone, would run.

"You got that from your father," she'd say. "Out there chasing demons. Doesn't make a lick of sense."

And I did chase my demons, but she didn't know that I also imagined, while out there running, that maybe my dad was out there running, too.

I grinned at the long straight road ahead of me – not a curve, not a hill for miles, hardly anything to block the big sky. Justin Timberlake bragged into my headphones about bringing sexy back. I paced off the rhythm, sometimes not even hearing the lyrics. I had to keep my running music from my Mom though because she thought anything outside of Reba McEntire and George Strait had the postmark of the devil. But I'd listened to some of those George Strait lyrics, and he certainly couldn't be called a saint.

Farm Road 367 ran a narrow path between my town and the town of Chayton. We all called it Pumpkin Road because Chayton had a big pumpkin festival every year.

The western edge of the Rocking K ranch sprawled out to my right, with cattle and a couple of llamas, leftovers from the craze that overtook North Texas before I was born. On my left spread the Jordan Midfield, with derricks and pumps in a random pattern across a land covered in wild flowers and mesquite trees.

Earlier that morning, around mile three, two large trucks, each carrying half of a modular home, had passed me. My classmate Gabe, in the lead truck for the hauling company his dad owned, honked and waved as they drove by taking up most of the road. Large farm vehicles often drove out this way too, so when I heard the staccato bump of tires over a cattle guard behind me, I pulled to the far side of the road, running just off the pavement in the red dirt and crumbling asphalt, over weeds flattened by tires over time.

“Hey, pretty lady.”

A man looked at me out his car window, his large forearm resting on the window sill. He had on a dirty ball cap that had an orange hue from the red dust. Greasy dark hair hung around his jaw and neck. I didn't recognize him.

I looked away, reaching for the volume on my phone so I could turn the music down but left my headphones in so maybe he'd think I couldn't hear.

“C'mon, honey, don't be like that,” the man said. “You look sweet. Are you sweet?”

His car pulled close enough that I could hear the voices from the talk show on his radio. I didn't know if I was in danger or if he was just being a creepy sort of friendly.

“Hey. Hey, girl,” he said, “I'm talking to you. C'mon, talk to me. You look good.”

I'd never thought about how I looked running before, but I became aware of it at that moment: sweaty, water bottles bouncing in a belt at my exposed waist, blonde ponytail hanging from the back of my hat, a lot of skin showing.

“C’mon, girl, come see what I got for you.”

I looked over at him, his car right next to me, so close he could reach me with his hand. In his lap, pants open, he held his erection, stroking.

‘Yeah, baby, this is all for you.’

My steps faltered. I moved farther off the road, into the ditch, slowing my run as I navigated gopher holes and tall sticker weeds. I had to stay upright, couldn’t risk falling where he could catch me. He slowed his car a little more.

“All right, girl, maybe next time,” he said before he gassed the engine and sped off with dust and gravel kicking up at me and the car that had driven up behind him.

I should’ve looked at his license plate or maybe flagged down the other car, but I didn’t think about it in time. I turned around, giving up on the long run, and ran home at a pace faster than I could normally sustain, with my phone at the ready in case I needed to call for help.

I sat at the breakfast table with my heart still racing while Mom made pancakes.

“Sarah, honey, you okay?” she asked, looking over from the griddle.

I nodded. No way could I tell her about the man. She’d make me give up my Sundays, join her and Gram at church, saying something about no one grabbing their privates during the service. So I told her what I could, “Just a hard run today.”

“I don’t get it, doesn’t make sense, out there chasing demons.” She dropped pancakes onto a plate for me.

That afternoon, while Mom weeded the flower bed, I knocked on Brian’s bedroom door.

My brother yelled out from inside, “What?”

“Seriously, that’s rude,” I said, opening his door.

“What, Sarah?”

Books and papers spread out on his unmade bed. I sat on the trunk at the foot of his bed and told him about the man in the car. When I stumbled over the description of his actions, my brother butted in, “That fucker was jacking it to you running?”

“Yeah.”

“Gross. Just another reason we should escape this backwards town.”

“Would you prefer Mom moved us into some broken-down neighborhood that she can afford in Dallas where her car will get burgled and she’ll get jumped in the street?” I asked.

“Burgled,” he mocked me then said, “At least she wouldn’t get treated to some bumpkin’s junk on a Sunday morning. So, did you get a good look?”

“At his junk?”

“No, dumbass, at the man or his license plate. You know, to make a complaint?”

“Oh. Sort of,” I said. “I mean, he looked older and dirty.”

“Spic? Nig-?”

“No, don’t say it. Jesus. What’s the matter with you?”

“Get over yourself. It’s just a description.” He liked to act like his words weren’t racist, but he knew better than to say stuff like that in front of Mom. “You calling it in?”

“You mean call the cops?” I asked.

He nodded.

“What am I going to say? That some perv ruined my morning run?”

“I’m pretty sure there are laws against exposure. Town’s so small, someone’s bound to know who he is.”

“Unless he’s just here to work the season. How about you find him and exact retribution on behalf of your little sister,” I suggested, only half joking.

“I fought my last fight in middle school, and I’m not breaking my streak for something stupid like this. If you don’t want to report it, go to Bernard’s and get yourself some pepper spray.”

“See, even you think it’s stupid.”

“Jesus, you’re impossible. Did you tell Mom?”

“Hell no.”

He laughed.

“Are we done here?” he asked, and we were.

In my room, I thought about how part of me really wanted my brother to beat the guy up.

I was mad. Of course I was mad at that guy for ruining my Sunday. But I was also mad at my brother, not just because he didn’t want to fight for me. I was mad at him because he would never have to worry about that happening to him. He’d never have to consider running with pepper spray on a Sunday morning.

Driving home after work the next Saturday, I thought about my upcoming run: how far, what route. I wanted to go even longer than normal since I hadn’t gone as far as I’d wanted the Sunday before, but I didn’t want to be out there and see that guy again. I smacked my palm against the steering wheel, thinking about that perv ruining my Sundays.

Then I thought of my father, a man I hadn’t seen in over ten years. I wondered if he ever thought of us, worried about us, if he still ran. I missed him, or the idea of him. Not because I

thought he would run with me or avenge me or teach me to change a flat tire, but because he might.

But my dad wasn't there.

I took the exit to Bernard's Feed and Tackle. I explained to the man behind the counter that I wanted protection while out running. He helped me choose a pepper spray and how to attach it to my water-belt, which would be a more stable and accessible spot than my shorts or sports bra. He said the spray might deter bobcats and coyotes, and more importantly, any weirdoes out there, but it was just a deterrent.

As I paid, he said, "Honey, you ought to stay in the more populated areas of town and maybe run with a friend. But if you really want to avoid trouble, your best bet is to keep a mind to how you're dressed."

Sunday morning, back on Pumpkin Road, just past the half-way point in my run, I had Eminem on low. The song playing had a slightly faster beat than my usual pace, so I pushed it, listening to the angry lyrics, more aware of the words than ever before. I charged through each step, pummeling the earth with my feet and surging through the air with my loose fists and shoulders. Instead of being lulled into a quiet mind where I could work through my racing thoughts, my mind focused on the power in my muscles, the strength of my legs tearing down the road and matching stride for stride the pounding rhythm of the song.

I heard the sound of tires in the gravel behind me. With one hand I turned the volume down on the music and with the other I reached for the pepper spray hooked on my water-belt. I didn't need my brother or my dad to fight for me – I could do it myself. In a way, I wanted to see

that guy again, to spray him, to yell, and, even though I'd never hit anyone before, I wanted to feel my fist connect with his dirty face.

My shoulders tensed when the car slowed beside me, and I took a deep breath in through my nose before looking over.

“Hey, Sarah.” Gabe, my buddy from school, leaned on the console from the passenger seat of his father's work truck, shouting over his father at me through the open window.

I took my thumb off the pepper spray, flicking the safety back into place, and smiled at them. His father smiled back and gave a little wave before speeding up again.

I slowed and focused on the yellow wildflowers, the wayward bluebonnets, the big-eyed red cows, and the slow-moving oil pumps, waiting for my heart beat to calm. A few yards ahead was the turn that would lead me through a bean field and around back home. Shutting off the music, I paced to the rhythm of my own breathing and the steady soft landing of my feet on the ground.

NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF

Billy sat straight in the gray steel chair; his posture fixed from the many years he'd spent at St Patrick's School of the Holy Ascension. He would've crossed his legs, but the chains around his ankles attached to an O-ring in the cement floor were too short. The chains connecting his wrists to the table were just long enough to put his hands in his lap or on the table but not long enough to reach his chin. For that he had to duck his head, which he did, slowly moving his blunt fingernails over the stubble at his bruised jaw line.

Billy watched the second hand rotate on the caged clock above the door, awaiting the Sex Offender Treatment program counselor. He attended every session available to him at the Pen, from Personal Finance to Baptist Fellowship, just to get out of his block. Notably missing from the roster of inmate options was A Quiet Space, something that he'd have put in the comment box if they had one. A quiet place to calm the mind had to be at least as beneficial to an inmate's reintegration into society as calculating debt-to-equity ratios or listening to the preaching of a sweaty fat man with a Livestrong bracelet digging into his fleshy wrist.

When the door beneath the clock opened, Billy expected to see the gray-haired program counselor in his wrinkled suit and stained tie. Instead, a tall, young man in a pressed navy blue suit with dark brown hair curling around his collar walked across the threshold. He held the door open with one hand and a folder in the other, while he spoke quietly to a guard just outside the room.

Billy'd only had a handful of one-on-one meetings with the gray-haired counselor, listening to his tales about fishing with his grandson or trips he'd taken with his late wife. They'd

shared stories about growing up on a farm, about the best time to the harvest hay or breed a mare. Billy liked the old man, and he knew the old man liked him. But he wouldn't have handed over five years of freedom for the chance to meet him. He'd done that for the chance to get close to his beautiful Anne. When he'd met her, she'd been just shy of fourteen. He wondered if, after he'd served his sentence, she would still hold the same charm. By then she'd be wearing makeup and shaving and sharing what she'd given only to him with oily faced boys who had no idea what they were doing.

The young man in the suit pushed the door closed and checked the lock by trying the handle. He gave the guard a nod through the square window in the door. Turning to Billy, he asked, "William J. Allen?"

Billy nodded. In grade school, a nun had commented that boys with two first names often had great success in life. "How about that, Billy," she'd said, "you might be a lawyer or even president one day." Apparently boys with two first names could also become guests of the state for five years of state-sponsored rehabilitation. And some of the other inmates and guards deemed it their duty to add a little supplementary rehab for certain prisoners like Billy.

The young man at the door introduced himself as Kevin Sandler, "the new guy. Here for your nine thirty." He looked behind him at the clock, "Well, your nine forty-five. Sorry I'm late."

Billy didn't answer the young man smiling at him, smiling as though he was comfortable being in a room with a man chained to a table when Billy could see he clearly wasn't.

Sandler glanced back at the door to the guard.

Sandler, with his shiny shoes and clean fingernails, probably thought he could show up every day with his can-do-attitude and walk away unscathed. But Billy knew no man could leave

these concrete walls without bearing marks from his stay, whether there by choice or by the will of the state. Sandler would learn that soon enough.

Sandler held the file folder to his chest and explained he had taken over as Billy's program counselor.

"What happened to the other guy?" Billy asked.

"Frank retired."

"Do we start over or pick up where we left off?"

"Where you left off, but based on Frank's limited notes," Sandler lifted the folder, "might as well say we're starting over." He pulled out the chair opposite Billy and sat. "I read your full file, too. Not much there either. No history of priors. Some fights here, one involving a guard is noteworthy. Couple of visits to the infirmary. Having some problems with the other inmates, Mr. Allen? Trouble with a guard?"

"Call me Billy. And you must know how it works. Didn't take long for word of my conviction to spread to the big boys who use me to feel better about their crimes. And the guard, well, let's just say he was doing much the same."

Billy had intended to keep his head down during his time in the Pen and avoid the other inmates. He'd expected the special treatment saved for convicts like him; he just didn't realize it would be so blatant or violent.

Sandler stared at Billy, visibly awaiting more, with his big eyes ready to witness Billy's acceptance of the offer Sandler so clearly wanted to make, an offer to let Sandler in the darkest corners of Billy's mind, an offer Billy knew wouldn't help him but would make Sandler feel better. Billy clenched his teeth at the thought, then immediately relaxed, his jaw still sore from one of the recent informal treatments doled out the night before, one that included having his

face repeatedly pressed into a metal bed frame by the beefy hand of an inmate grunting and rutting behind him. During these violations, Billy had learned that most of the guards either looked away or stood sentry, alerting the inmates when they were drawing too much attention. After the first violation, he'd also learned a person could actually have stitches inside a body cavity.

Finally Sandler gave in. "Would you like me to see about having you moved?"

"Wouldn't matter if you did." Billy lifted his foot to cross his legs, forgetting the chains until they snapped taut against his ankle, the sound echoing in the room. "You could undo these chains, if you want to be helpful."

"You know I can't do that, Mr. Allen. Not with your fighting."

"Please call me Billy. And I don't fight anymore. Tried it. Lost. Learned quick to just take it."

Sandler nodded and looked at Billy as if awaiting more information.

"Am I your first?" Billy asked.

"My first what?"

"First case."

"No."

"First sexual offense case?"

Sandler didn't answer.

Billy leaned in and said, "Nothing to be afraid of, buddy. I'll be gentle."

Sandler looked once more toward the window in the door as if he needed to verify the guard was still there. He nodded at the door before giving Billy a tight uncertain smile. Then he

opened the folder and pulled a pen from an inside pocket of his suit jacket. Sweat darkened the underarm of Sandler's dress shirt.

"Warm in here," Billy said, nodding toward the sweat rings. "Maybe you want to take off your jacket. Get a little more comfortable?"

Sandler's face flushed, looking like a prim housemaid who'd just been solicited by a dirty rake.

"Hey, now, just trying to be nice," Billy said, trying not to laugh as he raised his hands in surrender, the chains pulling on his wrists, "And, if you read my folder, you know you're not my type."

Sandler adjusted his jacket. "Let's talk a little about why you're here."

"In the Pen?"

"If you'd like, but I meant in this program."

"And then maybe we could talk about why you're here."

Sandler looked confused. "I'm your new counselor."

"I meant in this job. Thinking you can fix people."

"Do you think you can be fixed?"

"Depends on what it is you think's broken." Billy moved to cross his arms over his chest until the chains caught him again. With a sigh he leaned forward and rested his clasped hands on the table, the chains clanging against the metal top.

Sandler began writing. Billy glanced at the upside-down notes.

"Okay, Billy," Sandler said as he wrote, "how about you think about what might be broken, and we'll talk about it next week." He looked up at Billy.

Billy nodded. But he didn't want to tell this new counselor some tired lines about what might be broken or wrong. Nothing about his Anne and the memories that he replayed over and over felt wrong. Instead he wanted this man to see that before he fell for Anne he wore suits the same as Sandler, had the same ambitions and drives, had been well on the path to partner before he would turn 45. But that was before the sweetest face he'd ever seen smiled at him.

He wondered if he could even get his CPA license reinstated when released. The best he could probably hope for would be to make manager at a fast food joint. And this guy would likely get promotions and praise for his work in this schizophrenic society that stole Billy's freedom over an act that would've been congratulated not so long ago, still was in many parts of the world. By then, Anne would no longer be the beautiful girl who dominated Billy's thoughts.

Sandler set the pen down and glanced at the clock. "We're short on time. Anything you want to talk about today? Maybe what's happening with the other inmates?"

"I don't want to talk about that."

"We don't have to talk about their actions. We could talk about how their actions make you feel."

"So we're going right into Psych 101? Okay. They make me feel pain."

"I don't mean physically, Billy. I mean how you feel inside."

"Inside is generally where they focus their pain."

"I know it's uncomfortable to talk about, but if we can discuss this, we can start to discuss how those actions hurt you, and how your similar actions hurt someone else."

Billy fisted his hands on the table, the metal chains dragging against the surface. "What Anne and I had was nothing like that."

"Wasn't it, though?"

“Those men want to punish me. With Anne, it was different.”

“How?”

“We were there for each other, to help each other.”

“Is it possible she didn’t want to be there? That you couldn’t see past your own desires to see her fear? Maybe like when the other inmates hurt you?”

“It’s possible you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

Sandler began writing again.

Billy relaxed his fists. “I already said I don’t want to talk about the other inmates.”

While still writing, Sandler said, “What would you like to talk about?”

One topic Billy had been considering was books. Particularly why the library in the Pen didn’t carry *Lolita* but it did carry the *Bible*, lots and lots of copies of the *Bible*. When he’d seen it in the book cart, he’d decided to finally read it – he certainly had the time. After reading about a deal God made with a father that meant he had to set his daughter on fire, he’d returned the book the next time the cart passed by. Billy’s actions, while considered morally repugnant by the state, had never ended with a body burning.

But this wasn’t Book Club.

Billy said, “Did you read in my file about Anne?”

Sandler nodded.

“Do you know how she’s doing?”

Sandler said, “She’s had a rough go, Billy. Last update, she was in therapy.”

“By choice?”

Sandler seemed hesitant to answer, but he said, “No.”

Billy presumed this meant they were trying to turn her against him. He hoped she wouldn't let them spoil what they'd had, those all too brief moments he'd traded for these chains.

"Did you see pictures of her?" Billy asked

Sandler nodded.

"Are there any in that file?" Billy motioned toward the folder on the desk.

"No."

"Maybe next time." Billy turned his head away and whistled low under his breath, "Quite alluring, my Anne. Body still square, the softest skin. So fresh. Smelled sweet, like powder and candy. First time I really felt clean was when I finally felt her."

Billy had been looking at the floor while talking, but the sound of the chair opposite him scraping across the floor drew his gaze. Sandler sat back, arms crossed over his chest, clearly upset by Billy's words.

Billy almost felt sorry for him, knowing the young man wouldn't last, wouldn't make it past a month, if he found this conversation disturbing. Not when there were others here for truly ruthless acts, acts done out of anger and hatred or because they just enjoyed the cruelty.

"Seriously," Billy said, "come on back to the table. I won't hurt you."

Sandler said, "You're chained to the table and the floor. You can't hurt me. I simply didn't expect you to speak that way about an innocent girl you nearly destroyed."

Billy huffed. "'Destroyed' seems a bit of a stretch."

"Do you understand why you are in this program? Attached to this table?"

"I think I understand. I also understand that you and me," Billy moved his hands back and forth between them as much as the chains would allow, "we aren't that much different."

"I think we are, Billy. But if we work together, we might get to a point where we aren't."

“Because you think you can re-program me? To fit into society?”

“I think rehabilitation is possible. Isn’t that why we’re here?”

“Maybe I’m here because our society only recently decided to change the rules. Some societies still marry off girls as they hit puberty. But here we decided give in to fears and misconceptions about love and sex instead of going with a more natural approach.”

“There is nothing natural about raping a child. We can’t move forward in the program if you don’t recognize that.” Sandler said.

“Our society uses the word rape, such a negative word, even when the only flaw they can find with the coupling is the difference in ages. What if a girl could enjoy learning about her body with someone who adores it, but society makes it shameful or dirty?”

“Billy, you had a choice to make. You chose to break the law. This program will not succeed if you can’t accept that.”

“I accept that making a choice is a moral responsibility, and man must suffer the consequences for choosing poorly. But choice is active. Instinct, well, that’s passive, innate. Something a man doesn’t think about, he just does. Like when the smell of pecan pie wafts into the room, his mouth waters. When wind blows dust about, his eyes close.”

Sandler started writing again.

Billy continued, “When a young girl walks by with a body unburdened by the threat of an escaping egg, some men get an erection. A natural response.”

“It’s not,” the counselor looked up at him.

“Why not?”

“Billy,” he set his pen down with a sigh, “you know a sexual response toward a child is wrong.”

“What I know is that society says it’s wrong, that you personally don’t get stiff when you see a young boy with the fuzzy hint of a future mustache on his upper lip. But if another man has that reaction, who can say it isn’t a natural response? How many erections have you had that you controlled?”

The counselor capped his pen and began gathering his papers as though the session was done. Billy knew Sandler didn’t want to hear these things, but he couldn’t deny Billy’s point.

Billy said, “If men once accepted these responses in the past as normal, and still have these responses, as indicated by you and all these guards here gainfully employed and by the ever expanding internet video selection, then it’s a logical conclusion that those responses aren’t a choice or a fluke.”

Sandler straightened the edges of his papers on the desk and stacked them in the open folder. “Billy, society has evolved, recognizing that the children in these situations lack the understanding to choose this for themselves. The adult is acting in his own interest, not that of the child. The unequal power dynamic negates any attempt to justify the behavior.”

“So you would never sleep with a patient?” Billy asked, knowing Sandler would never do something so obviously illicit. “Or your assistant? Take advantage of that power dynamic?”

“Never,” Sandler answered, closing the folder.

Billy nodded and looked to the window where he could see the back of the guard’s head and asked, “Do you like to eat cheese?”

“What?”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know how cheese is made?” Billy asked.

Sandler said, “I don’t see how – “

“Grew up on a dairy farm, left as soon as I could get away. But I learned a few things. Cheese comes from cows in a continued lactation cycle, with regulated gestation utilizing a rape rack for insemination.” Billy paused, looked at the man sitting opposite him and tilted one side of his mouth up, “That’s how they referred to the device.”

When Sandler began to speak, Billy said, “If you buy cheese, you pay workers to rape cows, to take advantage of an unequal power dynamic.”

“You can’t equate a child to a cow.”

“It’s far worse for the cow because no one can explain to it what’s happening and there’s nothing in it for the cow. But what I’m saying is that society accepts certain behavior if, in the end, we get nachos, and, you and me, we both like nachos.”

Sandler’s eyes closed briefly, his cheeks flushed red.

Billy smiled and asked, “Does it anger you to face your own transgressions, to know we aren’t that much different?” He leaned in conspiratorially. “Does it make you want to lash out at me like the other criminals and guards in here? Would it feel good to hurt me?”

With an unexpected softness to his tone, the counselor asked, “Who broke you, Billy? What happened?”

Leaning into the table, Billy said, “You sit there feeling safe because you can walk away. But here’s the thing, you and me, we’re both chained here. Maybe next time we can talk about who broke you, made you become a counselor.”

Billy waited for a response, but the counselor just stared at him.

“We all have desires. Some are just more accepted than others,” Billy said.

“Your desires destroyed a family.”

Billy's fists dragged the chains on the metal surface and his voice rose. "Because they didn't trust their daughter's decision."

"That young girl can't sleep at night, Mr. Allen." Sandler's fists clenched opposite Billy's on the table. "She took a razor to her wrists after the trial. Did you know that?"

Billy shook his head, too angry to speak. He wasn't sure if Sandler was lying to upset him or if Anne had really done that, but if she had, he was sure it was because they'd been unfairly kept apart.

"She did," Sandler said.

"Her family didn't understand. They hurt her when they wouldn't let me see her."

"Said she'd never feel clean again. Nearly killed herself."

Billy's legs shifted, the chains rattling. The weight of the metal felt too heavy to bear. "They did that to her."

The counselor continued speaking in a low controlled tone. "Maybe more than the physical suffering, she feels shame. Ashamed that she didn't fight more. Ashamed of what you did to her."

"That's not true. She wanted to see me again." Billy banged his fists against the table, the metal rattle echoing in the room. "She promised."

"She said whatever she had to to get away from you."

Anne had promised to meet Billy again, when he dropped her off behind the convenience store by the school. She'd agreed, nodding while tears dripped from her chin onto her rumpled uniform skirt. She'd closed her eyes as he gently wiped the tears from her face while he said, "Tomorrow, Anne. Now go." Instead of finding Anne the next day, he'd been arrested behind the store. They wouldn't let him see her, let her know he'd come back for her. They'd made it

shameful and dirty, never letting him explain that her struggle with being separated from him was part of her learning about an unjust society, just like when she struggled with him was part of her learning how to be loved.

Billy hadn't considered how the police knew where he planned to meet Anne. Maybe Sandler was right; maybe she'd gone to them. Or maybe someone had seen them together and called the cops. And if Anne had hurt herself after, Billy knew it was because she just didn't understand. She didn't understand what he wanted to teach her about love. That had to be it because Billy wasn't anything like the men who punished him.

Two sharp knocks sounded at the door. Billy tensed at the noise but kept his eyes toward Sandler.

"You broke her, Billy."

Billy shook his head. "You don't under –"

"You broke her."

"We were –"

"Broken."

When the guard pushed open the door, Sandler gathered his pen and the folder, stood and, with one last look at Billy, walked out of the room.

The guard walked toward Billy and roughly pulled at the chains around Billy's ankles, detaching them from the floor. He kicked the legs of the chair out from under the table, scooting Billy back so his arms were straight out over his lap, the chains pulled tight against his wrists, the action setting into motion bruises that would be visible by dinner.

The guard released Billy's wrists from the table and reconnected them behind his back. He yanked on Billy's arms and pulled him to his feet, away from the chair. Standing behind him, the guard had one hand on Billy's shoulder and one holding Billy's right hand in a thumb lock, the pressure on the joint intended to keep Billy in line.

Billy asked the guard just loudly enough to be heard, "Does it feel good to hurt me while I can't escape?"

The guard increased the pressure on Billy's hand. The move brought him to his knees, pain shooting up his legs as he hit the concrete floor. The guard yanked on Billy's arms and pulled him to his feet, away from the table.

Angling Billy toward the door, the guard said, "Shut up and walk."

MONTANA

A week after Jim's funeral, a counselor in the survivor support group I never attended met with me in my empty living room. The hospice people had already cleared it of the supplies that made it a room for dying, including the leftover morphine provided in excess of what a broken body needed to go gentle into that good night.

She'd brought me the additional melanoma flyers I'd requested; then she sat with me on the couch, held my hand on her knee, and said, "Holly, you aren't alone in this."

I wanted to be alone. Grief is not something that can be shared like a bottle of wine.

But she was right. I had girlfriends and coworkers and people from the gym who offered condolences, tissues, and meals over the holidays. Even Jim's family called to check on me. I avoided them as much as I could, but they kept coming around. I knew they meant well, but I needed space from their good intentions.

A month after Jim's funeral, I called my broker to stop the automatic deductions from my checking account to my investments. He cautioned me, saying, "People sometimes do rash things after a spouse dies. You shouldn't make any big decisions for at least six months." I'd reminded him, "I've been an accountant for almost twenty years. I don't do rash." He laughed at my assurance. I should've felt guilty lying to him, but he, of all people, should've known that past results were not an indicator of future performance.

Two weeks after that call, in the middle of January, I quit my job, sold my house, furniture and car, and moved from mild Virginia to snowy Montana, where I knew no one except Mrs. Dalkins.

Mrs. Dalkins and I had spoken a few times after I found her Craigslist ad for a room to rent. Her husband had passed almost two years earlier, and her son was off for basic training at Fort Benning after six unsuccessful and nonconsecutive semesters at Montana State University. She had extra space and could use the income. I needed space and could live without an income for a short time, so I transferred a deposit and the first month's rent to her account.

My first night Bozeman, she'd made dinner for me. We discussed my old job, her current job, the weather, and her view of snowboarders: "Just plain inconsiderate. You want to take an easy ride, but if you aren't dodging those boarders screaming down the mountain, you're slipping on ice patches where they've carved away all the snow."

I didn't share an opinion. The only snowboarder I knew was Jim. I'd never been with him up in the West Virginia or Pennsylvania mountains farther than the lodges where I'd spend the day with a book and cups of hot tea while he, apparently, tore up the mountain.

She'd asked about my personal life. I told her I'd recently lost my dog and my husband. My dog died because he was old; Jim died because I didn't pay attention. But I didn't share that. Mrs. Dalkins knew he was gone, and that was enough.

My first five mornings, I'd wake early, not quite adjusted from East Coast time. I'd watch the room shift from dark to light gray, the days never shining in bright like they did in Virginia. The world felt perfectly muted in this soft light.

When Mrs. Dalkins would knock softly on my bedroom door, I'd ignore her, only coming out after she went work. Every evening since the first, I'd crack open the room door just enough to decline her offer of dinner, eating granola bars and crackers I'd brought with me.

But today was Saturday, her day off. I'd been awake for a couple of hours already when I heard her moving around.

I was always an early riser, waking before Jim, finding some part of him connected to some part of me. When he was near me, he was touching me, awake or asleep. If I'd tease that he was on my side of our bed, crowding me, even if just a foot hooked under my ankle, he'd roll over, flop a leg and an arm over me, and ask in a sleepy voice, "Better?"

When Mrs. Dalkins knocked on the door and said in a low voice, "Coffee's on," I knew I'd have to face her. Despite her kindness, I wasn't yet ready for people. Regardless, today I would venture out, ready or not.

I stretched in Mrs. Dalkins's son's bed, no part of me touching anyone else, took a deep breath and got up.

Every day, Mrs. Dalkins had made a little something, muffins or biscuits, before she went to work and left a plate for me with coffee in the pot that I could warm in the microwave. This she explained to me on a note leaned against a coffee cup in case it wasn't clear. Today, crescent rolls were arranged in the middle of the kitchen table on a light green porcelain serving plate.

Mrs. Dalkins smiled at me from the sink, her floral print thermal covered by an oversized plaid flannel shirt that probably belonged to the late Mr. Dalkins.

"Come in. Get yourself some coffee," she said, nodding to a cabinet where she kept the mugs.

I did and sat at the Formica table ringed with stains from so many cups of coffee before. Mrs. Dalkins placed a plate and napkin in front of me and pulled the platter of rolls closer. I

inspected the spots on her hands. I couldn't distinguish abnormal spots from age spots on the woman's mottled skin. I would need to look online at examples of both to compare.

"Have you thought about looking for a job?" she asked as she moved to the refrigerator.

I stopped mid-reach, turned to Mrs. Dalkins and said to her back, "I can pay rent. I have money for the rent."

Looking over her shoulder at me, she said, "I'm not worried about rent, Holly. Sometimes, when life shakes things up, a routine can help."

I split a roll in two, covered half with jam and took a bite. With my mouth full I said, "This is great."

Mrs. Dalkins removed aluminum foil from a baking sheet before sliding it back into the cooling oven. "What do your friends think about your move?"

"I don't know." I'd sent them all an email right before I left and a text to let them know I'd arrived.

"Have they called?"

"Yes."

She asked, "Have you answered?"

I shook my head.

"Honey..." she said, as though about to impart some wisdom but didn't say more. She picked up a dishrag and wiped the counter. Outside, birds sang and chattered.

She smiled at me and asked, "Can you believe how loud the birds are today? And have you seen how big those magpies are? I swear they're getting bigger. Makes me think of that movie sometimes. You know the one? About the birds? Where they swoop in on the people?"

"Yes, *The Birds*," I replied.

She tossed the dishrag in the sink. As she dried her hands on a towel, a distant train whistled. Mrs. Dalkins turned toward me and leaned against the counter, continuing the slow drying of her hands.

“Mr. Dalkins used to marvel at the birds.” She folded the towel. “He’d say that they can make themselves heard over all the loud noises people can muster, including that big old train. Hard as we try to cover them up or block them out, they still come through. You listen, you’ll know he’s right.”

She seemed to be looking at me to make sure I really listened, so I sat there, listening for the birds.

After breakfast, dressed in my warmest layers, I went to the closet by the front door for my coat. My dog used to act like a puppy when the weather turned cold, especially if it snowed, bouncy and playful, even when his face turned gray and he’d pay for that exuberance later with a stiff gait and creaky bones. I wondered if he would’ve liked the kind of cold Montana offered. Jim would’ve loved it. He preferred to vacation in the snow; I preferred the sand. We agreed to switch every year between the two. Our last trip was to St. John last January, between his treatments. I’d suggested we skip my turn, go somewhere cold, to give him what he wanted in deference to his illness. He’d grinned, put his hand on the back of my head and said, “Like I’d knowingly mess with your carefully crafted plans. You’ve probably got a head full of budgets and lists for this trip.” And I did, but they were saved in spreadsheets on my computer.

Coat buttoned, hat and scarf on and gloves at the ready, I called to Mrs. Dalkins, “I’m heading out.”

She called back, “Will you be home for dinner?”

“Not sure. Don’t wait for me.”

She acknowledged me, but I couldn’t quite hear what she said.

Mrs. Dalkins lived near the center of town, and most everything was in walking distance from there. I bought a newspaper in a convenience store on Main Street and entered a coffee shop.

Purchasing a large coffee from the young woman at the counter who sported multiple piercings in her face and dark purple hair and lipstick, I searched the girl’s skin for odd spots. She didn’t say much during this, but I guessed she’d be telling her girlfriends later about the creepy lady checking her out. My constant scanning had disturbed my friends in Virginia, too. Even so, I couldn’t stop myself from looking. If everyone looked, really looked, we might catch the growths before they spread and chewed up our bodies from the inside out.

At a table near a window, I flipped through the paper and turned to the jobs section. It wouldn’t hurt to get out, supplement my funds, maybe find something with healthcare so I could stop pouring money out for it. I held a pen at the ready to circle possibilities.

Ski rental attendant: I knew nothing about ski gear. Grocery store clerk: part time with no health insurance. Certified mechanic: hardly. Budget analyst at Montana State University: within my skill set.

I’d spent most of my adult life in the accounting field, sitting in a cushy office waiting to find out what happened so I could present it in numbers. Turned out what happened was my dog died and then my husband died all while I tallied up other people’s work in neat little rows with descriptions that didn’t exceed twenty-nine characters.

But the budget analyst position offered health insurance.

After an hour of people watching and reading the local news, I shoved the paper in my hand bag, left a handful of melanoma flyers on the window sill, and headed back out into the cold.

Snow drifted through the air. Random snowflakes melted against my cheeks as I walked down the sidewalk and listened for the birds.

At the town library, I signed up for a membership from the stooped man who looked like he and his big wool cardigan had both been there since the place opened in 1872. I used the public computers to fill out the application for the budget analyst job, but I never hit the “Apply” button. Accounting paid well, but the work was empty. After losing everything, I couldn’t go back to that emptiness. I’d passed the point of diminishing returns. So instead, I left melanoma flyers in the reading area and made ten copies of my resume, paying the old man while inspecting his wrinkled skin.

Outside again, I looked up at the flashing bank sign: 11:14, twenty-three degrees Fahrenheit. By this time of day two years ago, I would’ve already walked the dog, had breakfast with Jim and been at work for a few hours. A year ago, I would’ve carried the dog to the backyard to pee, helped Jim with his first round of pills for the day, and cried in the shower. Today, I’d read the paper, scanned the skin of strangers, and listened for the birds.

I walked the streets of Bozeman filling out applications. I’d decided about half an hour into it that if I liked the look of a place with a “Help Wanted” sign in the window, I’d apply regardless of what they were offering. I’d applied for a receptionist, a stock clerk, and an auction

house cashier. Mrs. Dalkins was right: I needed something to do. Actually, at that moment, I needed to be someplace warm with food. I was cold, and I was hungry, so I entered the Slick Rock, the first restaurant I saw.

I sat next to a scruffy older man sitting on the end of the bar and left a seat between me and two young men in ski gear. The bar area covered about a third of the floor space, tables covered another third, and pool tables and video games took up the rest.

I never excelled at playing pool the way Jim did. I always said pool highlighted the difference between an engineer's math, like his, and an accountant's math, like mine. Jim could think in angles. I could only think in straight lines.

The bartender, a tall slender young man slid a menu in front of me and asked, "Where you from?"

"Virginia," I answered.

"What can I start you off with today, Virginia?"

"Oh no, my name's not Virginia. It's Holly."

"I couldn't possibly remember the names of all the tourists."

"You get that many tourists?"

"Yep."

"Well, I'm not a tourist."

"All right."

We stared at each other for a moment before he asked, "What can I start you off with, Virginia?"

I smiled. "Hot tea, please."

The bartender patted the bar in front of me, and said, "Hot tea, coming up."

When he returned with my drink, I looked him over, what I could see of him. Clean shaven, he had no spots on his face or neck save a few freckles. I checked the exposed skin on his arms where he'd partly pushed up the long sleeves of his dark green Slick Rock T-shirt.

After ordering food, I watched the snow falling heavier than before through the large window facing Main Street.

The bartender approached to pull some beers on the taps near me, and I pulled a pen and the newspaper out of my hand bag and opened again to the jobs section.

"What're you looking for there?" the bartender asked me as he topped one glass and reached for another.

"A job."

He grinned at the spout and said, "Yeah, figured that much, Virginia. What kind of job?"

"Not sure what I want to do. Just pretty sure about what I don't."

"Suppose that's a start."

Halfway through filling the third glass, he shifted his chin toward my left hand, and asked, "What's your man do? Got a job at the university? Or is he in software?"

I looked at my wedding ring.

The scruffy man on my right said, "Ken, you got no imagination. Could be anything. Could be with that Sam's Club or the new vet just opened off West Peach."

I looked at the man on my right and scanned his skin. A big mostly white beard covered the bottom half of his face; his arms were completely covered by his dark blue flannel shirt. His hands were almost as hairy as his chin.

He squinted at me a little while I looked, then he grinned and said, "What's he do? He's that new vet, right?"

I said, "He's dead."

The man's smile turned, and he pulled his head back a bit.

I took a deep breath and said, "But maybe that new vet needs an office manager, so thanks for the tip."

He blinked a couple of times, and then extended his hand out to me. "Allen Kulski."

I immediately put my hand in his. "Holly Sandover Fisher."

We shook, and he said, "That's a mighty long last name."

I laughed, and it felt strange.

I'd never officially taken Jim's name. I wondered if the court would allow him to give it to me posthumously.

I pulled my hand from Allen's and looked up at the bartender staring down at me, a hand on his waist and a hand up on the top of a tap, in a way I imagined he'd stare down under the hood of a car running funny.

"You need a beer," he said, the same way he might say, "You need a new radiator."

I asked, "Anything local good?"

Allen knocked on the bar next me and said, "Slick Rock Winter Pale, Ken. Get her that."

He looked at me, "Best beer in town."

I asked, "This place has a brewery?"

"Says 'Brewery' right on the sign," Ken said as he pushed his sleeves further up his arms and reached for a clean glass.

I'd missed another detail right in front of me. I was meticulous about details at work, which made me a good accountant, and at home, which made me annoying. I'd come home from work and find socks on the kitchen floor, spoons on the banister leading to the bedroom, keys on

the counter in the bathroom... It drove me crazy – Jim always asking where his keys were. While helping him look, I'd tell him if he'd put them on the key hook by the front door, where they belonged, he'd know exactly where they were when he needed them. He'd hug me and say, "But then why would I need you?" Turns out he'd actually needed me to be more mindful of the details that mattered.

Ken set the beer on the bar for me. I grabbed his hand as he pulled away, pointing with my other hand to a spot on his forearm exposed when he'd pushed his sleeves up, what looked like a gathering of big freckles with an irregular border, one of the clues bodies give that something inside is going terribly wrong.

"Have you had that checked out?" I asked. I had no right to touch him or ask his medical history, but I couldn't stop myself.

Ken used his free hand to remove mine, repositioning it around my beer glass.

"Virginia, I've had this spot since I took my first breath, probably even before then. Drink your beer."

He walked off to wait on other customers, I took a drink, and Allen cleared his throat.

"How long ago'd he pass?" Allen asked "If you don't mind me asking."

"Three months ago," I replied without looking up from my beer.

"What happened?"

"Melanoma." I reached into my bag and placed a flyer next to his coaster.

He lifted his empty glass toward Ken down the bar to signal a refill and said, "My ma passed two years ago. It ain't easy, Holly, but it gets easier."

We sat in silence for a while until Ken set a new beer in front of Allen and a salad in front of me with silverware rolled up in a napkin.

“Need anything else?” Ken asked.

“I’m good,” Allen said.

I shook my head and started in on my salad, finding it difficult to swallow.

I watched a young blonde woman in a red Slick Rock T-shirt over a white thermal walk behind the far end of the bar and make drinks as she chatted with two men sitting at the counter. She wore a gold band on her left hand. If the useful life of a wedding vow were graphed, I’d guess she’d be at the beginning, as yet unaware of what “till death” really meant. I was so far at the other end the chart; she probably couldn’t even see me. She laughed at something one of the men said, the sound of her laughter carrying over the growing noise of the bar like the sound of birds over the train. She hefted the tray of drinks to her shoulder as she walked away.

I blinked. And blinked again, trying to clear my eyes.

“Holly,” Allen asked quietly, “you need another napkin?”

“I’m okay.” I gave Allen a tight grin, “Don’t really have the right to cry, seeing as I’m the reason he’s gone.”

He didn’t smile back.

“How d’you figure?” he asked.

“I didn’t look.” I took a deep breath. “He was diagnosed about a year after we married. He found me when he did so he’d have someone to look, to catch it in time. But I didn’t look. Not in time.”

I hadn’t told anyone else this. I don’t know why I told this stranger at a bar.

Allen stared at me for a moment, probably processing what I’d said, wondering if he should move to a different seat. He took a slow drink of his beer with his eyes still on me over the glass.

Then he said, "Seems to me you might be paying on a debt you don't owe."

I looked away. Maybe I should move.

He meant well, like Mrs. Dalkins, but he didn't know.

He didn't know Jim's laugh to miss it. He didn't watch as the morphine made Jim's face go slack, not able to look at me, barely able to pull a breath. And he didn't hear the last one pulled.

I shifted lettuce around on my plate.

"How'd your mom, I mean, what happened?" I asked.

He looked over my face as though verifying something before grinning and saying, "Now, I knew you southerners talked slow, but I didn't realize you thought slow, too."

"How's that?"

"Girl, I'm sixty-five. She died because her worn-out eighty-three-year-old ticker finally stopped ticking."

"Oh." I said before taking a long drink, doing the math. His mom was twenty when she'd had him. He was about ten years older than Mrs. Dalkins who was about ten years older than me.

"Yeah. But it didn't make it any easier, seeing her in that church." He paused for a drink. "My dad lost his shit when the pastor's daughter started singing Ma's favorite hymn. Lord, I nearly lost it when Ma's blue-haired posse started singing along, sounding like an uninvited chorus of old-lady angels. But what got me was seeing her empty body up there. And knowing I'd be in that church again, either sitting in that pew for my dad or my sister or stretched out in the casket at the front. Someone singing another favorite song."

We sat in silence for a bit, drinking beer, until I said, "Least you had her for so long. Jim was gone before our fourth wedding anniversary."

He lifted his beer, pointing at me with his glass. “Listen,” he said before taking another drink, “when you get a gift, you don’t bitch about how long you got it. You be grateful you got it.”

I looked back at my almost empty glass, picked it up, swirled the contents in the bottom, trying to remember the last time I’d been reprimanded like that. Probably never – my parents hadn’t cussed, ever, and Jim hid any censure in humor. I’m not sure why, but this scolding made me smile.

“So, Holly,” Allen said, “Why’d you choose Montana?”

I finished off my beer and said, “A woman I worked with once said Montana is the safest place to live – something about nuclear plants, sea level rise, and seismic activity – said the only place safer was North Dakota, but no one wants to live there.”

Allen chuckled and tilted his glass in a small salute before finishing his beer.

“But, really,” I continued, speaking to the big picture window where the snow fell heavily, “Montana is mostly empty. I figured it was a good place to go to be alone.”

When he didn’t respond, I turned and smiled at Allen, “And yet here I sit, in a busy bar, chatting up a local.”

Allen just looked at me, his face covered in all that hair, hard to read.

I pushed my plate and empty glass away from me, “You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

“Same as everyone else.”

I grinned at him, “You think everyone thinks I’m crazy?”

He smiled, “You know what I mean.”

He reached for my wrist and pulled my arm closer. He inspected the top of my hand, pushed my shirtsleeve up and inspected the top of my forearm. He turned my arm over to inspect the other side.

He released me, looked me dead on, and said, "You're all right, girl."

He must've seen something I couldn't yet, but I believed then that I would be all right. Maybe it was Allen. Maybe it was just time. Whatever it was, I knew I needed to get to a grocery store. It was my turn to make Mrs. Dalkins breakfast.

Allen swiveled away from me and motioned down the bar, signaling Ken with two fingers pointed at his empty glass. It seemed Allen and I were having another beer, so the grocery store would have to wait.

I rested my elbows on the bar, my chin on my hands, and watched the snow fall in fat flakes through the big window facing Main Street. I looked for birds outside, knowing they were there, making noise.

I DIE GOOD

As soon as I heard the gunshot with my one good ear, I knew Ben had pulled the trigger. I hadn't known his plan to eat that gun, but in that moment, I knew my brother had chosen to get off this ride. Another soldier winning the battle, but losing the war, or some shit like that.

I ran down the hall to his room. I didn't want to look, but I had to. The splatter of blood and bits of skin and bone were thick on the wall above his bed. At first I was pissed: he did that while I was there, in the place he'd rented to help me, his brother, while I got my shit together.

And then the nausea took over. I fought back both feelings, knowing grief would try to get me too. I reached for his wrist to find a pulse.

Instead, I found in his hand a rock he'd brought home from his last tour. It was gray and rusty, bits of concrete and metal. He'd picked it up in Kabul after responding to an explosion about a year before his last tour ended. He didn't tell me much about that day, why he carried that rock, only that three soldiers died along with a handful of civilians. Carrying it around with him told me enough. I pocketed the rock and turned away from his body, forcing myself to stay calm.

Ben was born ten months before me. Irish twins, our mother used to say. He had joined the Army to make Dad proud and to serve our country. I'd joined because he had. After a female suicide bomber blew my ass home, the guys at Walter Reed had all worried about my mental state, worried I'd be the one to check out early, but somehow I'd let the blood and gore from my tours wash from my body and mind. I wasn't sure Ben had ever really recovered from our mom or dad's deaths, and maybe every day in the Kush just pushed him further over the edge. I

should've seen it, should've caught on, but I'd let myself believe he was solid, the one who maintained perpetual motion while the rest of us sputtered and faltered and tripped over life's fucking roadblocks.

I didn't have it in me to deal with the circus of police and onlookers who would soon gather, so I searched Ben's closet for a backpack to get my shit and get out. I probably should've kept my Army-issued rucksack, but, no longer active duty, I didn't feel right carrying it.

In Ben's closet were random packs and ski gear – goggles, gloves, hand warmers and hats. He'd said that when he got back stateside we should go on a boys trip to Colorado, re-live our youth on the slopes. At the time, I was still living at Walter Reed. I couldn't afford a trip and wasn't sure I could even balance one-armed on skis.

Maybe a trip to the mountains would've kept him, grounded him in those memories before all the death and struggle, and stopped him from putting that gun in his mouth. But every man has his limits, and until that moment I hadn't known my brother's. Without him there looking out for me, I wasn't sure of my own.

I looked back toward his body, the gun on the bed beside what used to be his head, and then turned back to the closet. I removed the goggles from a pack and started to leave the left-handed gloves, but then thought the cops might find it strange, that it would raise more questions with answers that wouldn't change anything. I didn't need more questions. It'd be bad enough when I checked in later this week with the shrink; half a set of gloves left near Ben would just make it worse. The shrinks were good at making jacked up associations with shit that had no deeper meaning, and they'd all get raging psychology hard-ons trying to figure out what leaving gloves for a hand I no longer had next to my dead brother *meant*.

It was afternoon, a sunny fall day, but not knowing where I'd sleep that night nor when, or if, I'd return to Ben's place, that warm gear in his pack might prove useful. If I'd had my head about me, I would've grabbed a jacket, too. As it was, thinking to grab a backpack pushed the extent of my mental capacity. The fact that there were bits of gear in it was just dumb luck. Although, down the hall, I remembered my toothbrush. I'd learned after years of living with desert grit in every crevice, clean teeth were one of the things that kept me human, staving off the inner animal that threatened my sometimes barely civil existence.

Back in the room where I'd been staying, I shoved my clothes in Ben's pack. After his honorable discharge a few months ago, he'd moved near the hospital I'd been tethered to with red tape and monthly paychecks for the last year. I'd been surprised that he got out until he invited me to live with him while I was still in therapy and figuring out what to do with my life. He was there to let me lean on him like I'd always done. But now, like Mom and Dad, he was gone.

Walking out toward the living room, I imagined, maybe even hoped a little, that before he ate that barrel the last words my brother said were, "Ich sterbe gut."

I die good.

When I left Ben's place, I'd considered calling 911, but my good ear was still ringing from the crack of the shot – I wouldn't be able to hear much on a phone. Plus I figured someone else would've heard the gunshot and called already, and sure enough, as I sat on a bench across the street from the convenience store a couple of blocks away from Ben's, I saw some lit up cop cars and an ambulance heading in that direction.

Instead of stopping at the bench, I should've kept walking the ten or so miles to the hospital to check in, knowing my situation was fucked up. But I wasn't quite ready to go back to those dingy halls that smelled of disinfectant, to the men and women walking or wheeling over grimy linoleum, smiling and even laughing but blinking lifeless eyes. I needed time outside of it all before surrounding myself with the despair that haunts the soldiers there, haunts the staff paid to try and mold us back into regular people, albeit missing some standard-issue people parts. And a walk like that, with the havoc in my head from my brother, might feel too much like my patrol days in Iraq. I'm not crazy, but I know the mind can sometimes get screwy, and the last thing I needed to was flash on some other shitty memory. As it was, I had a precarious hold on calm – no need to court chaos.

I leaned my head back, closed my eyes, hummed the beginning of “Lara’s Theme,” and let the sun warm my face.

“Lara’s Theme” was Mom’s favorite – she hummed it all the time, even after she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer when we were all living in Germany, one of Dad’s last tours. She was diagnosed in the middle of my junior year and was dead before I graduated. Ben had come back to stay with us for a while, getting leave from his commander to help Dad and me. That was how Ben was programmed: anytime he was needed, he was there, just like Mom until she wasn’t, and Dad until he wasn’t either. I was programmed to stay strong, not show emotion, which I thought made me a good son and definitely made me a good soldier. So when our German neighbors visited after we returned from burying Mom in the States, with their broken English and my limited German, we created a jumble of words that didn’t make a lot of sense. I tried to explain that Mom had lived a good life, that she didn’t suffer a lot in death, and that we should all hope for the same. I ended up saying, among other poorly constructed German

phrases, “Ich sterbe gut.” Ben told me later that I’d said, “I die good,” which caused the neighbors take Ben aside, make him promise to keep an eye on me. It wasn’t what I’d meant to say, but it became part of our language, ending phone calls with “Ich sterbe gut” the way others might say, “I love you.” After a while, I’m not sure either of us thought of what the actual words meant, just that they were ours.

I saw the sun’s brightness through my closed eyelids. Birds fought to be heard over vehicles and distant train whistles, not stopping their singing to recognize a moment of silence for my brother’s death. If birds were to do that or even if people were to do that, recognize a moment of silence for each death, the world would be ghostly quiet. Sitting alone, on a bench, in a place I didn’t choose, having lost my mom to ovarian cancer and my dad to melanoma, I was glad cancer didn’t get a chance to kill Ben, too. I didn’t know how I’d die, but it wouldn’t be cancer. I’d die better than that, just like Ben. I’d die good.

I opened my eyes when a homeless man, at least he looked homeless, sat next to me on the bench. He smelled of piss and booze. He smelled alive.

“Hey, man,” he said to me, “hey.”

He was sitting on my left, so I rolled my head on the back of the bench to better hear him with my good ear.

“Hey, man, you got any smokes?” he asked.

I pulled a pack from my pocket, set them on my leg, opened the lid and pulled out my second to last cigarette for him. I bought only hard packs anymore because they were easier to negotiate one-handed. I offered him a light.

“Thanks” He inhaled. “You got any cash? My car broke down, and I’m trying to get a bus and—”

I cut him off. “How about this? I give you a few bucks, you do whatever you want with it, but you do it not on this bench?”

“Yeah, man. Cool.”

After taking the crumpled bills I’d pulled from my front pocket, he walked over to the convenience store, talked for a moment with another homeless looking man who was hanging with a scrawny brown mutt near the entrance. I closed my eyes, rested my head on the back of the bench again, and waited as the man’s smell dissipated.

I’d learned in school that smell is made from particles getting lodged in your nose somewhere, essentially the air carrying bits of whatever it was into your body, like perfume or shit or lasagna. It fits into little slots, like that kids’ game Perfection with all the different sized shapes, identifying to your brain what it was. I pushed deep breaths out through my nose to shed the residual scent of iron mixed with gunpowder. What I smelled were bits of my brother that had been carried into my nasal cavity, and once my brain registered that, it immediately sent a signal to my body to retch. The contents of my stomach shot out my nose and mouth onto the ground in front of me. Luckily I’d put the backpack beside me on the bench and not at my feet. I wiped my mouth and nose with the back of my hand, spitting out what I could and swallowing what was left, glad for the cleansing burning in my nose and throat.

I walked a few feet away to another bench, sat and looked around. Even with my brother taking his own life, I could still appreciate the cooling breeze that moved through my slightly grown out buzz cut, the pleasing bounce in the two female bodies jogging by across the street, the sweet sugary scent of donuts from the diner nearby. I’d figured out long ago that death doesn’t negate beauty, because if it did there’d be no beauty.

That didn't mean I wouldn't need time. Time to sort through Ben's death which would haunt me more than what I'd seen on duty and more than my mother's relatively gentle death. I'd need time to get my head right, and not just because I'd never thought of Ben as someone who could actually die but also because of the striking mess he made when he did.

My first experience with a messy death was in Baghdad when my partner, Pink, had his neck shot out. Pink was a talker, often mixing in French to show off that he was bilingual. He'd been telling me about the letters he'd received from his girl back home in Syracuse.

"She's a writer, trying to get into the whole erotica thing." He went on about her literary influences while an emaciated dog caught my eye as it stood from behind a pile of bricks and sand. Its beige coat was mostly worn off with mange, its body barely distinguishable in the muted colors of broken buildings and the empty gutted path considered a road.

"Sounds good, man, feel free to share that shit," I said while looking over the burnt-out buildings surrounding us. The dog stretched, looked over at me and my babbling partner, moved in a slow circle and settled back down behind the rubble.

"Not gonna happen, Franklin. You can buy it when it's published, just like everyone else."

I don't think Pink even noticed the dog. I'm not sure he understood what it meant to patrol – maybe he would have if I'd said it in French.

"So she wrote about these hot girls who got lost hiking. Of course, it's already pretty steamy with their sweaty, nubile bodies –."

"This reader would definitely be intrigued," I said as I stepped around a rusty mangled motorcycle frame.

“Anyway, it was cool because during the story they had to kill to survive, like, kill animals, and some crazy man, and in between the killings, the girls, you know, comforted each other. Jesus it was hot. And she called it ‘La Petite Mort,’ you know, the little deaths, which I thought was really clever and –”

“Wait, what?” I hadn’t meant to ask, but I couldn’t see how death and erotica were connected.

“You know, the little deaths? French for orgasm?” He continued on about some plot bullshit.

I didn’t understand why the French would use that phrase for something so life-affirming as an orgasm which, at the time, was one of the few things for me that hadn’t been jacked up by death.

We passed a couple of burned out truck shells, remnants of IEDs based on the shape of the blasted out metal. Sand piles had formed around the wheel rims and bodies of the vehicles where they rested on the ground. Looked like it had been there for years, but the way sand moved around here, it could’ve been just days earlier. I couldn’t smell sulphur or the leftover fumes from burned rubber or flesh, so I figured the incident that took out these trucks couldn’t have been too recent.

He kept on talking, and I scanned the road to our left, over the building there, and saw a small flash of reflected light in a broken out window.

I yelled, “Get down,” and moved behind the vehicle wreckage for cover.

Pink just looked at me, dumb and smug, even as the bullet ripped through his neck. He fell toward me, gurgling as air and blood escaped the new hole just under his jaw.

Reaching low beside me to pull his body behind the vehicle, I called for support, hoping the Humvees and other patrolmen were close behind. Positioning myself in the direction of the gunshot, I found a spot on the rusted metal to rest my rifle. Those dumb asses hadn't figured out that the weapons we'd probably sold them years ago didn't come with the anti-glare coating on their scopes, and I hoped they never did figure it out. I saw the flash of light again, relaxed my grip on my rifle and gently squeezed the trigger. A body lifted from the window's edge and fell backwards, and for a moment, I felt pride. Then I felt the familiar nausea brought on by the adrenalin and this time by the sight of my partner's neck blown out. Swallowing hard, with my bare hands I worked to stanch Pink's blood. But the fool at my feet was motionless, no amount of pressure would bring him back. The pool of blood around us increased in size, the bright red mixing with his short hair, splattered on his face with his freckles, the scent of pennies and firecrackers mixing in the air. The big death was not even close to erotic.

I looked toward the dog who looked up at me from behind the debris. Even it had the sense to stay out of sight through the commotion. Maybe having limited or even no language skills was actually a lifesaver in this fucking sandbox.

When I got back to our camp that day, I found the letters with the stories his girl had sent him while the guys packed his belongings, and Pink had been right: it was pretty steamy. I died many little deaths reading them.

At some point, I sent them to Ben, who was well into his second assignment in Afghanistan at the time. He gave me grief when we skyped after he'd read through it all.

“What kind of asshole takes a dead man's letters?” he asked.

I said, “A living one. Admit it, you're glad I did.”

He laughed and conceded it was good and said his buddy, Griff, one of the three soldiers who later died in that explosion in Kabul, suggested I get in touch with the young lady to request additional reading material, you know, for the troops.

I shook my head and said, "Tell him every asshole has his limits."

By then, we'd sent Pink's body home in a box. I never saw that dog again, as far as I knew. Could've been one of the carcasses I ran across along the way, but I liked to think that dog survived, found some kid to take him in, and he died of old age on a soft bed with a full belly. It was bullshit, but that's what I liked to think.

I didn't notice when the woman sat down next to me until she nudged my shoulder and said, "Hey, mister, you can't sleep here. You gotta wake up, man."

My head was resting on the back of the bench where I'd been dozing. The sky had turned from bright blue to muted orange. Stretching my neck, I looked over the woman, taking in her shallow eyes, her dark black skin, and her sunken lips resting in places where I'm guessing some of her teeth used to be.

This lady, shaking with her need, had snuck up on me in almost broad daylight, and I'd slept right through it. That's the sort of behavior that would get a man killed in the desert.

The woman spoke again. "Honey, you want to party with me?"

She traced a wobbly figure eight on the side of my thigh with her index finger. Based on the tremors in her body, I could tell she had gone too long without a drink or a hit or whatever she did. Unfortunately for her I had no interest in any little deaths at the moment.

She had on a dingy grey sweatshirt and jeans, but she also wore a raccoon stole around her neck, its bead-black eyes staring down into her lap. I reached out to pet the head of it; the brown-red hair was mostly worn away, revealing the pale skin below.

“This is Petey,” she said, looking down at the dead creature. “I got him from my grandmother in ’82 right before she died.” She brushed his fur, running her skinny ashy hand over mine as she moved up the pelt toward her neck. “Nana always wore him on Sundays to church. She said it was a day to celebrate and wear your best, but I don’t much like going to church, and I figure every day you’re alive is a day to celebrate, right, honey?”

She stopped petting the pelt and looked over at me for affirmation.

So I said, “I don’t know about all that, but I’m guessing Petey was none too happy about how it shook out.”

We grinned at each other. She put her hand out to me.

“I’m Nyla, baby. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

I took her shaking hand in mine.

“Franklin. The pleasure is mine, Nyla-baby.”

She laughed. Her voice reminded me of Billie Holiday, and I asked her if she ever sang.

“Nah, baby. But I got other talents, you know.”

“I’m sure. Any chance you’d sing me a song?”

“Any chance you’d buy a lady a drink?”

We walked past the dried stain of bile I’d left earlier in the day and across the street to the convenience store. With a bank card, I bought her two forties, a big bag of chips for us to share and a pack of smokes for me. As long as I kept checking in regularly with the local Army hospital, I’d keep getting money deposited in my bank account. I didn’t figure the scars and

gashes on the left side of my body were really worth a lifetime of monthly deposits and medical care, but the ear and the arm and five years of my life left in that fucking sand, well, that was a pretty fair trade. Although with my brother gone now, I had to wonder if they'd want to start seeing me more often. I wasn't ready to make that deal, but lucky for me they could barely keep up with their caseloads as it was.

Nyla and I wandered over to a park by the railroad tracks out behind the neighborhood and settled on a bit of grass partially shaded by an overgrown bush. She seemed to know the area, and by the greetings she had from some of the others lounging in the grass and around the perimeter, she was known. Nyla opened a forty and took a long drink. Her shaking didn't stop, but relief was clearly not far away – located about halfway down the bottle if I had to guess. I lit a smoke, crumbled the empty pack and shoved it in the bag. I leaned back onto my good elbow and the stub and looked up at the darkening sky. A clear evening, perfect for sleeping outside.

“All right, Nyla, sing me a song,” I said as I lay all the way back into the grass, rolling toward her with half an arm pulled up under where my ear used to be and the other arm holding the cigarette in front of my face.

She laughed nervously, cleared her throat, and said, “Really, honey, you don't want to hear me sing. That's not exactly my thing.”

Her hand moved up my thigh. Putting my cigarette in my mouth, I reached down to stop her hand's ascent – big death all too fresh in my mind for anything petite. Although honestly, I hadn't had any desire to be with a woman since I'd seen the one with red wires and C4 corseted around her before everything around me went black.

Holding my smoke in my mouth, I said between my teeth, “Nyla-baby, I just want to hear a song.” I closed my eyes and rolled onto my back, bringing her hand to my chest. “Just sing me a song, please.”

“Any special requests?”

I could barely hear her as a train whistle sounded and the noise of the approaching wheels grew louder. “Lady’s choice.”

She sang “Summertime,” starting out low and hesitant. Maybe the noise of the train gave her confidence because she got louder as she moved through the song. She wasn’t great, but it still sounded good to me. When she finished, I asked for another, and she sang “A Fine Romance.” Her Nana must’ve had quite an influence on her.

At that moment, I wanted to hear her story and tell her mine. I wanted to tell her that my dad thought I’d be the one, not my brother, to put a bullet in my brain after all the shit I’d seen and signed up for again and again. Just like our German neighbors had, Dad told Ben to keep an eye on me, just before Dad lost his own battle with cancer, and not long after I’d walked into a room behind four other soldiers where that woman was rigged with explosives, their bodies saving my life. Ben had always been the strong one, the sane one, the one you could count on. In the end though, it turned out he was more fucked up than me. The shit he saw while wearing fatigues was more than he could take; it was more than most people could take. I guess I was lucky that somehow the particles in my head allowed that shit to pass through my eyes, through my nose and ears and sometimes even through my mouth, and on its way to my brain it turned into something I could live with.

Strange as it was to call my situation lucky, I knew it was by the stranger singing me a song in an open field with the sun going down, without the sound of constant gunfire and the smell of burnt air following me around.

I looked up at a man standing over Nyla and me. His clothes were stained, and he smelled like ass and old beer.

“Nyla, what the fuck you doing?” He nodded at me while looking at her. Though it was getting dark, but I could see enough to know I didn’t like this motherfucker.

“Paulie, baby, I’m just singing a song.”

Paulie snorted at her and said, “How ‘bout you come on. You and me – we got some shit needs done. You wasting time here.”

I shifted up a bit on my stub and said, “Paulie, how ‘bout you shut the fuck up and keep walking?”

I reached down and fingered the rock in my pocket, thinking that a rock in a fist might make a hard punch harder. Even with only one arm, I could still take Paulie’s skinny ass down. I guess he knew it too because he walked.

“I hope that’s ok, Nyla. I wasn’t quite ready to call it a night.”

She looked at me for a beat and then started singing “Ain’t Nobody’s Business” a little too loudly, grinning as big as she could, showing all the spaces where teeth used to be. I had to smile back, my grin just as big as hers.

I knew it wasn’t safe to sleep out here in the open, but with Nyla singing and the train going by, I couldn’t help but lie back and close my eyes. I didn’t know where I would hole up, but I wasn’t ready to go back and be alone, to deal with the death of my brother. Plus there’d

probably be a lot of yellow tape around his house, a lot of uniforms moving in and out and maybe even some media jackasses.

Sometimes, I admit, I got angry, and I'd think maybe the trade I made, that my father and brother made, wasn't worth it. But, as the noise of the last car on the train passing by pulled my mind back from the foam of sleep, and Nyla's voice softened as she sang, I couldn't help but smile and think it was, it had to be. I wished I could have helped Ben see it the same, but for him, it was the living he couldn't do well. He'd tried to hide it, but it was there if I let myself look. I wondered if those fuckers at Walter Reed saw it. But I also wondered how many of them battled their own demons every day, barely staying one step ahead of the wave of anger and despair that would drown you if you let it.

Nyla settled down beside me, both her forties empty. She rolled up to my side, using my left arm stub as a head rest.

"Light me a smoke, baby," she said.

I opened the pack, shook it, and pulled out two cigarettes with my teeth. Fumbling in my pocket I found the lighter and lit both. I handed one to her. We lay there as the light left the sky.

If I died at this moment, with the sound of a woman singing and the low laughter of men around me, I'd die good. But today was Ben's day.

Nyla softly began a tune I didn't recognize. I took another drag and blew the smoke slowly out above me. I could see the shadows of a couple of men sitting at the edge of the park, backs against the trunks of trees. Their only movement traced by the slow drift of the lit cigarette tips brightening at their mouths and fading when lowered to their laps.

I wondered at this hidden community thriving in the shadows of the city. I wondered how many men and women walked out in the open like zombies or ticking time bombs, some with the

smell of pennies and firecrackers forever lodged in their nasal cavities. I wondered how many soldiers and civilians were still getting their rocks off on a war fought for a sometimes fucked-up version of freedom. About if the many so-called regular people complaining about gas prices and shitty calls on a football field realized the trades made by people like the weirdo who wandered the street in front of their church on soup kitchen day and slept in the field just outside their backyards. And with Nyla taking a long drag off her cigarette beside me and the voices of men nearby, I wondered how I could feel such a sense of connection to all of this, such joy to be a part of such a broken thing.

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