

# Bottle Trees

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For Paige, my oldest sister, most frequent rival, consistent critic, steadfast supporter, and oldest friend.

And for Mona, in return for fast friendship and late-night sci-fi marathons.

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# Introduction: A Conceit

During my last semester as an undergraduate, I took a class called “Creative Musicianship.” Mark Kirschenmann, one of the two instructors for the course, focused particularly upon the “creative” part of the course description. Several sessions of the lab section consisted of him showing the class portions of online lectures about creativity (Elizabeth Gilbert’s TED video is certainly worth a look), talking to us about his own creative challenges – such as a course he took as a college student which required him to compose a new piece each week – and urging the class to discuss our own methods and difficulties. Though I entered the course hoping to get more of a grasp on musical creation methods, I ended up learning a lot about creativity in general instead. In the end, I think this was more valuable. Thank you, Mark.

In listening to classmates discuss songs that sprang from the ether nearly fully-written, hearing one student explain that the night before our composition was due, he deleted all of his work from the week in order to begin anew, in having to twist and rewrite and rewrite my own pieces in order to get them into something resembling finished condition, I discovered that the process of making something new is rarely exactly the same from project to project, much less from person to person. Further, I discovered that making music is, for me, very similar to the process of making new stories. Sometimes new stories, ideas, or melodies flow from my head to my screen (or staff) with almost no effort. Sometimes it takes days, weeks, or even years for an idea to

mature. And sometimes I will spend days furious at myself for apparently being unable to write more than a few sentences at a time.

This process creates a story behind each story. Neil Gaiman often features stories-within-stories, a type of intertext that I have always found fascinating. I remember as a child watching a cartoon short about the storyteller who won the princess's hand by telling her father a story with no ending (you know the one: "And then another ant came and took out another piece of wheat. . ."). And as the inter-stories, the backstory of creation, have been such an integral part of my own experience, I will at this point shamelessly mimic Gaiman himself. Each story has a story, which in turn I hope will make each of my stories a little deeper. Or not. Honestly, you could skip this introduction entirely and I don't believe the stories would suffer for it. My apologies if you choose to do so now, for making you first trudge through a page and half of my rambling.

"Gingerbread" – this is one of those stories that I wrote very quickly. It is shorter than my pieces usually are, and written in a kind of distracted state of mind: earlier that day I had deleted most of another idea that I decided wouldn't work. Is it about anything in particular? Perhaps not. Perhaps it is merely about the need to keep busy, to make *something* even if it isn't what you really wanted to make at the time.

"Lasting" – I based this story on another short story I wrote while in high school. I still have the original somewhere, and honestly it's pretty terrible, but it was the most advanced piece of prose I'd created at that point. It took me this long to salvage the idea, and I almost didn't include it at all, largely because I dislike remembering the experiences that inspired it. I keep it now because I have to admit that sometimes even horrible people and events can create good ideas.

“Horseplay” – This was a challenge to write, as I usually make my narrators a little bit more self-aware. The bits about horses are all true.

“Mag” – This story is a something of an artefact. Initially I planned for this project to consist entirely of realistic fiction based on mythological concepts. This did not pan out, but the mythic trend in this story is visible to anyone who knows about Odin and his two ravens, Hugin and Munin, Thought and Memory. In *Grimnismol*, Odin frets about sending these two creatures out as his scouts. “For Hugin I fear/ lest he come not home, But for Munin my care is more.” (stanza 20, Bellows translation). In Nordic stories, Thought is worthless without the context Memory provides. Though the raven is transformed into a crow in this story, I leave it to the readers to decide which one she is.

“Compulsion” – a companion to “Mag,” though “Compulsion” was actually written first. I suppose it too reflects on the importance of memory and thought.

“Storm” – Another story about a soldier, this one a veteran. “Soldier stories” make up a large portion of my portfolio, which I guess isn’t that surprising. Real life creates plot, and this country has been at war since I was ten years old. Growing up in a small town with very limited resources and even fewer opportunities, I saw several friends join the military as soon as they graduated high school. Too few went on to successful careers in the field. Most just seemed to get more lost than they’d been before. The change in themselves was difficult enough, but I had one friend in particular who discovered that his old friends and loved ones could not relate to him anymore. He’d lost a part of himself, and also his old support network.

“Clock” – I couldn’t write this piece until I made the conscious decision to give the narrator difficulties with her attention span. It also was part of a self-imposed

challenge to write a piece that involved a polyamorous system – i.e., a sexually open relationship among multiple people – that did not provide the main source of conflict in the story itself. I think this is the closest thing to a happy, healthy relationship that I have included in this collection. Make of that what you will.

“Doll” – a prequel story that necessitated a rewrite of the previously-written sequel. I did not realize that it was about a character mentioned in “Bottle Tree” until I finished it, and then I had to change both stories slightly to solidify the connection.

“Bottle Tree” – Bottle trees do exist, though their origins and purpose will vary from person to person. Sometimes they may not even be trees. This is another piece of mythological fiction, as the narrator is herself well aware.

“Cellar Wine” – Networks between friends often seem rather fragile. I have most of the friends I do today because someone I met while moving into my dorm freshman year thought I was physically attractive and decided I was interesting enough to meet *his* friends. Connections are intangible things, and perhaps can linger even when those who forged them are no longer present.

“Nan” – My longest completed piece to date. This underwent a terrifying number of drafts before it came to its eventual conclusion, which isn’t even really a conclusion. It started after a chance encounter with a friend of a friend, a gentleman of East Asian descent who was adopted into a Jewish family, which honestly still sounds like the setup of a potentially-tasteless joke. He turned it into one, at least, which made the idea stick with me for some time. My own experiences with Japanese language and culture and my upbringing as a Jew in a mixed family living in an isolated area of rural Michigan eventually combined with the initial grain of an idea, and “Nan” was the final result.

These stories are not the sum of my experiences, nor a record of them. They are, however, born of ideas that stuck to me, or surrounded me, or grew on me like parasitic moss. Creativity is often portrayed as stemming from an “other,” such as a muse or a daemon (the term favored by Elizabeth Gilbert). Writing is at least somewhat different from story to story for me; however, it is always a way to shed myself of excess ideas and images.



# Gingerbread

I'd wonder how I got myself into this, but I know it's the same as ever. We need another eight dozen cookies and some sauerkraut for the dinner – and it wasn't even *my* church, it was Alice's, and she'd come over to ask me because she'd already done a double-share of rolls for the Christmas dinner, and she even explained that the sauerkraut was just something the church always had, and here was the recipe, and thank you so much, and I was left agreeing to take care of it without ever having said anything.

I ran my wrist under the tap, glaring at the searing red line the baking sheet (now on the floor with two dozen gingerbread men) had left on winter-white skin. Like that could somehow make it better. Stupid, stupid, stupid. And the whole apartment smells of burning sugar and boiling cabbage. Even the cat took refuge under the bed a couple hours ago. I'd have to ask Jamie to fish her out – no, wait.

Shit. *Shit*. He still had a pair of boots by the door, but I knew him and he'd buy a new pair even though we'd just gotten those ones a few months ago and the soles weren't even scuffed yet, because he'd left. He wouldn't be coming back, not for a pair of shoes. It's amazing the holes a person can leave, gaps in the bookshelf where entire series had been removed, a dozen empty slots in the DVD rack, spaces in the cupboards where his dishes had been and weren't anymore, and I kept looking at the empty hook by the door

where he used to hang that awful battered Columbia jacket with the patches he'd sewn onto the elbows, and on one, a patch on a patch, he'd had it that long, and I kept wondering when he was coming home and then remembering that Alice had volunteered me just to keep me busy, like she was afraid that without anything to do I'd just be sitting in the dark crying.

Well, Alice, I'm plenty busy, and look, no tears, just gritted teeth and a blister rising on my arm, and another batch of dough to mix up because I had to go and dump it all on the floor.

I plucked a gingerbread man off the linoleum. He was faceless like they all were because you don't put the icing on until after they're cooled, and even though I'd just swept there was a long dark cat hair clinging to his one remaining arm. The other arm and one and a half legs were missing, had broken off in the fall and suddenly I'm glad its face is a perfect blank, because if that little gingerbread head had been smiling at me even after I shattered most of its limbs I might have lost it completely.

I dropped the cookie in the cat's dish and gathered the rest into a little macabre pastry pile, dumping the heap of mismatched limbs and empty heads into the trash. The pan was cool now, resting in the sink where I'd left it while running water over the burn on my arm, and I started washing it, trying to calculate hours in my head. Twenty minutes to mix the dough and an hour and a half to chill, and I still needed to pick up Jamie's dry cleaning because I had the ticket, and drop it off at his brother's, another hour there because they always make you wait, as though hoping you'll stain your silk shirt just waiting there and give them more to do, like that could happen, so I'd have to factor in a couple hours for that with the travel, and the sauerkraut was boiling over and I just

don't have time for any of this. Hands still dripping suds, I jerked the pot off the lit burner, ignoring the boiling water seething over my fingers (just more burns and now I'm almost used to it), the car is making that clackety sound again and the mechanic says he has no idea what it is anymore, we've fixed almost everything and now there might just not be a point, so I needed to drive out to the used lot off the old highway and see if they have any decent Christmas deals, though their New Year's deals might be better, Mom said, because they'll have almost given up on selling anything then.

Normally I'd ask Jamie to handle it, he doesn't know cars any better than me but people assume he does, he looks like that kind of guy I guess, burly and always a little grungy, with large hands with broken twisted nails (from soldering his sculptures, one of which is still sitting on the dining table, a crane with an angular head and tapered neck and outstretched whirling wings all in silver and I don't know what to do with it, it's beautiful and I want to break it into a dozen pieces at least, shatter it and use the pieces to make little gingerbread smiles to crack my teeth on later). And I know those hands, can feel them resting on my shoulders pulling me away from the damn kitchen and telling me to calm down, only they won't do that anymore he's got better things to do.

And I'm not helpless and I know this, but I sank into a chair and tried not to look at the crane that was a birthday gift last year like looking at it could break me instead and then Alice would come in the unlocked door and find me on the floor in a handful of pieces like the gingerbread men.

Not too unlike when I came home from work and Jamie was sitting on the couch, not doing anything at all just staring at the television – some cooking show we never watch except by accident when nothing else is on – and he said he'd been thinking and I

wondered about that, because the living room was full of boxes and I could see his jeans and suit jackets and chinos spilling out of the tops along with the cords of power tools like synthetic ivy, creeping out of the boxes and along the floor, and when I asked what was going on he just told me that I had to know, could I possibly think we were fooling anybody, and surely it would be best if we both moved on with our lives, he'd been preparing this for months, surely I couldn't honestly be surprised, and I just stared and watched him like that show we never watch as he loaded up his truck and drove off like he'd been planning to do for months while I was planning our fifth anniversary in a few weeks. I guess he'd forgotten.

There's a beetle crawling on the floor by my foot, one of those little Japanese-looking red and black ones with the curly antennae, and I stomp on it before remembering that I'd kicked off my slippers earlier and I feel the body of the bug crunch under my sock, feel the legs twitching as it dies, and I should have just left it anyway for the cat to chase, lord knows she could've used the exercise and she goes nuts over these things for some reason, even though she ignores mice completely, and then the phone rings and it's Mom. Her flight's been delayed again and she's going to take the bus back to my place, they're not flying anyone out because of a flood in Dallas or Baltimore or somewhere, and she'd need to stay another night, would that be okay? And I don't remember what I said or if I said anything at all, because as soon as she was gone I got another text from Alice, one of the usual church ladies had bailed out and would I mind terribly driving in two hours early to help set up the tables, it's for charity after all, the volunteer supper, and were the gingerbread men coming out okay?

Yeah, yeah. I type back. I'll be there.

# Lasting

The two of them slept in that day, by a full three hours. To be fair, they spent the last curled up in bed, still under covers, still wrapped together, half-awake and murmuring of nothing in particular to ears wanting only soft familiar noises. But the sun invades and the sun moves on, and eventually they got up, teasing each other in the shower with soap beards and quick kisses. He snatched the towel and ran back to the bedroom with it, leaving her, shivering and shouting, mock-angry as she attacked him with dripping hair and breasts goosebumped with cold. They dried off, passed the towel back and forth. He ran fingers and a comb through her tangled hair, and again they whispered words meaning nothing to anyone who wasn't them. And they dressed, not without hesitation. Bed was there still, promised warmth and silence and togetherness for a few hours more. But they left, locked the door behind them and lugged a backpack to the car.

The car refused to start at first, hemming and hawing like an emphysemic old man before hacking the last of the night's phlegm out and revving to an idle. He teased her about her old pile of junk. She told him that being self-deprecating wasn't productive, and they smiled and laughed. Old jokes, jokes they had told each other a hundred times and would miss. They knew the jokes too well to ever get tired of them. They drove with

inside hands interlinked, swore together at traffic. No stranger looking through the window would see anything extraordinary about a young man with an out-of-regulation face of stubble and a young woman with hair combed and lying against her neck like a yellow curtain.

There will be nothing unusual about these two for a while longer. Perhaps an anniversary, a few will think, looking on as the two of them rib each other over coffee at a café where the barista knew their names and had their order waiting. Perhaps it's her birthday, the businessman glancing over his paper will think, watching her suck the foam off the top of her cappuccino. And he will think no more of them that day, nor any other day.

They went to a mall next, half-running, weaving their way through crowds of parents toting young children too impatient and too eager to enjoy the last few days of summer underneath already-changing leaves to care about new school clothes. Harassed teenage boys dragged along with girlfriends or sisters, begged for opinions of shoes, tight jeans, short skirts. A few elderly mallwalkers sat on benches, picked at food court salads and gossiped, or quietly watched other people. They, too, saw nothing unusual, and some of them go there every day.

A pass into a store they both love, which is bright and airy, followed by one they both hate, which reeked of cologne and air freshener and was too dimly lit. In both, they took armloads of clothes into adjoining dressing rooms, stepped out with each outfit to size each other up, to ridicule, to compliment, it hardly mattered, a nod or smile or quick shake of the head and an echoing laugh. They bought little that day. A stop by the pet store, where eager puppies strained to lick her outstretched hand and seemed to smile

back at her, where kittens rolled about and napped while steadfastly ignoring the couple's curious glances. A snake dozed with unblinking eyes in her tank; a lizard's tracked the man's slow-moving finger outside his cage, and the two uncaged humans timed their exit with the moment the employees realized they had no intention of taking any of the animals away.

They drove next to a crumbling movie theater that catered to the college crowd, bought cheap tickets for dilapidated seats to see an outdated but highly-rated action flick. She was on edge as much as he is for each explosion, each outcry and punch and stab, and frequently reached for his arm. They had forgone popcorn in favor of a shared coke, and their hands touched far more often than either of them drank. The movie ended, the credits rolled, and they strolled out before the lights fully lit, her arm in his and both laughing over everything they could. Again, they were not noticed, and this would have been satisfying to both of them if either of them had had attention to spare to notice anyone else.

They walked into the basement arcade next door, and took turns feeding quarters into vintage games for a while. Together, they battled evil creatures with magic and sword until the quarters ran out. He remarked that she seems to get worse each time, and she replied that he is simply unfamiliar with the fine nuances of failure. They laughed again, and left, blinking as they emerged into the late afternoon daylight.

They had dinner at a cheap sushi bar they knew well enough to avoid the maguro. He struggled still with chopsticks, and she demonstrated several times with hers until he remembered enough to grasp his own food for at least the few seconds needed to get it to

his mouth. They fed each other boiled soybeans and drank far too much weak tea and left too large a tip.

Their last stop was a low, large building that branched off several times, long nearly-identical wings skirting the outdoor runways. People rushed in and out of the buildings, hauling children, hauling bags, hauling themselves. It wasn't a place anyone wanted to stay any longer than necessary. The car parked, he shouldered his bag and they walked very slowly through the parking structure maze down to the automatic double doors, still quietly talking. Words that mean nothing to anyone else. Words about everything that matters to them.

They walked together through check-in, smiled and chatted comfortably with the neat middle-aged woman who verified his ticket and wished him luck and safety. The bag checked, he had nothing to carry, and wrapped his arm around the girl's shoulder instead. For a moment, she does seem a girl, several years younger than she is, with wide brown eyes and long hair and a face that is, for just a few seconds, unsure and on the edge of tears, but it disappeared before anyone who didn't matter could notice, disappeared as the young man bent slightly to kiss her cheek before they entered the security line. As the last people ahead of him began to remove their shoes, he pulled her close and kissed her mouth, allowing it to linger a little longer than either of them could possibly need.

"Goodbye," he said simply.

"Be safe," she said, smiling at him again. "See you in six months." She hugged him, pressing her face sideways into his chest and inhaling deeply, and his lips rested softly in her hair before they parted again and he walked through the checkpoint without a backward glance. There was nothing more to say, nothing that had not been said fifty



times that day at every moment possible. She stepped quietly out of the line and walked alone back through the airport, rather quickly this time, in step with the pressing crowd of people looking for nothing but the exit.

She is in a hurry, now, without him, and no one will notice the difference at all. She gets into the car alone and drives back to her apartment. It is too early for bed, but she climbs in anyway and falls asleep quickly.

On the plane, he will not sleep, and instead will work his jaw and toy with the rosary in his pocket until the plane lands, and there everyone will know there is something wrong, but no one will care because in that land of blowing wind and scorching sun and frostbitten nights, nearly every young man has someone to pretend not to miss. And though it matters, they will pretend not to notice each other's absent stares in slow hours or the long looks at fraying photographs.

Even in dreams, she knows that she will sleep in again the following morning, though she has errands to run and work to do. Instead, she will call in sick, not bothering to fake a stuffy nose or a cough over the phone, and she will crawl back into bed and wait for the tears, muffling sobs with fistfuls of bedclothes so no one who does not matter will hear her crying through thin walls for a man who may not come home with a beating heart.

# Horseplay

It's hard to feel all that clever or important when you're lying flat on your back in a corral that only the extraordinarily polite or deluded would simply call "muddy," jaw clenched and face screwed up trying not to cry or scream and bloodied palms of both hands dripping that gross liquid clear stuff bad rope burns always leak. And of course that wasn't the worst of it, but the frustration that I couldn't just give up and go back inside; the clouds were already too heavy and gray to ignore and the air had that tinny electric bite to it that it gets just before big storms, and the burns were my own fault anyway. I knew better than to wrap the lead around my hands, especially with a horse like Abby, who took any excuse she could to spook and run and roll on her back in the dust when she knew it was time for the stable. And of course that was exactly what she'd done – one of the dogs sussed out a partridge from the brush at the corner of the pasture, and you'd never think it looking at the things but when they go up it's always in a veritable explosion of feathers and dust and effort, and for Abby that was reason enough to rear up, tossing her head to the limit of her neck. The end of the lead rope went with her and so did the skin on my hands, and it had been too long since I'd done something so stupid, and I simply couldn't keep my balance in the mud.

Every part of me wanted to give up and go back inside, shuck off my farm jacket and soaked jeans and jump into the shower. Let Abby stay out in the storm – serve her right for acting like a goddammed fool over birds she sees every day – but horses don't work like that, and of course there were dozens of reasons not to leave her out during a thunderstorm, not the least of which was precisely the fact that she spooked so easily and would probably barrel straight through the fence if thunder sounded a bit too close, nor the fact that she still had the (doubtless blood-spotted) lead rope dangling from her halter, and any second now would step on the free end. That's something else that terrifies some horses. Some figure out the issue right away and aren't bothered by the sudden limit to their movement. Mom's old sorrel was like that, would just lift her hoof, toss her head a little to make sure she was free, and go right along, but Abby's eyes would bulge and she'd pin her ears flat to her head and throw a proper fit until the lead rope, her halter, or her neck broke.

Of course, right then I wasn't thinking about any of that, but instead was fuming, because if I gave up just then and went inside, leaving Abby out to the storm, that meant she'd Won. And with how things had been lately, losing a game of patience to a horse wasn't something I could take.

I got the call somewhere around 3 am. I knew he'd be calling, so I'd waited up in the living room, curled up on the armchair with a cup of tea and my laptop. He'd promised to call me by midnight and hadn't answered my last few texts asking where he was and if everything was okay, so I picked up the phone fully intending to lay straight into him. But as soon as I heard his voice, I forgot about being angry – he sounded

breathless and a little hoarse, but it was still his voice, and my stomach still knotted up when he said my name. He was sorry he was so late, of course, but it was his best friend's birthday and of course I couldn't be so selfish as to want him to leave before the party was really over. He didn't say as much, but I could feel the reproach in his voice, and felt like a jerk for wanting him to blow off his friends for my sake.

"Sorry, babe," I said smiling into the phone and rubbing my eyes with my free hand. "I'll be right there to get you."

"Actually," Ted said, "I'm gonna go ahead and bum a ride off one of the guys. You can just go to sleep."

Oh. We wrapped the call up quickly and I went to bed feeling like somehow I should have seen that coming. I woke up when he flopped down in bed next to me, harsh whiskey and tobacco smells still clinging to his mouth and bare chest as he kissed me before falling face-first into the pillows. I asked if he was still good for the wedding tomorrow and got a nod and a muffled "yeah" in response. Good enough.

My alarm rang at eight and I rolled away from his warmth and out of bed, eyes still heavy and gritty from not quite enough sleep. I spent extra time in the shower just trying to wake up, and of course my hair didn't want to lay right, so by the time I was back in the room pulling on my stockings and the dress I'd bought for this months ago, it was almost half-past nine and Ted hadn't moved. I reached out and shook his shoulder gingerly. "Sweetie, you really need to get up."

"Another hour," he said, not really lifting his head out from the pillow. I chewed my lip. Mia was getting married up in Denver, a good hour-and-a-half drive from here, and I was supposed to be there by eleven-thirty.

“I really need to be there early,” I said quietly.

“I said give me another fucking hour.”

I backed out of the bedroom hurriedly. I’d give him half an hour, I thought, and he could get ready quickly and it’d be fine. The heel of my shoe snagged on the dress shirt he’d thrown to the floor when he got home last night, and I noticed a dark splotch on the collar. Perfect. I could take care of the stain to kill time quietly. I mean, I’d planned on making us a good breakfast, but the clattering of pans would just wake him up, and there really wasn’t any time left for that anyway. I took the shirt over to the sink and examined the stain – really more of a waxy burgundy smear. Lipstick?

Ted’d be able to explain, so I shrugged it off for now and attacked the spot with Dawn and cold water until the color faded.

“C’mere, girl,” I muttered, trying to force my shoulders to relax. “C’mon, Abby.”

You can’t just storm up to a horse if you’re angry. Horses are bigger and generally faster than people, so if they don’t want you to get near them, you won’t. Stomping at Abby would just make her more irritable.

The trick with horses is to make them think they want what you want. Failing that, you have to at least make them think you could force them into doing what you want them to do – it’s all attitude and mind games with horses. I toyed with the idea of getting an apple from the barrel in the barn, but you have to be careful with bribes. I didn’t want her thinking she’d get treats for misbehaving. It wasn’t raining yet, so no need to get desperate.

I tried to stroll as nonchalantly as possible in her general direction, approaching her from the side so I didn't startle her.

He stumbled out of the bedroom as I was finishing with the shirt. I glanced at the clock. Ten-thirty. I was going to be late at the very least.

"We've really gotta get moving," I said, draping the shirt over the back of one of the dining chairs. He shrugged.

"You expect me to hurry with no breakfast, woman?"

"I'd planned it, but you were so late getting up and I—"

"Geez. Just a joke, Amber."

I raised and lowered a shoulder. "I, uh. Cleaned off your shirt. There was make-up on it."

Ted opened the fridge and stared into it for a few seconds. "That's weird. Must have been from Issa. You know how huggy she gets. Hers must've smeared onto me at some point."

I nodded. I didn't really know how "huggy" Issa got, since I'd never met anyone from Ted's work except in passing when they dropped him off or I picked him up. But he'd mentioned her before.

He was still standing in front of the open fridge. "Sweetie, we really do need to get going..." I trailed off. "I'm supposed to be there in like an hour, and no way will we make it..."

"Then go without me," he snapped. "If this stupid wedding is that important to you. I don't care."

I looked back at the clock and bit my lip. “We RSVP’d for two,” I said, swallowing hard. “You promised you’d come.”

Ted crossed the kitchen, laid his hands on my shoulders, and kissed my forehead. “I know, I’ve been real busy lately. Just text me when you’re on your way home after the reception and I’ll make it up to you, okay? No need to get all uptight about it. Relax a little.”

I nodded, smiled a bit, and grabbed my purse and car keys off the table. “See you tonight.”

It took half an hour, another slip in the mud, and more than a few mumbled curses to coax Abby back into the barn. Of course, it had already started raining by that point, so when I finally was able to slog back into the house, I was not only muddy and gross, but soaked through.

I walked in through the basement. One corner was still set up as a playroom for my brothers and me – a dusty old brick of a television from back when flatscreens were still new, a Playstation with frayed wires, a rug with a cartoony cityscape printed on it in grossly faded neon colors. The sports bin was down there too, deflated basketballs and broken tennis racket topping the neglected pile.

Mom was over by the dryer, folding a set of sheets. “What happened to you?”

“Abby,” I muttered, shucking off my boots and leaving them to dry by the door. “Swear she’s gotten even worse.” I wanted nothing more than a hot shower.

“Don’t go upstairs like that! You’ll get mud all over everything. Here.” Mom tossed me an old faded green towel – the one we usually use to dry off the dogs after a

bath. I sniffed it suspiciously, making sure I could only smell Tide before I peeled off my socks, jeans and sweatshirt, dumping them in an unceremonious pile on the floor. My underwear and bra were damp, too, so I slipped them off too, shivering a little as my bare feet hit the concrete floor. I started to wrap the towel around myself for warmth, but Mom stopped me.

“What the hell is this?” She grabbed my right arm and pulled it away from my side, exposing my ribcage, still purpled with bruising that had just started going green and yellow at the edges.

“It’s fine, Mom,” I said, pulling away a little, covering myself with the towel and folding my arms over my chest. “I fell on the dresser a couple weeks ago. You know how slow I am to heal.”

Mom’s mouth twisted a little, forming a tiny network of channels in her skin. I’d never really thought of her as old, but moving back in with her and finding that she’d stopped dying her hair and was letting it grow in grizzled, well, I guess it made me notice these things. She didn’t say anything else, so I told her I’d shower and then start dinner, then scampered upstairs before she could change her mind about letting me go.

I mean, it’s not like I lied. I *did* fall against the dresser. And it was just all so confused, but I figure that’s okay, I mean, Ted didn’t hit me or anything even though we were fighting, he’d never out-and-out struck me on purpose. I guess a couple of times when I tried waking him up he’d sorta flail at me, and he’d caught me pretty good in the face a few times, but that’s not *hitting*, you can’t count that when he wasn’t even really awake, and I really should’ve known better by then. He’s awful in the mornings and hates oversleeping, but he hates being woken up even more.



I was really too late to the wedding to do much more than hand Mia her bouquet and apologize for being so late, but luckily she was so excited that all I had to deal with were a couple dirty looks from her two sisters. She and Rob had been dating since high school or something ridiculous like that, and it was a nice little wedding, but I don't remember too much of it because I kept having to duck out of the sanctuary to answer my buzzing phone.

Ted had started texting me on the drive over, and he gets upset if I ignore him for too long, so I'd pulled over once and told him I'd let him know when I got to the church, which I did, but he kept at it even after I told him the ceremony had started.

*i just cant believe u just left like that*

*I'm sorry but i was already so late :(*

*whatever, you coulda waited another fifteen minutes*

*you told me to go*

*whatever. just text me when ur on your way home*

By that time, the bride and groom had finished the vows, and I got back in just in time to watch them kiss – a slow lingering one that went on just long enough to be a little uncomfortable. They looked so happy, though.

I followed the line of cars to the community center down the road for the reception and sat at a table full of cousins I didn't really talk to anymore, occasionally answering questions about my brothers. Ben? Still doing his research up in Canada, something about arctic moss. Mike, well, he's Mike, down in Louisiana right now doing construction. About as far away as they could get from each other, really; I'm the only

one who hasn't left Colorado. I tried to dodge their questions about me. The whole family knew I'd been trying to save for med school, but it was expensive and Ted didn't really think it was a good idea. *You're too high-strung; it'd just stress you out even more. Keep your job at the bookstore instead.* He's probably right, but it's hard to explain just why sometimes. I know he's right.

"I couldn't handle the stress," I said finally, laughing a little, but then the band started up which saved me from having to say more, and the girls around the table dispersed to find their dates. I dug around in my bag, pretending I was trying to find my lip gloss so I didn't have to look at anyone for a minute. The table was empty, and everyone was on the dance floor, and suddenly I just wanted to be home. I glanced up. Mia and Rob were both dancing, Mia leaning heavily on his arms and giggling every few seconds. I thought about the open bar and the champagne – Mia had always been a lightweight. And they wouldn't notice if I slipped out early.

I pulled out my phone to tell Ted, but then tucked it away. I could surprise him, maybe pick up some tacos or something on the way home. He wasn't too much of a cook – neither am I, really, but he seriously burns water.

I don't really remember so well after the drive back home. I let myself in the apartment, and I could hear voices, soft voices, one of them Ted's, the voice he uses when he's alone with me and I'm not irritating him. I closed the door behind me quietly, and set down the take-out bag of Alfred's Tacos (two burritos, which are so hideously greasy that they leak straight through even three layers of take-out bags, and certainly later there would be a dark oily stain on the rug).

The voices were coming from the bedroom, and of course there's no real surprise about what I found there. Ted lying in bed with the blankets thrown over his stomach, bare chest and legs exposed, and another girl – my age, blondish, and I guess she was pretty, too, probably would've been prettier if her face hadn't frozen mid-word when she saw me standing there, leaving her mouth agape. Her lipstick was smeared, and I glanced over to the pillow, which now sported a matching maroon smudge. Maybe I asked what was going on. Maybe I screamed at Ted first, but it wasn't long before he and I were in the corner by the dresser, each screaming at the other and I don't even remember what we said, except when I called him an asshole, that did it, he lost it and shoved me. It wasn't a hard shove, but I was still in my heels, and couldn't stay up. I tripped and sprawled over a dresser drawer left half-open, and instantly he and the other girl were there, trying to unfold me from the floor, slapping my back to get me to stop retching from the pain. Funny, but it was the girl who said "Hey, sweetie, you okay? I'm sorry." Ted was a blubbering ball of stammered I-didn't-mean-to, but I didn't stay to talk anymore, just straightened up as much as I could and staggered back to the door, grabbed my purse, and walked back out to my car.

I drove back to Mom's, and moved in, and she was the one who went back to get my clothes, and that was the end of it.

I heard my cell ring from my room while I was still in the shower, and got back to a voicemail.

"Baby, please. I'm so sorry, please, please pick up."

I listened to this, and more, for about a minute, and hung up before he'd finished. All of my missed calls are from Ted.

And I wonder, and maybe he really is sorry, and my finger hesitates over the call button, it would really just be that easy, and then I remember Issa, and she knew I lived there too, there was no way not to know, and I wish I could be angry, it's okay to be angry at people, but I remember his voice and I can't.

He's probably right, and maybe I'll tell him so. I've pushed the button down halfway when the thunder rolls and the lights flicker, and somewhere far off I hear Abby whinnying, and maybe I can pretend that I don't want to hear his husky sweet voice for a little bit longer.

# Mag

“Come on. You need to get out of the house.”

“I’m fine.”

Lane folded her arms. “You haven’t gone further than the grocery store in over a year.”

I shrugged. “It’s quiet here. I like it.”

Lane cast a long look around the garage, lingering on the rusting four-wheeler, the jumbled tool bench that I never could quite get in order, the moth-eaten La-Z-Boys Hitch and I had gotten at a garage sale, and Mag’s open cage. Mag herself was somewhere up in the rafters, and periodically Lane’s head would jerk up towards her in a quick nervous sort of movement, like a sparrow watching a hawk.

Meg and Mag. Hitch’s joke, and he’d never stopped laughing over it. Little M and Littler M. I whistled, and Mag descended in a flurry of black feathers and dust, landing on my gloved hand. Lane ducked, though Mag hadn’t gone anywhere near her. A few years ago, if I’d done something like that, Lane would’ve shot me a dirty look and that would’ve been that, but now she just gave me a look so pathetic that I could practically feel a torrent of pity barreling out of her wide gray eyes.

I ignored Lane and stroked Mag's breast with my free left hand. She croaked, a sound something like gargling gravel.

"I shouldn't leave her for long. Something could happen."

Lane sighed and sank back down onto her chair, sending up a small puff of dust. "She's been fine for ages now. Even Hitch said so."

I raised and lowered one shoulder, eyes still on Mag. Satisfied that I didn't have a treat for her, the crow fluttered awkwardly to the tool bench, the four-wheeler, and then to her cage, making the journey in a series of frantic flapping leaps. She couldn't fly. She probably never would again. She tugged at the rope that Hitch had tied between her cage and the rafters to give her a little more freedom, as though hoping one end would come loose.

I glanced back at Lane. She was sitting bolt upright with her arms and legs held and tight close to her body. She'd always had problems with dirt, dust, sweat, any kind of mess. As long as I'd known her, and she ended up rooming with me my sophomore year, poor thing. I stared at my boots, which hadn't seen polish in ages and were stained with bird shit and mud, as was my jacket. When had I last washed these jeans? Couldn't remember. Sometimes it felt like I couldn't remember anything, and I left notes around the house reminding me to eat, reminding me that I needed groceries and needed to get dressed that day.

I never forgot Mag, though. She gets noisy and irritable whenever I'm even a few minutes late feeding her. I don't know how she tells time, but she knows. Maybe the radio I leave on some nights taught her. Crows are sociable birds. You never find one living alone for long in the wild, Hitch had told me. Or perhaps I'd only read it since.

Hitch was, had been, a veterinarian. He mostly worked out of the garage or the barn – large livestock and farm dogs, mostly, around here. Sometimes people'd bring him a cage full of hissing, drooling, wild-eyed cats, which would upon escape from the box tumble around the yard, scared and angry at everything and unable to keep their balance. And sometimes they brought him things like Mag.

One of the local kids – can't remember who – had brought her in, wrapped in his Carhartt jacket. She was too small to have been alone, too small, maybe, to keep up with the other birds when some of the other kids started throwing rocks at them in the school parking lot. Hitch had tried to explain to the boy, bending down and placing his hands on his knees so they could see eye-to-eye, that wild birds never did well in cages, and sometimes you have to let them go and hope for the best.

But the black bundle of feathers had squawked, a small painful noise, and a few minutes later she was sitting on his operating table, bad wing lying uselessly next to her as she buried her head in a pile of raw hamburger. Hitch never could stand the sounds animals make when they're hurting.

While he stroked Mag's feathers, he had me check the Internet for other vets. He was the only animal doctor for a good fifty miles. I called the six closest to us anyway, and none of them wanted anything to do with a wild bird. The local wildlife rehab – "local" meaning it was down the freeway some seventy miles – didn't open until over a year later, so Mitch pulled down some of his old anatomy books from college and rifled through them, checking every avian reference he could find. By then, I'd gotten offline to keep our phone line open and was tentatively tossing bits of bloody meat to the little broken bird on his table. She should have been terrified of us, being wild, but instead had

never been more than a little timid. Like somehow she knew what we were planning to do.

I used to handle the business side of Hitch's work, sending out bills and reporting the income to pay taxes. I was good at it, keeping everything straight, and Hitch almost never asked me for any more help than what I could give him sitting at the computer. But with Mag, he wanted someone to tip the light for him so he could see every splintered bone in her open wing after he put her under.

"Come on." Lane had gotten up and crossed the garage. She hesitated a moment, clenched her jaw, then grabbed the arm of my jacket. "Mag's fine. Let's go inside."

I stared at her hands. The filth and grease on my coat already rubbed off on her skin, leaving her reddened but pristine fingers marred with dirt. She pulled, and I followed, more out of shock than anything else. Lane hated getting dirty, used to clean our dorm twice daily top to bottom, went into paroxysms when I cut myself fixing a hinge and bled on our rug before I realized.

She opened the door, led me through the hall. It was still lined with cardboard boxes and old newspapers I'd never quite gotten to sorting through and throwing away. Somewhere in the mess was the last box of Hitch's clothes, winter flannel shirts I'd found the last time I tried to clean. Opening the box had been too much – the blues and reds and greens, worn at the elbows in all the same spots, and for a second I almost thought I smelled him, sweat and horses and a whiff of Mag – and I'd thrown the box at the wall, then ran back to the basement and grabbed as many other boxes as I could, Christmas ornaments and old hunting trophies and boxes of manuals for computers and phones we'd



long since thrown away, and piled them on top and around the box that still held a tiny bit of Hitch. And then I forgot it.

Lane swept a pile of magazines and graph paper covered in meaningless scribble off the couch, still keeping a grip on my arm with her free hand, and shoved me into a seat. It was almost laughable, really. She was six inches shorter and at least forty pounds lighter. I sat, dully registering the creak that the couch frame gave, louder than it ought to have been, and aware suddenly that there were lumps under the cushions, other things that had fallen or been hidden there.

It had taken weeks for the sutures to heal up, and some of Mag's primaries, the flight feathers, never came back in fully. A few would always jut out at awkward angles, and while she could move the wing, it wouldn't extend properly. Hitch fussed over her constantly, worrying about leaving her in a cage but not knowing what else to do with her.

"She should have died out there."

"Did you say something?" Lane asked. I shook my head. She pressed a warm mug into my hands. I sniffed at the steam. Black tea, gone creamy tan with milk. How I drank it in college. I'd switched to coffee sometime after Hitch and I moved in together, but found that I couldn't drink a whole pot by myself after he died, and the morning of his funeral I'd left the half-full pot on the burner to cool. By now the pot was rank and fuzzy with green mold. I had no idea where Lane found the tea.

"Drink it," Lane ordered. I sipped at the tea which was warm and slightly soapy with bergamot.

"Thanks," I said, staring into the mug. The lump under my right leg had a sharp edge to it, like a wooden box. Had I put something like that in there? I couldn't remember.

Lane sighed and sank down next to me. The couch groaned, weathered stitching threatening to give way completely. We'd bought the couch used, too.

Mag seemed to do well enough. Hitch or I were almost always in the garage for a good part of the day anyway, and having the bird to check on made us spend extra time in there, to the point that we started leaving books on the workbench to help pass the time, and eventually bought the chairs. Hitch took his radio out there, and we just left it on at low volume on a country station to keep Mag company when we weren't in there. Technically, keeping her at all was illegal – but Hitch called the state DNR, who weren't especially interested in a plain black crow who couldn't fly. As it was, we kept the window cracked open, and Mag's cage didn't have a door, so she was hardly captive but for the wing.

“You're gonna have to come out eventually,” Lane said. I raised and lowered one shoulder. “Colin and I. We miss you. Colin's still your brother, you know.”

I stared at my feet. “Hitch,” I started.

Lane let out a sharp, impatient exhalation. “He's gone! You're not!” She threw herself up off the couch again, which shrieked at the sudden shift of weight, then gave way altogether.

I found myself sitting in a pile of splintered wood and moth-eaten foam, a wooden box cutting into my leg and my hot tea all over my lap.

“Jesus!” Lane knelt down next to me, mindless of the grungy puddle staining her jeans. “You okay?”

I was pretty sure the box had scraped some skin off my thigh, and I felt scalded from the tea, but I nodded, mug still clenched in one hand. With the other, I pulled the

box out from underneath me. It was an old wooden cigar box, the kind with the woodburned designs on the lid. This one had several deer racing through sepia-and-tan trees, and was badly askew from either its imprisonment in the couch or my own weight falling completely on top of it. A black feather peeked out from the gap. Gingerly, I pulled it free.

Some months after the surgery, Mag had started molting the regrown feathers again. One evening when Hitch and I were taking turns feeding her bits of beef heart from the downtown butcher, she plucked one herself, holding it teasingly out of reach. I tried to take it from her, but she jumped back each time until Hitch set a particularly large bit of meat in front of her. Then she set the feather down and snatched the meat. A trade. Hitch had pocketed the feather, stowing it deep in his farm coat pocket – brown canvas like the one Mag had arrived in, though several times larger. I knew this was the feather. It even had a dark, slightly sticky patch from the dried blood.

“Meg?”

I ignored Lane, looking around the living room. Newspapers and veterinary magazines I hadn't bothered to cancel had piled up in the corners. Dishes were piled on the coffee table, bits of food hardening and growing on them. And suddenly I was aware that I could smell my own clothes, and myself, a sharp rank odor of sweat and mud and bird.

I looked back at the box. I remembered now. I'd stuffed it in the couch after cleaning out Hitch's office. He kept odd bits of paperwork and the contents of his pockets at the end of the day in the boxes until I emptied them for him. This feather, though, he must have hidden from me several times over, for it to have lasted so long. I ruffled the

edges of it, feeling the partitions separate, and smoothed them back down. Except for the crusted beef blood on one side, it might have just been plucked.

There was still a swig of tea left safe in the bottom of my mug. I downed it, then set the mug on the floor. I tucked my legs underneath me and set the box on my lap.

“You’re right, Lane,” I said calmly, unfastening the bent catch. “I should start cleaning up.”

# Compulsion

"Do you really need that much Febreze?" Colin asked, glancing at the pile of spray bottles and aerosols in my cart.

There's something that always skeeves me out about moving into a furnished apartment. I mean, how do you wash a leather couch? Or, worse, the mattress? And I was definitely going to have to rent a carpet shampooer.

"Yes," I said firmly, "I do."

"You couldn't just spray it down with some Windex or something?"

"That isn't *antibacterial*." I said, carefully pronouncing each syllable. "I don't want to get sick from my furniture."

"Right," Colin said, sighing. "What about these?" He held up a pack of antibacterial multi-surface wipes. "They're five for eight."

I grabbed ten. Inevitably, most of the cupboard and shelf space anywhere I lived got taken up by cleaning supplies – extra paper towels (I never use sponges), multi-purpose kitchen and bathroom cleaners, extra-strength shower scrub, rubber gloves, spare rubber gloves, disposable toilet wands, and cans and cans of antibacterial sprays, air fresheners, and cleaning masks for the fumes. And that's not even counting all my personal hygiene products and laundry soaps. It's not that my space ends up cluttered. I'm

perfectly organized about it all; I only ever have one of each product open at a time. I just tend to spend most of my free time cleaning, and you go through stuff fast that way.

"How many steps have you taken since we entered the store?" Colin asked. I wish he wouldn't tease, but he's nicer about it than anyone I've ever met. Well, except my therapist, but I prefer teasing to analysis in any case. A therapist isn't a friend. And though Colin *does* tease, he's never tried to convince me to stop cleaning or counting, which is more than I can say for *anyone*.

"My sister was like you, even when we were kids," he told me once. "She had to decide when she needed to stop. Didn't matter what anyone else said."

"Five hundred and thirty-seven, eight, nine." I stopped to look over the bleach selection. Or should I get ammonia? I knew you couldn't use both.

"Ammonia's less likely to damage your floors," Colin said, looking over my shoulder. "I'm not sure what bleach does to laminate."

I nodded thanks and grabbed a gallon jug of lemon-scented ammonia. On the shelf beneath were neat stacks of brightly-colored plastic cleaning pails for mops. I found a light purple, not quite pink enough to be lavender one and added it to the pile in my cart.

I wish that stopping were just a matter of making a decision. Mind you, I'm nowhere near as bad as I used to be. Back in college, I once caulked myself into my apartment for a week because I'd had a panic attack about getting sick. I only had big lecture classes then, so no one noticed I was missing until Colin tried to visit. He cut his way in with a pocketknife and sat quietly on the couch while I screamed at him, then handed me one of my cleaning masks and took me grocery shopping to get immune-boosting vitamins. Not everyone would do that. He knew how to handle me, which is

why I'd agreed to try to move in with him. It had actually been my idea, after his last lease ran out and he had to start looking for another place. He hadn't been able to find one in time and ended up crashing at my place for almost a month. It was nice having some noise in the place for once that wasn't a vacuum cleaner, and he cleaned up after himself just enough not to bother me, and so when he still couldn't find a single bedroom in his price range, I suggested we split a small two-bedroom instead.

Not that Colin was in particularly poor financial straits. He's not, nor am I. I'm actually head of cleaning staff at the downtown Marriott, which tends to pay either a lot more or a lot less than most people would think. I'd started as a maid, though, back in school. Neurotic or not, cleaning is something I do damn well, and fixing messes relaxes me. Colin's an insurance salesman. He does pretty well, but housing in our area of town is pretty scarce, and expensive to show for it. And his landlord kept dodging him when he tried to renew the lease, right up until the day after the deadline, when he called and told him he'd have to move out in two weeks.

Colin hasn't and won't say anything about it, but I'm pretty sure it's because his landlord found out he was gay, when Colin showed up with Ben at a barbeque hosted by the complex several months earlier. I was there, too, of course, though I didn't eat anything, and there was a bit of a scene, which the landlord's wife Merta ended by pretending to get sick and having her husband escort her home. Nice lady. She even remembered enough about me to warn me that she was going to throw up first.

Colin had a sleek little Volvo, but I'd volunteered my SmartCar for grocery shopping and such, since he needed to save his gas for work. Plus, I'd only just last year calmed down enough to even drive a couple blocks and never used my car for anything

else. We loaded up the back seat quickly – the pile of cleaning supplies I'd bought for the place filled it almost level with the rear windshield. Colin laughed, and I grinned sheepishly.

"It's just the right size," I said a bit defensively as he buckled himself in. "I can fill it up without buying too much." Colin nodded, still smiling.

It only took three trips for us to unload the stuff into the apartment, but over an hour for me to put it all away properly. Colin disappeared into his new bedroom while I was doing that and came out holding a Sharpie marker. He handed it to me.

"Can you number everything so that I know which product is open and what order they go in?" he asked.

Like I said, he knows how to handle me. While he finished unpacking his room, I organized the cleaning shelves by product and numbered one of each, going up from left to right. For good measure, I wrote my name on my purple cleaning gloves. I'd gotten a green pair for Colin, but he'd admitted to me that he tended not to bother with them, so I didn't label them. They could be spares.

Colin walked out of his room. I peeked behind him. He still had empty boxes piled up, and it looked like he'd just thrown a lot of his everyday clothes on the floor. Colin closed the door, jokingly wagging a finger at me.

"We agreed that my room was allowed to be messy as long as I kept the door shut, Laney."

It was true. We had. And once the mess was out of sight, it stopped bugging me. Colin squeezed my shoulder – our equivalent of a hug. I still tend to hyperventilate when



touched, but Colin figured out a compromise, one he and his sister had used, actually. And it did work. I'd missed being able to touch other people.

Colin went into the kitchen to start dinner, and I decided to start working on my room. If I Febrezed the mattress now, it'd be dry and not too fumey by bedtime.

Rubber gloves and cleaning mask equipped, I hefted at the edge of my mattress, trying to flip it up. I finally managed to set it on end so I could spray the underside. Leaving it to balance a few moments, I reached over to the bedside table for the Febreze and froze.

The bedframe stood a little apart from the wall to allow for the thickness of the bedclothes. With the mattress up, I could see a thin line of tan carpet that was otherwise invisible. Except up in one corner, it wasn't tan. It was red.

I knocked the mattress onto the floor, ignoring it even when it bumped against my shins. I jerked at the bed, trying to uncover the rest of the stain.

I peered over the off-kilter bedframe.

I get a bit fuzzy here, but Colin says he ran in because he heard me scream. Just once. When he got in, I was huddled in the opposite corner.

It wasn't very *much* blood, but I couldn't stand even a little of it. I'd actually gone on a three-month injection cycle of birth control just so I wouldn't have to see blood more than a few times a year. I vaguely remember rocking back and forth, and I'm glad Colin says I was incoherent, because I never told him why I moved to California right after high school, a thousand miles from my hometown and good state schools with scholarships.

I wasn't always like I am now. It started when I was sixteen. I had a boyfriend, then. Eric. And, dumb kid I was, I believed him when he said he could pull out with the same risk level as using a condom. Stupid. But I thought I loved him, because not thinking about him every spare second was difficult. Because I wanted to fall over, to cry, to die a little whenever he said my name.

I never expected him to accuse me of cheating when he got me pregnant. Never expected him to run out and join the Marines, telling his mom that I'd slept with his best friend and gotten knocked up. Can't blame her for believing him. I was a sketchy-looking kid, hair dyed too dark for my complexion, too many earrings, a nose ring, heavy black eye makeup, bad taste in music and clothes. Eric was a clean-cut boy, always had been, and I was just a slutty punk trying to cause trouble for him.

So I had to tell my parents alone. But as it turns out, I didn't have to. I resolved to tell them exactly two weeks to the day after I found out. On the thirteenth night, I woke up with cramps and my sheets were soaked through with blood, and I screamed. Mom and Dad took me to the hospital, and the doctor said he didn't have to tell them what had happened if I wanted to tell them myself. I told him I would, but I never did, and my parents never really asked, and it became this whole big thing that we couldn't talk about. I never could get the stain out. Of the sheets, I mean, or the dark spot on the mattress, and when I moved out I just hauled the mattress with me and dropped it off at the dump on my way out of town.

Colin brought me a glass of water with lemon where I was lying on the couch. I think he put me there to get me off the floor. Hands shaking, I squeezed as much juice as

I could out of the lemon and into the cup, then dropped the desiccated wedge into the water.

Management had already come in, and I could hear them bickering about how to get "it" out of the carpet, whether to call their regular cleaning staff or foot the bill for a professional carpet cleaning.

"You'd better get a damn professional in here!" Colin snapped, half-shouting down the short hallway. He turned back to me. "You okay, kid?"

I nodded. Shook my head. Nodded again.

"I guess the last person had a . . .a . . .girl cat."

I nodded again, trying not to think about the bloodstain, or the little white tufts sticking out of it, or the dried brown bits, or the—

"I had the landlord check. The cat had kittens in here. I guess the last tenant never cleaned it up, and the cleaning service didn't think to move the beds to clean before we moved in."

Colin kept talking, but I just stared into my drink and started counting my breaths.

One.

Two.

Three.

# Storm

I probably should have expected trouble when Melanie stormed into my apartment, hair mussed and eyes red, not even saying hello. Darren. I don't even know why she's asking for my help of all people.

I guess I wasn't paying close enough attention at the time, though, and I said something to that effect, because she sighed – and because she was Melanie, it was a production like everything else, a great big gusty heave of air like she was responsible for *so much* and just taking the time to explain this little thing to me was putting a serious kink in her plans.

He listens to *you*. Like an accusation, and it's not true but it doesn't make any difference really, not when she's already flopped down on my couch and is fumbling for a cigarette. You can make him talk.

Like she thought I was Dr. Phil. I'm an office manager, I want to say. A freaking secretary. So I took a couple psych courses the year I met you, but I didn't need them to know perfectly well that Melanie, being Melanie, wasn't actually worried about whatever Darren's problem might be, and if I actually did what she was telling me to, if I went and talked to Darren for her, I'd come back to find her still in my apartment, in a tearful frenzy because I'd left her alone, and there'd be cigarette ash all over the carpet.

Screw this. At least Darren's less predictable. Put that out, I tell her, heading for the door.

*Just wait til you meet her*, Darren wrote. He told me I'd absolutely love her. So of course, I replied, *can't wait*.

I'd gotten involved with a soldier outreach program my freshman year of college. I needed volunteer hours to keep one of my scholarships and my dad was ex-Army, so I guess it just seemed like a decent fit. The point of the thing was just to send off a few postcards thanking servicemen posted in Iraq and Afghanistan for what they were doing. I spent a couple hours a week sorting and stamping cards, and I was more than a bit surprised to get a battered envelope containing a reply to my own postcard in the mail. We'd been told not to ask for or expect replies of any kind. Basic supplies like stamps and paper could get scarce way out there, but really the reason was time. Who could blame a soldier ignoring a nice letter from a stranger when he could be writing to his girlfriend, or his parents, or his little brother?

Darren's note wasn't much, really. Mostly just a series of questions. Did I read? Or did I like video games? What about sports? Did I watch any? Play any?

*I can't stand the idea of not getting to know someone who took time for me, I guess.*

Then he pre-emptively answered my return questions – only if audio books count, anything but shooters, and only boxing. What could I do? I responded – yes (mostly sci-fi), sometimes (I'm terrible, but I like playing with friends), and not really (I can never remember the rules for anything). And I found a few questions for him, and we went back

and forth for two years like that, without ever meeting in person – mostly snail letters, but occasionally he'd send off a quick email when he had access to a computer. Usually kind of a “ha-ha, haven't died yet, actually pretty quiet here lately.” It was only in emails that he talked about what he did on a daily basis, and that in couched terms, barely skirting the edges. I didn't even know he'd been promoted until Melanie caught me addressing a letter wrong.

Melanie was who he wrote about mostly, and he introduced us in a kind of roundabout way. I knew her name, of course, and that he'd proposed to her the first time he got leave stateside – still standing in the airport, groggy from the plane ride which had been delayed by three hours, and knowing Melanie now I can imagine her reaction. She would've loved it, the stunned onlookers muttering to themselves, pointing at the amazing new couple *right there, see, he's proposing!* So her reaction would have been broadcast for their benefit, not Darren's: the gasp, hand fluttering over her mouth, drawing back away from the ring like she just can't believe what she's seeing, and her eventual response probably just a shade louder than necessary. Applause? Almost certainly.

Their apartment door was unlocked, and I let myself in and took off my boots. I shrugged out of my jacket, which was nearly soaked through – their building was only three blocks away, but it had started raining as soon as I was too far away from my own apartment to make it worth going back for an umbrella, but still close enough to my own place for me to get plenty wet. Just my luck. I found a spare hanger in their closet and hung it up.

I'm here, I felt like saying, but I could already hear Darren moving around in the back room. Probably cleaning. Darren's one of those people who's always cleaning and organizing, yet his space never seems to get any less cluttered.

Melanie, I'm not ready to talk yet, at least have the decency to oh. I waved at him a little, which seemed to dispel his exasperation somewhat. He'd started growing his hair as soon as he was discharged, and it fell over his forehead in lank oily tendrils. His eyes seemed a little glazed, and he hadn't shaved in a few days. He was wearing a battered pair of plaid pajama pants, and after a few seconds he disappeared and re-emerged from the doorway pulling a shirt over his head. He muttered an apology, then an accusation. Of course Melanie had sent me.

Chased me out more like, and saying that made him half-smile, and he didn't look nearly so tired when he did. I asked if I could come in – I mean, I was already in the apartment, that was no big deal, but ever since they'd converted the spare bedroom into a studio for him, that had been his space. I'd never gone in uninvited. He nodded and gestured me in, jerking his head toward the interior.

Wow, I said, not able to stop myself. Melanie got to it, huh?

Melanie and I went to the same university, though she was in the acting school while I took business courses. I just knew she was an actress of course, didn't know we lived in the same city until she showed up at my dorm holding one of Darren's letters, and introduced herself as...what was it? "Darren's fiancée and your new bestie." That's sort of how things are with Melanie: you're lucky if you can keep up, much less have a choice in any of it. I'd pulled an all-nighter the evening before and had crashed right after

my exam, and she barely gave me time to get dressed before dragging me to Starbucks, buying me a triple-shot, and begging to know everything about me. I think she was convinced that I was somehow a lot more interesting than I am.

I wrote to Darren about meeting her, and his next letter came back full of apologies. *She can be really enthusiastic sometimes.*

It wasn't a problem, I told him. Honestly I probably needed someone to shake me out of my routine a little. I didn't have much of a social life outside class and volunteer work, which didn't really count since I pretty much stuck to sorting paperwork. The next time Darren had leave, Melanie showed up at six in the morning to drive me to the airport to meet him with her – as a surprise. He'll love it, she told me, and I caved.

Darren ran right up to her and folded her in his arms, kissing her madly, and I know that's something you only ever hear in crappy romance novels but really there was no other way to describe it, I swear. And it was awkward standing right there and realizing that while I'd seen plenty of photos of him, courtesy Melanie, I'd never actually sent him one, and he had no idea who I was or why I was staring at him and Melanie practically making out in the waiting area.

Surprise! Melanie said, a minute too late.

It's you? And I remember that it was kind of a question, the way Darren said it, and his face was flushed but he was half-smiling. I'd learn that was usual for him, that a big toothy grin only ever showed up when he was drunk or faking it. Nice to meet you, and I shook hands with the young man I'd been exchanging letters with for over a year.



I nudged the brilliant orange bean bag beaded in bright yellow spirals that hurt my eyes a little under the studio lamp with one toe. This had to be Melanie's.

Darren nodded, rubbing his eyes like he hadn't gotten enough sleep. He probably hadn't, I mused, glancing at the half-naked canvas behind him. It was gleaming unevenly with wet paint. I turned back to my corner, which featured a small silver CD player, a large incense burner shaped like a tree with eyes, and a set of chimes the size of my fist.

Melanie had decided that it wasn't fair for Darren to have the second bedroom all to himself, and set up a meditation corner for herself.

"And now when I work, she comes in here and plays music and won't leave until I do."

I nodded slowly, still gazing at the spiral pillow. So Darren had been getting up in the middle of the night to work on his final project. He didn't get it, he told me. She was so supportive of him going to art school at first, and I nodded again, remembering the day she told me. It meant another Starbucks run, with a giant no-foam-no-sugar-flavored monstrosity for her and a plain drip for me while she told me just how *talented* Darren was and how lucky she felt to be near someone so inspired and even then I thought that the first thing she'd want him to paint – the first thing he *would* paint, since she'd ask as soon as he had the materials – was a portrait of her. But she was worried. He used to be so carefree and relaxed before the, you know, before he joined the army. And now he wasn't always sleeping at night and he was talking about maybe seeing a therapist, did I think that would help? I sipped my coffee and nodded, not that Mel really needed the encouragement. She never did.

And he was always fidgeting, she complained. Always cleaning up, washing his hands constantly.

He's been like that as long as I've known him, I interjected.

Exactly, she said. He used to have the biggest smile.

I frowned at the little yoga setup. Melanie knew perfectly well that Darren hated being watched no matter what he was doing, sketching a landscape or painting or just cartooning. Even I knew that, and she'd had opportunity to get a lot closer to him.

I don't get it, he kept on saying.

Idiot, I thought. She's just jealous.

I needed to look at something other than the little section of Melanie in Darren's studio, so I turned and ended up face-to-face with his work in progress. The canvas was huge, almost as tall as I was and at least as wide, and I saw now that it wasn't half-untouched, like I'd thought at first, but merely that the edges were carefully shaded in tans, browns, yellows, so that it still seemed blank, but *aged* somehow. And in the center was a swirling mass of clouds and electricity and angry smears of searing white, and just above that, a set of eyes without irises or pupils.

Darren told me, watching my face, that was what he was working on now. He gestured toward the corkboard on the adjacent wall, where he pinned his reference photos. Most were of Melanie in various poses and costumes – one I recognized from her part in *MacBeth*, and a few were of her naked. One on the corner, though, I knew: my face. Just my face, and Darren had offset the eyes with a rectangle of black sharpie.

Your eyes are better for this kind of thing, Darren said.

That what you and Melanie are fighting about? But of course they weren't really fighting, they never argued, Melanie just did what she wanted and expected Darren to agree, and then it all came out, and Darren was sitting on the floor with his head in his hands. She expects me to be like I was before and I can't, no matter how much she asks, and she's never been so goddamned *jealous* of anything.

And I can't feel anything anymore, he says and my stomach goes cold. Outside the thunder rumbles again and I'm vaguely aware that I'm going to get soaked all over again on the walk home, and dammit Melanie is still there, I'll have to deal with her. Darren was gripping his left wrist with his right hand until the knuckles went white, like he was trying to stop it from getting away. Nothing feels right anymore and she just can't get it, that I'm not like I was, and suddenly he's grabbing at my sleeve and trying to pull me close to him, and I jerk away, feeling tears start because screw this, I know Melanie and I know Darren too and if I only knew one of them there wouldn't be a problem.

I ran outside and realized a block down that I'd forgotten my jacket, that the rain was falling harder than ever but then I decided I didn't care, and I walked the rest of the way back to my apartment on the edge of the sidewalk, avoiding the inviting awnings of the shops that were just starting to open for the day.

Melanie was waiting for me, and her cigarette was lit and she looked just about to start into me when she stopped. You're soaked, and she for once sounds a little concerned.

What happened?

Nothing, I tell her.

And put that damn thing out.

# Clock

I broke my clock the other day.

I didn't mean to, or at least I didn't think I meant to at the time, but on the other hand I don't think it was too much of an accident, maybe more a decision I didn't entirely think through, but I was sitting at my desk trying to piece together an idea, probably something about Kant, Kant is always the one who escapes me, but something tangible for this damned report, and the clock just kept ticking incessantly, reminding me that I'd been sitting staring at a blank screen for over an hour and that Tanner would be coming home soon and what had I done all day, except try to distract myself from work I couldn't bring myself to do – and *tik tik tik* went the clock, and then suddenly it was in pieces on the bedroom floor and there was a small scab of torn wallpaper near the door.

The worst thing is, Tanner would come home and wouldn't be bothered by it at all. He'd notice, of course, he notices everything, but he'd just be so kind and understanding about it that I'd want to hit him.

I'm quite aware that I'm not always the most rational of individuals.

My phone *bleeped* at me, which shouldn't have been possible, I always turn it off when I want to work, but this time I'd forgotten – which really was just a death sentence to my daily word count goal, forgetting a thing like that, because when my phone rings or

beeps or whatever I can't stand not to look at it, which is the same reason I type on a word processor instead of a computer, a little plastic word processor with a screen the same quality as a TI-81 calculator, it looks like a toy but it has a decent memory and it gets the job done when I can bring myself to work at all. Computers are distracting, and no matter how I try to hide my Ethernet cable and forget about Facebook and Skype and the half-dozen blogs I read (some using the incognito feature on my browser; I haven't lived with my parents in years but I still maintain a few habits of self-preservation), I can't stand to leave them unread when all else I have to look at is a blank Word document.

But yes, my phone went *bleep*, which is the tone I use for texting, so I looked and it was from Jess, wanting to know if Tanner and I would be up for grabbing dinner with him later. Hell if I knew, I told him, but probably, I'd ask Tanner when he got back, and then I basked for a few seconds in an odd sense of self-righteousness: my boyfriend and my lover knew about each other and were not only okay with the situation, but were best friends besides, though I'd never be able to convince them a threesome was a good idea. I mean, they've both made other little arrangements like this too – Tanner's got a girl over in Farmington that he goes to see every so often, though she prefers not to meet me or his other partners, and Jess until recently had a boyfriend. Hell, I used to meet locals off Craigslist every so often, but that was always something of an anxious experience at best, and lately I haven't even had the time to post joke ads – *Crazy cat lady looking for sexxeh time with a man who doesn't mind being watched by her beautiful pride. Need someone to jab sixpenny nails into your taint?*

Actually, to be fair, the second one had gotten me far more responses than I'd expected.

My phone *bleeped* again – Mom, this time. Probably just another picture of the cat. I looked again, because one what kind of a person would I be if I ignored my mother, and two, I really didn't want to try to think about my dissertation anymore today. Stupid philosophers and their stupid metaphysics.

Yep. A picture of the cat, a spoiled thing that had to weigh at least twenty pounds by now; the darn thing was given little chunks of liver every night on top of his (specialty gourmet) canned cat food, and I knew perfectly well that he'd mastered the art of begging for treats years ago. Mom's a pushover, of course, all it really takes is slight pressure applied to her knee from a declawed paw and she caves, "Oooh, look at his little *face*," and out comes the bag of dentally-approved treats, or a bit of cheese, or a potato chip. Cat absolutely adores potato chips. Dad got him hooked on them, specifically these super-crunchy ones that the Meijer down the road has in the "local" section, and his favorite (and Dad's) were those awful salt-and-vinegar ones that Mom and I can't stand the smell of. Mom still buys them, I think just out of habit now, and I've even tried eating them a few times since Dad got moved into the home, and the smell is still awful, pungent, almost vomitous, but it's a familiar stench, so I guess I'm just as ridiculous about this kind of thing as Mom is.

The cat is the most personal thing Mom and I talk about these days, really. I haven't been hiding anything from her, I mean, the arrangement between Tanner and Jess and I has been going for just about a year now, and Tanner and I have been dating for something like a year and a half, and I'd tried to explain at the beginning of *that* what an "open relationship" was, using a lot of words like "negotiation," "personal freedom," and "nigh-religious use of contraception," but I could tell she wasn't happy with the idea then,

actually that'd be an understatement, she had a few choice words for me about what was ladylike and what wasn't, how I was selling myself short and should really hold out for someone ready to commit, and my rebuttal that I already had a commitment from someone went over considerably less than well, and started a period of several months where we both pretended that we weren't *not* talking to each other, just we were both oh-so-busy, and eventually she caved and sent me a picture of the cat gnawing on a pair of wool socks I'd left there last Christmas, and that did it, and we started talking again, but she gets very tense whenever I mention Tanner or Jess, especially in the same sentence, but I can't just *not* talk about them, not without feeling dishonest pretty much all the time.

I tried that, for a while. "What are you doing tonight?" "Oh, just going out to eat." "Alone?" "No, uh. Yeah, by myself."

I'm not a very convincing liar.

My therapist, Lisa, seemed pretty okay with the whole polyamory thing. She almost never asks about it, and only probes if I bring it up. Doesn't happen all that often. She pokes at my attention span a lot more.

It seems like you're saying you feel chaotic, she said once. And I said, yeah, that's pretty much true. Does it bother you?

Not really. I mean, sometimes it's hard to get work done, but when I am able to focus I can just push everything out at once, kind of like productive diarrhea. She winced at that simile a little, but then asked that if I thought my attention span wasn't causing any real problems, why did I think I was worrying about it so much, and so on.

I asked Mom about that later, if I'd always been like this. Mom kinda shrugged it off. Oh, your teachers used to complain that you couldn't sit still and were always asking

questions, but I told them that's what kids do, and she's just bored. It got a lot better when they started letting you read your own books when you were done with the other work. You always worked better when there was a clear idea of a reward once you were done with the task. Your dad and I used to bribe you into doing homework and chores with a trip to the bookstore every couple weeks, remember?

Yeah, I remember, Mom.

Back then Mom was still working full-time – that was a joke, it was a lot more than full-time – so pretty often those trips were just me and Dad. He'd drive us into town in the old pickup truck he'd had for at least twenty years, you had to pump the pedal like crazy to get it to start, that was the car I learned to drive on, some years later I'd dent the bumper running into a light post when I was driving my date and I to homecoming because I was trying to drive in heels, which Dad made me promise never to do again, and I don't, I still keep a pair of flat sandals in the back seat of my little sedan just in case. And the bookstore Dad would take me to, it was this little place on the corner, or at least it looked really small and dingy on the outside, but when you got in it was like stepping into a library in a storybook to me, wooden shelves from floor to ceiling, and even a steep spiral staircase in one corner you could take up into a kind of catwalk-loft, with a railing to stop you from falling back down to the first floor, and pretty soon the owners got to knowing me and they started setting aside books for me upstairs on the tallest shelf so I could use the moving ladder to go get them, and I still wonder at that sometimes, sticking kid's sci-fi and that series of proem books Mom got me into next to the classics, but in any case I got really good at using that ladder, could stand on the lowest rung and push off from the floor and glide to exactly the right spot. I tried going back once, maybe a



couple years ago, but it had closed and the only other bookstore in town was one of the big-box ones, which are nice and honestly as a little kid I might have loved it almost as much since they had an escalator, but it wasn't the same, I swear it even smells different, even though it should, reasonably, smell almost the same since both were packed with books, but it's different. After the bookstore sometimes Dad would take me to the ice cream parlor even though Mom kept telling him not to spoil supper, and we'd each get a banana split as big as my forearm, and like him I'd save the cherry until last.

I really wish I could talk to Dad again. Really talk to him, I mean. I sometimes imagine conversations with him, but always feel a little guilty about it, like it's something I shouldn't presume to do, like I could really understand how he worked.

He always would surprise me. Mom and I would butt heads, and have to compromise and negotiate for hours or days before we could even pretend to see the others' point of view, and most of the time we still wouldn't really be able to agree. Sometimes that was a good thing, like when I was sixteen and tried to convince her that a wonderful birthday present for me would be a tattoo. I'd even picked out what I wanted, a Chinese *lung*, a type of serpentine dragon, coiled around my hips. Dad had told me to ask Mom without even looking up from his book, and then Mom and I spent the next three days arguing about it every chance we got, and then I spent two weeks sulking hoping to get her to change her mind.

Honestly, I'm kind of glad she didn't, but still. It wasn't exactly the most productive or least frustrating of conversations.

Dad and I were totally different. Telling Mom that I didn't really think I believed in God was a whole production unto itself. Dad just kind of nodded, and said it made

sense to him, that I liked thinking in my own head too much to just accept something as it was told to me, and besides the Bible was full of thinkers, and from there we'd jump into a discussion of Moses and Aaron and Joseph who interpreted dreams, and after an hour he suddenly remembered that Mom was still upset and he got up to go find her, and I don't really know how he did it but a few days later I found Mom on the computer looking up introductory philosophy texts for me, which I opened up on Christmas and pretended to be surprised over, then read and reread voraciously (*The Last Days of Socrates* is still on one of my shelves here, and I refuse to get rid of it even though it's barely held together with layer upon layer of packing tape and some of the pages are all crinkly because I dropped it in the bath once. Okay, twice).

*Your father's birthday is coming up, Mom texted. Any ideas?*

*Maybe we could make a dinner or something. I could bring over the carbonara if you do the bread.*

Mom made the best garlic bread, entirely from scratch, and I don't know what she does to it, because she gave me the recipe once and I tried and tried and could still never get anything other than a rock-hard lump of charred and stinking dough, while Mom could twist it into a beautiful knot with a crust that cracked in all the right places and had exactly the right hint of garlic smell to it. Mom said I just wasn't patient enough to handle bread. Probably true, except Dad and I tried it once when she was gone at a weekend spa with her sister, and while Dad was able to twist it the same way Mom did, and I *know* I had the recipe right, it still was just too tough, too salty, too greasy (and how we made it greasy *and* tough, I have no idea, really that shouldn't be possible at all).

Tanner walked in the front door just then, and I knew it was him because none of our other housemates can manage to make that much noise, not that Tanner slams the door or anything, it's just everything he does is magnified a little. He wears these big work boots everywhere because they're about all he can find that fits him. He's a really tall guy, somewhere around six-eight, and every step he takes is measured and in our house echoes off the tiled floors. He also wears this giant old biker's jacket that he found at a Salvation Army, and it fits him perfectly but is stiff and creaks and snaps when he takes it on or off, especially when it's cold out like it is today and sometimes I swear it sounds like he's breaking bones down there, but by now the sounds are more comforting than worrying, and I shove my processor back in its case and run down the stairs to meet him, nearly tripping and falling down the last six steps.

Tanner half-caught me and made a big show of picking me up, setting me more firmly upright and meticulously dusting me off until I started laughing a little, and then I pulled a fake scowl and told him to lay off, the big bully. And he grinned at me and even now that makes me blush, because Tanner isn't really, objectively, all that attractive – he's big and tall and really muscular because he used to wrestle in high school and he still goes to the gym five days a week, but his jaw is kind of heavy and he's got the sort of nose that used to be described as “aquiline” which is at least a pretty word for it, and his smile is really oversized for his face and utterly goofy, and for some reason it's my favorite thing about him. It's so utterly at odds with his severe appearance that there's just no way for it not to catch you off-guard.

Jess of course had texted him too while he was still at work, and Tanner's always hungry and we didn't have anything else planned and it was a Thursday night which

means that the local brewery had the red ale Jess and I like, too, and it didn't take long to get all three of us there, sitting in a corner booth, me in the center, and I love this place because everything there is at least forty years old, the booths are all really heavy dark scarred oak with red threadbare cushions and the lights are all smoky with age and yellowed from two generations' worth of cigarette smoke even though the owner had banned smoking at least ten years ago and surely they'd washed all the lamps at least once since. Anywhere else it'd be kinda gross, honestly, but here the servers and the barkeepers are always so friendly that you kinda forget about that, and it feels a little like visiting home for me.

I mean, it definitely has nostalgia value. Dad took me here for my twenty-first birthday, decided to make a big deal of it and drove me over here, ordered a meat-lovers' pizza and their sampler row of beer – a brown and copper rainbow of frothy half-pints – and some of my friends thought it was weird that I wanted to spend the weekend with my Dad instead of barhopping with them, but I was glad I did it even if I couldn't really explain why at the time. I mean, it's not like Dad didn't know perfectly well that those beers weren't actually my first taste of alcohol, and I can't even really remember what we talked about, and even the taste of the beer and the food comes back with only occasional flashes of clarity. The brewery makes fantastic pizza, and the meat-lovers' actually has like three kinds of sausage on it, and that was how I discovered the red ale I drink all the time now.

Dad was always kind of quiet. The sort of guy who came home from work and started reading, and when I was younger, sure he'd read to me, and when I got older sometimes I'd borrow his books just to have something to say to him even though I never

could really get into sci-fi the way he did. But he didn't like wasting words much, and he was just always so calm, like when Mom was freaking out about my tattoo, he knew exactly how to calm her down. When Mom and I fight, we just go in circles and get more and more worked up and then like before we go months without talking at all just to wind ourselves back down again, but with Dad there, it's like there's an off switch or something, like he was in control of everything, the captain of a ship set to autopilot, just watching and waiting until something went wrong for him to fix. And he always did.

Jess and Tanner had their glasses raised, faces broken out in mismatched grins – Tanner's glass just had ginger ale in it like always, his dad was an alcoholic and Tanner doesn't want to ever touch the stuff – and both nudged me to raise mine too, and we clinked glasses while still laughing, I could feel a smile distorting my face anyway, it felt frozen and stale and fake like that godawful frozen garlic bread I'd tried once, nothing's ever the same as it is at home. And I'm sure they noticed, they did that little exchange of glances they do when I'm upset, like comparing notes to see if one of them knows better than the other, and Tanner almost imperceptibly shrugged. And Jess follows us home and we pile onto the couch in a tangle of denim-encased legs, and some of that's comforting to me, just having both of them near me, sometimes touching makes my brain stop for a few minutes, and we watch *Labyrinth* again so Jess can do his Bowie impression during "Dance the Magic Dance," ignoring our housemates when they come in to ask what the hell we're doing up at that hour because sometimes it doesn't matter at all.

And less than a week later I meet Mom outside the home holding my little casserole dish full of warm pasta covered with tinfoil and she's got a Rubbermaid container with sliced bread in it, and we share a kind of half-hug, and in that second I

remember the older women at the potlucks at Dad's old church, the sort of shoulder-bumping they'd do when they saw each other but had hands full of soapsuds or crock pots of spicy meatballs in gravy or someone's grandchild, for a second we are those older women and I almost drop the spaghetti and Mom gives me a funny look as we check in with the girl at the front desk, she really is a girl, they take volunteers from my old high school here.

Dad's in his wheelchair sitting at the window facing out when we get in and he doesn't move. I expected that, I mean, I know perfectly well that he doesn't move himself around at all anymore, that he just kind of sits there however they leave him. The nurses used to turn on his TV in the mornings and leave him facing that all day, and it took Mom and I weeks to make sure they stopped, it was just too unnatural seeing him staring and drooling at a screen he'd never looked at when he was, no not alive, he's still alive now, I can hear him breathing, but he never watched TV when he was still himself. So I brought in my old boom box and a bunch of books on CD I'd pirated for him out of desperation, and told the nurse to put those in if there had to be noise. There's one in now, I realize, *The Hobbit*. Bilbo and Gollum are riddling and Bilbo hasn't asked his last one, the one that's really kind of cheating but he gets away with it.

"Happy birthday, Dad," I say quietly, setting the casserole on the table by the bed. We'll cut the pasta into bite-size lengths and spoon-feed it to him later, not too much or he'll choke and there's something awful about that, watching his lips go slightly blue as his body sputters and struggles to cough but can't quite manage it anymore.

Mom turns him around in his wheelchair and starts babbling to him, telling him about the cat of course and how I'm doing and that I've nearly got my dissertation done,

it's practically a book by now, and I just tune her out, sitting on the bed trying to remember anything else so I don't have to look at Dad's sagging face or his vacant half-smile.

"Amy." Mom's name. That's all he's said for years. It'd be touching, but he says it to all the nurses, to me, to the lime Jell-O they serve for dessert here on Tuesdays. Like he's looking for Mom even when she's right in front of him.

I can practically feel Mom glaring at me, trying to get me to say something else to him, but dammit there's no point, and I start with the first thing on my mind and of course the first thing is that Tanner and I have been talking about getting our own place, with a spare bedroom for when one of us wants to have a guest, or when Jess comes over, or I guess Tanner's girlfriend in Farmington, I feel kind of bad that I can't remember her name, Tanner has to have mentioned it at least once, and I can feel Mom's glare getting worse but right now I don't really care that I should feel horrible for bringing all this up in front of her, and maybe Dad would care or he wouldn't and I'd never, ever really know.

Look, I want to say. The clock on his bedside table was one of those ones with the little calendar that turns over at midnight each day, and it was stuck on last Wednesday and no one had noticed that he hadn't had a clock for over a week, not even him, I'd bet, as he stared out the window listening to a dramatic reading of Tolkien on repeat for fifteen hours a day while we pretended that was somehow better than watching reruns of *The Young and the Restless* and *The Price Is Right*.

"Clock's broken," I manage before I start giggling. "Clock's broken, Amy." And Mom's nearly in tears now and I know I'll feel bad for it later, really I'm not trying, not trying at all, and then Dad's hand flops off the arm of his wheelchair and lands on my

knee. Mom and I both stare at it dully, wondering what muscle reflex this was now, if this was the start of another seizure or what, but his hand just clenches slightly, and that's the most movement I've seen him make on his own in months really and I try to close my mouth. My hands keep fidgeting and toying with the hands on his clock, moving them back and forth. His hand falls off my knee and he says "Amy" again, and that's it, Mom starts crying, and I turn the clock face down to lay lifeless next to the casserole dish of spaghetti in cream sauce that sometime long ago was Dad's favorite meal.



# Doll

Sometimes I feel like a little doll. I had one as a kid, just a tiny thing, maybe ten inches tall, with a hard body and china face and arms and legs. She wore a blue dress, the kind a bit like Judy Garland in *Wizard of Oz*, but not quite, something that hasn't ever really been in fashion. I didn't especially like dolls as a kid, I mean, no more so than little girls are expected to anyway, I had baby dolls and later a few Barbies that ended up all over house like they always do, half their clothes missing. But that doll had been a gift from an aunt I almost never saw. I guess she decided I liked dolls or something, but I was eight years old and Mom said I couldn't play with it like the others and I had to be careful or she'd break, and you know when you're a kid it's hard to fathom the idea of a toy you don't play with. Mom set her up on my highest shelf on the bookcase – she came with a little metal stand that clipped around her waist so she could stand upright.

Sometimes, when Mom was busy downstairs, I'd pull a chair up to the shelf and get the doll down, and sit cross-legged on the floor with her lying unblinking in my lap. She had wide blue eyes and no eyelids, and no smile either, just a grave expression that didn't fit at all with the curly mop of hair and the bright blue dress that looked like it belonged in a movie, and her face was hollow, I could tell because when I tapped a fingernail against her skin, it sounded a little quiet airy sound, and I was almost afraid

that her face would crack like an eggshell if I tapped it too hard, and I could never bring myself to hold the doll for more than a few minutes at a time before I had to get her back up on the shelf and put the chair away, and I'd sit heart pounding and hands sweating a little thinking about how I'd just so carefully and painstakingly broken the rules.

I'm not sure how my brain interpreted just touching the doll as "playing" with her, but that's apparently how it worked in my head, and I don't think my mom ever knew either. The doll's long gone, of course, now, a lot of things are gone, but I still remember the sound of my nails against china and the vacant stare of those milky blue eyes.

Smile just like that, honey, I say brightly as Cal steps behind the camera yet again. She's maybe nine years old and has sunflower barrettes in her red hair, and freckles, and brown eyes, and she grins showing a gap where a tooth had fallen out recently. Cal is the photographer in the business, the main one anyway, I know how to work the camera but I only do it when no one else is around, my photos are just not quite as good as his no matter what I do, I guess it's just something I don't have, but I'm good with people, good with getting babies to stop crying and toddlers to stop squirming and pockmarked fourteen-year-olds – I swear they're the worst, they're just old enough to decide that they should be taken seriously and for the most part express this in the most ridiculous ways, there's no good way to explain to a pudgy preteen boy in a metalhead t-shirt that his eyeliner is smudged and just makes his cheeks look fatter anyway. I admit I was just as bad once, had a real thing for bad music and unfortunate haircuts right about the time that china doll got banished to a box padded with tissues and Styrofoam under the stairs.

I'm sure they don't even realize they're doing it. We get adults who sit with their chins tucked down toward their chests (which makes the skin under the jaw look looser

than it is) and shoulders raised like they're expecting something to jump out of the camera at them. Cal depresses the shutter and I smile and laugh to get them to relax; it works so well. Wade used to say it was just because I was pretty, but I think, maybe, he just wanted an excuse to say it during the day back when he still worked here with us, and I'm not *that* pretty anyway, there's nothing of a model in me even if I did pose in most of the demo shots when we first set up the shop.

The local mall had been dying out a bit – a Wal-mart had moved in just across town, and pretty quick all the little boutiques, the toy store, even the bike shop that had been in there, well they couldn't keep up, that's nothing anybody hasn't heard before. And the mall owners, faced with scars in the masonry from neon signs that weren't there anymore and gratings pulled down over empty stores, started offering half-price rent for any new store for the first year, and Wade and I, we decided that was the signal. I was working in a salon downtown at that point giving manicures and I told all the girls about it, and I kept my job there as long as I could, but even during the first month I needed to be there so often; Wade would lose the props or a lens cover, the backdrops would stick and he'd need me there to untangle the cables, and eventually I told the salon to hire a new girl and I could come in during busy weekends (midwinter when women start seeing their knuckles dry out and crack, and spring right around when all the high schools have their proms). It was sweet, actually, the gals threw me a going-away party, went all out and got an ice cream cake from the place down the street we'd always go when it was hot because they still did the old-fashioned cream sodas, and I do miss all of them, and I miss knowing that if I left the place there'd be a half-dozen people who'd notice I wasn't coming in, not that Cal isn't great, he is, he's a genuinely good guy to be around. It's not

like we only hired him because he was Wade's older brother – he's a damn good photographer, just as good as Wade, maybe a little better, I can admit that now. He's better than Wade was.

The next mother comes in and strips her baby down to his diaper so we can do an old-timey bathtub scene. I thought Wade had gone nuts when he showed up with an old-fashioned tin tub, but he insisted, and it's lined with blue cushions for the baby's bottom and at one point I went into Wal-Mart and bought a few packs of oversized transparent bouncy balls to use as bubbles and a squeaky yellow duckie, and we gave one of Wade's old work buddies a discount to have his kid take the first shots and hung them up next to my glamour portraits (black-and-white, my red lipstick like a wine stain and my hair pinned up and curled and a dark beauty mark drawn on my cheek, a slim cigarette holder balanced on two self-manicured fingers) on the board facing the interior of the mall, and it's one of our most popular sets. A bathtub scene from an era when the bathwater got heated on the fire or not at all, and I wonder if anyone who bathed like that had ever had a rubber duckie to play with.

I make faces at the baby from behind Cal's shoulder and wave a jingly rattle to get his attention. He pulls the duckie out of his mouth long enough to giggle and Cal gets the photos we need, and then the next set has the baby dressed again, though we can't get him to let go of the duckie without crying so we let him hold it even though it's a forest scene.

It wasn't quite fall when Wade took that shot. Most of our backdrops are just flat stock colors, and a couple are mottled sponge paintings we did ourselves and had printed, but the photos of the seaside and the cityscapes and of course the forest, with green

leaves just starting to yellow and the arch of rocks in the background, those are all Wade's own pictures. Somewhere, probably stashed in an album in a box under the stairs I own now, there is a photo of me sitting on the rail of the bridge that is just visible in the backdrop behind the baby, just as forgotten and forsaken as that little china doll.

Now see, I tell the mother, we can get you a nice portrait size, good for framing, we've got a few stock frames here too if you want to look around a bit, and of course you'll want lots of wallet sized, for the grandparents, right? And the four-by-sixes are what go in the typical photo album. As I babble, the rattle in Cal's hand jingles, and I'm so happy to be able to look away from that day in the forests of Mackinac so I can stare instead at plain black-and-white forms, it's a form I made through struggling with the typewriter for an afternoon, but it works and it's just mine, Wade had nothing to do with this part of the business, though we had weekly discussions of prices.

There's a photo of Wade on the promo board, too, in uniform no less. Cal took that a few days before he left on his first tour. And that, well, we'd never expected it, he was Army Reserves and you never expect anything to come of it, but something had and there wasn't anything I could do to change that. He left smiling and I try to remember that – the face on the board is stern and serious, a slash of mouth underneath hooded eyes, the scar on his cheek from a biking accident a faint pale line. Cal did a good job with that one but it doesn't look like Wade at all. It doesn't bother me to look at the photo of Wade standing in front of a blank canvas but I can't stand to look at those trees.

I don't know why I remember that day so clearly. It's not like he proposed to me then (no, that had been some weeks before after we ordered Indian take-out, and I was so startled I dropped the ring in the chutney). Or like he told me he was being deployed then

(that came months later). It was just a trip, our annual week vacation to somewhere a bit touristy, always a little bit off-season to avoid the crowds, he hated crowds, but it was unseasonably warm for a Michigan October, in the fifties the whole week we were there. And of course we went on a horse carriage tour and came back laden with boxes of novelty fudge but mostly, while we were there, we rode trails on rented bicycles. And Mackinac is beautiful.

You're beautiful, he teased, taking a quick photo of me before turning back toward the woods. I helped him set up his tripod. We'd opened the business six months before, and he wanted a new backdrop – something woodsy, something natural – and we could have bought a stock photo for it, but, as Wade put it, we're supposed to be better than Wal-Mart's photo studio.

Where is that photograph of me? I'm not sure and suddenly that bothers me, I want to leave the mother and baby to Cal and go home to dig through boxes until I find it, surely I hadn't thrown it away, we never throw away photos, or lose them really, just hide them for a little while. I remember it, the cool dampness of the wooden rail pressing into my backside, not really posing, one leg still thrown over my bike to keep it upright against the bridge, arms outstretched, laughing, my face was stretched into a laugh at the very moment he took it and I smile now remembering but it feels brittle and hollow and I can't hold it for long without cracking.

Sign here please, and we'll give you a call when your prints are in, about a week okay? And she bundled her little boy into a stroller gaudy with plastic teething rings and soon she disappeared and I wondered.

Of course you never expect to get the call, that'd be too easy if somehow I'd seen it coming, but it was only a phone call and not a knock at the door because Wade didn't die in action, he died on the plane home, nothing heroic, just a sudden heart attack, something about having a pre-existing condition that the army physical hadn't caught, it could've happened anytime. Anytime at all.

That's it for the day, Cal said, wiping his lens with a dull yellow cloth. Why don't we grab some food at the café before you head home, eh?

And I say yes, because I don't really want to be alone just yet, and the mall café, like almost all the shops here now except the one where teenage girls get their ears pierced is a little independent place, and they have the best chicken salad I've ever had, with grapes in instead of raisins. There's something about biting into something firm and juicy in the middle of a sandwich made of mush that makes it so, so much better and I tell myself this is all I'm thinking about and I believe it.

Cal had taken the phone call for me; I'd left the studio when the cramps started. So I was still lying on the hospital bed wondering how to tell Wade I'd lost the baby, steadily going through the box of tissues one of the nurses had thought to leave for me, when Cal came in, wiping his nose with a sodden handkerchief (dark red) and blubbering with lips wet from dripping snot and spit.

And Cal orders for both of us (I always get a drip coffee with three creams and that chicken salad sandwich here, I don't think I've even tried anything else) and we talk and laugh and really he does look a lot like Wade, squarer and broader, no biking scar on his face, and I wish that it could be easy, that after I finished my coffee we could walk

out to my car and I could kiss him goodbye and fall into his arms, and that could be the end of it, but it isn't. It never will be.

After we eat he walks me out to my car because just last week a woman got mugged as she was finishing her shopping, and we wave goodbye as always, and I hear his Buick pull out of the lot only a few minutes later, but I sit for a while behind the wheel, knuckles pressed against my cheeks, wishing they'd cave in and crackle inward like the face on that old china doll.



# Bottle Tree

I think the important thing to consider when somebody rejects you, sexually I mean, is that there's always a chance that they aren't rejecting you as a *person*. I mean, that's really only the case if you're already friends with a person, someone you aren't friends with doesn't know the person you are yet, so they're just rejecting you out of hand and honestly how soul-crushing could that possibly be? But someone who's a friend already, they've already accepted *you* to an extent, if you've done it right, that is. A friend is someone who figured you out ages ago – my friends know my moods when I'm painting and the faces I make when I'm doubled over laughing until I puke and most of them by now have seen me cry until snot runs in clear strings out my nose. And in turn I've taken the two am phone calls and the drives to the airport and the dates to a cousin's wedding and the dead relatives, because that's what you do, when you're friends.

There had been a lot of champagne at that wedding. It was just a few months ago now, four months, four and a half? Not long. Not long at all, really.

My last ex left me with a couple scars, I guess. Well, one of them's literal, he shoved me into the stove once and my arm hit the burner and crisped, little bubbles of skin rising so perfectly and so much like the skin on a good chicken or a roast that I nearly hurled right there, just looking at it, and of course he freaked and took me to the

hospital and told the nurses I'd tripped, why weren't they helping me, where were the painkillers, where were the bloody doctors? He was from Essex, had moved to the states when he was seventeen and had never really let go of the accent, I guess it wasn't that long ago for him but seventeen seems like another country, another planet even these days. I was stupid over him, and part of me blames that voice, like someone off TV (the telly, he'd correct me), and I guess I just watched too many *Doctor Who* reruns as a kid, and too much rested on just that accent, the rounded rolling words and I would like to say I didn't know better, but I did, Mom had told me she left Dad because he hit her once, he didn't even know she was pregnant yet and she just never told him, went to court proceedings and let him call her a lying cheating bitch without a flicker, at least that's how I imagine it, and he took almost everything because of that, but she didn't have anything before she married him so it didn't make that much difference to *her*.

The wedding, the wedding I went to with my friend Tristan, was utterly beautiful, and such a ridiculous lacey affair I couldn't imagine trying to plan it – the bride was a second cousin of Tristan's he almost never spoke to, just a little older than us, and I had to buy a new dress for the occasion. Tristan begged me to go with him, begged me not to make him show up alone, and it wasn't like I didn't want to be with him, it was hard not to want that all the time, I don't even know when that started but it had, it did, I have this horrible habit of falling in love with friends, or at least that's what I think it is. I wore a muted orange, figuring that was safe enough for a wedding, kind of a burned-out darkened sunset color, and it clung to me a little, but it hit my shoulders just right, so the eye went to my collarbone instead of my scarred arm (shiny, pinkish against deep tan skin, it always looks like I've got oil or something spilled onto my arm) or so I liked to

think. There was an open bar, and Tristan kept bringing back more champagne. Neither of us dance, so what else was there to do but wait and drink.

Aunt Beth was a drinker, I remember, even when Mom and I moved in with her. She had a tree out back hung with dozens upon dozens of glass bottles, green and clear and reddish and all glowing and tinkling gently in the sunlight, and it was supposed to be a spiritual thing, but I could tell from how Mom looked at it that she didn't think so, that it was a reminder of how many more bottles Beth had emptied, and that was just how it was. Beth always had a little glass of something whenever I saw her awake; she'd tell me it was lemonade or water or orange juice. She used to sleep until eleven every morning, and lived off the checks from her dead husband who'd gotten shot in the war and her own social security.

Beth used to let me help her hang up her bottles at the end of the week, Saturday mornings when Mom opened at the diner where she'd started working during the divorce, and she told me that the empty bottles were to catch evil spirits, like the kind that cause bad dreams, and I don't know what it is, but I almost never had nightmares until I moved out of that rickety old house and into a college dorm, and I tried putting an empty wine bottle under my bed, but that didn't seem to help. Maybe they had to be out in the open to catch them. And maybe Beth was just a superstitious old lady – fifteen years older than Mom, even. But mostly these days when I think about her, I remember her in the spring, just as it was starting to get warm again, holding an old plastic crate filled with empty gin bottles and wine bottles and vodka bottles, and me holding out the scissors and fishing line for her. I learned how to tie a good hard knot from Aunt Beth, because if you didn't tie the bottle up tight enough, it could come down again, and the bottles could kill in a

good enough wind, though that wasn't the way Beth died. No, the bottles weren't involved at all in that.

Tristan found the idea of bottle trees fascinating. He was Wiccan, had been since he was fifteen or so, he said, and he always wore on the end of a long silver chain a tiny star encased in a circle, all in silver and very plain but for the round purple stone in the center (amethyst, he told me, I remember), and it was at the wedding, looking at the champagne bottles lining up on the table that I told him about Aunt Beth's tree, and he said he'd heard of it, that it was an old African tradition, and for a second he flushed, but I ran a hand through my thick black hair and tried not to laugh at him. My family's been here so long we're a bit of everything, and it hardly matters anyway – Aunt Beth was at least half white, a quarter Cuban and a quarter fuck-all, who knows she used to say, and Mom's almost the same but with a different father, so there's some Chinese in there too, and maybe a little Indian. So it didn't matter where the bottle trees had started or if Beth had any real idea what they used to mean. She had one, and it kept nightmares away, and that's all I really know.

Tristan was in one of my mythology classes with me, that was how we met, and he was with me when I met my last ex, too, the one who pushed me and maybe meant it and maybe didn't, but anyway I've still got that scar on my arm and no amount of bottles can make me forget about that, and Tristan and I used to talk about the Greeks a lot, especially Dionysius, who my old books used to say was the god of wine but was really the god of madness and drunkenness and the wild, too, he was a wild god, Tristan said. And for me it was hard to link all those ideas together, because Beth wasn't always drunk or anything like that, but just kept up a tiny buzz throughout most of the day, said she got

headaches if she stopped, and then her whole body would start to hurt, and she drank just enough to “keep the hurting away.” I found a bottle of brandy in her pantry once, unopened, coated in a thick layer of grime that none of her other bottles ever grew, and asked her about it, and she said that Wade had bought it just before his last tour, said they’d drink it together when they got home, and that was really the only time I saw her stop smiling for very long, her eyes went all kind of loose and she took a gulp of her screwdriver to steady herself. Can’t bring myself to open it, honestly, she said, maybe I’ll will it to you so you can keep it, a little reminder of your old uncle, huh?

Dionysius was the source of alcohol-madness, of drunkenness, Tristan told me as the champagne bottles lined up. We weren’t the only ones drinking from them, surely, but Tristan’s blue eyes seemed hazy and bright all at once, so maybe he had more than I did. I felt steady enough that night. He was, and here Tristan lowered his voice a little, he was a way to forget yourself, to let loose, and the Greek women used to run out into the mountains and tear animals to shreds and strip naked and have wild orgies when struck with the madness of Dionysian wine. Beth never felt that, I told him, but she did forget, it helped her forget. Mom told me that she’d been pregnant when Uncle Wade left, four months pregnant, far enough along that it’d be Christmas with a new baby when they finally drank that brandy, but she’d no sooner sent off a letter to him telling about that awful hospital stay (it was nobody’s fault it never is) and only a few days later came the knock at the door, the officer with his hat in his hand, and the father and the baby boy must have died within a few hours of each other, I told Tristan maybe they just wanted to see each other first, and that was when Beth started drinking more, worked long hours and stored away all of it to drink and make the payments on the house, retired as soon as

she could. I never saw her leave that house – she kept the garden wild and chaotic with roses in the summer, roses climbing over everything, the porch, the trees, each other’s thorns, and of course there was the bottle tree, and the house itself was always spotless.

And Tristan laid a hand on my leg and said, oh what did he say, he said something about a little madness being good for the soul, and I remember looking at him and seeing past the stone-colored eyes and the hair he had gelled back, showing his high forehead because all the men in his family (you only had to look around a little to tell) started balding early, he was lucky that his had only receded a couple inches, it was still thick and brown otherwise, and his face was pale, pale, pale like the moon I thought then and giggled a little, and he asked why and I said it was because he was Diana with the moon glowing on her brow, and there really had been too much champagne that night.

Aunt Beth might have been the drinker, but it was actually Mom who gave me my first taste, the diner was staying open late for New Year’s because it had a TV in the corner, I was fourteen years old, turning fifteen in January, and Mom had a glass of champagne to sip while she worked since it was a holiday and when her boss wasn’t looking let me try it, I was a woman now she told me, so I may as well, and I don’t remember the taste, I remember the bubbles sitting somehow light in my mouth and heavy in my stomach, and it seemed like I held it there, that curious hint of warmth like a secret nestled in my belly.

My ex had some trouble with my drinking, he said it was too expensive and I was just going to end up a useless lush like my aunt, and that was what made me start fighting back a little, because how dare he talk about her like that like she was someone he knew, and then he’d tell me to shut up about that fool old woman, only an idiot would drink that

much anyway, how did I know it didn't run in the family, and so I'd ask if he was calling me stupid, and it never ever got any better from there, and more than once I'd end up calling Tristan at two in the morning asking him if he could come get me, because the fight had ended badly and I didn't want to sleep in our bed, and Tristan never said no to that, even if he had work early the next day, he'd come get me and set me up in his own bed while he kipped on the couch and that was how it was.

The bottle of brandy sits in the back of one of my cabinets now, and sometimes I almost forget it's there, it's so easy to forget things sometimes – it was four months ago now that we'd had far too much champagne, or maybe five, and I haven't forgotten any of it. His hands were so cold and felt almost desperate crawling over my body, nails digging into my ribs, fingers squeezing my breasts which were sore the next morning from the heat of it. I saw his eyes linger on the scar on my thigh, it's a little narrow jagged ridge of skin just past the point where my crotch becomes my leg, the same ex had told me he'd write his name there once with a razor so I couldn't cheat on him – who'd want to be down there looking at another man's name? He carved a ragged *S* before I started crying and apologizing, sorry for putting on makeup before buying groceries, sorry for smiling at the bank teller, sorry for not being good enough, sorry, sorry, sorry, and then he stopped and said it was all right and helped me clean and bandage the cut. I'd never told Tristan that story before and I still haven't told him, I haven't told anyone and sometimes I almost think I don't really remember it, and sometimes I'm glad to have the scars because without them maybe it would be too easy to forget anything like that could ever happen, and I don't want to forget. Then warmth and the light tracing line of a tongue over the skin and I remember and I want to forget again the moment when Tristan

pressed his mouth to the scar, and perhaps it would be easier if I had flinched away and instead, no, my breath hitched in something almost like a sob and I don't want to forget.

Aunt Beth had started to forget a lot of things, near the end. It'd be easy to say that the drink took her and I've heard people say as much, but it wasn't that at all, instead her brain started fighting itself, and I came home from school one day to find her sitting on the floor in the corner by the window overlooking the bottle tree, hand pressed over her mouth and tears flowing from her eyes, and she was talking into her hand so I couldn't really hear the words, but it was a conversation I couldn't stop and I knew then that she was talking to Uncle Wade, and from then on she never called me by name, she'd look at me or through me and call me by Mom's name instead, and I learned to answer to it because she didn't recognize Mom at all, she thought we were years in the past, and the doctors said it was just senility setting in and she'd lost the last fifteen, twenty years, and I helped her comb and braid her hair and put on red lipstick so she could go dancing with my uncle – I couldn't stop her from remembering, and if this was easier for her, fine, and we found her the next summer lying on her back beneath the bottle tree, neck twisted beneath her and they said she'd lost herself and tried to climb the tree even with her bad back, and I knew it wasn't an accident, because she'd told me the tree was supposed to catch bad spirits and maybe in that last day she thought she had one living inside her and she wanted to fill her old empty bottles again.

And then I remember Tristan again, his hands on my hips pulling myself up and over him, and the next morning when he said it was a mistake, just a mistake and we should just forget it, it was one night of wildness and I said, maybe I was angry, I asked if he thought Dionysius had entered the two of us and he wouldn't look at me, and there had



just been too much champagne, somehow it felt that there had always been too much champagne and my head had always hurt and my mouth had always been dried up like I'd been eating spoonful after spoonful of salt.

I want to forget.

I tried calling him a few nights ago, or maybe it was weeks ago, I'd had dreams again and wanted to see him, just to see him and talk for a while, and he said he just didn't have the time and before I could ask anything else the phone went that special kind of dead and quiet that you know he'd hung up, even though with cell phones that's a nonsensical phrase now, you push a button and just like that everything turns off – not like Aunt Beth's old phone which had hung on the wall and even had a cord, and if someone on that end of it decided they were angry enough they could slam it back down on the hook and the sound of it echoing through the telephone lines would make your ears ring like you'd just been clipped across the head, it was that loud and I haven't seen a phone like that in ages.

And I remember Aunt Beth's frozen little smile she wore all the time in the few weeks before she died and I wish I could forget it, I wish I could forget the smell of gin. And I lay my head down on the table and pretend that I can't hear the tinkling of the bottles I hung up on the tree in my backyard yesterday – the bottles clink and ring against each other and it is music that I wish I couldn't hear, and the deep brown brandy bottle was the first one I tied up hollow and empty with fingerprints marring the thick layer of grime forty years had left on the glass.

# Cellar Wine

The air was hot and heavy and somehow felt *dirty*, like it could creep into the sleeves of your jacket and leave oily traces of leaf mold and soot on your skin. Dirk walked confidently ahead of me in the gloom, leaving me to poke the heavy flashlight into all the corners.

He and his sisters had spent every summer with his grandpa Matt. They used to play down here, he told me as I checked under a shelf for rats, smudging the knee of my jeans against the dirt floor. Hide and seek especially – he was small enough, as the youngest, to fit into bottom of the laundry chute and it was several games before they figured out his hiding place.

“Now it’s nothing but this cellar and a few rafters,” he said, motioning toward the ceiling. The fire had eaten nearly everything, and though his granddad had gotten out of the house alive, he died in the hospital. The smoke he’d inhaled screwed with his emphysema, and in a few days his persistent cough turned into pneumonia. “He liked you, wanted to see you,” Dirk told me at the funeral. I nodded. What else could I do? I’d been stuck in an airport a few hundred miles away; winter lingered into April that year and none of the planes were taking off into the blizzard. So instead I was helping salvage what was left in the old man’s Michigan basement.

Something crunched under my shoe as I took another step after Dirk. I lifted my foot and shone the flashlight straight down. Mousetrap, now with a pulpy mess covering the spring.

Dirk laughed when he heard me gag. “I kept telling him to just get a cat. Come on.” And he beckoned me into the back corner, over by the boiler. “You’ll love this.”

“This sucks,” Marty announced, fussing with the frayed lapel of his suit jacket.

I shrugged and kept staring at the wallpaper over his shoulder. I’d already looked at the open casket, which was a frilly white affair that managed to be both too ornate and too plain for my taste, and certainly wasn’t anything Dirk could have had a say in, and worst of all it framed a waxy face set into a stern expression that could never have been mistaken for my brother.

Well, he wasn’t *really* my brother, and I knew at the funeral I’d be ushered over to the “friends” side and all of a sudden I didn’t want to think about any of that anymore.

Ellie nodded vehemently. She’d been dating Dirk for a couple of years and stuck with him even after the diagnosis. I guess Marty and I had been a little distant from her, like we were with all of Dirk’s girls. They just never lasted long – Dirk could wring the energy out of you pretty quick if you didn’t know how to handle him, and even Marty and I need a break every so often. Dirk was always on the run, always doing something, usually the kind of thing everyone secretly wants to do but doesn’t out of fear of getting caught, or maybe just for the sake of propriety. But El lasted almost a year before they found the spots in Dirk’s lungs, and for me at least that kind of proved it, that Dirk didn’t

try to get her to shove off, that she refused to let him go. Maybe he just wanted to keep someone around when they told him he was going to die. I never asked, and I don't regret that – it was his business, not mine.

I looked around the church. It was one of those tiny small-town affairs, the sort where everything – the carpet, the cushions on the pews, the curtains, the altar cloth – was the same color so it felt as though you were floating in an artificial sea. In this case, it was a sort of raspberry red, and the cushions were frayed, some indented with the precise shape of the thighs that had pressed against them every week for the past decade or more. I'd attended a church like this when I was a kid, could bet that the pastor greeted everyone by name and that the communion wine was really just grape juice because more than half the congregation had liver trouble. Really, Dirk's and my childhoods were a little too similar, so that sometimes I'd forget that we spent them on opposite sides of the state, until I moved to live with my mom when I was thirteen.

A leathery hand fell onto my arm, and I turned to have to look down at an earnest wrinkled face underneath a mauve hat. The old lady had on bright pink lipstick, and a little had rubbed off onto a yellowed tooth. A false tooth, I remembered, she'd been telling everyone about her last dentist's visit at Thanksgiving – this was Dirk's mother's sister, and I spent the first half-minute or so of our conversation distractedly trying to remember her name. Jill? June? Probably June. Oh, it was so sudden, such a shame really, she said. Then a sly look, and the comment that it was a pity I'd never made a man of him.

I'd been fielding this lady off for years. I waved a hand toward El and just said something about it not being my place, or not having the patience, both of which were true. The smile on her face became a little fixed as she glanced toward El, who smiled

brightly and gave a little bounce and a wave, the gold Star of David around her neck glinting in the tinted light from the stained glass window. Aunt June, unless she was Jill, just nodded, smiled, and suddenly found someone else to talk to. El's smile never wavered, and if anything she seemed even more cheerful.

“You shoulda told her Dirk was an atheist.” I laughed a little, and somehow the fact that we were all ignoring the casket behind us was easier to take.

Dirk and I had been friends since junior high. I was a chubby kid and tended to hide behind hair that was already turning a bit greasy with puberty – and to top it off, I was the new kid and had moved in right in the middle of the semester. I read books mostly so I wouldn't have to look at anyone. Even at my old school, I was always the kid picked last for everything – gym, which made sense since I had the athletic ability of the average harp seal, and group projects, even though my grades were pretty good. In the first week, I convinced Mom to forge me a doctor's note to excuse me from gym class. I'd sit on the sidelines, back against the wall, and read, usually something by Judy Blume.

That wasn't enough to get Dirk to leave me alone, though. He started bouncing a basketball off the wall by my head. I forced myself not to flinch each time, knowing the second I tried to jerk away he'd aim the ball for my face instead. After a couple minutes, though, he just stopped and asked what I was doing. I told him, in no uncertain tone, that I was reading, hoping he'd take the hint. Instead, he hung around, chattering about how his sisters read some of the same books and he tried them and thought they were okay.

I lowered my book. I'd never even heard of a boy reading Judy Blume and wanted to get a look at him. He wasn't much, really. Scrawny, mostly elbows, spattering of acne

on his forehead. Messy brown hair, and blue eyes that even back then always looked oversized and credulous – it would only be a few years before he learned how to use them to his advantage. He had something. Charisma, I guess. He was just difficult to actively dislike.

In any case, Mr. Moore, the gym teacher, told him off pretty quick for dropping out of the class basketball game, and Dirk winked at me before running back in. After that, I started watching the games instead of steadfastly ignoring them.

“What is it, Dirk?” I asked a little snappishly. I’d walked into a cobweb when we first came in and could still feel strands of it clinging spiderlike to my face and hair. He grabbed my wrist to direct the light onto the lowest shelf in the corner, onto a battered green footlocker. He grabbed the handle and hauled it into the open, panting a little.

“Open it,” he told me, grinning.

The catch had nearly rusted shut and squealed loudly as I forced it open. It was packed with hand towels of half a dozen colors and weaves, all rolled into little bundles. I looked a little closer and saw a tiny plastic foot poking out of one. Dolls.

“Told you you’d like it.” I ignored the comment and handed him the light so I could pick up one of the bundles. I cautiously unwrapped it – I’ve been collecting and restoring old Barbies for maybe fifteen years now, ever since Mom gave me some of her old ones to play with. They had closed, pouty lips and funny old hairstyles, and I liked them better than the new smiley blondes that all my friends had, even if I did have to be careful not to pull their hair out when I brushed it. The doll in my hands had her hair teased into a giant bubble cut, like Jackie Kennedy, and the strands shone light gold

under the flashlight. I nearly dropped her, and my hands trembled a little as I fumbled to wrap her back up.

“Nice, aren’t they?” Dirk asked. I nodded. They must’ve been his mother’s.  
“Don’t know what to do with them.”

“Well,” I said calmly, tucking the bundle back into the trunk. “You could sell the one I just had out for upwards of five hundred dollars.”

Dirk whistled. “Seriously?” I nodded, the shadow of my head bobbing against the circle of brilliance the flashlight threw against the back wall. “We’ll take that trunk with us today, then, before Aunt June gets her hands on it.”

I latched the lid and was about to start carrying the trunk toward the stairs when Dirk told me to wait. He’d found something.

I turned back and stuck my head into the corner he was investigating. An old bedsheet had been draped over something lumpy. Probably just another pile of junk – grimy mason jars, scraps of 2x4, that sort of thing. Dirk lifted the sheet up, showering me with more dust, and immediately both of us retched from the stench. It was a cloying smell, sickly sweet with a touch of rot, but vaguely familiar. And sitting in the corner was a bundle of dusty tubing and glass jugs, and two crates – one with closed jars and the other with glass wine bottles. Dirk poked at the still a little bit, holding his breath against the smell. One of the jugs was half-full with a murky liquid the color of old piss.

“I’m not drinking that,” I said quickly, remembering an experiment we’d run in college trying to ferment pizza sauce. I still can’t go back to Domino’s. “I don’t wanna go blind from drinking old moonshine.”

Dirk had picked up one of the glass bottles and was holding it to the flashlight, then set it down to examine one of the sealed mason jars. He grinned, teeth glinting faintly in the dim light. “It’s not moonshine,” he said. “It’s mead. Honey wine.”

El, Marty, and I didn’t stay at the viewing much longer. It was stiff, really, and boring once you got past the novelty of having a dead body in the room. Marty was right. Dirk would’ve hated it.

In the last couple months, he kept making us promise that we wouldn’t be sad. That the funeral would be a big party or something. And of course we promised, but it’s not like we had any legal say. Maybe El should’ve talked him into getting married or something. But as it was, his family, mostly his aunts, got to decide what happened, so we were standing in our best dull clothes around a casket inside a church to talk about the atheist who wanted to be cremated.

His hospital room had been more cheerful. Dirk had that effect on anything, though. Somehow he’d charmed the nurses into ignoring the bottles of mead he had me store behind the bed, and El got to stay way past normal visiting hours, when even his aunts couldn’t get in. Marty carried in a cot and a couple of extra chairs, and I sewed bright blue curtains for him to tack over the aluminum blinds and brought in an old quilt done in shades of violet and lavender. We spent a few nights getting shitfaced on his grandfather’s mead and passing out in the extra furniture, and we all spent as much time in there as we could but it was Marty who was actually with him at the last.

Dirk’s breathing had gotten progressively worse over the eight months since we’d cleaned out the old cellar, and despite the homemade food we brought in for him – and



we tried everything, soup and stew and anything we thought he'd be able to chew – he lost weight steadily. His hair thinned, but he never went completely bald even during his chemo. But after a while, we could tell he was ready for it to be over. He started getting antsy, like he used to before we headed out on our road trips to big concerts or comic book conventions, things like that.

Marty won't tell us how he went. I guess that's okay. Nothing would make it right, I mean, that he's gone.

The first time Dirk piled us – Marty and me, anyway, El wasn't around yet – into his old Chevy, we had no idea what was going on. It was October, our freshman year, and we'd only just met Marty. Apparently he and Dirk were in the same intro to bio class, or something. Certain things are hard to remember. All I know is Dirk told us to pack clothes for a weekend and stuck me in the middle of the back seat so I could lean forward and talk to them “on the way.”

The drive was supposed to be something like four hours, and Dirk wouldn't let us fall asleep. Marty did once, and Dirk left him until he was snoring a little, then nudged the car over onto the chatter strip on the side of the highway. The car groaned and rattled, and Marty bolted upright so quickly he cracked his forehead on the slope of the roof. And this is the thing about Marty, as soon as he woke up enough to realize what'd happened, he laughed along with us. But he didn't fall asleep again.

So all of us were awake when the car coughed and shook like a dying thing, when Dirk's eyes went wide and he swore as steam poured off the hood into the light rain. He

managed to get it pulled off the shoulder before the engine stopped completely, and we piled out, me pulling my sweatshirt hood over my head against the weather.

I stood a bit aside as Dirk popped the hood and stared helplessly into the depths of the engine. For some reason looking under the hood is something everyone does when a car stops working, even if they're the sort of person who thinks a V-8 is a can of vegetable juice. And I knew Dirk didn't know anything whatsoever about machines. They just weren't his thing, and I knew I wouldn't be any help. Marty peered over Dirk's shoulder and said something about it just being overheated, and long overdue for service from the looks of it, and did Dirk happen to have any water in the trunk? Of course he didn't, and that left us standing in that incessant fall drizzle halfway to nowhere on an abandoned highway.

It's funny but I never really developed so much as a crush on Dirk. It was enough for me to loan him books, and for him to show me how to dribble a basketball after school. I guess we were both just kids, really, kind of lonely – Dirk's family didn't have much money and his clothes were always worn out hand-me-downs from cousins and sometimes even his sisters, and most of the other kids just sort of avoided him. I mean, sure they liked him, everyone did. He wasn't the first picked for teams, but he was never last; people said hi to him and he could sit anywhere he liked in the cafeteria, but no one really wanted him around other than that. I was the only one he ever invited over to his house – a trailer out in the middle of the woods, and you had to let the water run for a little bit before it would come out clear instead of pink with rust. He slept on a fold-out bed, his three sisters shared one bedroom, and his mom had the back room that was just

big enough for a double bed. He was embarrassed by the whole thing. His mom was a great cook, though, so I really liked visiting – my mom usually just brought take-out home after work. I'd never seen chicken that wasn't deep fried or smothered in sweet-and-sour sauce before.

We used Dirk's truck to haul the trunk and the booze back to my apartment, and just piled everything in the living room. That was when I first noticed something was off – Dirk flopped onto the couch and didn't move for a bit once we'd gotten everything in. Dirk was always moving, always doing something. He never just lay still while awake: his hands would fiddle with the hem of his shirt, he'd pull out a deck of cards and shuffle them nervously, for a while he even started crocheting just to try to be productive with his fidgeting. And I looked closely then, and his face was pale underneath the layers of grime, his eyes sunken and shadowed.

Marty might have been there when he died, and El might have been the one who spent the most time with him when he was dying, but I was the first one to learn he wasn't going to live too much longer. I can hardly remember the conversation except the way it started.

He asked if I'd ever thought about my own funeral, and of course I hadn't, that was for old people, and he ignored me when I started asking what was up and made me promise that his wouldn't be depressing. He made me promise that before he told me anything about the dark blotches on the CT scan.

Dirk was always like that about any bad news. When he found out his mom was moving to California – she'd been close with my mom, and kind of like an aunt to me,

but in a good way – he showed up in my dorm room at half past midnight. And you know, he wouldn't tell me anything at first, he just said we were going to the arcade, just like that, and wouldn't even let me change out of my pink fuzzy pajama pants with goldfish on them.

He actually told me the news while we were playing *Street Fighter* – I was losing, I pretty much always do unless I accidentally figure out how to do a combo attack – and it's hard to say if it actually made it any easier. I didn't win that round, anyway, and had to try to jiggle the joystick while the information was still rolling around in my head. Afterwards, we went back to my dorm and watched a rerun of *The Price Is Right* on mute, filling in the silence with our own made-up dialog. Dirk gave Bob a faux-Russian accent and called all the contestants “Comrade,” which seems uninspired in retrospect but I assure you, at the time it was the funniest thing I'd ever heard.

So I had a feeling that day, after we'd cleaned out the ruins of his grandpa's house, that Dirk was trying to build up to something, and finally he told me, and then he tried to get me to watch a bad movie with him. I attempted to argue, but he didn't have anything more to say about the fact that he was dying. So the night I found out, we sat in my apartment with the TV glowing, volume way up as we sipped at a jar of sour-sweet honey wine we'd salvaged from the cellar.

Later, I sold most of the dolls on eBay for him to help cover his medical bills.

It took over an hour just to get someone to stop with all three of us flagging down every passing vehicle, and another twenty minutes to convince the driver – a matronly-looking lady with her hair cut in a bob a bit too young for her and with eyes unevenly

shaded blue – that we really weren't serial killer rapists looking to jack her vehicle and really just needed a ride to the next exit so we could call for a tow.

Which of course meant waiting another hour in a tiny BP, arguing with Marty over whether pizza-flavored Pringles were better than loaded baked potato, with Dirk steadfastly defending the superiority of the cheesy ones. A senseless argument, and I even remember thinking that at the time, but somehow that entertained us while we waited, and I guess I remember it so in its own way it's important.

We ended up spending the rest of the weekend in a run-down Holiday Inn instead of the sci-fi convention Dirk wanted to surprise us with. The first night, after we'd gotten the car to a mechanic and checked the mattresses for lice (no parasites, though Dirk did find a used condom underneath, right near the headboard, and, being Dirk, he immediately picked it up with a pen and chased Marty and me around the room with it until we collapsed out of breath on the very mattress that until then had concealed it), Marty flipped the television on. The newest incarnation of *Superman* was on, and looked like it had just started, and then Dirk's face brightened up, like it always did whenever he got an idea, and he told us to wait a minute, like we could possibly go somewhere, and he left, returning half an hour later loaded with a paper sack full of cheap, watery beer and all three types of Pringles we'd argued about earlier, fake ID clamped in his teeth.

“What did he tell you he wanted at his funeral again?” El asked.

I ticked them off on my fingers: “Booze, strippers, a giant cake, a cake *with* a stripper, and Guitar Hero.” And somehow I felt, that if it had been one of us in the casket, that Dirk would've found a way to make all of that happen.

Marty slumped into my armchair, and I cast a look around my apartment. Honestly the place was more than a little bit bare – I don't really decorate, and the only things I owned that weren't purely functional were my vintage Barbies, and I kept those in a case in the closet. Seeing dozens of sets of plastic legs and unblinking eyes along a shelf tended to be a little unsettling, even to me. One doll sat out, or rather stood, supported by a plastic stand, fifties-era flowered dress and haircut glaringly out of place next to the sleek television and game system with their tangled wires.

El shrugged, and pulled off her cardigan, half-heartedly swinging it around her head. "Strippers."

I ducked into my kitchen and found some Little Debbie snack cakes, then dumped the entire box out on the coffee table. El, bra strap poking out from under her camisole, was already booting up the Wii. Marty dug the blade of his pocketknife into the cork of the last bottle of mead, and the three of us spent the day of our best friend's wake playing video games, Dirk's inherited Jackie Kennedy Barbie looking on as we drank the last of his grandfather's cellar wine.

# Nan

It was dark, and the space was so small I had to pull my knees even with my chin in order not to crush my toes against the wall. It smelled of dust and cedar, but not at all of the flowers down the hall – so many chrysanthemums I could hardly breathe, couldn't take three steps without their fluttering petals brushing my skin like the wings of a moth; here I could hide from them. I can't hear anything, even though the walls are thin enough that footsteps, movements, the clattering of pots in the kitchen come straight through without bothering to echo and fade. There is a small thread working loose from my jeans, where I'd snagged them on a nail one of the other kids hadn't pounded flush with his project. Tim's doghouse, I think, but it doesn't matter.

It's the third night of Passover, and two days ago Nan gave her annual speech at the local high school. I'd never heard it before. When I was little, I used to beg Nanna to tell me about it.

"No," she'd say, brisk and always a little nasal. "You're too young." But she'd carry her little case to the high school down the road once a year, and show them the strange things in the case of which I'd only caught tantalizing glimpses – a pair of shoes with the soles hanging off in great flaps, a tiny stuffed dog with mismatched button eyes and stuffing falling out of a hole in the leg – and explain what had happened to her "back

in the forties.” It killed me not to know, and I couldn’t even try to sneak into the high school to listen because she always timed it for the beginning of Passover, before the first night’s Seder. Those days, Mom would get me out of school early. She said that enjoyed my help preparing the dinner, but I knew it was really because she couldn’t read Nan’s handwriting, which was small and spiky and seemed to twist in on itself, like if perhaps it curled up tiny enough it could just disappear. Not at all like the tall rounded letters I was taught to make at school, or the wandering, random shapes and lines and abstract pictures Mom still used when she was writing in a hurry.

I only knew how to read a few of them – like “Tsukino,” my name, which was the symbols for “Moon” and “field” and pretty easy to remember, and I’ve always liked it even if it’s hard for people to say, because when it’s written, and written properly, I remember how Mom had described it. Rice fields are full of water and so my name was like the rippling moonlight, she said. It also sounded like I belonged to the moon, and she said that fit because when I was little I could never sleep through the night. Well, that part’s still true, actually, most of the time. But Japanese is like that, everything has double or triple meanings, and just trying to understand all of them means a good headache. Back then, though, the only other one I knew was “Mother,” because I’d snuck a peek into Mom’s dictionary when she wasn’t looking and copied it so I could address her birthday and mother’s day cards correctly.

That was something Mom and Dad had always argued about – me using Japanese. I was maybe four when Nan moved to Michigan (Dad used to say “MEE-chee-gan” to tease my mom, who after seeing it on a map said she wanted to move there because her and its names were almost the same, forgetting about the short “i” sound completely



because her name was Michiko). Dad was always worried that I'd get teased at school because of how I looked, or that I'd start speaking in an accent if I learned, so Mom didn't teach me any of it at first. I didn't understand then. But Nan hurt her foot in the move and stayed with us for a couple weeks while it healed, because our house only had stairs leading down to the cellar while her apartment was on the fourth floor.

Nan had me pulled out of my last class twenty minutes before the assembly. It was shop, and I knew she was going to do it, so I already had my kit put away. I'd gotten about as far as I could in one day on the cabinet door by then anyway. Mom needed a new spice cupboard – the one that had come with the house had had a hole near the back as long as I could remember, with black charred wood marring the edges of it like a popsicle stain around a little kid's mouth. The previous tenants must have somehow lit it on fire, and the flames ate through part of the cupboard before it was extinguished. I used to try to imagine it sometimes – perhaps a tired mother, trying to make a grilled cheese sandwich, had forgotten the pan until the bread crisped, blackened, and flamed like it did the time my mother had tried to make one for me. Or maybe it was nothing like that at all. Either way, the hole was there, and even though we kept the wide canister of salt over the hole, I'd already accidentally nudged it aside once, knocking the pepper shaker through it. It shattered on the counter, and Mom and I spent the next twenty minutes trying to clean it up with burning eyes and noses that kept running. She and I both have a problem with black pepper, and I didn't want to do anything like that again, or worse, break something expensive that way, something we have to go into Detroit or mail-order to get, like the rice vinegar.

But Nan pulled me out of class, like I said. She liked bright colors usually, always had those bright jackets and matching pencil skirts all old ladies seem to have – hers were blue, purple, sage green, and I swear I saw her in a pink one once. But the day of the assembly she wore black, and she leaned a bit heavier than usual on her cane.

She'd had an argument earlier with some of the parents, but wouldn't tell me whose. There'd always been a handful of people who'd rather she stopped coming to the school. They'd say things like "leave the past in the past," or "kids don't need to know about that stuff," or complain about her giving their children nightmares, or say that it was a Jewish thing and not really any of their business. Sometimes there were outright accusations, that she'd been too young to remember, that she must've misplaced a few bits of memory, that part always with the little condescending smile suggesting that maybe she was really just a little too old to be taken seriously. That was the only kind of argument that really tired her out. People don't like talking about things that most people hide. And sometimes people will do anything to make sure they stay that way. But Nan was good at arguing, thrived on it usually. She always won, and went in swinging with the kind of confidence only the very best ever have, and came out the other end still grinning, barely pausing to dust herself off.

Mom was making breakfast for herself and me the morning I first started really getting to know how Nan worked. Rice with egg for Mom just like she'd always had in Japan, oatmeal with lots of raisins for me. Dad and Nan already had their coffee. Dad was frowning a little at his paper like he always did. His coffee would be almost cold by the time he remembered it. Mom called me from the kitchen – probably just asking me to get

the milk or something, but she forgot and said it in Japanese, so all I got was my name, my Japanese name.

“I don’t understand you, Momma,” I said.

Standing at the stove, Mom’s ears turned a little red, and she tried to cover up her embarrassment by patting at her tight bun of hair over and over again, smoothing imaginary flyaways into place while she tried to remember the English words she needed. But she didn’t have to, as it turned out. Dad didn’t seem like he’d heard anything and he went on reading the paper, but Nan set her coffee cup down harder than she needed to, jarring my glass of juice and slopping it all over the tan placemats we had back then.

She turned to Dad. “Do you mean to tell me,” she said, and like whenever she knew she was starting an argument, her voice got loud and shrill enough to break windows, “that my own granddaughter don’t know how to speak to her own mother? Huh? After all the grief that I gave you over Yiddish, did none of it get through your big head?” And with Mom and I staring in a kind of fascinated horror, Nan, this tiny wrinkly lady just about even with Mom’s height snatched up Dad’s paper and rolled it up, waving it at his head like a weapon. And Dad, who was six-five and still hugely broad, or I remember him being huge anyway, from his time in the Army, just tucked his chin down a little into his chest and tried to disappear into his work shirt. Nan turned back to Mom and I. “He used to try to hide his Yiddish books so he didn’t have to study! ‘Oh, I lost them, Mama!’ Pfahh!” Dad’s face was bright red. I couldn’t stop looking at him, and Mom must’ve been staring too, because I remember smelling the oatmeal boiling over and burning on the stove.

“Why don’t she know?” Nan demanded, wagging the paper in my Dad’s face.

“Didn’t want her to stand out at school, Ma,” Dad mumbled.

“Hah! Like *that’d* be what did it, huh? Tell you what, if you’re so worried, Mickey—” Nan could never quite manage “Michiko,” and told me that she’d given up on it some weeks before I was born “—she can teach both of us. Hey! What’s this?” She held up the sugar bowl and fixed her eyes on Mom.

“*Satou*,” Mom muttered, transfixed, hands still hovering around her head.

“Saytoo. See? I’ll be fluent in no time.”

I giggled.

“Oh, what? You think I’m too old to learn?” With a great heave, Nan pushed herself up and limped around the table, patting Mom on the shoulder as she passed her. “Now let’s check on this breakfast. What’re you having?” she asked, lifting the stinking oatmeal off the burner.

“Mom always has rice with egg in it,” I said, bouncing a little in my chair. “I can help!”

“Then we’re all having that today. Throw some more rice on, Mickey.” Dazed, Mom did as she was told, tipping an extra cup of water into the pot with it. Nan stuck the ruined oatmeal under the tap and continued talking over the hissing of the steam.

“You too, Joseph,” she said, addressing Dad. “I won’t be having you skipping breakfast. Most important meal of the day.” Mom nodded enthusiastically. She’d tried without success to get Dad to eat before going to work in the mornings, even as she packed up a lunch for him – always a ham sandwich, the only Western food she could reliably make right. She even burned toast.

I was late to school that day – Nan kept poking at the pot of rice, wanting to know how long it would take and how Mom would know when it was done, then tried to dish it out herself. For the next week, I had to pick bits of cold cooked rice off the bottoms of my socks before throwing them in the hamper. But I’d never heard Mom laugh so much, and even Dad ate the eggy rice without complaint. And of course after Nan insisted on walking with Mom and me to kindergarten, stumping along with her cane and chattering our ears off.

“What’s that?”

“A *mise*. A shop.”

“*Me-say*. Now you say it, Sukey.” Nan couldn’t quite get my name either, but it was her nickname for me that eventually stuck. Even Mom started using it after a while. “And that?” Pointing at the Smiths’ dog, who had his front paws up on the gate in order to bark at us better.

“*Inu*.”

“Shuttap, you stupid *inu*!” Nan waved her cane at him. “How do you say that, huh?”

Mom smiled. “*Urusai!*”

“That one word?”

Nan handed her little briefcase to me when we got to the auditorium. I took it under my right arm and offered her my left for the stairs down to the stage. She ignored it and just leaned a little more on her cane with each step. She didn’t seem tired, exactly. More like she suddenly was heavier than usual and had to be careful, lest a misplaced

step send her straight through the floor. I kept half-opening my mouth, trying to find something to chat about like we always did when we were together, but Nan was always the one who asked the questions, who steered the conversation, and I didn't quite know how to do it for her.

She'd already told me I knew by now most of what she was going to say. "It's the questions that'll be new to you. You'd be amazed what some people will ask." I didn't really know who "some people" were. Maybe the students, but her eyes looked distant, and I remembered the arguments she'd had over the phone the week before, having to insist that her memory was as good as it was ever been, what, did they think she'd gone daft in just a year? Did they think she couldn't handle herself?

Stubbornly independent Nan went back to live in her apartment after her foot got well enough to manage the stairs, but the morning lessons continued until the three of us could have a passable conversation in a sort of pidgin language – English and Japanese at first, but after a while Nan started throwing in bits of Yiddish. And sometimes, if she got excited about something, she'd use a couple German words, but I wasn't allowed to use them even though they weren't dirty.

Nan was a tough old lady, and I think after a few years some of it started rubbing off on Mom. Mom used to always keep her head down a little around Dad, and was always so shy about her English that she couldn't ask for help at the supermarket, preferring to take me with her so I could read the labels. But suddenly she started talking a lot more, chatting about this and that even when Dad was in the house. And listening to music. I came home once in third grade to find her dancing to a Beatles record Nan had

left on the coffee table, eyes closed and hips swaying, smiling from ear to ear. Dad sometimes seemed a little confused by the change, but sometimes I could catch him staring at Mom as she pranced around the house, cleaning or just dancing, and he'd be kind of shaking his head but there'd be a little smile on his face, too.

He caught me in the garage one Saturday morning trying to make a car out of some scrap wood he had lying around. I wanted to be like him – he made our coffee table and Mom's little jewelry box. The hammer was almost too heavy to lift, and I'd really only succeeded in pounding a nail crookedly into a bit of two-by-four.

“Whatcha doin’, kiddo?” he asked, kneeling down beside me and yawning. He worked late a lot and didn't get home until after dinner. Mom would keep it warm for him, though, whatever we had. If she tried making Western food, it would always come out a little strange unless Nan was helping – her meatloaf was always burned on the bottom or gritty in the middle, spaghetti was always a little crunchy, and her hamburgers crumbled. Dad never complained, even when we ended up having rice and stir fry for dinner for a week straight. When she could, she'd make soba or sukiyaki, the cold noodles dipped in broth for summer, and the simmering pot of meat and vegetables and wine as soon as the Michigan winters started getting to her, but sometimes finding the ingredients was difficult, and I was never sure what anything she needed was called in English.

Dad had big blue eyes that were always a little watery and puffy. He didn't sleep well – I sometimes woke up at night hearing him walking to the living room to stretch his legs, do push-ups, read the morning paper over again. I knew this because I'd follow him down the hall, holding my teddy bear and tiptoeing so he wouldn't hear me. I used to

think I was really sneaky, until one night he disappeared into the kitchen and came back with two mugs of milk. He sat on the couch and waved me over from where I was hiding behind the bathroom door. I crept out and sat next to him a little sheepishly. We didn't say anything, just sipped at our milk in silence, my legs swinging against the front of the couch because I was still too short for my feet to reach the floor. I remember staring at his feet – I couldn't have been more than six or so that night. His feet were huge, with knobbly knuckles and sparse golden hairs and dark yellow nails, and part of the little toe on his right foot was missing. I guess he caught me staring, because he wiggled his foot at me, set his mug down next to mine on the table, and swung me and Teddy into his lap. I shrieked a bit and giggled, but he pressed a finger to his mouth and shushed me. He told me that he'd hurt his foot a long time ago, when he was living in Okinawa where he met Mom. And I didn't want to go to bed yet, so I asked him how it had happened, hoping the story would last a little while.

He ran a hand through his mussed yellow hair and grinned crookedly at me. Then he told me that he'd made fun of a tanuki statue – a big fat raccoon with puffy cheeks. Tanuki have really big somethings, too, because Dad started telling me and got about halfway through a hand motion before he seemed to think better of it and just went on with the story, and back then I didn't think to ask him what he meant, and if I asked Mom she'd want to know where I'd heard about tanuki, and somehow it felt – still feels, really – like I'd be betraying Dad somehow. That was our story. But anyway, he'd laughed and mocked the statue, puffing out his cheeks and waddling like the thing would do if it could move. And on the way back to base he tripped and caught his foot in the rocks. It took two of his friends lifting under his arms to get him loose, and he waited too long before



going to see the doctor on base. It was so infected that at that point there was nothing to do but cut it off.

“Your mother scolded me for hours over that one,” he remembered, laughing a little. Mom had heard about the whole thing and lectured him not for hurting himself but for not apologizing to the tanuki. She believed that the raccoon had tripped Dad on purpose because his feelings were hurt. And right there, lying in bed with his foot bandaged up and waiting for a medical discharge, Mom had said that if he couldn’t keep himself out of trouble on a little backwoods island, then no way could he take care of himself in a big country like America.

Mom had never told me that.

I also found out that night part of why Mom didn’t talk too much about Japan. She didn’t have much family left when Dad met her. Just two cousins who’d taken her in as a baby when her parents disappeared – a lot of Japanese people disappeared around then, I guess. I’ve asked Mom about it more recently, and she told me her dad was a soldier, so no real mystery what happened to him. Her cousin told her that they found her mom lying with a broken neck at the base of a cliff by the sea, and you couldn’t rightly guess if she’d fallen during her daily walk or jumped because she’d heard the Americans were coming that day or because she missed her husband, and in the end it didn’t matter. By the time Dad got stationed in Okinawa, Mom had already been on her own a few years and was a fixture on base. She could sew like crazy and used to fix ripped trousers for just a couple hundred yen. Mom was really pretty when she was younger, too – I’d seen pictures. Mom hated seeing anything hurt, she was the kind of person who’d pick earthworms up off the sidewalk after the rain and drop them in the grass, and it occurred

to me that it was really lucky Dad had tripped and hurt himself and gotten discharged, because maybe if he hadn't Mom wouldn't have had the guts to tell him that she wanted to marry him. And I tried to tell him, between sips of milk, that maybe Tanuki had just been trying to nudge things along a little.

“Maybe, kiddo,” he said, laughing and rumpling my hair.

He always called me “kiddo.” Mom had picked out my name – her mom was named Tsuki, so I was Tsukino, and that was the third meaning of my name, and maybe it's bad luck to be named after someone who might have committed suicide but maybe somehow I can make up for that – and I think Dad had some trouble pronouncing it, and he never got around to just calling me Sukey like Nan did. But that morning in the garage was the first of a whole lot of Saturdays we spent in there together. I wanted to make things like Dad did for Mom. Dad pried out the nail I'd gotten halfway in, and then he helped me pick out a few proper pieces of wood. He wanted to know why I hadn't just asked for help, and for some reason I couldn't really tell him. How could I say that his just knowing how to put useless scraps of wood and metal together to make useful, sturdy tables was really a kind of magic to me? I was afraid that somehow it was all a trick and if I knew how he'd done it, some of that would be gone like the time the magician at the county fair had made one red foam ball turn into three balls. It was magic the first time he did it, but then he did it slowly and showed us how he'd gotten the others stashed up his sleeve, and though the other kids clapped just as much after that, I asked Mom if we could go look at the horses again because I felt like it was kind of like cheating, showing us how he'd done it. And maybe one of the girls who owned the horses would be around and would let me feed one a sugar cube or a wisp of hay out of my outstretched palm and

I'd feel a big soft pink tongue swiping my skin, and that was magic without any tricks, and something I could respect.

“What are you working on in class, Sukey?” Nan settled herself on the stool behind the podium. She was a little too short to stand behind it and still be seen. I handed her the case and watched her fuss with the clasps.

“Still the spice cupboard,” I said. “I want to try carving a flower design on the door, but Mr. Buck has no idea about things like that. So I've practiced on scrap today.” I held up a palm. My fingers were covered in a series of fresh nicks, and I noticed belatedly that I'd left a few reddish smears on the brown leather of her case.

Nan nodded, like she approved of it. “You'll get the trick of it soon, trying it out for yourself like that.”

Carpentry isn't really tricks, though. It's skill, and kind of like a puzzle, and it's not any less magical if you show someone else how to do it. And Dad handled it and me like that. He guessed that I wanted to make Teddy a car. The neighbor boys, five redheads with varying amounts of snot bubbles and freckles and names beginning with “M” that I could never keep quite straight, had little painted trucks that they'd run around with, making crashing noises at each other, but at some point they figured out I was a girl and shouldn't play with them, and not too long after that one of them remembered that my mama had long black hair and tan skin, and I found that it was easier to stay in our own yard, or inside. But I remembered the bright red fire truck I'd gotten to hold once, before all that happened, and it was just big enough to set Teddy on it and push him

around. I'm still not sure how, but Dad convinced me that Teddy needed a little chair first – we didn't have any dowels to make moving axles for a car and he probably didn't think I'd have the patience to learn how to make my own – so we made a little lawn chair with arm rests and everything, and I've still got it buried somewhere here in the closet.

The next week Dad came home with a few dowels and a new, smaller hammer that he painted green for me, and he helped me put together a car (which I wore out through running it over the linoleum in the kitchen, making screeching noises that didn't sound anything like a car but could make Mom jump a foot in the air on a good day), and then for a few weeks we worked on making a little box to keep any little treasures I found – a lucky penny, a feather I was convinced came from an eagle at the time but was probably just a goose feather, things like that. After a while, it started to be more me drawing what I wanted and him just telling me how to do it, then watching while I tried to follow his directions. He liked letting me work on my own.

My third grade science project was supposed to be a musical instrument of some kind, and I knew that harmonicas made sound from the air rattling through them. I tried making it alone first, cutting drinking straws I'd saved from the malt shop Nan took me to when she picked me up after school, but I couldn't manage to fasten the wood together without crushing them. But if I didn't fasten it completely, they just fell out.

Dad found me staring at the jumble of broken straws, fuming silently and sucking a finger I'd cut on the plastic. He looked at the mess I'd made on his workbench, then back at me. My ears were red and hot, they always get like that when I'm frustrated, but I wasn't quite crying yet.

He pulled my hand out of my mouth and looked at the cut, then whistled softly.  
“Got yourself good, kiddo. Why didn’t you come get me?”

I raised and lowered a shoulder. “It’s *my* project.”

He laughed a little. “So Ma’s rubbing off on you, too, huh?” He jerked his head toward the house door, and sure enough the record was playing again, almost as loud as it would go, and you could hear Mom trying to sing along. “She tried to get me to dance with her, too.”

I tried not to laugh, imagining Mom tugging on the sleeve of Dad’s robe while he tried to read the paper.

Dad picked up the pieces of my project, and after looking at them for just a few seconds figured out that I needed to brace the straws in, and that I should try gluing in small pieces of wood instead of nailing everything together.

And that was kind of magic too, how much better and easier it was to see how the pieces fit together when he was around.

Nan told me to sit in the third row. She didn’t want to be able to see me too clearly, and if I sat in front she’d try to look anyway. But she could look past me if I was a few rows in, so I sat there and waited quietly, picking at a scab on my index finger as the rest of the school filed in. The upperclassmen knew kind of what was up, and I like to think they jostled each other a little less, laughed a little quieter, got to their seats a little faster than the freshmen. But it was probably just my imagination, like when I thought Nan’s eyes settled on my face just before she started speaking, and for a second she faltered and I thought with a kind of dull horror that she’d lost it, she’d start trembling

like she did at home sometimes when she tried to tell me the harder parts. She told me that she'd never been anything but calm or maybe a little angry at the school presentations – “what could I do? Cry? I done that already” – and right then I wondered if maybe she'd lied to me, and the world wobbled a little bit, and I knew the feeling from the day that Dad died.

On presentation day, Nan burst into my third grade classroom in the middle of our science project demonstrations. Anna Q. was showing us her electric potato. I had the harmonica sitting on my desk, had been jiggling my legs in anticipation of going next. But Nan was leaning heavily on her cane, grey hair flying everywhere and she looked like an old witch, huffing and puffing for breath. Her face wasn't right, somehow her mouth had gone all hard and her eyes were wide and red, not like she'd been crying, but more like she'd been trying not to cry for a very long time. That was what wasn't right, and even though I was just a stupid kid I knew it, and I resented it for all it was, that sick feeling in my stomach and the burning in my cheeks. I wanted to cry, because it would've been easier than watching her not cry.

“Sukey, I'm taking you home early.”

Said so matter-of-fact, like nothing unusual had happened, not like she was standing there where she didn't belong at all, that I just slipped my project back into my bag and stood up. Nan stumped past the desks of whispering kids like she couldn't see them at all, disappearing into the coat closet and coming back out holding my little red jacket with the mismatched patches Mom had sewn onto the elbows to help it last longer. My teacher just kind of sat there at his desk, not saying a word, and I felt my cheeks

burning as the whispers turned into muffled laughter. I knew I didn't look at all like Nan and right then I didn't want to, and I stood there staring at my shoes and wishing desperately that she'd waited in the hall.

She tried to help me into my jacket, but I snatched it from her and slung it over my arm. Normally, classroom of interested observers or not, that would've gotten me a swat across the ear for being smart, but instead she just took my arm and steered me gently out of the room.

I knew then that something was really wrong, and immediately I felt sorry, and I begged her to tell me. But like always, she wouldn't.

“When we get home, Sukey. But we need to get you home now.”

And for the twenty minutes of walking, she refused to tell me anything, and instead asked me about my day, and what the other projects were, and about the class pet (a turtle named Speedy) sitting in his terrarium in the corner. And the whole time her eyes stayed the same, flat and tight somehow, but I kept talking, wanting her to laugh, or get angry, or cry, or anything that would make that look to go away. I was halfway through explaining Anna's stupid potato when we got to the house, and Mom was sitting on the porch and there was a policeman there and it took me a minute to realize that Mom was doing what Nan couldn't, and had a tissue pressed to her eyes and her shoulders were shaking.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but Nan had just gotten through the part I knew, the part she started telling me the day Dad died, when she wavered a little. Her words slurred. She was trying to explain how she felt the first time she had to eat pork

because it was all that there was, but it came out all mush, and it was like looking at two people at once – one side of her face crumpled, her lip drooping wildly, while the other half pulled tight, and I didn't even register that anything was wrong at all until I saw in the gleam of the spotlight a single tear trickle down the soft side of her face. Nan never ever cries, and she certainly never just falls over like she'd been struck like she did just then. When I shoved my way out of the row and past the principal who'd only been a little faster than me in figuring out what had happened, all I could think was that I didn't want to remember her like this, and then I hated myself for thinking at all.

Because whenever I think of Dad now, I don't remember him like he was. I remember Nan standing next to Mom on the porch, shoulders squared as if to defend her from the cop who was really only doing his job, it wasn't his fault that another driver ran a red light, and certainly not that Dad died in the street that day. I wish I could remember something else first, though, something right, something about him instead of just about us. I can remember Mom and Nan and I just fine, but I don't have enough of Dad. Even the funeral would be better, but instead I remember the sound of Mom crying and Nan placing a tired dry hand on my shoulder and squeezing a little while I tried to make sense of what they were telling me.

He had to be coming home. I'd promised to tell him exactly how the presentation went and what grade I got. He had helped me glue the bracers in, shown me how to squeeze the glue bottle to get just the right amount of glue I needed in a neat thin line, just enough to make it all stick but not so much that it would ooze out the cracks between the pieces when you pressed them together. And when I screwed up and used a little too much, he handed me a knife and told me to fix it, and I used the blade to scrape away the



extra glue, and when it was dry I sanded it smooth again so you couldn't tell. You couldn't see from looking at it that I'd messed up at first, and someone who knew how to fix something like that couldn't possibly not be able to come home again.

I broke away and ran into the house, forgetting to leave my shoes at the door like Mom had always demanded and running into my room. I threw my backpack at my open closet, hearing a distinct *snap* as the harmonica inside broke, and that was too much, even with Dad's help it took me a week to get right, and suddenly I was balled up on my bed but I wasn't crying, only babies cried, and Mom when she was on the porch with a policeman.

I don't really know how long I stayed like that, but Nan came in eventually, not knocking, just opening the door and walking in. She seemed like she was about to sit on my bed, but stopped when she saw the open closet. She stared into it for a while, then picked up my bag.

I'd begged and begged for a bright green one, and Mom had said it was too expensive, and Nan was school shopping with us and agreed. "Your old bag is fine, Sukey." And it didn't matter what I said after that, and they dragged me out of the store without it. On the first morning of school, it was sitting in my room, with a new pack of colored pencils in it for good measure.

"My father gave me a bag about this size," Nan said. "Everything I wanted to take with me, I put in here."

It took me a minute to get what she meant, and I couldn't believe she was telling me this now, of all times, when for once I didn't really want to hear what it was like in Germany.

She poked her head into my closet. “Come here, Sukey.”

I stood up slowly and dragged my feet across the room. Nan grabbed me by the shoulders and shoved me in front of her.

“See that spot there?” She waved a hand at the corner of my closet, where I’d put Teddy and some books that I was too old for now. “I had to sit in a spot just like that, but it was in the wall, just that size, and I couldn’t move or talk at all. I had a little pot for, for a toilet, and some days they’d let me out to walk a little, but I couldn’t go near the windows and I always had to be ready to duck back inside. It was always so quiet that I could hear the blood in my ears, and always perfectly dark.

“And I was sitting there when they opened the wall and told me that Papa had been killed.”

I turned and stared at her. She was blinking her wide blue eyes too fast now, and looking past me at something I couldn’t see.

“And I didn’t have nobody. And I don’t know where Mama was when she found out, or if she found out. Do you understand?”

I didn’t, but I nodded anyway, and let her take me to the living room. Mom had come inside and was sitting on the couch. She wasn’t crying anymore, but her hair had come out of its bun and she looked very small and very tired. I sat next to her, then suddenly realized I was still wearing my shoes, that you could see footprints on the carpet crossing the room. Nan disappeared into the kitchen, leaving us alone, and all I could think of was that Mom had never let me wear shoes in the house, and whenever I forgot I had to help her scrub the floor clean even if there weren’t any actual marks.

“I’ll clean the floor,” I said abruptly. “I’m sorry.”

Mom turned her head and looked at me, her eyebrows pulled together in confusion. And I felt bad that she hadn't noticed, so I lifted a sneakered foot and wiggled it at her, like Dad had done to me when he told me the story about the tanuki. The corners of her mouth twisted a little, and I reached over and brushed a tendril of her oily black hair behind her ear, patting it awkwardly back into place. She grabbed me and pulled me into her chest, and she didn't let go until Nan, following several minutes of banging pans and some Yiddish words I'd never heard before, brought in a bowl of rice yellow with runny egg, and a mismatched pair of chopsticks.

Mom did smile then, and she ate the goopy mess with several compliments.

And nothing ever really got said of the matter, but pretty soon all of Nan's clothes were moved into the spare room, so I guess in some ways this isn't really the story of how Dad died but how Nan came to live with us, and how she started telling me, in fits and starts, about the years she spent hiding in the walls as a teenager.

They wouldn't let me stay on the ambulance with Nan, so I had to run home, get Mom and try to explain what happened. I didn't know the Japanese for it, and she'd never heard of a stroke, and I ended up just pushing her into the car and gunning it out the drive before she'd even strapped in. It turned out to be a waste, anyway. They wouldn't let us see her, and I wanted to slap the look the nurse gave Mom when she said she was here to see her mother right off her starched face. My grandmother, my Nan, I wanted to say, but I just gripped Mom's hand as tight as I could and tried to memorize everything the nurse said so I could translate the important parts for Mom later. The waiting room was too bright, and Mom and I made pained half-conversation, Mom too upset to use English

easily, but both of us aware that every word in Japanese brought a few curious stares that weren't as discreet as the observers thought they were, and when they finally let us in to see Nan it was even worse because she just sat there, staring in two different directions, and neither one of them had us in it.

So we went home. We're no good at comforting each other, really, and couldn't figure out who was supposed to make rice for whom, so we just got in each other's way and snapped and I ran into my room more huffily than I'd meant to, leaving Mom sitting silently on the couch. There was lamb all thawed out in the fridge, and it was Passover and I knew that we should be trying to get it roasted, that the herbs needed to be chopped and the egg boiled and a hundred other things, but I couldn't even stand sitting in bed, couldn't stand being angry at Mom just because I was worried about Nan. My closet door was ajar; I'd been in a hurry that morning and knocked a shelf over. My clothes were still everywhere and my teddy bear had fallen off the top shelf I'd exiled him to years ago. I walked over and picked him up. One button eye was hanging by just a thread, and I tugged at it until it broke completely, but then his face was lopsided and I couldn't look at him anymore, so I set him in the corner of the closet, looking away from me with the remaining eye.

People started bringing flowers the second day, mostly just carnations and the like, but the ones who knew Nan at all brought chrysanthemums for us to decorate her hospital room. Mom nearly started crying with the first batch of them and wouldn't tell me why until the plain rice we had for dinner, after trying to visit Nan again in the afternoon. In Japan, mums are mourning flowers – well, Mom said “death flowers,” really, trying to help me understand, but I think that was what she meant.

“They mean the opposite here,” I said firmly. I hope she believed it, because I have no idea.

And today was the third morning, and Mom and I spent the morning choking on the scent of Nan’s favorite flowers, waiting for the hospital to call us with Nan’s test results, waiting for them to call to tell us when we could see her again. I stared at the phone until I wanted to hit it, and ran to my room before I let myself do it. Mom had set some of the flowers in a vase by my bed, so I ducked into the closet, pretending that I’d just clean up a little while I waited. With the closet door closed behind me, I barely had enough room to stand pressed against the shelf, and without really meaning to I sidled into the corner for a little more space, and sat down. I’d done this before, late the night after Dad’s funeral. I was still in my black skirt and blouse then, and I pulled my knees up to my chest and closed my eyes, trying to imagine that I couldn’t feel the breaths of air from my open window, that I couldn’t hear the sounds of Mom and Nan cooking rice downstairs in the copper pot.

Today was no different, and my ears rang with the sound the phone refused to make.

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