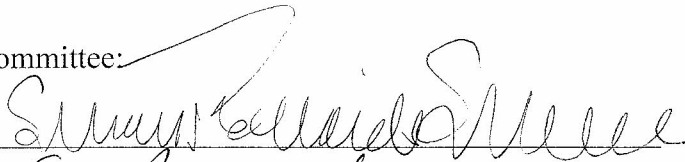


INHERITANCE

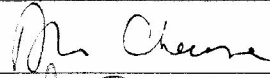
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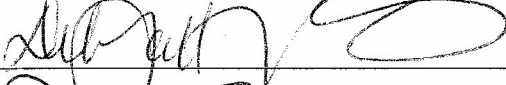
Alicia L. Gleason
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
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Committee:



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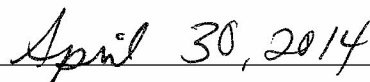


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Date:



April 30, 2014

Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

INHERITANCE

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Alicia L. Gleason
Bachelor of Arts
Colgate University, 2008

Director: Susan Shreve, Director
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Spring Semester 2014
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DEDICATION

For my dad.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Gio, for the unending love and encouragement. To my mother, for her voice on the other end of the line. To Susan Shreve, my thesis director, for the tireless hours she spent reading the early drafts of these stories, and for the countless afternoons she spent listening to me talk about them. Courtney Brkic and Alan Cheuse, for their keen reading. And to my peers and colleagues at GMU, who often provided insightful feedback and moral support in and outside of the classroom. Special thanks to Danielle Harms, Alex Henderson, and Jay Ivey.

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ABSTRACT

INHERITANCE

Alicia L. Gleason, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2014

Thesis Director: Susan Shreve

This collection of short stories observes families as they grow and wither, as they form and crumble. A young woman takes a road trip with her father's ghost. A twin is pulled into the vacuum her sister leaves when she runs away. A father watches his daughter and her mother unhinge. These stories examine the things we inherit from our own parents and siblings and ask us to question the things we presume we'll leave behind.

12TH ST SE

I always end up back at the apartment on 12th street. We moved in on a dim Saturday morning. Remember how you found that kinked key in the cabinet beneath the sink? A key someone before us had bent? You fell ill with interest in the houses' previous owners; in how they got in and got out; in where the key fit. You called the landlord. You searched in the cobwebbed cellar while I soaped the kitchen floors. I'll bet this was with a hammer, you said when you came out, holding the key with two fingers, a loop of red thread drooping from the hole at the top. Then you tracked dirt onto my clean floor. Or, someone with a strong hand, you continued, your shoe prints bleeding into the suds. Or, I said, waving you off the floor, it wasn't in the lock when it was bent—it was alone. I sponged the places where you shoes had been. The water in my bucket turned sour. So you agree, you asked from the creaking doorframe, that this key is trying to tell us something? I got impatient with you then: Sure, I yelled, it tells us we've inherited a half broken key that doesn't fit anywhere; that won't open a thing. Right, you said, but why?

EN MEMORIAM

After he died and I felt myself forgetting him, I often imagined my father and I on a mid-winter road trip down Highway 1, the coast wading into the water, foaming where the waves met the weathered cliffs. We drove towards Big Sur, where he wanted to stop for some photographs. From Pfeiffer Beach, he said, we could see the whales migrating.

In the fantasy, we took the same route we always drove when he was alive. But the difference--what always felt special about the fantasy--was that on this drive my father's flaws fixed to him like a rained on t-shirt and he knew me as a grown woman.

"You want pictures of the whales?" I asked, rubbing my swollen belly. His first grandchild, the size of an eggplant, drifted inside of me.

"They don't turn out," he said. "I want photos of the mountains with cows in the foreground."

"That's been done before," I teased, "those prints at the Coast Gallery."

"Not the way I'm going to do it." He turned to me, the mountains skimming past his profile, his teeth clenched together, crooked, stained with ten extra years of black French roast. He looked the way I like to remember him: skin flushed pink, beard growing in full and gray. "How's the baby?" he asked.

"Good," I said, "hungry."

We pulled into a vista point. While my dad took pictures of the coast draped in fog, I dug through the grocery bag in the back seat, feeling for the bag of dried, sugared mangos. I slid the bag between my teeth and backed myself out of the car. Once I was out, my father's lens pointed towards me.

"Smile," he said, winking through the view-finder, glasses pushed up against his thin, dark lashes.

I smiled, the bag of mangos still hanging from my teeth, the wind pulling strings of long, curled hair across my face.

"Without the fruit."

I dropped the bag into my open palms and tilted my head.

"I think it's a girl," he concluded, easing the camera down until it hung from his neck.

"What makes you say girl?" I asked.

"Your skin," he explained, "and your hair. Women get prettier when they have baby girls."

I flushed. (This, this complimenting with such clarity, is only something he can say in my fantasy).

"You'd be good with a girl, too. You'd be like your mother."

"Well," I paused, "For all I know it's dead in there."

"Stop."

"What? I wish I could see in."

My father sighed and clicked the cap on his lens. “You’ve got that gene.” He walked to the car, unlocked it, and once we were both inside, continued “the nerves.”

I looked at him, surprised. In all of my years with my father, he had never told me this. “You never show it.”

He cranked the key in the ignition, “I remember when I first started working for the ACLU,” he said. “I couldn’t get through a day without taking three trips to the toilet.” He paused. “At least. Those days, I was in court, defending these guys, but I had no idea what I was doing.”

I cleared my throat and detached a mango, tender and flaking with sugar, from the others in the bag. They were warm, heated by the stream of sunlight that had dipped into the grocery bag in the back seat.

He put his hand out.

“No,” I said, holding the bag of mangos beneath my arm, “You worked for the ACLU?”

“Why can’t I have one?”

“Because. They’re mine.” I smile. I feel like I came from somewhere.

He kept his hand extended: “Just out of law school I interviewed and they took me the same day. They must’ve really needed someone, I was so green. I interviewed in Converse sneakers.”

I unstuck another mango from the bunch and pressed it into his palm, soft and pink.

“You did not.”

“I did,” he said, clenching the mango between his lips, “and I had facial hair.” He held a hand to his lips, sucked in the rest of the mango, and parted this thumb and index finger over the flesh of his upper lip, “a really very attractive red mustache about here.”

I paused to pick the fruit that had stuck to the edges of my teeth, “I don’t take three shits a day.”

“But you imagine the baby you’re carrying is floating belly-up?”

He held out his hand for another mango.

“That’s worse,” he said, “that’s sick.”

“It’s normal when you’re pregnant,” I said, “to feel--” I pressed another piece of fruit into his palm.

He interrupted: “You just hope she doesn’t inherit what we’ve got. She’ll be just like you when you were a kid.”

Dad accelerated, shifting when the engine of the car whined, leaning with the curves of the road. I sucked on a mango, the sugar gone, the fruit slimy and gliding over my tongue.

“Can you look at the map?” he asked after the silence.

I slid my finger across the plane of the map and used my pinky to measure the distance from us to Big Sur. “Five miles,” I estimated, “maybe ten with the curves.”

Just before Big Sur we drove a long stretch of straight road, parallel to the ocean. A thick fog settled there; Dad squinted and rested his chin on the top of the steering wheel. Out the passenger’s window, I saw the lacquered surface of the ocean reflecting the fog that

settled above it. A lighthouse stood at the end of a jagged peninsula, a dim white cylinder with a light circling around top.

“This isn’t good for pictures,” I observed, “but if it were clear, we could take some shots of that lighthouse.” I tapped on the passenger’s window.

“As if *that* hasn’t been done?” He looked at me above his finger-printed pair of rimless sunglasses, “I’ll be able to get the cows down there if we can get a part in the clouds.” The cows lay folded into the crease of a small hill, their legs tucked beneath them. They sat a hundred yards from the edge of the highway, but I could barely see them through the fog.

He pulled over to the shoulder of the highway and gravel popped beneath the car’s tires.

He got out, left the car door open, and walked across the highway, the keys hanging from the ignition. I lingered at the door, elbows resting on the roof. The baby moved. I swayed my hips to release the pressure.

While I swayed, my father leaned over the fence on the other side of the highway. The road stretched beneath us, empty, quiet, and I could hear Dad’s camera clapping in the fog.

“You know,” I yelled, “I resent what you said before.”

He stood up, and swiveled towards me. “What?”

“I wasn’t a bad kid,” I yelled.

“I never said you were bad,” he responded, “you’re reading too much into it.” He turned back to the foggy scene he photographed. From my angle, it looked like nothing but white, but he must’ve seen something.

“You said I was a tough kid.”

“I said good luck if the kid’s worried like you,” he called, still shooting.

I slammed the car door and walked around to the trunk. The car creaked. It sounded like something dripped inside. I heard a car accelerating towards us, shifting up a gear.

“What does *that* mean?” I yelled.

The car came into view and drove between us, and once it passed, my father stood up, the camera hanging from his shoulder. A wind touched his collar, rearranged the folds across his sweater. He looked both ways, exaggeratedly, then crossed the highway.

“It means you were a nervous kid.”

“Why do you have to say it like that?” I asked.

“Because you were!” He dropped his palm on the roof of the car.

“Maybe I learned it from you.”

We both paused.

“Please,” he said, “nobody is a blank slate.”

I stared at him, my hand on my hip.

“I don’t get it.”

He slammed his fist on the roof, “See!” he shouted, shuffling to the back of the car, his sweater collecting dust as it dragged across the car door, “you’re doing it now. Making

something out of nothing.” (In this fantasy, my father’s temper is important to me. I revel in it. Look, how he’s mad at me. Look how he’s slamming his palm on the hood of the car. Imagine this, too: pursed lips and a pair of flushed cheeks.)

“Dad, I really don’t get it. You’re saying I didn’t inherit this from you.”

My father turned, his back against the car door. He leaned into the car.

“I don’t know. I hope not.”

He lifted the camera from his shoulder and planted it on the trunk. He ran a smooth palm over the oiled dome of his head, through a thin peninsula of grey hair.

The fog began to dissipate, swirling around us like cigarette smoke in a dim tavern.

“I’m just trying to figure out,” I said, “why you’re holding grudges against me for this.”

“I’m not holding grudges,” he said, exhaling, “I’m making connections. I’m patterning for you. So that you can see what you were, and are, and what you’ll probably be,” he paused, looking away, “as a parent.”

In my fantasy, I’m boiling. It’s something I can’t feel for my father, unless I’m there, in Big Sur, because losing my dad made me love him differently, with less complexity, maybe. In my real life, my most vivid memory of my father remains him giving up beneath a thin, starched sheet, his last breath foul smelling as it peeled across my cheek. That afternoon, as he died, I remember him saying, with an earnestness that almost hurt: Hey, listen, I forgive you—for everything you think you did wrong. Do you forgive me? It is a graceful memory that makes him seem wise.

To capture him as he was, I’ve always needed Big Sur.

We drove further down the highway, the fog thinned, and we could see the rest of the coast. My dad stopped again, yanking up the emergency brake, the car lurching forward. He acted like nothing had happened, he hid himself:

“There it is...there’s the shot.” He reached into the back seat, pulled his camera to his lap, and got out of the car. He kneeled next to the driver’s side, camera pointed at a herd of cows, their hides wet with fog. Behind the cows, a smooth-topped mountain dotted with evergreen trees. The mountain parted into three foothills, stony at their crowns, green towards their collective base. Mountains shaped by wind, and time, and quivering tectonics. They looked, to me, to be perfectly irregular. The hovering fog cast a shadow on the foothills, a veil of black lace.

Dad’s camera clicked, shuttered. The cows posed for him. The baby floated inside of me. After several minutes, I got out of the car and walked around to the driver’s side.

“Hey,” I said, stuffing my hands into the back pockets of my jeans, “I’m going to take a walk.” I pointed to a thin, gravel path that led to the ocean. “See if I can see any whales from there.”

“Ok,” he said without looking back, “I’d still like to get to the beach this afternoon, before it’s too windy.”

“When does it get windy?”

“I don’t know,” he said, dropping the camera from his eye, “Four? As the sun is starting to set.”

A spotted heifer stood up, her bell chimed. Dad lifted the camera to his face again.

I walked toward the path. He called after me:

“Don’t trip with the baby in there.”

I turned to look at him.

“Kidding,” he said. He smiled with his lips shut.

The path descended onto a purple-sanded beach. Before the path became too steep and rocky, I sat on a boulder and watched the winter ocean curl in towards the beach, the waves frothing as they flattened. The baby pushed against me with a small, tiny-fingered hand. I lifted my sweater and watched it streak across my stomach, the lines of her fingers soft and undefined, a print in wet sand.

“You like the beach?” I asked, touching her hand with the pad of my finger. She fluttered inside of me.

I heard my dad take a few steps down from the highway. He skidded, then stopped: “You ready to go?” he called.

“Nah,” I yelled, “Go without me.”

“You sure?” He asked. “How did you get down here?”

I swiveled around, on the boulder, but couldn’t see him.

“Yeah. Don’t worry, I’ll wait for you here.” I said.

“I’ll leave your fruit,” he called. “And my camera.”

“You don’t want pictures of the whales?”

“They never turn out,” he said. I heard him open the door to the car. Then, the creak of the seat, the door slammed closed.

The engine turned. The popping of gravel beneath the tires. He peeled out onto the curled highway, accelerating away from me, towards Pfeiffer Beach.

I kept my sweater lifted, tucked between the fold of my belly and my breasts, to let the midwinter sun warm us, then walked up to where the car had been for my bag of mangos.

The wheel's tracks looked faded, unclear in the gravel pull-out. It seemed as though he'd never been there. Against the fence, he'd propped up my mangos, and his camera, the neck strap looped limply around the lens. I tucked them both beneath my arm and carried them back down to the boulder. The dried mangos were almost gone. I pressed my finger to the bottom of the bag to lift the sugar to my lips.

The sun darkened at its core, its orange glow casting an auburn sheen on the water. I lifted the camera to my cheek and took a couple of shots: of the marbled sand on the beach, of a spider crawling between my shoes, of my toes with the water sparkling behind them. Then I switched the camera to play and the screen lit, bright white. I shuffled through the day's photographs: the cows, looking as though they'd been licked clean by their mothers, their fur sticking upright, darker in places where the dew from the hovering fog dried more slowly. He ended up with some good shots, I thought, of the cows in the foreground, and the mountains out back.

"Hey, Dad?" I yelled up the path, forgetting, for a moment, that he'd gone, "these turned out nice."

A hawk cawed. A thin wave sizzled as it met the sand.

I scrolled through the other photos, several of the cows, of the ground, of his fingers. I thought of him, driving down the highway, almost at the beach by now, fading.

I scrolled to the first photo in a series of seemingly blank photos, taken of that first hazy attempt at the cows. In the photos, the cows' figures were hardly visible through the dense, whipped fog. I could make out their legs, just barely, and in the next shot, the outline of an inky black spot on a broad heifer's hide. And in the next, a figure, fading so fully, that I had to imagine it there to reconstruct it.

UNTIL WE FIND SOMEBODY, GOD WILLING

Sra. Royá knew her son's unpopularity was mostly her fault. Not completely, though, because he was, God bless him, made of at least half his father, which meant half of him wasn't Cuban, the pobre. Although Tony had her long, shapely nose, her coarse black hair, her robust intellect, he'd also inherited the cautious demeanor and the pink, puffed eyelids of his Irish father. She'd taken the job at Tony's high school, though, and that—*that* was her fault.

In her Freshman Spanish class, while the other boys—pigs most of them, their faces pink and bloated after gym class—whispered and lifted text books from their bags, her Tony sat silent, lips pressed together, hands folded atop his desk. Always, like this, Sra. Royá observed. No friends. Depress. Anti-social like his father.

"Chicos" she sighed, turning her attention to the other boys, "Vamos—we get started with a pray in Spanish." Sra. Royá stood, and as she rose, Junior, a wispy-haired son of an ambulance chaser tapped Tony's shoulder. Her son leaned back in his pupil's desk, his ear tilted towards Junior.

"Sure," Tony whispered, "I'll do it."

Aye, thanks be to God! Sra. Royá thought. They interrupting a prayer, yes, but God understand. Since she'd started teaching at his high school, she'd rarely seen Tony talk to

boys his own age. Teachers, yes. But the other boys: almost never. And looking natural-like while he did it!

The conversation ended and Tony turned back to the front, his lips pressed together again, his eyelashes casting a long, dark shadow across his cheeks. Her jaw tightened.

“Tony,” she said, walking towards her boy, “do you want to continue this chit-chatting with Junior in the JUG?” Her son flushed. The blue-blazered boys tugged at the ends of their ties. “Mrs. Royá,” one of the boys shouted from the other side of the room, “it’s JUG—Justice Under God—not *the* JUG.”

“Well,” she said, “I do not speak a perfect English, but your Spanish is—”

Mierda, she thought. Total shit, you shit. Instead, she said: “is not that good either, no?”

The boys erupted in laughter. Junior leaned back in his desk and clucked his tongue, a puppet with a clipped head string.

Sra. Royá took a visible breath, her bust rising.

“Sorry Mrs.,” Junior said. “I was asking him a question.”

“Yeah,” Tony added, straightening up excitedly, “he wanted to know the present perfect form of tomar.”

“During pray?”

The boys nodded.

“Oh,” she said, “so?” she lifted her eyes to Junior “what will be the answer?”

It didn't matter what Junior said. He mumbled something, his voice wavering. But she already imagined room 111, dim and buzzing with fluorescent light. Bespectacled Brother Byer slumped over the desk, the worn pages of his Dhuey Rheims Bible splayed on the table, his breathing steady and nasal, and Tony and Junior—together.

“Out,” she said, “both.”

As her boy stood, lifting his pack from the space beneath his desk, Sra. Royá turned to the board. She could feel her son peering down at her, his jaw clenched the way it did when, at the dinner table just over one year ago, she'd told him she'd gotten a position at Galley Catholic, thanks be to God.

She'd been advised not to teach her own boy. Once by a neighbor friend, shivering at the bus stop in a thin sweater and high-waisted jeans, “It'll traumatize him,” she advised in a Miami whisper, “sure maybe he doesn't have friends but if you get involved he'll definitely never make any—and you'll go crazy trying.” And she was warned once more by the pediatrician, who claimed it was “meddling” (but who also once, when Tony was a toddler, claimed her boy had a *slowness*. “He does not speak English yet,” Sra. Royá responded, “he speaks a Spanish. But while you checking maybe you should test yourself”).

But in Sra. Royá's memory, maybe glorified, sat a small turquoise school house with pink, creaking shutters; a low, sweet looking building three blocks from the center of Pinar Del Rio. And again, it's possible she remembered it better than it actually was, but her mother stood at the front of the classroom, her hair curled in soft, graceful coils, a book propped open between her hands.

And look, she turned out fine. In fact, her mother was so well-loved at the school—this was before Fidel, obviously, before the rules and the officers, and the little red neckties—that it actually earned her a following. Children flocked to her, especially girls who, charmed by her mother, insisted on coming over to the house with small boxes of hard candies for her mother. And maybe it was more about her mother than it was for her, but she had what looked like friends at the very least and she couldn't help it that she had that Cuban charisma. Tony could be that way too, Sra. Royá reasoned, it weren't for his father's genes and the antisocial faces he made. Kids could come over to work on the Spanish homework, at the very least, and we could have snacks. If Tony just had more of the charisma.

"You really need to learn how to control yourself," her son warned that afternoon as he opened the door to her classroom, "its pathetic." A minute earlier, Sra. Royá had pretended she didn't see the tips of his hair along the rectangular window of the classroom door, pretended she didn't hear him pacing, his sneakers squeaking against the linoleum, planning his entrance. He sulked ugly, just like his dad, his eyelashes drooping over his eyes like a rained-on storefront awning.

"You should not talk while I'm talking, I hope you learn that lesson." She slid a pile of half-marked papers until they drooped over the edge of her desk. Then she looked up at her boy.

"You shouldn't try to match me up with other kids like a gay dating service—that JUG is going on my transcript."

“Well dear, I’m your mother, I have the authority to nudge you in the direction.
For friends, too.”

As Tony sat down atop a desk in the front row, it lunged forward, creaking.

“Why can’t you get it through your head that I don’t care about friends?”

She rolled her eyes. “Why can’ you admit that you do?”

Tony’s chin dimpled, his chin quivered.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” he continued, inhaling deeply, “I’m definitely not going to help him.”

“Help him with what?”

“Help him cheat—he might as well fail on his own.”

“Junior ask you to cheat?”

“He asked me for my notes to use on the exam.”

“For my class?”

“And Algebra.”

“And?”

“At the time I said sure, he could have my notes, but then I thought better of it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I guess I thought it wouldn’t be bad if I just gave him the notes.”

“No, why you decide not to do it?”

“Because someone would probably catch me and I’d get a Saturday JUG.”

“I wouldn’t catch you.”

“What, you want me to give him my notes?”

“No, dear, cheating is wrong,” Sra. Royá said, “but helping a friend is not wrong.”

“How about helping a son?”

“Dear, I gave you the life, put you in this world. You know that after fourteen hours of labor,” Sra. Royá felt her eyebrows lift, “the doctor give me a cigarette, your head already dangling out of me? That is how hard I work to bring you into this world.”

“Gross.”

She walked to the front of her desk and felt the cool steel against her bare calves. “Anyway, forget it, thank God you were born. Let’s say you did this with the notes,” she said leaning against her desk, “would you charge the fee?”

“If you want me to make friends here? No, I’d do it for free.”

Sra. Royá tugged at her thin silver wedding band. A band that, when she’d first married, felt loose and easy and that now, 20 years after the hem of her wedding gown turned gray with blizzard snow, strangled her finger, skin bulging over the lip of the silver loop. She lifted her eyes to her son.

“What? You think I should help Junior cheat on your exam?”

“And Algebra” Sra. Royá corrected.

“And you aren’t going to bust me?”

“What? Why would I bus you?”

“You just gave me a JUG two hours ago.”

“That was different.”

“You’re a piece of work,” Tony kicked and let his shoe fall to the leg of the desk.

“I’m not doing it, I just spent all afternoon justifying why I shouldn’t do it.”

“You were thinking wrong though—you were being selfish.”

“Because I don’t want a Saturday JUG on my transcript?”

“It’s a little narrow mind, no?” she said, “you should consider Junior—who is, I can really tell dear, he just trying to be your friend.”

“Mom, you’re so out of touch. He doesn’t want a friendship he wants a piece of notebook paper with the answers on it.”

“No Tony you should make it a color copy. But you not planning to give him the original notes in the notebook paper, right? I think is too obvious.”

In the copy room, Tony flipped through the crinkled pages of his Spanish notebook.

“You take too many,” Sra. Royá observed, standing over his shoulder, “you should listen better.”

She put her hand around his shoulders and the tips of her acrylic nails dug into the starched, navy seam of his uniform. The copy machine revved.

“I don’t want to do this,” Tony sighed, dropping the notebook onto the lid of the copy machine.

“Why? You think I would tell you to do something wrong? I’m your mother.”

Tony looked at her skeptically.

“Please Mom. Not everything you do is right.”

“Not everything I do is right?” Sra. Royá flared her nostrils.

“Correct. You do bad things sometimes.”

“Oh?”

Tony mocked her: “Oh? Remember when we used to go to the drugstore in Union City?” Sra. Royá nodded. She couldn’t imagine what he’d say. “And you would put a piece of newspaper over a pack of batteries, or a roll of Mentos, or a tube of Neosporin so that, when we got to the counter, the cashier couldn’t see it?”

Oh. That?

“Aye Tony you don’t understand, these places mark up everything so it is three times more expensive than wholesale. You know what? It is a smart consumer.”

“Or it’s stealing,” Tony offered, shrugging.

“You understand—God willing—when you a parent.”

She snatched the notebook from her son and positioned it face down in the window of the copier. She watched the line of light glide beneath the lid of the machine. She listened to her son’s breath, jagged and strained.

“I know, Tony,” she started, “I know you mad about me working here, and it makes it difficult with the friends and all that shits, but you know what? You cannot be here if it weren’t for me. You think your father can pay for this? So I’m here, I’m working here, for you, so you can get a free private school education, and become a President of the United States. Do you ever think of that? Do you ever thank me for that?”

Tony leaned against the copy machine and picked at the sticker near the buttons. “I don’t want to be a president.”

She continued: “Well you think I wanted to be a teacher?”

Tony shrugged. Blinked.

“No. Especially not for pigs who are no good in Spanish. What did I wanted to do instead? I wanted to open a stationary store. With the calligraphy and Abuela, and we were going to have tea, and croquettas, and some Cuban cookies, and we will do all the weddings and baby shower. We were really prepare, too—my uncle gave us the start ups, and we just needed a space, but then I said to myself, you know what? Your son needs a good school, so he can go to college, and not end up in a college cafeteria like his bum of a father.”

Tony, still picking at the sticker, rested his elbow on the machine. “Ok,” he said, “sorry.”

Sra. Royá felt guilty bringing up her husband’s shortcomings, but ever since it slipped once, when Tony was ten, it kept rising out of her. Spilling from her open mouth like a curse word. That he worked a lady’s job. That he wore an apron. That he misinterpreted the term breadwinner. And although she knew Tony didn’t deserve it, he didn’t deserve it the same way she didn’t deserve to hear her mother cry when they arrived in Miami from Cuba almost forty years ago, the bedroom door ajar, her mother slumped over the edge of the bed, she said it anyway, and it couldn’t be unsaid.

“So here’s what you going to do,” she said, changing the subject, her hand pushing atop the lid of the machine, “tomorrow, when I excuse myself to the ladies’, you pass out the notes to Junior—and anyone else who want it.”

Tony looked away from her and bit a hangnail.

“Tell them you know what is on my exam because you saw it, in my briefcase, or my purse—or whatever you say is good, and the more people will want it.”

“Then what?” Tony asked, looking back at her, his eyelids drooping to his hangnail.

“Then what? You pass the notes out, you shake their hands or slap their backs or whatever, and thas it.”

Sra. Royá lifted the color pages of Tony’s notes from the tray of the copier, and handed them to her son. “Thas it” she repeated, lifting her shoulders.

“It’s scary,” Tony said, the papers stiff in his hand, a false smile tugging at the corners of his lips “that you use your power for evil.”

Sra. Royá scratched at the corner of her lip. Then Tony said, his eyes pouring into hers, those gold flecks still sparking from his pupils like they did when he was an infant and the whites of his eyes were glossy and new:

“I hope it’s not genetic.”

The next afternoon it rained and Sra. Royá’s classroom filled with steam. She could feel her hair expanding. It was the Cubano in her that made her hair *almost* like black-people hair. It had always grown thick and coarse but now, in her late fifties, it sprouted silver so Sra. Royá singed it with an inkish dye once a week, a cigarette dangling over the edge of the bathtub, her eyes drawn to a close.

She closed her eyes briefly then, alone in her classroom, surrounded by the steam, and hoped to imagine her boy, younger, more attached to her, before he *knew* her, his tiny fingernails square and white, his hand wrapped around her wrist. But the back of her eyelids were blank, the memories left unprojected. She shifted in her chair.

Her Freshman Spanish class soldiered into class in two's or three's, except Tony, who entered alone, fighting with the spring top of his pen, oblivious to the opportunity, the friends, aye, look around Tony, the friends!

"Chicos," she said, when the boys were seated, "I need to go to the ladies' because, well, when you a teacher you get no time to go," she glanced at Tony, who rolled his eyes exaggeratedly and nodded to the door. She added: "you can take out a Chapter 5 if you wanted." She left hurriedly, like she really had to go, her skirt wafting the humid classroom air between her legs.

She stopped just outside the door next to the World Language Bulletin Board that hung, crooked, next to her classroom. Amid the chatter, she heard Tony:

"Here," he said. Sra. Royá imagined him turning in his seat, looking weary.

"What?" Junior asked coolly, "those the notes?"

"Copies."

"Awesome, dude," Junior exclaimed, "I owe you man."

"What's that?" another voice asked.

"Tony's notes," Junior replied.

"Do you have any more?"

"A couple more," she heard Tony's voice blooming with excitement.

"Sra." She felt the warm, pink hand of Brother McNair on her shoulder. The warmth of the hand seeped through her thin, pink blouse, over the strap of her bra. The brothers—they perverts, she thought—touched, hugged, comforted in the name of God.

"Taking a moment?" he asked.

“No,” Sra. Royra countered, smiling, “I was coming back from the ladies, an this was not a straight sign.” She pulled at a flyer on the board. As she spoke, a voice from the classroom raised over the rest:

“Cheating on your Mom’s exam? That’s rich, dude.”

Brother McNair stood in the classroom, his broad, black-shirted shoulders curved towards the ground like a frown. The pigs quieted, and Sra. Royra, her nerves buzzing, stepping into a speed boat that would take her somewhere her mother called Miami. She leaned into the doorway, the steam from the classroom licking her cheeks, peeling over her forehead.

“All I heard,” Brother boomed, “was ‘cheating,’ Sra., and I don’t know how things work in your classroom, but under God we don’t cheat.” He looked back at her.

Sra. Royra nodded, and, in an attempt to look disgusted, channeled an image of her husband, throwing dough at the cafeteria, his belly dragging flour across the counter. But as she looked to Tony, a spitting image, his eyes drawn down—like her husband’s to the floured counter—face sweet and round, eyelashes casting a shadow on his cheeks, she felt herself warm, biting into a cranberry scone on a Saturday morning, her husband smiling from across the table, cheeks bloated. She waited maybe slightly too long to say: “Yes, I am disappoint to hear it.” She crossed her arms.

“So, Tony,” Brother said, stuffing his hands into his pockets, “is that right? You’re planning to cheat on the exam?”

Tony studied the surface of his desk.

“Tony,” Sra. Royá repeated, before she had a chance to consider what it might mean to say it, “it’s respectful to answer a Brother.”

Tony looked up, wicked.

Sra. Royá felt that boat to Miami moving beneath her feet, the ocean steam in her face, absorbing into her hair. The Cubano in Tony would explode. He’d embarrass her and call it honesty. She saw the words pouring from her son’s mouth, dripping down his chin. She saw the vein in the side of his neck swelling, his throat full of the words. She saw him screaming and pointing at her, at her cheating, and she saw Brother, his pink hand on the back of her neck, steering her out of the classroom, away from her boy, from her Tony and all of his potential friends.

“There’s nothing to say,” Tony mumbled, “I should’ve known better.”

Brother McNair stood at the front of the room, a grim reaper, his black clothes cooling the humid room. A greased string of luminously white hair slid down his wrinkled forehead.

“You’re damn right you should have,” brother McNair hissed, the words so well enunciated that the string of greased hair fell further, to his nose, arching over the his brow. “There isn’t any reasonable excuse for this kind of behavior in a classroom **UNDER GOD**—in a classroom where, excuse me for saying this, by even *considering* cheating you’ve embarrassed yourself. And your mother!”

While Brother boomed about God and honesty, Sra. Royá studied her boy. She admired his fair, freckled cheeks, the way his pants folded inward at his knee, showing the space between his leg and the fabric. The puffed pink eyelids that made his eyes look even

larger, bulging from their sockets. His belly that hung, just slightly over his belt, like rising dough. She loved the pinkness of his skin, the orange glow of the light passing through his ears, the plump peak of his upper lip and the hairs that curled over its edge. She admired the parts of him—the parts of his father—that'd make him hold his tongue.

That afternoon, Sra. Royá waited in her classroom, her acrylic nails chattering on the desk. She knew that Tony could be tattling to Brother right now. That he could've spared her in front of the class, then burst.

But she'd deny it. And Brother would take her side.

What? You think that I help my son cheat? On my own exam? Please Brother, now you really going insane, you know that?

She lifted a pile of papers and tapped them against her desktop, straightening the stack. She set her chin on the top edge of the stack, the paper bowing slightly. The rain had stopped, the humidity dissipated. She imagined Tony in front of her, shoulders slumped but his long nose glistening, looking slender the way hers did in the summer: Well, Tony, I couldn't say anything because I try to protect my job, and without this job you have no private school, because you know, with your father, as hard as he works. And it was for your own good anyway because maybe you don't see it right now, but Junior probably love you more, or he should, because you take a bullet. Well, if he doesn't care then fine, we move on. Anyway, his father a crook. We find someone else because you deserve a friend. We go to the community center, or you start a Cuban club and we make flan so people will come. Don't you want a friend? We here three more years, Tony, we deserve somebody, no?

PLAY

I remember my older brother crying once as a boy. He must have cried more than once, but memory guides me here, to that afternoon, to deep, heaving sobs in the powder room. We played in a cement-floored storage room stacked with boxes. It rained outside. I chased him up the stairs, hissing hate into an oversized, pink ear until he locked himself in. I remember the smell of the soap wafting from beneath the door as he ran the sink. I didn't even feel about it.

I know now, listening to him talk about our years in elementary, that I was perhaps his only friend.

THE APRIL JOURNALS

April 1:

Let me be transparent: this is not a real journal. You will not read my most secluded thoughts or dreams here, but instead, some orderly reflections. Dr. Woo, the teacher of Transitions, assigned this therapy journal from today until the week after we get our expiry dates. There is a grading rubric.

The assignment—which is to write a journal that would help *you*, future Transitions student, as you work through these challenging weeks—is, frankly, busy work for a natural writer. However, as Dr. Woo has probably already mentioned, Transitions class is a rite of passage for New Yorkers and for that—for having a spot in The City when so many artists and dreamers can never cross our borders—we should be thankful. For you, transitioner, I will take this task seriously. Unlike Tina Renaud (whose weepy journal I suffered through earlier this semester) I will write so that you can experience these days with me.

I'm Ofelia but people call me Ofie. I doubt you know me (I didn't know Tina): black hair, brown eyes, a long dimple on my left cheek? Between Clea and I, I'm the less attractive twin. In terms of how I feel, know this:

I'll be relieved to know my expiry date, and Clea's. We've been waiting since I can remember.

April 2:

Future transitioner: are you nervous? Something I find helpful is thinking of other things. For example: any day now, the cicadas surface in New York—one million bugs per square mile. I can't imagine more *things* in this city, but I suppose nobody can, which is the point, which is the reason we expire. The city air already seems thicker since the weather turned, and now the cicadas will come too, perched between buildings, collecting at the mouths of the subway. According to my research, cicadas live six weeks, maybe ten: then they expire, like us. Dad told me he remembers them screeching. He said the last time they swarmed the city Clea and I were babies, and we did not sleep through their whining.

That was before our mom expired. It seems silly that I used to wonder how she went, and what she looked like when it was all over. I know now that they use a lethal injection and she probably just looked pale.

April 3:

Still no cicadas. I read that the ground temperature must reach 64 degrees: it's hardly that in the air today, and misting. Shoe-shaped puddles on the 4 train. Shop fronts droop, grey and damp. This city, a black-and-white photograph.

While we wait for my expiry, I'll fill you in on the rest of things. I was accepted to NYU and Sarah Lawrence this afternoon. Still waiting on Columbia—my top choice. It's frustrating getting into schools but not knowing if I can go. What if my expiry date is next year? Do I still go to college for one year? What if it is sooner? I'm hoping for an expiry date that is at least 6 years out, which gives me enough time to complete four years of college and to live as an adult in The City. I also imagine four years in college and two after

is enough time to get a couple of poems published and a good start on a collection. I'd like to leave a paper trail. Have you thought about that yet?

Clea only applied to two schools, for fashion design: The New School and FIT. She doesn't seem to wonder about them—Daniel is her distraction, I know—but I wonder. I wonder how far away will she be from me? How many minutes on the train? And if she'll leave Daniel? They say twins can't be separated for long—and Clea is so close to me she pushed my first tampon in with two fingers. The grip of her other hand left a white print on my thigh.

You'd recognize her if you saw her because she and Daniel can't be missed. Have you seen them, hanging on each other like scarves? He is handsome in an unconventional way. A thickly curled mop of blonde hair that sweeps over one eye. Skin so fair it seems you can see through it at the wrist. He was my friend, first, but Clea loved him from the first time I had him over to the house. He's a year younger and doesn't have the same feeling we do, this feeling of *what's next?* But of our 18 years together, this year with Daniel seems to have been her happiest. For me, it's been a year to focus on my poems, to observe New York.

Tomorrow, we get our expiries. I am part nervous, part delighted. Just to know....

April 4:

10:00pm—Long day... we went to school as usual, and one by one they called us into the nurse's office to find out our dates. It felt like an eye and hearing test. You should know this because it is what will happen to you.

I figured they'd call Clea and I in at the same time, since we're from the same zygote, but they called me in first. The nurse gave me a glass of water and asked me how I felt. She fingered her way through the file folder, pulled out my file, handed me my card.

First, I did the math: 10/13/2065. Another 12 years, until I turn thirty or about as long as my mother. I asked the nurse what she thought, and she said she also gets until 30—three more years and she's lived a full life. She said it's not bad.

I left the nurse's and went straight to the bathroom to call Clea. She didn't pick up, so I put down the toilet seat and waited.

A chipped green tile.

A single drop of urine on the floor.

Then, Clea's shoes beneath the stall.

"Did you get it?" she whispered.

I opened the door and she slipped in.

"Yeah," I said, handing her the card.

She rubbed the raised plastic of my expiry card with her thumb, and looked up into me. She took a breath and let her cheeks fill with her exhale. "I guess twelve years isn't bad," she said, dipping her fingers into the pocket of her jeans, "enough time for a few poems." She smiled at me, her two front teeth yellow in the bathroom's sour light. Her eyes looked weary. She lifted her card from her pocket and I watched as each corner emerged. She pressed her card into my hand, date side up. As I read, she talked:

"It's not all bad," she reasoned, "enough time to figure out a plan."

The date on her card said 6/10/2054. One year from June.

There was a shuffling of sandaled girls into the bathroom, a hug from Clea, a few choked tears about Daniel, the warmth of her hands on my back; I remember thinking that even though she's the one who expires early, that I am the unlucky one.

April 5:

Today is quiet and dim—no cicadas, no school. (Future transitioner, this is worth planning for: they give you a long weekend after the expiry dates are handed out). Clea and I slept in and woke to a grey mid-morning.

“What does it feel like?” I asked her.

Clea sighed and looked up towards our ceiling, her eyebrows unruly and reaching across the bridge of her nose.

“It's not any more difficult than the waiting part. I'm devastated for Daniel, though.”

A thin beam of light stretched across her face, illuminated the room, then dimmed. Her hair turned grey in the light's shadow. She turned her face away from mine, sniffed, wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

“How did he take it?” I asked.

“I don't know,” she said, pulling the duvet up to her neck, “he didn't say anything.”

I nodded.

“I guess I was expecting a lot worse,” she continued, “like a couple of months or something.” She paused, and turned towards me, her hands folded between her cheek and the pillow. To me, she looked so lovely. “What's it like for you?”

“Knowing *my* date?” I clarified. “Comforting in some way, to know. And to expire the same age as Mom did.” I paused.

“I wish we’d known her,” Clea said, nuzzling her cheek into my hair. “I don’t remember a thing.”

April 6:

Future transitioner: The cicadas have arrived! At least one, that is. I found him perched on the railing of our building—bigger than I had imagined, with netted wings and an iridescence that somehow surprised me, despite all my research.

Perhaps it was the arrival of the cicada that triggered the visions about our mother. Last night marks the third time in my 18 years I’ve dreamt of her. In the dream she piloted an old-timey plane. She wore goggles and had a thin scarf tied around her shoulders. The fringe flapped out the window.

When I told Clea and Dad over toast and three cups of tea, they both got interested.

“She had one of those,” Clea said, “the see-through blue scarf? I saw it in pictures.”

“It was silk,” Dad interjected. “You’re right, except it wasn’t just blue, it had pink and other colors in it.” Dad spread a slice of butter across his toast, then lifted a finger to us, “The old-timey plane thing I don’t remember her having, though.”

We laughed, chewed.

“Do you still have it?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Clea added, “can we have the scarf?”

“You know,” Dad said, pushing his plate back from the edge of the table, “I don’t think I’ve got it anymore.”

“What did you do with it?” Clea pressed. “Didn’t you keep her things?”

He lifted his arms above his head, “we don’t have the room,” he reasoned. “It’s a space thing.”

“There’s room *outside* of New York,” Clea said.

I shifted in my chair and the wood creaked. Clea re-crossed her legs. Dad cleared his throat and set his napkin on his plate. The cicada—or maybe a new one—chirped somewhere near the kitchen window.

“Listen, Clea—both of you actually—this is not easy to understand, I know—”

“It’s really not complicated, Dad,” Clea countered.

I looked up from my chair to Clea. She stuck her chin out towards our father. A thin coil of hair fell across her shoulder.

My father said, sternly. “We stayed because we had to.”

I strung my arm around Clea’s hip: “It’s not a bad place to be stuck. People *wish* they could be here, with all this.”

Clea looked down at me, stabbed. She pried my fingers from her hip.

“Girls,” Dad said, holding his palms out to us. His glasses, round and thick, slipped down his nose. “Your mother and I stayed, even after the expiry dates began, because we felt as if there was no other choice. With the stories we heard about the border—which was so much less secure then—people were drowning in the Hudson.” He swallowed and

looked down at his plate, “Nada, your aunt, left during those years, and for a while we thought we might follow.”

“And?” Clea demanded.

Our father lifted a hand to his mouth, rubbed his lips with the pads of his fingers. “When they called us in to claim the body...” He covered his eyes with his palm, “she was unrecognizable.”

He paused again, drinking in breath. “She had this pink slice down the bridge of her nose. We thought it couldn’t be an accident.” He pushed his plate away. “Then they put up The Wall, and in a way we were relieved.” Clea shifted her weight, crossed her arms. Dad continued, solemn: “ At least, in New York we knew life would be short, but rich with quality.”

(At that moment, transitioner, I thought it really must be hard for him to have such an unusually far-off expiry date. They say those with far-off dates are lucky, but maybe not? To watch so many of us come and go?).

Clea turned and left the kitchen, the door to our bedroom slamming behind her. Her napkin curled over the edge of the table, a button of apricot jam bleeding into the linen. Dad and I spent the afternoon watching cicadas multiply from the kitchen window.

April 7:

Dreamt about Daniel. Probably because of talking with Clea yesterday, he was on my mind. He put his lips into a soft place on my neck. I woke feeling warm. I’m only

saying this, transitioner, to follow through on my promise to tell you as I live it. I'm wondering, perhaps, in the shadow of the expiry, if we all become a bit love sick?

Clea got up early. I heard her shuffling through our desk drawers. She shook me awake, though I was already half-way conscious, figuring out that dream.

"Where's the envelope with all of our college stuff?" she asked.

I swatted her away. "Middle drawer," I said, then cleared my throat. "Why? Did you hear something? Did they email you?" I sat up.

"No," she said, digging, "I just need some information off one of the applications." I watched her pick up the envelope, tweeze open the mouth with her fingers.

"Are you going to tell them all your expiry? Try to get an expedited answer?" I asked. "It'd be nice to have some certainty."

She looked at me. "I'm not worried about it," she said.

Of course, you already know that I *am* worried about it. I'd like to get an expedited answer.

Looking forward to the distraction of tomorrow (Wall trip!).

April 8:

Today was the Transitions field trip to The Wall! If you're like me, you've been looking forward to this. When I got Tina's journal last year, the first thing I did was flip through, searching for an entry about the field trip—but as I said, her recordings were sorry and I hardly learned anything at all. She barely mentioned The Wall.

But I can tell you what I saw.

They took us out to Battery Park. The tour began in a museum room. We buzzed, wondering how it would look, how close can we get? We met our tour guide (Melinda) who took our phone and cameras in a basket, and led us into a conference room.

It filled with light. One river-facing wall was made of glass, and the class gathered there, our hands smudging its fine finish. From there, we could see The Wall, at a distance: worn, majestic, parting the Hudson. I hadn't expected the foam of the water against The Wall's façade. Or its height, how when I looked up, I couldn't see the end of it. Or greyness of it, the greyness of the water against it. That's what struck me most, I guess, was how ugly it looked. I turned to Clea, but she'd moved, standing back from the glass, taking it in from her distance.

While we stood there gawking, Melinda made some comments about the technology of it, which is fascinating, the fact that the water—charged with electricity—is a part of the defense. Have you heard that? In all of these years of rumors, of loitering around the Transitions kids, I never heard that. Clea asked whether there's an under-part, that secures beneath the surface of the water, or else couldn't someone just dive under there with a protective suit of some kind? To which Melinda said: "It's secured beneath the river bed, and any attempt to get over or under the wall is a virtual suicide."

Dr. Woo interrupted her then, and said, "They're Transitions students, you can be specific."

The tour guide looked annoyed. She projected some footage of a close up of The Wall. It shone, electrified. And when Clea countered, "couldn't someone just cut the power?" the tour guide, smiled politely at my sister and said it was a wireless technology,

upgraded each year. Dr. Woo walked behind Clea and put her hands on her shoulders, massaged her neck, and to break the silence I asked “Do we get any closer?”

“This is it,” the guide said.

Then she showed footage from before The Wall was raised, and that, you’ll need to see it for yourself, transitioner. But I recognized a river undecided: bursting with bodies colliding, thrashing towards and away from our city. I saw the coast on the other side, another set of buildings, reaching upwards, and for the first time I wondered if this wall was built to keep them out, or if it was intended to keep us in.

April 9:

Average day at school. I couldn’t concentrate. After the field trip, Transitions became a therapy room—crying and grief—and I can’t get anything done. Not even a short poem. I suggest you get all of your work for the semester finished before the day they hand out your expiry date. It will, undoubtedly, distract you.

Clea and I stopped for tea on the way home. She ordered a slice of vanilla cake with a thin slip of raspberry jam between the layers. We both had jasmine tea, the buds blooming at the base of our glass mugs. I watched the flower unfold completely. Then I said:

“I’ve been thinking. And a year isn’t bad, C. You could live in my dorm with me. I don’t know where yet, but NYU, or maybe Columbia. We could really *live*.” A pause. “I could just leave when Daniel comes over.”

“Gross, Ofie.”

“What?”

“We don’t do that. We just fool around.”

She took a large bite of cake and chewed for a while.

“What are you guys going to do when your expiry comes?”

“I don’t know. But we’re not going to follow each other around like a couple of lost dogs,” she said.

“Did you break up?” I asked. I felt my face flush.

She looked away, and took a deep, intentional breath. After the exhale she said:

“I’m in love with him, Ofie.”

I changed the subject to the cicadas, which have descended now on Manhattan. I told her everything I know, and she sipped on her tea and said, leaning back in her chair, *Interesting, isn’t it?*

April 10:

Future transitioner: I went through our desk today, looking for the return dates on my college applications (still haven’t heard from Columbia) and found a stack of Clea’s identity papers in our college envelope. It means only one thing: she’s arranging to leave New York. She had it all, passport, ID card, the name of a smuggler written on a yellow scrap of paper.

I took the papers out to Dad, and as he sifted through them in silence, Clea walked in from a walk with Daniel and set her purse down on the floor next to the door. Her hair was stringy, wind-combed. She wore a soft pink sweater—mohair. She smelled of rain.

“Raining?” I asked from the kitchen table. My hands clasped in my lap.

“A little,” she said, peeling her sweater from her arms. “We didn’t have an umbrella.”

“Clea,” Dad said, and I heard her sigh as she tossed her sweater over the back of the sofa.

She brushed the rain from the front of her jeans.

“I found your papers,” He said, jaw clenched.

She looked up at me.

“Doesn’t mean anything.” She said, sitting on the sofa. The coils whined under her delicate weight.

“C,” I said. “Don’t be stupid.”

Dad let out a breath. He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers. “Honey, this isn’t a realistic plan.” He was clearly acting, sizzling beneath his skin.

She snapped at us: “*You’re* being stupid. Both of you! You guys just take this, like this is how life has to be? And in twelve years you’ll be gone,” she looked at me, “and Dad will be alone?” She said, pointing to Dad. She wet her lips.

Pause.

“Did you not see The Wall?” Dad yelled, slamming his hand down on the kitchen table. Clea and I both flinched. He tossed her papers on the floor and they floated apart. He walked to Clea, leaned in near her face. “Do you not understand the basic principle of The Wall?” I watched a vein swell in his neck. “Is there something I can clear up for you?”

C started weeping into a pair of cupped hands. “I have a guide,” she said.

“And what do you imagine this guide can do to help?” From my post, I saw the spit spray from his lips. “Does your guide have *magic powers*?”

“I knew you’d think that,” she said, wiping her nose on the hem of her undershirt.

“Come on!” he yelled, and her sobs intensified, “You’re smarter than this!”

She looked up at our father, gasping for air, snot cascading over her top lip, and managed to say: “Daniel’s going too.”

Dad and I looked at each other. I felt myself, somehow, sinking. Dad seemed to calm down then. He sat down next to Clea, a palm on her back, the fat tips of his fingers gliding down her spine and across each of her ribs. He pushed Clea’s hair off her back and over her shoulder.

“Daniel’s going with you?” I asked.

She looked at me, sniffled, shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Dad got up from her side and walked into his office. Before he closed the door, he said, “This isn’t a choice. You’re not going.”

Later in the night, she packed some of our accessories into a shoebox. She untangled our necklaces, the delicate gold chains impossibly adjoined, knotted. When she was done she laid each necklace separately on the desk, one loop next to the other, and asked: “which do you want?”

Maybe it was dramatic, but I said, “I want you and Daniel to stay with us.”

“Why do give two shits about Daniel?” She asked.

April 11:

After third period, I called Daniel. “Meet me in the alcove,” I said. “Without Clea.”

I half-expected her to show up anyway, but he came alone, late. I pulled him behind a pair of lockers. “Are you behind this?” I hissed. “Clea leaving New York?”

“Ofie,” he started, and a lock of his golden hair slipped over his left eye. “I couldn’t stop her if I wanted.” He looked at me through his hair. I wanted to brush it from his face. “She’s going.”

I paused, recalculated. “You’re not going with her?”

He sighed, shifted his weight, slipped his fingers into his pocket. “She thinks I’m *deciding*,” he said, looking down, “she wants me to go. But I’ve got another year before I even *know*...”

“Shit, Daniel,” I said.

“I know.” He hung his head. Sniffed.

I lifted a hand, to shake him, I think, I can’t remember, but next thing I knew he had my hand enveloped in his, and the warmth of his transparent skin was bleeding into mine and I felt myself flush. He said: “I don’t want to risk it.” He raised my hand to his chest. “Do you think that means I don’t love her?”

What was there to say? No, Daniel, you love her, you should go? Then, the two of them washing up in the river, electrocuted? Or worse, with a line, down the bridge of their nose, from some savage across the river? I guess what I should have said is, “I don’t know,

Daniel, that's for you to figure out," but I was drunk with his touch and instead I dropped his hand and said:

"Yes," I said. "It might." And when I turned to leave him, there was Clea, her jaw dropped, watching us.

April 12:

Transitioner, it's raining again. Morning and night feel joined. I did not sleep last night, listening to the rain. Feeling Daniel's hand. Listening to Clea breathe, breathe. I feel like I have to watch her. And I wonder, next year when you transition, if you'll feel this way about anyone?

Letter from Columbia arrived. I ripped apart the envelope so fast that a corner of the letter itself ripped. I will accept the offer. I'll go. I called Daniel and he said, with a grin I could hear, "Ofie, that's great!" When I told Dad and Clea they both put on a kind of fake smile for me, hugged, I felt Clea's bones.

"Let's do dinner," Dad said, "to celebrate."

We went to a farm to table on 93rd and Madison. They had a roof-top farm that looked 20 x bigger than the one on our building and a list of seasonal appetizers involving cicadas, which I refused to try, but later regretted. During dessert, Dad said, "So C, how are things with Daniel?"

And she threw a quiet look to me, and said, her jaw tight, "Ask Ofie."

Dad looked at me, pained. I blushed and said:

"I have no idea."

April 13:

I don't know if this is real, transitioner, or imagined. But I woke this morning to Clea hovering above me, palm on my shoulder. Her breath felt hot on my face. A string of hair fell from behind her ear, swung towards me. She looked beautiful, the whites of her eyes luminous in the dark. I heard the cicadas crescendo. "Ofie?" I think she said, "Take care of Daniel." I think I closed my eyes then, because it had to be a dream, how cliché she sounded, but I heard the bedroom door click behind her, and when I woke up, Clea was gone.

I rushed out to the living room, calling for Dad. He sat on the floor, scraps of paper scattered around, the phone in his palm. He said, tears marking trails on his cheeks, "I've called *everyone*." A cup of cold tea sat on the coffee table. He lifted it to his lips, swallowed, and then ran his fingers through his hair.

I slumped into the armchair and wondered if what I thought I remembered was real. Perhaps, I reasoned, I'd already invented the memory to make myself feel her. "And nobody's found her?"

He shook his head and then buried his face in his hands. He rocked himself, his body shook. I've never seen my father cry like that.

I got up, sat on the floor next to dad, and put my arm around his shoulders. "I'm sure she just went out for croissants."

Of course, we both know where she is, or at least where she's going. But we don't know whether she hears the cicadas when they screech, and if she doesn't, we don't know exactly why. Is she too far from them to hear? Can she hear at all?

And how am I, you wonder? I don't know, transitioner, because no matter where Clea is the result is the same, and I have 12 years to wait before I know for sure.

April 14:

With Clea gone, Dad sleeps all day, a purple hand dangling off the edge of his bed.

I asked Daniel over to help me go through her things, to make more space.

We went through her books, her clothes, her figurines. We put everything into boxes. I guess, transitioner, I see why Dad threw Mom's stuff away. As we sifted through her belongings I found myself thinking she must have left something for me, a goodbye clue? And when I didn't find it...

And here's the shame and the delight of it: when I lifted a strand of her hair from the side of her pillowcase, and couldn't believe that just a few days ago we were here, in bed with our new knowledge, I unraveled. Transitioner, I'm embarrassed to say I cried such deep, heaving sobs that the shame of it burned in my cheeks, that the sound of my own crying, for a moment, drowned out the incessant hum of the bugs. And Daniel pulled me onto his lap and rocked me with those transparent arms.

And when I'd finally stopped crying, when I was quiet enough for him to talk, he brushed the hair from my face, the heat of his hand on my forehead, and said, "Are you ok?"

And I, like a fool, I kissed him. Sitting in his lap, then down on the floor, then with my hand against his bare skin, and it felt exhilarating, the weight of him over me. And afterwards he said, “Wow,” and smiled.

“What?” I asked.

And he said, “you’re just so different from her.”

April 15:

I am tired of the bugs, their chanting. The way they crash into our kitchen window and collect inside the vestibule of the building. Can you believe how recklessly they spend their short, loud lives? Dive-bombing cab cars and flying into windows? Do they think they can get through the glass? Does the reflection trick them into thinking they’re flying into something just as good as what’s behind them?

April 16:

I keep thinking of her eyes, gray in the morning light. Of the strands of blonde hair woven into her sweaters. Of the look on her face when, that first time, I read her expiry card. I keep thinking of her soft white cheeks, of her smell. Of that ball of jasmine blooming in our cups. I keep thinking of the soft rhythm of her breath, the pulse I slept to each and every night for 18 years. I keep thinking of how it must have been for us, together inside our mother, touching, and pulling and reaching for each other. I keep thinking of him, of Daniel, of the warmth of his arms around me, of his skin, clear at the wrist. I keep thinking of his hand around mine, to his chest, near his mouth, of his mouth, of our kiss. I

keep thinking “you’re so different from her” like we were the same, or should be the same, or like he wants her instead. I keep thinking of her hanging on him, around him. Of her lips on his, of her hair between his fingers, curled around his knuckles. I keep thinking of her, and him, and me, and him, and her, and her. And her.

And you, of course, and what’s next.

I don’t know how to say goodbye to you, transitioner. Writing to you has meant something to me. And maybe you’ll think I’m just gunning for an A+ from Woo, or that I’m only *acting* like this assignment added value to me, but it’s true, transitioner. And now I don’t know how to say goodbye.

Mostly, nowadays I wonder: what it would be like not knowing exactly when you’ll move on? To be delivered into this world buzzing, screeching, and expecting the best?

Good luck, transitioner.

IN BIRCHES

To Rita, it would always be winter at the Whitt's.

When Rita first visited the house, in elementary, it was the largest home she'd ever been inside, and it made her feel lucky. Even now, trimmed in green and sitting atop a hill, Rita respected the house; the height it would take to reach apex of the kitchen's vaulted ceiling.

Millie poured Rita a glass of water, then leaned over the counter, plucking at a bowl of grapes. From where she stood, Rita could see down the shallow V of her friend's shirt, to the bulbous mole that hung from her left breast.

"Your brother is home," Mrs. Whitt said, nodding towards the stairs. "You could go say hello."

Millie, disinterested, shrugged.

"Hugh's here?" Rita asked, casually, toying with a button on her cardigan.

Mrs. Whitt nodded, then, dipping her hand into the sink, "Rita, if you need to call your mother-" She nodded to the phone on the wall. "She'll be worried about the weather."

Rita looked out the window. Snow fell quietly outside. It rounded the sharp corners of the Whitt's house, concealed the mailbox.

Rita dialed, then listened to the phone ring four times before she started pretending. “Hi Mom,” she said, twirling the chord around her finger, “I’m at Millie’s.” She imagined the phone ringing on her mother’s kitchen floor, the curtains drawn, the faucet dripping into a dirty cereal bowl. “I know Mom, I won’t.” Rita turned from the kitchen and admired the manicured carpet of the family room. “Ok,” she said, after three rings, then cupped her hand over the receiver: “Mrs. Whitt? My mother wants to know if the storm is too heavy, if I could just stay the night?” Mrs. Whitt nodded without looking up. Rita loved that.

Rita uncupped the receiver: “Mom? She said it’s fine. Ok. I love you too.” She heard the phone ring once more before she hung it back on the wall.

“She said I should walk home if it doesn’t amount to anything.”

“And if it does,” Mrs. Whitt offered, “you’re welcome here.”

Millie slipped a pair of grapes between her lips and pulled Rita to her, their fingers entwined, “Let’s start on our project.” The whites of Millie’s eyes glowed. Rita watched Millie’s tongue flick across her lips, wetting them.

Downstairs, the television played loudly from the family room. Millie led Rita into the bedroom. They arranged their book bags on the bed.

“Long night ahead of us,” Millie said, raising a brow. Rita looked away.

“What?” Millie asked, stringing her hands around Rita’s waist.

“The door’s open,” Rita said. She could feel the pads of Millie’s fingers, cold and soft, dipping beneath the waistband of her skirt.

“So?”

Millie touched her lips to Rita's neck.

"So stop." Rita felt her face flush. Her fingers dangled at her sides.

Millie's gaze dropped to Rita's feet. She slid her hands off of Rita's hips. "I don't want to," Rita said, reaching for Millie's hands. Millie pulled her hands away, turned to the family room, looked back at Rita coyly.

Rita stood, her feet sinking into the carpet.

Millie settled into the sectional in the family room, next to her older brother. Rita stood at the opening of the room, watching them, their heads barely visible over the couch's pillows. Then, she slouched into the room, arranged herself next to Millie. Hugh, home for winter break, looked suddenly handsome, occupying a man's body. His chest looked wide, shoulders broad. He sighed, lowered the volume on the television, and looked to Rita.

"You new here?" he asked her, holding back a grin. He lifted an arm behind his head, and the bone of his elbow poked through the skin, like the joint of a small, delicate bird. Perhaps his body, Rita thought, was between child and man.

"You look different," Rita said, looking into her lap.

"Well," Hugh said, tossing the remote on the coffee table, "good to see you, too." He leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees.

Across from him, Rita could see his chin, still smooth.

"Stop bothering her," Millie snapped, "she's in a bad mood."

Hugh strung an arm around his sister. “I can bug you instead.” He pinned his sister to the couch. She pedaled her feet against his thighs. A small, perfectly round mole stretched at his bicep.

Mrs. Whitt called for Millie to set the table.

They unbound, Millie’s stood. Rita noticed her friend’s hair, falling in strings across her back. Millie padded up the stairs, towards the kitchen.

Rita hadn’t been alone with Hugh since last year, when she was a sophomore, when Millie had the flu, when they had, finally, kissed.

“How’s college?” Rita asked, pulling a blanket over her lap.

“Good,” he said, “fun.” When Rita didn’t respond, he continued: “Meeting lots of new people.”

“That’s good,” Rita said, looking at the television.

“How about you?” Hugh asked, leaning back into the couch. “Boyfriend?”

“Not interested.”

“Yeah right.” Hugh laughed.

“I’m not. I’m fine alone.” Rita looked straight at him. His green eyes shone, his figure backlit by the window. Outside, snow illuminated a forest of birches.

To Rita, there was something about the Whitts, the way they lured her in. Much like the first time she’d kissed Millie (was it in the bedroom? In the birches?) when Rita felt so utterly out of control, Hugh lunged at her now, and in the heat of his exhale, their lips touched for the second time in her life. She felt it through her.

As he pushed her onto her back, Rita felt somehow conscious of the differences between Millie and her brother. Millie's scent (rosewater, soap), the way her hair fell onto Rita's cheek. And yet with Hugh her body felt smaller, his chin seemed to work against hers. She watched a bead of sweat drip down the bridge of his nose.

He slipped his pants to his ankles, drew Rita's shirt over her head. He unbuttoned her jeans, slid them to her knees. Rita tasted salt on his lips. Then, he butterflyed her legs and she felt him, foreign, pushing into her underwear. In that moment, the sense of anticipation that Rita had felt, the warmth that had spilled across her body, the sizzling of it, released. Her interest in Hugh fled, and she wondered, as she had before, if these years with Millie, touching Millie, had taught her to love something a boy could never offer.

Suddenly, Rita became aware of Millie, standing at the top of the stairs. She heard her speaking with Mrs. Whitt, her voice nearing as she descended each step. Hugh, still pumping between her legs, exhaled into her face, eyes closed.

"Stop," Rita said, pushing him away, "we have to stop."

Hugh opened his eyes, that single bead of sweat still dangling from his nose, "Why?" He asked, still gyrating, "does it hurt?"

Millie's footsteps drew closer.

Hugh lifted a hand to Rita's breast. He kissed her neck. She pushed at him, at the shoulders. "Stop," she said, almost crying now, "I said stop!"

Millie rounded the corner, and looking up from a plate of grapes: "Hugh!" She yelled. "Put your shirt on!"

Rita sat up, the blanket tucked beneath her arms. Millie, looked rosy, her hair parted solemnly down the middle. Rita pulled her shirt back over her head, and Millie stood, transfixed.

“Mill,” Hugh said, pulling the blanket from Rita, “We didn’t do anything.” He wrapped the blanket around his lower half, and as Millie ran to bedroom, spilling grapes with each stride. Hugh jumped over the back of the couch, reaching for her arm. “Don’t get mad,” he called.

“We didn’t do anything!” Rita followed them. The door to Millie’s bedroom slammed just as Hugh reached it.

“Shit,” Rita said, out of breath. Hugh laughed, covering his mouth with his elbow.

“It’s not funny,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry,” he offered, sitting on the floor, “She’ll cool down.”

Rita finished buttoning her jeans and stood above him, leaning against the wall.

“We didn’t do anything wrong,” Hugh said, looking to Rita.

A silence pooled between them. The blanket around Hugh’s waist had loosened, and Rita could see he’d deflated. After a while, she pressed her ear to Millie’s bedroom door.

“Do you hear anything?” He whispered.

“Nothing,” Rita said.

Upstairs, Mr. Whitt arrived. Rita heard plates lifted from the cabinets, the refrigerator opened, then closed again, silverware sorted. Behind Millie’s door that silence developed.

Mrs. Whitt called for dinner, and Rita helped Hugh stand up. As he walked over to the couch to retrieve his pants, Rita knocked lightly on the door once more. "Dinner."

The table had been set with yellow dishware and blue napkins. When Rita reached the top of the stairs, she peered out the window. The snow still fell, silent, dangerous. Mrs. Whitt had the radio sizzling in the background. The announcers reported the conditions of the highways. Mr. Whitt walked toward the kitchen table, two glasses of red wine strung between his fingers. Hugh reached the top of the steps, out of breath, "Millie's on her way." He lied.

The family gathered around the table, each taking their customary place and Rita at the extra chair. Rita loved this: the ritual. They lifted their napkins, floated them onto their laps, and passed the meal. Roast chicken, a basket of dinner rolls, a plate of thin green beans, and a salad dressed with slivered almonds. When their plates were full and Millie still hadn't arrived, Mrs. Whitt lifted her fork and turned to Rita: "Is something wrong with Millie?"

Rita's mouth watered, the chicken steaming on her plate. Rita fingered the handle of her fork. "I don't know," she offered, "should I go check?"

Mrs. Whitt nodded, then stabbed a pair of green beans. "Please honey. I don't want her plate to get cold."

Downstairs, Millie's door was still closed tightly, and when Rita pressed her ear to it, she heard the same sickening silence. She tried the knob, which turned fully, but as she opened the door, she felt a heavy resistance. She reached an arm through and felt the back of a chair, propped poorly against the door. A sharp, winter air stung her skin. She worked

the chair, pushing it back far enough so that she could slide her body through the door's opening. Inside, Millie's room appeared orderly. Drawers closed, laundry folded.

Everything appeared neatly arranged, except for the window above her bed, which opened wide enough for snow to form a pile of white dust on the windowsill, spilling onto the bed. She approached the window, kneeled on the bed. The ground rose with a thick tide of snow. The birches shone, illuminated by the whiteness around them. Rita must have kneeled on that bed, in that stinging silence, for several minutes, alone. It was the loneliest she had ever felt.

Rita reported this to the family. The room, the windowsill, the neat pile of snow on the bed. Mrs. Whitt stuffed a forkful of white meat into her mouth as she stood, and a piece of chicken skin stuck between her teeth. She asked, earnestly, "Do you think she took a coat?" The family dressed at the back door. Rita borrowed Millie's boots, which still dripped from that afternoon. They trudged to the back of the house, each carrying a flashlight, each calling for Millie.

The snow fell silently, barely a wind, but it accumulated quickly. In the hood of Rita's jacket. On the head of the flashlight. In that moment, Rita became aware of the severity of this environment, of the way the snow seemed so perfectly beautiful, the way it fell so quietly. The temperature measured below zero, and she could feel the sting of the air in her lungs, on the slit of exposed skin between her coat sleeve and her mitten. She imagined her friend in that forest of birches, shivering in the dark.

At her bedroom window, Mr. Whitt kneeled, running his flashlight over the ground. Her footsteps, if they had been there, had disappeared. He ran the flashlight

across the ground, from the window, out into the forest. Against the wall of the house, stood a window screen, now frosted with snow. Millie had detached it, propped it up, as she'd left.

"Hard to see her trail," Mr. Whitt said, standing.

"We could try the woods," Hugh offered, "Rita and I could go."

Mrs. Whitt, tortured, exchanged a glance with her husband. "Rita honey," she said, "do you have any idea what happened?"

"Now's not the time, Mom," Hugh interrupted, "Millie is wandering around out here, possibly without shoes or warm clothes." He pointed his flashlight into the woods. "We should stop talking and go look."

Mr. Whitt stepped over to his wife, put an arm around her, and pulled her to his chest. "Go in," he said, "call the police. Look through the bedroom."

With that, they waded into the birches. Mr. Whitt walked several feet ahead of the kids, his flashlight scanning as he walked. Behind him, Hugh leaned into Rita and whispered: "Is this our fault?"

"Seems like it," Rita said, wiping beneath her nose.

Rita breathed in through her nose, felt the sting of the air in her nostrils, against her face. A white cloud formed Hugh's lips as they parted, then floated into the fingers of the birches.

"I'd do it again," he said.

Mr. Whitt stopped ahead, turned. "No tracks here. We've got nothing to go on."

Rita and Hugh caught up with him, pointed their flashlights at the ground, looking.

“I think,” Mr. Whitt continued, his moustache growing ice, “we ought to go back.”

They followed their tracks back to the house. Rita imagined Millie frozen. Her skin transparent. Her lips purple. But yet, somehow beautiful, her hair salted with snow.

When they arrived back in the house, the smell of roast chicken still hung in the air. They laid their boots and coats carefully on the floor to dry. Millie hung her mittens over the radiator. Mrs. Whitt spoke to a pair of crew cut police officers, who held mugs of coffee in their hands. Mrs. Whitt poured a pot of coffee into a carafe:

“Tall, blonde, green eyes.”

“Could she have been abducted?” one of the officers asked, “was there anyone who might want to take her?”

Hugh and Rita looked at each other.

Mrs. Whitt hung a dishtowel over the edge of the counter, then crossed her arms.

“I can’t imagine.”

“And what happened before you discovered the window?” the other officer asked, setting his mug on the table.

The room looked to Rita. She felt a certain warmth.

She shrugged, “nothing unusual.” Hugh added:

“I was with them. We watched TV.”

A knock, loud and sharp, echoed from the front door. Mr. Whitt cleared his throat, lifted a hand to his chest, and walked toward the front door. Hugh and Rita stood rosy cheeked and silent in the kitchen.

“Thanks,” the officer said. “Every bit helps.”

Rita nodded at him, pressed her lips together.

Mr. Whitt's voice, low and soothing, wafted in from the foyer. Rita wished, in the pit of her, that Millie would never come back.

When she did appear, in the hall, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, Mrs. Whitt ran to her. She guided Millie into a chair, pushed her palms to her daughter's cheeks.

Millie's eyes remained closed. As Rita had imagined, her hair, salted with snow, hung limply at her shoulders. A pair of bony hands, almost disconnected from her body, appeared from beneath the blanket and settled themselves on her lap. It was as if Millie were a ghost.

Rita felt the urge to run to her, tweeze open her eyes with a pair of fingers.

Instead, she kneeled in front of Millie, put her hands on her friend's knees. She felt the family, gathered around her. She, at its center, an incredible warmth surrounding her. Rita, her hands against the cool, bony rounds of Millie's knees, imagined this might be what it felt like, to be a Whitt.

Millie opened her eyes.

She opened her eyes, and they froze, fractured and crystalizing like ice.

Rita looked back at the family, at Hugh. Mrs. Whitt stepped forward again, "Millie, do you know where you are, honey?"

Millie blinked twice, her eyes glassy. She pried Rita's hands from her knees, and Rita remained at her friend's feet, silent with secrets.

"Get out," Millie said.

“It’s just us,” Mrs. Whitt insisted. “Honey, it’s only us and Rita.” She extended a hand to her daughter’s cheek.

“Fuck Rita,” Millie said, weakly. Then, with more strength, “Fuck. You.” Millie stood up, shaking now, shivering. “Get out,” she repeated, screaming now. “Just get out!.”

Rita stood quickly, surprised. The family gathered around Millie, cooing, shepherding her back into her chair, and Rita, squeezed out of the circle, stood on the periphery.

“Get her out,” Millie repeated again, “get her away from me.”

Rita walked to the window.

“She’s gone,” Mrs. Whitt said sweetly, “look, honey, she’s gone.”

From the window, Rita could see the outline of footsteps, hers and Hugh’s and Mr. Whitt’s, erasing, with each curtain of snow. She saw a thick, teeming snowfall developing in the birches. She saw, behind the beautiful birches, and at the bottom of the hill, her own home, dark and frosted. A sidewalk un-shoveled. A bead of water, hanging, frozen, from the faucet.

MY MOTHER TOOK ME TO A PLACE TO DIG

As a girl I often dreamt I was digging this hole. It wasn't the type of hole meant to bury roses for the winter, or to mine worms after a heavy rain. It was a hole wide and deep enough for me to stand in. It was a hole dug for me to be alone. As I dug, my muscles felt supple and I saw the soil was richly layered: shadows atop agates atop red soil atop grey. The air swirled coolly around me, a summer heat descending into the pit. This place was quieter than sleep. I dug easily until I hit a patch of hard ground. I cut the tip of my shovel into the earth and water simmered from the incision. The wound opened quickly, the pressure forcing the water into a high arch, a boiling geyser. As I stood beneath it, feverish, sweating, I thought: *this hole will fill, and I will drown.*

SLIPKNOT

Once every few years, Lani and her mother gently untie. Is it every mother-daughter pair, or just my girls? When it happens, I wait, I listen, I sleep well. During these separations, I feel most valuable.

In the years before she met Clay, Lani visited her mother every two weeks. I will say: it hurt that she never went that distance for me. But for her mother, Lani drove down from Boston to New York. Sometimes, they met half way. They went out for Indian, ate with their fingers, leaned into the center of the table.

But when Lani first took up with Clay, she stopped calling us. Tamma got nervous, phoned me, asked if I'd heard anything (I hadn't). And when our daughter finally did take her mother out she said Clay was *the one*. Gracious, mature, and so gentle, she said, and Tamma said, Oh? Is he part woman? And Lani faked a laugh into her tea and announced that she was moving to California for him. According to Tamma, Lani was moving too fast even then. We worried over her. We didn't want her to end up like us; numb, wounded, detached.

Visits dwindled. Excuses bloomed. A Thanksgiving apart. Then, Lani addressed her mother a wedding invitation and on the back of the envelope, wrote: *A quick, no-frills wedding, Mom, but with all of the planning haven't had time to call! See you in May!*

I mean, my Lani must've known how that would go.

But she told me afterwards, when she had already sent the invitation to her mother and hadn't heard back. Had I? Lani wondered (I hadn't). Because I couldn't prevent the initial betrayal, my advice was simple: arrange a visit with her mother, show off the ring. "There is no ring, Dad," she said.

"Bring her in on the planning, then."

Later, Tamma called, told me she felt *so hurt*. Was Lani ashamed of the engagement? Had she done something to make Lani mad at her?

"She must love him," I offered.

"How would she know," Tamma whined, "she's barely out of college."

"We raised her right, Tam. We have to be confident in that."

"I don't know if I should even go," Tamma said, weeping.

"To the wedding? Oh stop, blow your nose."

She blew.

"I mean, it's in California, and I don't really *feel* invited." She said. "Maybe our cards are just a formality?"

"Maybe." I noted. "She didn't invite June."

"She didn't?" Tamma said, surprised. To Tamma's credit, she had always been supportive of June. "You'd think she'd be used to June by now," she said.

Who is this Clay, we said. This is unlike her, we said. In *California*? we sniped. Is it something we did, we wondered? And then, I said: "Regardless, Tam, we have to go. I'll book you a room. "

On Lani's wedding day, she printed out a schedule for me and slipped it under the threshold of my yurt. I'd never stayed in a yurt, not even with Tamma. When I booked the room they'd asked, tent, or yurt, and I said yurt, not knowing the difference. I booked Tamma a tent.

When the schedule appeared, a wrinkled page on the floor, the top line said, "breakfast on your own." I hiked up the trail to a general store, where I purchased a frozen burrito. They had public microwaves. I watched my burrito twirl on a tray. The attendant told me they were out of coffee, which got me going. I sent Tamma a text: U eat yet?

She responded quickly. "Not yet. U?"

We exchanged a few more texts. Small talk.

When I arrived in Lani's yurt later that afternoon, Lani applied make up with a hand mirror. I kissed my girl on the head and asked her how she was feeling.

"Fine," she said, not looking up at me. "Nervous."

"What can I do?" I asked. I sat on the floor and watched a woman braid Lani's hair, weaving flowers into the empty spaces. I didn't tell her this, but God she looked just like her mother.

"Nothing, Dad." She said it slowly. Then: "Where's Mom? Have you seen her?"

I told her about the texts, of course. She asked if I could make sure Tamma had gotten her schedule, that she was comfortable, that she was prepared to help Lani into her dress. For the photos, she said.

I stepped out of the yurt, and dialed Tamma.

She picked up after four rings. "Where are you?" I asked. "Are you here?"

“Where, Bill?” She asked.

“Where?”

A pause on the line. I heard my own footsteps on gravel. A propeller plane overhead. The call of a canyon bird.

“Don’t tell me you’re not here,” I hissed. “I’m staying in a god damn *yurt*.”

Tamma cleared her throat.

“I couldn’t make it, Bill. I just couldn’t bring myself to go.”

I stopped in the middle of the trail, bit my bottom lip, looked up the mountain, where the peak shone like a bald spot. The mountain vegetation was dry, and I could smell it in the air, the toasted grass. I sighed heavily.

“Where is her present?” I asked.

“It’s here,” she countered. “I’ll get it to her.”

“And what am I supposed to tell our daughter?” I snipped. “That you *just couldn’t make it?*”

Tamma, collected, said: “Yes. That’s exactly what you should tell her.”

I hung up on Tamma, stomped to the outhouses. There was a line.

You can imagine how the rest of the day went. I fumbled with Lani’s zipper, my thumbs pudgy and wide. My poor daughter heaved, sobbing in her yurt, the room becoming thick with the smell of her sweat and mine. I should’ve just called her, Lani said, dabbing her eyes. And when the zipper of her gown stuck, and I pulled at her, clearly making things worse, Lani asked me to leave it, Dad, just leave it. She walked down the

aisle with a dress mostly zipped. When it came time to bustle—her language—she said, Dad, never mind. It'll just get dirty.

I drank so much of Clay's home brewed beer that I don't even remember who was there. Mostly young people, I think, only a few of whom I recognized from Lani's years at home. I do remember who was not there. I remember that very clearly.

Apparently Tamma phoned them on the third day of their honeymoon. This part, I heard from Lani. She spared little detail:

"You answer," Lani said, handing the phone to her husband, "I can't deal with her." Clay pinched the phone between his cheek and shoulder and held Lani's hand as she leaned into a peach tree.

"Mud?" the voice on the line projected from the receiver, sharp. (Cute, Tam)

"Clay."

"Right, where's my daughter?"

Lani pulled at the flesh of a ripe peach and felt its soft weight sink into her palm.

"I'm here," she said, loudly enough for her mother to hear, "I'm picking peaches on my *honeymoon*."

"What do you need?" Clay added, "validation that we're still alive? A report of the wedding you missed? Some photos?"

(Clearly that kid's got an impression of her already. I feel for Tamma with that.)

"I thought you and Lani might care to know I'm in California for a conference in San Francisco. Touring around between meetings—you're in Big Sur, right? Thought Lani might be interested in meeting up."

“Plus I brought your gift,” Tamma continued, “and my blessing.”

“You are pathetic,” Lani hissed

“I know,” her mother agreed, “a mother and daughter should have a part in this kind of thing together, which is why I wish you’d let me come.”

“I invited you--”

“No, honey, I know. I’m not saying that. I’m saying I wish you’d let me come see you.”

According to Lani, they met at a restaurant just south of Big Sur, a ribbony twenty minutes from the horse farm where they’d rented a room. “I guess I just need the closure,” Lani conceded, “I need to get it off my chest, you know?” I said yes, honey, of course. You’ve both messed up, I said, and Lani took a deep, long breath and said, “I know, Dad.”

The restaurant was small but full. On the table, four pairs of mismatched silverware held down antique napkins. The menu hung on the wall. Lani and Clay sat at a booth next to the door. Lani slid her napkin off the table, onto her lap, lifted her finger to her mouth and chewed the skin around her nail.

When our girl looked up, her mother stood behind Clay with her hands on his shoulders. Lani said Tamma looked like Big Sur itself: a beauty perched on the edge of abyss. Beauty was never Tamma’s problem.

Now, Tamma says she shook hands with Clay and hugged Lani, and that after they’d settled, she put it out there: “how was the wedding?”

“It was beautiful,” Clay said flatly, “just what we wanted.”

Tamma looked at Lani, “And how was the dress, honey? Did it turn out?”

Lani nodded and then looked at her husband across the table.

“She looked like an angel.”

“Good,” Tamma said, “You are beautiful honey. I’m sure you were stunning. I’m just sorry I couldn’t be there.” She shook her head, “ I’m so sorry I missed it.”

“Yeah,” Lani said, “me too.”

I imagine, there had to have been a silence here. Something long. Loaded.

“Well,” Tamma started, “I know this is late, but I brought your gift.” She reached into her purse, pulled out a small, square jewelry box and slid it across the table to our daughter. “I’d like you to have it.”

Tamma claims she lifted the box out of her purse with panache since, she said, she didn’t have a chance to get it gift wrapped. Our daughter sat across the table from her mother with one hand extended towards the velvet box, and another draped limply over her lap.

“What is it,” Lani asked?

Tamma says she kept it a surprise all along, “Just open it,” she said, “you won’t guess.”

Now, this part just broke my heart. Lani slid her fingers over the front edge of the box, while Tamma held on to the back. They, Tamma said, almost touched. *Almost*, she said. When I heard it from Lani, the story was different: she *really* liked that gift she got me, she said. Didn’t want to let go of it.

However it went, when Lani had the box in her hands, she pulled at the mouth until it opened, revealing a white satin lining and a simple gold loop with a dazzling solitaire

nestled inside. Lani lifted it with the tips of her fingers and examined the ring. It was a gorgeous thing, really. “Whose is this?” she asked, looking to her mother.

“Your father’s,” Tamma answered, smiling, “and mine. It’s from both of us.”

“Why?” Lani asked, “because Clay didn’t get me a ring?”

And to that, Tamma responded: “No, because we wanted you to have a piece of all of our mistakes, so that you won’t make the same ones.”

No offense to Tam, but if it were me I would’ve explained it in a more positive light. You know, like, we made this for you as a sign of our support. As a symbol of our togetherness as a family. As a token of our affection and love. To note that you were one of the beautiful things that come from our marriage, and for that, you should have this.

Not surprisingly, Lani got confused. “So you’re giving me a failed marriage ring?”

Tamma said she explained it all very well then, with the melting of our rings into hers. And since there wasn’t a ring, etc., we wanted to deliver something meaningful.

“All of our experience is here,” she said to Lani, “so that you don’t have to make the mistakes we made.”

“Right,” Lani said, putting the ring into her purse, “thanks.”

Tamma arranged the silverware at her place, straightening the fork, knife, centering her paper placemat.

“It’s a symbol of your parents’ support.”

Lani nodded, “thanks” she said, “it was really thoughtful.”

At that point, Tamma said, thank God a waitress came, filled the silence with a list of meals. Lani pouted her way to an eggs benedict. Three coffees.

As I said, these two have derailed before. When Lani was in high school, especially. I always helped heal the wound. A gift. A pair of tickets to the ballet. But this, somehow, this felt different to all of us. A secret engagement. A skipped wedding. During those months I felt that they were beyond my reach. That, perhaps, my girls had outgrown me? It was with great anxiety that I waited for Lani's call after their breakfast.

It took two days. When she called, I picked up on the first ring.

"So," I asked, "how was it with your mother?"

I heard Lani switch the phone from one ear to the other, "it was fine," she said.

"She was the way I expected her to be."

"How?"

"Just, with that ridiculous gift and everything. You didn't have anything to do with it, did you?"

I played dumb: "What gift?"

"The ring. Like a melted ring from you and her. It made no sense."

"Oh," I said, and then I switched the subject, "so did you apologize about the wedding invitation?"

She was silent, breathing on the other end.

"I didn't have a chance."

"Lani," I said, losing patience.

"I didn't. It was ridiculous to see her falling all over herself like that."

"Nobody said your mother was perfect."

"No kidding. She was disgusting."

I took in a breath, held it.

“But I’m sick of talking about her.” Lani decided. “How are you, dad?”

I don’t think I ever felt so loved in my life, the way she said it. I almost fell over.

And then she waited for me to respond!

“Dad?”

“I’m fine, honey,” I said, stunned.

“How’s June?” she asked.

“She’s good,” I said. “She’s fine.”

It felt unusual, to be asked about myself. I felt lost. So, I dug back in: “So back to your mother. What’s your plan?”

“Leave her be,” Lani responded, “let her sweat.”

“And the ring?” I asked, “you wouldn’t wear it?”

“Dad,” she said, dismissive.

“Right,” I said. “Well, you know how she gets.”

“I know, Dad.”

When she said that, I could feel her, somehow, through the receiver, leaning into me, pressing against my leg, standing at the height where I could rest my hand on the top of her head, a nest of blonde hair beneath my palm. The age where, as she clung to me, my leg began to sweat, dripping down my ankle.

“Anyway.”

“Anyway,” I said, not knowing what to say. What, without Tamma, I could possibly say to my dear girl. “You’d like this weather,” I started, then stopped.

“Huh?” She said.

“Nothing.” I looked to the ceiling. I rubbed the back of my neck. I went blank, completely blank, and, as I had years ago, before Tamma and I had signed the papers and loaded my things on the U-Haul, I felt myself, bound, Lani tying the wrists, and Tamma at the feet.

INHERITANCE

The irony is that before my parents' crash, I could hardly wait to run our family's publishing house. I have to remind myself of that sometimes; that I used dream of owning all this.

Instead, the day of the funeral, I sat across from a lawyer in a three-piece suit. It was July, and a thick summer heat had descended on Manhattan. A greased curl hung from the lawyer's forehead. "You'll be the acting president," he said sliding a sheet of paper across the table, "when you've grieved sufficiently."

I had just turned 22; just framed my graduation photo; just stacked boxes into my childhood bedroom. I had also just signed with Doubleday as a copy editor, a job my mother thought of as treason, a job I considered spying on the enemy, a job that, until she stepped on that plane, had shepherded a silence between us. When Mom and Dad left, I kissed my father goodbye, his beard rough against my cheek, while my mother turned her nose into the air.

I smoothed my skirt to my lap, felt my thighs adhering to each other. "I'm not qualified," I said, blankly.

"I'm sorry," the attorney insisted, "it's not a choice." He lit a cigarette, and I watched the smoke wind up from its glowing tip. "Sign."

I signed. He pulled the page across the table, examined it, then, with another drag, said: "I've got some budgetary concerns." He tucked the page into his briefcase, "we can go over them next week." He paused, extended a hand.

The first days wafted past me like a thin odor. I met with Simmons and nodded often, imagining my parents' propeller plane diving through a pair of twin clouds, dividing the fog into four neat halves. At home, I sifted through Mom's jewelry box. Pushed my parents' beds together. I felt, somehow, that they were still just away on business. The guilt I felt, especially about my mother, was incredible.

On my fifth day at the office, we met with the lawyer again. He settled into the head of the conference table.

"There's a discrepancy," he said, unbuttoning his jacket, "in the estate." He wiped his face with a handkerchief, and Simmons rushed to open a pair of windows, switch on the fan. At the window, she sighed, fanning herself with a palm.

I looked over the lawyer's shoulder as he pointed, "this is the sum from the most recent draft of their will," he looked up to me. "But when I called the bank, to allow you the withdrawal privileges," he gestured to me, "their records indicate the account is worth half that."

"Alice took care of the accounts. There must have been something she had hanging in the balance," Simmons said, fingering a pearl on her choker. "I'll check her files." She hurried out.

"Did your parents have any money forthcoming?" The lawyer asked, turning to me.

The city noise crescendo-ed. The fan pulled a breeze into the room, drew a hair across my face. I closed my eyes. “I don’t know,” I said, tucking the hair behind my ear, beneath a pin, “I haven’t gone through their things.”

“I’m sure it’s clerical,” he offered, standing, “but I’d keep an eye on the accounts.”

After the meeting, I sunk into my mother’s desk chair, and a thin slick of perfume floated around me. I hadn’t, until that moment, missed her so fully. The desk stood in front of me, layered with papers. The bottom drawer hung open. Simmons knocked and I waved her in.

“This going to be your office?”

I leaned back in my mother’s chair: “I haven’t decided.”

“The sooner the better,” she said. “We’ll need to go through them both.”

I lifted a pair of papers from the desk, pretended to look at them.

Simmons sighed deeply. As she turned to leave, she lifted her glasses from her face.

“I’m not trying to be pushy, ” she said.

She closed the door softly behind her.

I sifted through a few of the papers on my mother’s desk: an unsigned contract, a printing schedule, an invitation list. I opened the top drawer, which felt light, almost empty. Inside, a sheet of legal paper floated in the middle of the drawer, a red ballpoint rocked. I lifted out the paper, and beneath the sheet, yellow and worn, lay a thin, well-studied manuscript. I lifted the book from the drawer, examined it from all sides. Hand-bound. Meticulous.

Unsent Letters: a Memoir of Love and Loss, by Nelson Benton.

Beside it: “title?” my mother had written in her distinctive red script.

I ran my fingers across her letters. The ink bled slightly at the point of the question mark as though she’d hesitated, her pen paralyzed.

I peeled off my cardigan, blotted my upper lip with a handkerchief, and turned the page to the dedication:

Perhaps once in our lifetime, we cross paths, share our hours with another that changes the course of our own lives. I’ve had that privilege, that joy, of working with a woman of great genius and moral vision. This is the story of my editor, my tamer and the way our love bloomed secretly in the dark.

I closed the book swiftly, set it on the desk and stood up. *My editor*, it seemed, was my mother. But *my tamer*? The way our *love*, I thought—love of books? Love of letters?

Standing back from the desk, I saw my mother there, a pen strung between two indelicate fingers, brows knit.

“Simmons?” I called. “Do you know of a Nel Benton?”

Simmons stood in the threshold of the door, adjusted her glasses. “One of our clients,” she said, looking at her shoes.

“What do you know about him?”

She gestured to the chair in the corner. I nodded. She sat down, folded her hands in her lap.

“Nelson. He’s a promising young writer. He’s offered up a couple of interesting manuscripts, but I haven’t read his work. Your mother,” she said slowly, “was an advocate.”

I turned to the window, where a flock of pigeons floated up Thompson St, toward Washington Square Park. “Has he made any money for us?” A single bird landed on the windowsill, cooed, bent its neck towards our voices.

“Not yet.”

“What did Dad think? Did he see potential?”

A pause hung between us. The pigeon departed, the sound of its wings just barely audible. I felt the room thickening. Simmons looked intently in her lap.

“He trusted your mother’s intuition with new authors,” she said, “I don’t think he felt as strongly about Nel.”

“And it was novels?” I clarified, “he was working on a novel?”

“Yes.” Simmons said, looking up. “The first book was set for release in May.”

I fanned myself. “So where’s the novel?”

She pressed her lips together.

“I don’t know.”

“Right,” I said, politely. “Could you look into it?”

My mother’s office, an office that, as a child, I had admired, felt suddenly small. I sat back down at the desk, took up Nel’s manuscript.

Page eleven:

We sat down to coffee in my conservatory, twenty one stories up. I served her coffee with cigarettes. She loved that. The view of the city was spectacular. While we ate, she said, “What’s the matter. You seem distracted.” She took my hand. Alice looked beautiful, the way she took my hand.

"I'm fine," I lied.

She smiled at me, coyly, and I, flustered, spilled my coffee onto the table. She started laughing, but obviously I still felt anxious. The nerves were unbelievable.

She leaned in to give me a kiss, probably to pacify me, and meanwhile I'm thinking "Oh God, should we? Is this good for my art?"

Of course, I thought, there must be more than one Alice in this town. Probably more than one editor named Alice.

I thumbed further ahead, to a page where Benton described a tryst at a vacation rental in Spain. He noted the way his work in that house had evolved, flowered under her supervision. At this, I began unknowing my mother. It couldn't have been last summer, Costa Brava, in the villa we rented on the ocean? My father and I had exhausted the afternoons swimming; Mother went for groceries, walked into town with a tote on her wrist, left us with instructions to watch for jellyfish.

It occurred to me that she could have been somewhere else.

Just as I'd begun to calculate which house it was that Nel might have rented along the Spanish coast, the phone rang. It shook, disturbing the papers on the desk. I lifted the receiver quickly, annoyed.

"Yes?"

"Alice?" The voice on the line asked.

I paused, perhaps for just a moment too long. Did I sound like my mother?

"It's Nel."

"Yes." I said, instinctively. "Hi."

I immediately regretted it. Here I was, talking to a man I thought I despised, and I said, of all things, *Hi*—so familiar!—as if I’d known him all these years. As if I’d woken up to *him* each morning, standing in the galley kitchen of our two bedroom, pouring coffee from a steel carafe.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, “Everything OK there?”

I paused again, blank.

“Darling?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” I said, wincing, “this isn’t Alice.”

I heard him move, perhaps transferring the phone from one ear to the other.

“Very sorry,” he said slowly, “you sound alike.”

“This is Carole.” I said, “I’m Alice’s daughter.”

Just then, Simmons burst into the room, a single sheet of paper fluttering in her hand. “Excuse me,” I said, “Nel, just a moment.” I put my hand over the receiver.

“Nel?” Simmons mouthed, pointing to the phone.

I nodded.

She gestured with her hands, keep talking, she seemed to say.

“Nel? Sorry for the wait.”

“It’s alright,” he said, “your mother, you may know, is my agent.”

“Was,” I corrected.

He paused.

“My mother,” I said, “and my father—both of my parents—died in a plane crash.

I’m sorry you hadn’t heard.”

“No,” he started, “I hadn’t.”

“Somewhere over the Dakotas.”

I let the silence develop fully. Then: “I didn’t have time to contact all of our clients. The funeral was small. There was a write-up in the paper.”

“I’m sure there was,” he said, distracted.

His voice, perhaps different in this context than it was for my mother, sounded boyish, unsure. I imagined him tall and lean, a side part, a clean face. I imagined him in an empty apartment, sitting in the corner, the phone in his lap. He seemed to me, a smoker.

“Now,” I offered. “I’m glad you called, actually. Nel, we’re looking at your contract—” I lifted the paper, lifted my eyes to Simmons. “And I see here a five thousand dollar advance for the book?”

“That’s right.”

“And how’s the book coming?”

“The novel?” he asked?

“I’m not familiar with your project,” I said, coldly, “why don’t you describe it.”

He hesitated. I felt delighted by this.

“It’s a long, immersive piece,” he said, “an epic.”

“Sure,” I said, inviting him to continue.

“A generational tale.”

“How much of the work is written?” I pressed. “With five thousand—you must have some finished.”

He stuttered, sputtered: “Perhaps forty percent.”

“Forty?”

“Maybe forty five.”

“Nel,” I said, “you know the deadline was in May?”

“Alice,” he mumbled, “your mother had given me an extension after I took up another project.”

“Another project?”

“A memoir,” he said, “an autobiography.”

I felt myself flush. I brought myself to say:

“And is that out for publication?”

“Not yet,” he said, “perhaps a couple of revisions more. But the advance,” he said, “has given me the support to get this right.”

The advance.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” I said, “but are you referring to the five thousand? Or were you given one for each book?”

“Another three,” he said, “for the memoir.”

“Right, Nel,” I said, “of course. Three thousand for the memoir, five for the novel. I’ll make a note.”

Simmons noted this at the bottom of the contract, underlining it twice. Then she gestured for me to hurry it along.

“I’ve got to run.” I said, “but I’d like to see some of the new pages.”

We agreed that he’d bring the opening chapters of his manuscript by the office first thing the next day. Before we hung up, I expressed my sincerest condolences that he would

no longer be working with my mother—an excellent editor, I said, emphasizing the *editor*—but that I would do my best. I didn’t wait to hear his response before I hung up.

“Three thousand?” Simmons asked. “For what?”

“A memoir.”

“I didn’t find any note of that,” she said, exhaling.

“They were together,” I said, almost interrupting her, “weren’t they?”

She leaned against the desk, straightened a pile of papers. She looked at me, then back at the pages. “I’m going to stop in at the bank early,” she said, “to ask for a statement.”

I agreed, distractedly, and she left me in that office, alone. I sat in my mother’s chair, watching the warm summer light cast shadows on the wall. I heard Simmons close the front door behind her, descend each of the four flights of stairs, then open the door to the building. I listened to her walk until the sound of her steps joined with the hum of the city. Eventually, the shadows on the wall faded to into the hazy grey of a city night. I walked home.

In my dream, I swept dirt off this sidewalk. Sand and cigarette butts and cellophane wrappers blew across it, and I swept, and they blew back across, and I swept, and each time the wind changed, or someone stepped across my clean sidewalk, or a tree shed a leaf, I watched this mess displaying itself to me. It felt demanding, the way the sand kept blowing back, scratching my ankles.

When dawn arrived, I dressed myself in a long skirt and a pair of my mothers’ amethyst stud earrings. It still felt as if I were invading her privacy somehow, rummaging

through her things, using the master bath. I still imagined her and my father unlocking the door to the apartment, swiftly butterflying their luggage, my mother soaking her stockings in the sink. After toying with my hair in the mirror, I arranged it across one shoulder. It strengthened the resemblance to my mother.

It rained. I took a taxi to the office, ten blocks west of the apartment. I didn't want my hair to fall. When I arrived, early, the office looked dim, a grey morning pouring through the windows. The humidity had already seeped into the space. I felt my hair expanding.

At my mother's desk, I re-shelved books. Tucked Nelson's manuscript back into the top drawer, the page of legal paper arranged artfully over top. I imagined Nelson meeting me here, in an office he hardly recognized. By the time Simmons arrived the surface of my mother's desk was bare.

She leaned against the door frame. "This looks good."

"Cleaning," I said.

"Well I've talked with the bank."

I turned my attention to Simmons.

"Oh?"

"The teller wasn't authorized to give me all of the information. I introduced myself and said I just couldn't remember if we'd paid a certain client, etc., and anyway, she pulled out the last five transactions."

"And?"

“Three were to Benton: a couple hundred each.” She paused. “Nelson Benton—your mother’s--”

“Yes,” I interrupted, “I know who it is.”

Behind Simmons, I heard someone ascending the steps to our door. Simmons turned to look behind her. A small man, broad and bearded, lifted a knuckle to the glass of the door. Simmons waved him in, and I watched him shake his umbrella, then prop it against the wall. He carried a thin, leather file folder. His shirt wrinkled at the waist, where his belt appeared too tight.

“Mr. Benton,” Simmons said as he opened the door, “nice to see you.”

Nelson nodded to her, tucked his hat beneath his arm. I stood, behind the desk, my hands clasped in front of me.

“Nelson,” I said, extending my own hand.

“Such a pleasure to meet you. Carole,” he countered. His hand felt smooth. I sat.

“Simmons,” I said, sweetly, “some coffee?” She nodded.

“You look like your mother,” he said, arranging himself in the chair, “your face.”

“Thank you,” I said, flushing. I crossed my ankles. Re crossed them. I felt myself shaking.

“It’s almost alarming.”

I dismissed him with a hand. “Mothers and daughters-- it often happens this way. So please, tell me--”

“My sincerest condolences, also,” he said, “about your parents.” He shook his head, dropped his eyes to the surface of the desk. He was disarmingly earnest. A pair of

thin, brown eyes squeezed the bridge of his nose. His build, unlike my image of him, was not lithe or muscular. Nelson looked worn and traveled. “Must be a real shock.”

“I’m sorry you had to hear it through me.”

“No good way,” he offered.

I found myself smiling at him.

“So, Nelson, tell me about your book,” I said, clearing my throat.

As he spoke, I watched his mouth move. I watched his eyelashes, parted in triangles, flutter. I watched his ample, imperfect belly expand and retract. I smelled his aftershave. A bead of sweat slid down his nose, he dabbed it with the cuff of his shirt.

“Interesting,” I said. “And my mother gave you an advance for another text?”

“Yes, as I said on the phone, the memoir.”

“Right,” I said, opening the drawer, “this one.”

I set it on the table. I searched him for a reaction, expecting him, perhaps, to blush. Or apologize. Instead, he blinked slowly and asked: “Have you read it?”

“I have.”

“What did you think?”

I felt myself igniting.

“I found it irritating,” I said, “the same story repeated. And I found the writing plain. And frankly, I’m astonished—that you got a three thousand dollar advance for this. I’d call it unpromising. ”

“Right,” Nelson said, earnestly, one hand cupping his neck, the other draped over the arm of the chair. He looked distressed, exhaled loudly. “I appreciate your honesty.”

Simmons arrived with a carafe of coffee, two mugs in her other hand. She set them up on the edge of my desk, poured both cups. I nodded to Nelson.

“Please, help yourself.” I lifted a cup to my own lips, inhaling deeply. “In fact, based on this memoir,” I said, sipping, “it’s hard to tell if you’re any good at all. Which is why I’d love to see your fiction—perhaps that’s your talent.”

He lifted a stack of papers from his leather case, slid the pages across my desk. “I’d like an honest assessment.”

“Honestly.” I leaned back in my chair. He rested his mug in his lap. “What are the checks you’ve been receiving?” I said, lifting a blank piece of paper as if it were bank statement. “Explain that arrangement.”

He looked genuinely confused. “Your mother offered me a hundred a month to write.”

I set my cup back down on the desk, lifted a hand to my lips.

“The memoir,” he added. “And a few other things.” He raised his brows.

“Which other things?”

He gestured with one hand toward his manuscript. “She mostly wanted the memoir.”

“Why?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Because I wanted to write it.”

I pushed my coffee away. The smell of it, the heat of it, nauseated me.

“Well we won’t be able to honor that arrangement,” I said.

He looked exhausted.

I stood. "You understand."

He took a final sip of his coffee. It still steamed as he set it on the table.

"Just so you know," he said, reaching for my wrist. And before I could calculate my next move, I curled my hand around his. My fingers grazed the hair on the back of his hand. His palm radiated heat, perhaps from the coffee cup, perhaps just from within. I looked down at our hands. His fingernails, square and stiff, mine rounded and manicured. Our hands hung there for a moment, Nel and I and my mother's ghost, knit together.

"I don't need to know," I interrupted, dropping his hand.

Up close, it was clear his beard had been combed.

After he left, my office appeared dim, beads of rain had formed on the outside of the window. I smelled the street, steaming. I pushed my head out and saw Nelson rounding the corner, his hand out to a cab. His walk looked poised from above. I watched a pair of children cling to their father. I watched a cat, licking from a puddle. Behind me, Nelson's manuscript sat stacked on the desk. I imagined the pages curling up with the moisture of the room. I imagined myself smoothing them down with my palms. I imagined smoothing them, but still, the pages softened and curled, curled up at the edges.

BIOGRAPHY

Alicia L. Gleason received her Bachelor of Arts from Colgate University in 2008. She earned her Master of Fine Arts in Fiction from George Mason University in 2014. She lives and writes in Washington, DC.