

A LIFE LIKE MAD

By

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A Thesis

Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty

of

George Mason University

in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

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Fall Semester 2016  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

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

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## **DEDICATION**

For my mother, who continues to enlighten and inspire me, even in the darkest moments.

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## **ABSTRACT**

A LIFE LIKE MAD

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Terry Brennan is a middle aged single mother deep in the throes of an addiction to alcohol and prescription drugs. As she enters a month-long rehabilitation program in the heart of California's Napa Valley, so begins Brennan's almost unwitting transformation. Braiding together past and present, this narrative follows a woman on the brink of collapse, as she confronts the effects her addictions have had on her life and the tenuous, often complicated relationships that might well have inspired them. Navigating the choppy waters of recovery, Brennan must somehow free her mind and heart of her past, while accepting the dynamic trials of her present without the crutch of drugs and alcohol.



## PROLOGUE

*Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack  
all dressed in black, black, black,  
with silver buttons, buttons, buttons  
all down her back, back, back.*

Terry hums to herself as her mother tugs at her hair. Her mother, in a black dress, with shiny black shoes. Just like the woman in the song. A black veil rests on the bathroom sink, waiting to be pinned.

“Stand still,” her mother demands. Her voice is stern. A yank, gentle at first, then harder. A soft yelp hiccups loose from Terry’s lips. A pinch as the pink foam curler tugs free. She feels her hair snapping at the root.

“OUCH!”

“Well if you could only stand still!”

Her mother takes a deep breath and releases it. It sounds like a balloon losing air.

“Lord save me,” she says to herself. “What will I do with you now...”

And then, without warning, her mother is crying, tiny raindrop tears running from the corners of deeply pinched lids.

“Don’t cry, Mother. Please don’t,” she pleads. What has she done? What has she done to make her mother cry? She hugs her mother’s hips. “Please, Mother. Don’t cry.”

She feels her body being pushed, the force of her mother’s weight, as she tries to break free of Terry’s grasp. Her mother’s sharp nails carve the flesh of her bare arms.

“Let go,” she says, quiet at first and then louder. “I said let go!”

Terry feels the floor tilt beneath her. She stumbles, attempts to regain balance as her mother edges back, staring at her with the kind of look that bad men in the movies make. Hatred, she would call it. And maybe she’d be right.

“I’m sorry, Mother.” Her voice wobbles. “Please,” she says, “Don’t cry. I’ll be still now.”

## **PART 1: THE FARM**

## GOING THERE

*September 21, 2009*  
*Day 1*

The wine lingers on her tongue—alkaline and stale—remnants of a quick binge in a gas station bathroom twenty minutes before. A girlhood giddiness fills the hollow of her chest; a euphoria she feels keenly, anxiously afraid of losing. She savors the buzz. On her lap, she feels the contours of the bottle hidden in the lining of her purse.

“So that’s it? That’s how you want to do this?”

The landscape passes in a blur: rows of vines, alternating swaths of dead, yellow grass, and spotted cattle. The air is sweet with the scent of ferment.

“Oh, Ana. Let it go,” she says with a sigh.

Her daughter’s knuckles tighten on the wheel. Her long brown hair is pulled back into a loose ponytail and a vein pulses in her temple, her eyes never moving from the winding stretch of road before them.

“Let it go?” Ana issues a tired laugh. “You’re unbelievable.”

She does not respond. She is attempting to savor the ecstasy a moment longer.

“You’re going to rehab. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

She closes her eyes, blotting out the sun-sharpened sky. “Ana, please—”

“No, Mom. You don’t get to tell me to stop.”

Terry holds her hand up to her forehead, as if to suggest a headache.

“I know, I know,” she warbles, exhaustion in her voice, her tongue thick and lazy in her mouth. “I’m a terrible mother. I mess everything up. Now can’t I just have a few moments of silence before you lock me up?”

The tires catch a patch of broken asphalt and the car dips. She braces her bare feet against the floorboards. *When had she taken off her shoes?*

“Ana,” she cautions. “Watch it, OK?” Her stomach churns, a warm, watery sensation creeping up the back of her throat.

“It’s not my fault. It’s the road.”

“Well be careful.” She hears the edge in her voice and she hates herself for it. She hates herself for a lot of things these days: that her daughter will now miss the annual harvest festival because she must drive Terry three hours to a rehabilitation center in the heart of California’s wine country (how ironic); that she promised Ana that she would not go to Mercy Farm drunk; and that secretly she knew even then that she would. But more than any of it, she hates how hollow she feels. Because really, she’s not sure she actually cares enough to hate any of it.

The car catches another dip and, without warning, the contents of her stomach leap into her throat. She grips Ana’s right arm.

“Ouch! Mom?” Ana looks at her with confusion as Terry jabs frantically at the locked window button. She feels the car rapidly decelerate. They jerk off the road into a patch of gravel and she flings her weight against the door, feeling the belt catch on her

shoulder as she catapults from the car. Hard white gravel scores the bottom of her feet as she sprints, falling on her knees in a patch of weeds. Her hands dig small burrows in the wet earth, dirt clumping in her fists as she pitches forward, emptying her stomach into the tall, yellow reeds.

“Mom?” She hears Ana’s disembodied voice somewhere behind her.

The wine forces its way up in sloppy lurches, a sharp scorch in her nose and throat. Her left arm buckles, and she feels her body being tugged upwards. Ana holds her, steadying her shaking form.

When there is nothing left, Ana kneels down, cleans her mother’s mouth and nose with a napkin fetched from the glove compartment. She wipes the backs of her hands, cradling Terry’s body as they maneuver their way back to the car. She folds her mother into the passenger seat and does her buckle, like a poor, sick child. Ana guides the car back on to the road.

Life resumes.



*Obstinate, prideful, sick.* These are just a few of the words Ana would have used to describe her mother that cold Sunday morning in October.

Yes, like a child, she would have agreed.

As she pulls the car back onto the road, her mother’s limp body curled against the passenger side door, she prays for resolution.

*She prays.*

Prayer—something she had never been taught to do. It's not even something she fully understands, because how does one pray to a God they have never been taught to believe in? But she prays anyways. She prays because she does not know what else to do. Because what else is there? Because praying brings miracles, and that is the only thing Ana has to hope for.



They arrive at the paint-peeled Victorian in the late afternoon. The air is thick with the scent of rotting leaves and wet bark. The soot sky glowers, threatening rain. Terry slips on her shoes, feels a light sting where the gravel nicked her bare feet. The car idles; Ana does not release her belt.

Her daughter looks small and fragile in the driver's seat, her eyes—blue like her father's—weary and sad. Worry lines crease the soft skin of her forehead: she looks older than seventeen.

“I don't want to do this anymore,” Ana says.

Terry's chest is as hollow as her stomach, the exuberance of the high misplaced in the vomit-soaked weeds. She feels a flare of anger in of her chest, though she knows it's unfair.

“So you're just going to dump me off then? No hugs goodbye, no good luck wishes?”

Ana's brow knits two perfect, vertical lines.

“Everyday, Mom. Every single day I see you like this. Don’t you think I know how hard this is?”

Terry holds her bag to her chest, clutching it, as if for support.

“So why are you abandoning me?”

Ana shakes her head, tears of frustration welling in her eyes. Her voice fills the car’s interior. “Stop making everything about you. What about me? What about the fact that it’s Sunday and instead of being with my friends I’m driving my mother to rehab? What about that?” She sucks in a needly breath. “You don’t get it at all. You’re so wrapped up in *you* that you can’t even see it.”

Ana casts off her seatbelt, kicking the car door open. Terry hears the punch of the gravel under her daughter’s angry steps as she stomps around the front of the car. Ana throws open the passenger side door, her face suddenly so close that Terry can feel her breath on her cheeks.

“Go!” She screams. Her daughter stands back, gesturing wildly. “Get out!”

Terry is stunned, her body rigidly aligned with the seat. “I—”

“No! I don’t care. Really, I don’t.”

After a moment of silence between them, Terry feels the fury build and erupt, a familiar nastiness that seems always to reside just under the surface.

“Fine! I can see my daughter doesn’t give two shits about me.” She stands, her face warm, sweat forming at her temples and in the hollows of her pits. “This is the kind of daughter I have. So ungrateful for everything I have done for her.”



Ana rolls her eyes. “Save it for the people in there.” She motions to the sagging Victorian. “Because I’m so freaking done.”

Her daughter walks to the back of the car, popping the trunk, and snatches Terry’s duffle out of it, casting it down on the pavement between them—a gauntlet—then she walks back around to the driver’s side, climbs in and slams the door. The car *tut-tuts* rhythmically. Terry reaches for the handle, but it’s too late. She hears the locks click into place. She bangs her fist once against the side window, a searing pain exploding across her knuckles.

“Fuck! Goddammit, Ana.”

Twenty feet away, standing on the front lawn of the rehabilitation center, a very fat man watches her. He waves once, his fat arm waggling.

“Terry,” he calls.

She does not wave back. The car launches into reverse, kicking up a cloud of angry dust in its wake. Behind her, she can hear the man approaching: soft, puffing breaths.

“My name is Donald,” he heaves as she turns to face him. Skin sags from his bones, his thick jowls a flaccid continuation of his cheeks, and his teeth like porcelain piano keys between fat black lips.

Terry does not take his hand. Her fingers trace the outline of the bottle hidden in the flesh of her purse; only two more sips, maybe three. The tin cap catches the underside of her thumbnail. Donald reaches for her duffle and Terry hugs her purse more tightly.

He sucks his lower lip with his big white teeth.

“Shall we?”

“I need the bathroom.”

“Right, well we’ve got one in the common room you can use. Then I’ll give you the grand tour.” His eyes study Terry curiously, cautiously. He shifts his gaze to the expanse of tall, yellow marsh grass behind her. In the distance, the mountains have turned indigo in the shadows and the horizon is beginning to eclipse the sun. “Not much work we can do today, I suppose,” he says, looking back at her.

They approach the house in silence.

Donald guides her into what he calls the common room, a sunroom with several sagging couches and chairs. In one corner, at the foot of the stairs, a pay phone has been mounted to the wall. Donald gestures to a door just to the left of the pay phone.

“The bathroom’s just there.”



Her body prickles with an electric energy. She locks the bathroom door behind her and fishes the bottle from the lining of her purse, the liquid a pale gold under the fluorescent lighting. *Not nearly enough, but something.* Right now it’s everything.

Terry reaches down and cups her left breast, locating the three Xanax she has hidden in the cup. She swallows two of the oval-shaped peach pills, considers saving one for later. *But no.* This one she chews. A bitter flavor coats her tongue. Once she meets with the psychiatrist, there will be more. There are always more pills.

She does not savor the wine, but throws it back in two fluid gulps. She can scarcely taste it, the crushed pill filling her mouth with a chalky bitterness. The wine stings her throat, raw still from the bile that has come before it. Terry buries the bottle under a stack of towels in the trash and washes her face in the sink.

She wipes away the mascara that runs from her lower lids and studies her reflection in the glass. She doesn't look so bad, really. Only tired. Nothing a little sleep can't fix.

The pills hit first.

Her chest loosens and the space behind her eyes feels fuzzy, as if she is full of batting. *Like a doll*. Like a tired little doll, still wearing last night's makeup. Maybe still beautiful. The light above her dims and her lids felt heavy. She turns off the tap and pinches herself twice on the left wrist.

*Donald.*

The name pops into her head. That is why she is here. Well not *for* Donald, but he is somehow part of it. Mercy Farm. Mercy... *Lord have mercy on me*. But she knows that He will not. She flips the lock and opens the door.

## DAY DRINKING

*Spring 1998*

She's sitting at an empty bar. It's a quarter after two on a Wednesday afternoon and she expected to be held up in court for most the afternoon, but after a wasted hour of everyone's time, the judge orders meditation rescheduled.

Three times now she has scraped the lawyer fees together and three times now Greg hasn't shown.

"I'll have a white wine."

"Pinot Grigio OK?" asks the small, stumpy woman behind the bar.

"Whatever you have is fine," Terry says. She is tired and she is broke. She does not have enough left in her heart or her bank account for distinctions.

The woman places the glass in front of her and fills it to the brim. A tattoo of a weathered red heart bleeds across her left breast.

Terry could have gone to the Liquor Lobby. A bottle of wine is always cheaper at the store. But she can't stomach the thought of sitting at home alone, drowning her sorrows in the middle of the afternoon, in the middle of the week.

She pulls the glass towards her, downing half in a single swallow. The woman behind the bar watches from the corner of her eye, the side her mouth tugging upward in a knowing smile.

“So it’s that kind of a day,” she says. She towels down glasses with a ratty bar towel.

“It seems like every day is *that* kind of day lately.”

“Man or mother?”

Terry pauses. She considers how much to say. It is, after all, a small town. “Man. I stopped talking to my mother a while ago. Right around the time she told me to suck it up and stay with the man.”

The woman nods. “I’ve got me one of those too.”

“Man or mother?”

“Mother.” The woman lets out a low whistle. “I think I’m as good as done with the men.”

“Really?”

“Sure, why not?”

Terry throws back what’s left in the glass and taps it against the counter to signal she’s ready for another. “I can think of a few good reasons.”

The bartender pours out another glass. “There are ways around them,” she says and winks.

She looks at her glass, sips it more slowly this time. She’s all out of witty banter. And the truth is, she does not know how to be alone. She isn’t any good at it.

There is a perpetual ache in her chest, and she knows this is because, deep down, even though it was she who left, a part of her is still crushed by the fact that Greg can't even be bothered to come to court. To mediation. For his daughter. She worries for Greg. She hopes he is getting help. And, secretly, she misses him.

The front door swings open and a man walks in. He wears teal coveralls and has shaggy brown hair.

"Hey there, Bev. How goes it?"

"Oh it goes alright," the woman behind the counter says. "Just talking about what scum men are."

The man tips his head in a jovial kind of way. "Perfect timing."

"They're not all like you," Bev says.

"A schmuck, you mean?"

"Right." She pours two fingers of whiskey and slides it across the bar towards the man. She looks at Terry, gesturing to the man at the bar. "This here's one of the good ones, if there is such a thing."

The man gazes down the bar at her, leaning across the two barstools that separate them. "Mitch," he says and holds out his hand. His palm is pocked with callouses and his nails hide half moons of grit.

"I'm Terry," she says. She does not take his hand, but raises her glass instead, holding it up. His clinks his whiskey against it, and they both swallow what's left of their drinks in a single gulp.



They slide around in the cab of Mitch's pickup truck. The narrow interior is thick with his scent, motor oil and stale booze. She can taste the whiskey on his tongue, spicy and sweet. His hand grips her hip, slides across her stomach. Maybe it feels good. Maybe she is thrilled. Her body buzzes.

"You're beautiful," Mitch says.

He lies on top of her. The sun is beginning to slide down the sky, pushing the truck closer to darkness. If someone walked by, they would still be visible. This occurs to her, but she does not really care. Mitch is looking down at her, staring right at her. She wonders what he sees.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She moves his hand lower. "No talking, OK?"

His face belies confusion and she presses her mouth to his before he can say another word. She doesn't want to think, because if she does she won't be able to do this. She is still married, after all. It's almost five. Soon the bus will drop her daughter at the corner of Hawking and Spruce. This is what happens when she has time to think: she worries; she feels guilty.

Mitch presses himself into her and she opens her legs to accept him. He moves slowly and she is grateful. She hasn't made love in at least a year. He kisses her neck, his lips working their way along her chin, up to her ear. She moans, soft and low. A thought enters her mind: she has not made love to anyone except Greg in more than a decade.

Mitch rubs her left nipple through her blouse. He is nearly there. He thrusts, once, twice, hardest the third time, and collapses.

A moment passes. She pushes him away from her, sitting up.

“I have to go,” she says.

Mitch pulls his coveralls back up, leans against the driver’s side door.

She adjusts her skirt, checks her reflection in the rearview mirror. She leans into the passenger door, heaving it open.

“I’ll see you,” she says. She is about to close the door when she sees his face. His cheeks are wet, his eyes glassy and unfocused. “I’m sorry,” she says, because it seems right.

He turns his head, staring out the driver’s side window.

She checks her watch: it’s almost five-thirty. If she doesn’t leave soon, Ana will return to a locked door and an empty home.

She throws the door, lets it slam.



## INTAKE

### *Day 1*

Like the expression he wears on his milky sun-spotted face, Dr. Solomon's office appears to slump at its limits. Located just off the common room, it contains a single shelf that sags in the center, joined by dusty texts and a nicked particleboard desk heaped with graying stacks of manila folders.

"Ms. Brennan, why do you think you're here?" Dr. Solomon asks from his perch, a leather swivel chair that all but consumes his bird-like frame.

Terry sits on a dusty pink loveseat that mirrored the dip of the shelf, pushing her body into the crack between the cushions. Her head feels heavy, her body like a marshmallow, shapeless and buoyant.

Terry has seen her share of shrinks over the years. It was her mother who first suggested therapy. As if all she and Greg needed was a good talking to. Because that was the only option, as far as her mother was concerned: to make it work. Swallow the blows. Let the insults slide. Cover the bruises. *Marriage is a compromise. Failure is not an option.* The shrinks called her codependent, guilty for loving Greg too much. Guilty for staying. And in the end it made no difference. The pain—physical or emotional—had

become almost irrelevant to the conversation. For even when her mother realized that it was leave or die, still it was Terry who had failed.

“Ms. Brennan?”

She blinks, raising her gaze from the dirt-circled knees of her jeans to find Dr. Solomon’s stormy blue eyes studying her like the first worm of the morning, his legs crossed, and his thin nose scrunched, as if preparing to peck, again and again and again.

“I’m sorry?”

“Why do you think you’re here?” He doesn’t bother to mask his irritation at having to repeat himself.

Terry’s head feels heavy as she grasps for words—for the right words—to answer the doctor’s question. Her thoughts, slow and sluggish, move through her mind like walking against a current. This is a question with a correct answer.

“My drinking has become a problem for some people.”

“But not for you?” Dr. Solomon’s right eyebrow arches; *I don’t believe you*, it seems to suggest.

She shrugs: shrinks and semantics. Dr. Solomon scribbles something on a yellow steno pad in his lap, tufts of silvery hair bobbing on the crown of his flaky pink scalp.

“I think people exaggerate. I get myself to work in the morning. I’ve raised a seventeen-year-old, almost solely by myself. I’d say I’m doing OK.”

Dr. Solomon writes furiously, the scratch of his fountain pen against the paper burrowing like a beetle in her brain. It gnaws the space between her eyes, the nickering scrape blunting her high.

“Let’s talk about the prescriptions,” Dr. Solomon says and pulled a sheet of white paper from between the yellow pages of his notepad. “It looks as though Dr. Marlow has you on Lexapro for depression, a combination of alprazolam and clonazepam for anxiety related to depression, and... zolpidem for insomnia. Do I have that right?”

She pictures the bottles in her mind: burnt orange with white labels, blue around the edges, tiny black font with recommended doses: one in the morning, one at night; two before bed; one, as needed, but only for anxiety. So many things to remember, to forget; all the *pams*: trazepam, temazepam, lorazepam.

“That sounds right.”

Dr. Solomon nods knowingly. “Let’s start with the insomnia. How long have you suffered from difficulty sleeping?”

Her head is a cloud, unable to locate that moment years ago when she first began seeing Dr. Marlow. Had she ever slept before the pills? She shrugs, suddenly exhausted. “Since Greg left, I think.”

“Greg is your husband?”

“Was.”

“Have you attempted since then to reduce your dosage or wean off of the Ambien?”

“No.” She considers this, felt a blink of anxiety rise up from the pit of her stomach, and adds: “I mean I can’t. I need it.”

The bluish, almost translucent skin around Dr. Solomon’s eyes twitches. He nods again, but it felt like an act of mock understanding.

“And the Xanax? How long have you been on that?”

“I don’t know... five years maybe? I’ve been on lower doses.” She recalls something important: “Last year I switched from Zoloft to Lexapro.”

“And you find that works better for you?”

“About the same, I guess.”

An electric current buzzes through her brain as the Xanax fog begins to roll back. She wishes then that she had saved that last pill. Gooseflesh rises on her forearms, like ants crawling across her skin. She imagines Dr. Solomon’s spidery scrawl on the yellow steno. *Poor, pathetic woman*, it says. *Crazy*.

He will find a way twist her words, make it sound like it was her, not Greg, who has all the problems. That’s what *they* did. Only Dr. Marlow seems to understand.

“Are you going to switch my medications? You should really talk with Dr. Marlow. She’s been working with me for... years.”

Terry folds her arms across her chest in an attempt to conceal their shaking.

“I have no intention of switching your medications, Ms. Brennan.”

“She won’t be happy...”

“Rather,” Dr. Solomon continues, “what I am trying to do, Ms. Brennan—”

“Terry.”

“What?”

“My name is Terry.”

“Right, *Terry*. As I started to say, what I am trying to infer is the actual benefit of this myriad of medications you are on.” Dr. Solomon puffed out his chest as he spoke.

“As I’m sure you may be aware, we strongly discourage the use of controlled substances here at Mercy Farm, prescription or otherwise. I have spoken with Dr. Marlow at length about your current... cocktail. And while I understand your concerns, *my* concern is that your treatment here be as effective as possible.”

Terry’s heart races—*pitter-pitter-patter, pitter-pitter-patter*—bumping up against her ribs.

“As I have discussed with Dr. Marlow, my intention is to take you off of the alprazolam and clonazepam.”

“What? No, Dr. Marlow would never agree to that.”

“This is a safe environment, Terry—one in which I would like to see you grow and thrive,” Dr. Solomon continued. “I want you to have to best opportunity to find a sober way of life. Part of that means creating new routines.”

“But you don’t know me. You don’t understand a thing. You don’t know. You don’t know...” Terry cannot finish her sentence, because she does not have words. She feels helpless, sinking. “You don’t know—“

“You’re right Terry, I don’t. I don’t know. Just as you likely do not know. For so long you have hid behind this mask of pharmaceuticals. I would like to see how your body reacts without these drugs. You will have ample time to establish a regular sleep cycle, and as such, I would also like to experiment with taking you off of the zolpidem. As for the Lexapro, there are some mildly unpleasant side effects related to withdrawal, so I intend to monitor you closely as we pare down your dosage.”

“Dr. Solomon, please.” She sucks in air, biding her response. “Please don’t do this. I need my medicine. They, th—they help me.”

Dr. Solomon removes his wire frames and leans forward. “Terry, this is an honest environment. We’re here for you to get better, are we not?”

“I told you why I’m here.”

“Right. Well here’s why I think you’re here: I think you’re here because you have a substantial addiction to alcohol, further compounded by depression and anxiety and a co-addiction to prescription drugs. I think these drugs, which you seem to see as your answer, actually significantly debilitate your cognitive abilities, specifically when it comes to making decisions about your sobriety. My job is to help you get better. Unless I deem these medications necessary to your mental well-being, I see no incentive continuing your use of them.”

Terry’s fists grip the loose fabric of the couch and her body rocks forward. A thin film of sweat traces her hairline and the dip between her breasts. She shivers.

“I won’t get better.” The words bubble out of her like a threat.

Dr. Solomon replaces his glasses and flips the steno closed. “That’s a gamble I’m willing to take,” he says and stands, signaling the session’s end.

## TAKE IN

It's after lunch when Ana finally calls. It's done; she has left Terry in rehab, and now it's done. David heaves a mixture of relief and resentment.

"I'll see you tomorrow night," he promises his niece. Tonight Ana will stay with her best friend, but he will come check in on her the next evening. She will not have to be alone.

The line disconnects and David turns back to his mother. Dribble drips from the corners of her mouth, the plate of mushy purees largely untouched. Her eyes suggest that she has had enough—of lunch, of life.

"Ma, you've got to eat a little more," he says and wipes the corners of her mouth. "You're losing too much weight."

Marie does not respond, instead closing her eyes.

"Ma, come on." David scoops up a spoonful of peas. "One more, please."

Marie's eyes snap open. "Good Lord, David, I don't want anymore damn peas. Will you let a woman be?"

David might have expected this. Just like her daughter, Marie is stubborn as all hell. And he is... what is he? A pushover? A punching bag?

"Fine, Ma. You win," he says, defeated.

“Who was that on the phone?”

“Who? Oh, it’s nothing.”

“No it’s not.”

“Ma, please.”

“What’s happening? What won’t you tell me?”

David thinks back to the afternoon two days before. *No one*, Terry said. *Not a single soul. Definitely not her.* Those were the conditions. He cannot renege on them now.

“It was just Ana. I’m bringing dinner tomorrow is all.”

A muffled wheeze tumbles up from Marie’s chest, like marbles rattling inside a tin can. She clears her throat, takes a sip of water, but she will not let it go.

“Where’s Terry?”

“Ma, calm down. You’re getting all wound up,” David says, dodging.

Outside, trees sway in the breeze: orange, yellow, fiery red leaves, shaking loose and curling across the parking lot.

“Why won’t she come?”

David does not answer. What can he say? *Because you were terrible to her? Because she hates you?* “She’s very busy now,” he says instead. “She’ll come soon.”

Marie follows David’s gaze to the window. “Your father died on a day like this. An afternoon, just like this one. Do you recall?”



## ALONE WITH IT

“You didn’t miss anything, anyways,” Heidi says. She sits cross-legged in front of mirrored closet doors, combing out her long, blond locks. “Mostly just Frank trying to get that new girl—Hillary?—to go out with him. But she won’t. I already told her what a dick he is.”

Ana lies on Heidi’s queen bed, replete with a princess pink comforter. She stares at the ceiling, resisting the urge to throw something. *That’s not the point*, she wants to say. But it doesn’t matter anyway, because Heidi’s only half listening. Heidi’s parents are perfect, always laughing to one another as they cook dinner, or watch their shows. Her older sister got into U.C. Davis on a cheerleading scholarship. Heidi’s Uncle Ted and Aunt Linda come over every Sunday for family dinner, and the only grandmother she has left is one of the sweetest women Ana has ever met—a stark contrast to Marie, who her mother avoids like the plague. She and Heidi have been friends since the first day of second grade, and that was probably the last time they shared anything in common. And though they have stayed friends through it all, lately Ana isn’t sure why.

“I talked to my dad the other day—on the phone,” she says.

Heidi continues to run the flat brush through her hair, her eyes glancing up in the mirror. “Oh?”

Ana sits up. She's trying to have a real conversation, because she hasn't told this to anyone else. "He's living in Hawaii somewhere. He has a second cousin there or something."

"That is *so* cool," Heidi says. "You should totally try to go visit him."

"Right," she says. Her reaction is a perfect illustration of how often Heidi misses the point.

"Well," Heidi swivels around to face her, "it's not like your mom's in a position to tell you what you can and can't do. You're going to graduate this year and then you can do anything you want."

"I guess... but what if he goes crazy again, tries to kidnap me or something?"

Heidi shrugs, like it's not a real possibility. At least now she has stopped brushing her hair. "Well at least you'd be in Hawaii." She sighs dramatically. "Speaking of which," she holds up her right forearm, studying it. "I'm totally losing my tan."

Ana flops back on the bed. The clock on the bedside table says it's almost one and she has a Chemistry test in the morning. "We should go to bed."

As if in response, her phone glows to life: her mother. She flips it over, so the screen is facing down.

"You're not going to talk to her?" Heidi asks, pulling the covers back.

"Would you?"

"I don't know," Heidi says, collapsing onto the bed. "Probably. I can't imagine not speaking to my mother."

Ana rolls over and pulls the covers up over her head. There are so many things Heidi can't imagine.



### *Night 1*

Upstairs, in her temporary bedroom, moonlight filters through the dust-thickened glass, the lace curtains patterning the wall. Terry unbuttons her jeans, kicks them down around her ankles. She falls back onto the small twin-sized bed. One day gone and only twenty-nine more to contend with.

She collapses sideways on the bed, her body thick with exhaustion. The hard plaster wall catches her skull with a *thud*. Finding a final reserve of energy, she rolls to her side, arms cradling her tender, grumbling stomach. She notices a plum colored bruise on the top of her left thigh. It's yellow around the edges and violently red at its center, with three smaller, greyish-yellow dots like fingerprints arced around its edge. She tries to recall the moment, but it's missing. It's not the how that matters anyways, but the fact that it exists at all. This bruise, like rips in her clothes or the dings in her bumper, are a suggestion—a suggestion of another life, the one she lives almost every night but can't remember, a life where memory no does not exists. She rolls over, watches as the digital red numbers of the bedside clock tick away: 9:38, 10:21, 11:19.



The clock says it's almost midnight. Perspiration beads on her skin, drenching the faded floral sheets. Thunderbolts of acid puncture the walls of her stomach. She pitches sideways, the coppery taste of bile rising in her throat. Her mouth feels warm. She reaches for the small waste bin next to her bed. Vomit strikes the plastic liner, rushing from her like a burst pipe. Once it starts, she can scarcely make it stop. She gasps for breath, the air around her acrid, suffocating—not enough to replenish her burning lungs. Her body shivers and burns at the same time, gooseflesh running down her spine. Her thin cotton T-shirt is soaked through and sticking to her skin.

Because she has not eaten, there is little left inside of her to give, but still it surges forth, bitter as anything, like liquid metal. It burns her nostrils, eating away at her oxygen. She reaches for the glass of water on the bedside table, sucking it down in wet gulps. It stings the walls of her throat like salt in an open wound, tasteless, warm. Her stomach seizes, as if to heave, but there was nothing left. She falls back on the bed, counting numbers in her head, moments between heaves. A routine. *One, two, three. Deep breath. Swallow. One, two, three.* Six successful breaths and she might make it to nine.

Every night—even when she uses the Ambien to knock her into a dark, dreamless dimension—she eventually arrives at this place. It's the moment when her body finally defeats her. She cannot remember the last day without this sickness, threatening its way up. *One, two, three. Swallow. Nope, you lose.* The urge is too strong. *Roll to your side. Let it win. Start again: one, two, three...*

After nearly an hour of counting her breath, she finds the strength to pull her body up, out of bed. Her hands guide the way down the creaky, wooden stairs. She feels along the slick plaster walls, thick with layers of old paint, gently sidestepping one step at a time. At the bottom, the room opens up and her eyes adjust to the pale moonlight illuminating the common room. She moves quietly, cautiously, feeling her way along the backside of a loveseat until she arrives at the pay phone. She jabs the concave, metal numbers and waits. It rings, once, twice, three times. On the fifth revolution, the line connects.

“Ana?” She rasps. Her voice comes out hoarse, desperate.

“You’ve reached Ana’s phone. Can’t get to it right now, but please leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

Terry hangs the receiver back on its hook, her hand unable to release its grip on the hard black plastic. She has two quarters left. She clutches them in her left palm like they are the answer to everything. She punches the numbers again.

Again, the phone rings five times, followed by a *click*. “You’ve reached Ana’s phone...”

“Goddammit!”

She slams the phone back into its cradle. Her grip on the receiver is all that keeps her from sinking to her knees. She leans into the plastic wall of the payphone, the scorch of vomit still smoldering in the back of her throat.

## **NOT HER OWN**

### *Day 2*

Morning comes too fast, and does not let up: pale shadows at first, then bright lacy patterns throwing light against the stark white walls. She feels as though she has been sucker punched in the stomach.

A nurse with purple, Disney-print scrubs enters the room at a quarter to seven.

“I let you sleep a little late, but it’s up and at ‘em now,” she says, pulling the blinds up into their holster. “Breakfast is waiting.”

Terry rolls over, cradles her stomach in her arms. “I can’t eat.”

“Sure you can.” The woman’s tone is matter-of-fact. “You must. You’ve a full day ahead.”

“I need to stay here awhile longer. I don’t think I can stand.” She sounds like a whining child.

Without warning, she feels her body being tugged upright. Her eyes shoot open. The ceiling spins above her, the nurse’s expansive chest resting on her forehead as she pulls Terry up to a seated position.

“Nope. It’s time to get to work.”

Like Donald, the woman has several extra pounds around her waistline, a theme she's starting to notice at The Farm. The fabric of the nurse's scrubs stretch across her rubber-tire waist, mutating Pluto and Minnie's faces into cruel jeers. She holds Terry up by either shoulder. She can smell the tang of stale coffee on the nurse's breath.

"I'm Luce," she says. Her arms come around Terry's waist, hoisting her up to a standing position. "I'll be your go-to gal these next couple of weeks. But first thing's first. You smell like a goddamn carnival ride. Let's get you in the shower and then we'll get your vitals."

She feels helpless, like a ragdoll, her body weak and her head pounding as the nurse pushes and pulls on her. Her knees wobble beneath her. "I can't," she whines as Luce guides her to the bathroom. "I need to lay down."

"Look, honey," the nurse huffs, "you ain't dying. It's just all the crap you been putting in your body for so long. And laying in this bed ain't gonna make it any better."

Her body feels like it's caving in on itself. "No," she says. A bolt of anger rises in her chest. "I said, I need to lay back down." She tries to move back towards the bed, but Luce catches her shoulder, her grip firmer this time, and pulls her back.

"But I think we both know that's not why you're here," Luce says. Her voice is low and even, her eyes locked on Terry's. "Now you can get in the shower on your own accord, or I'll be just fine to do it for you. But you've got a full day ahead of you and it's starting right now."

Luce pulls her arms away from her body, tugs the thin cotton shirt up over her head. In the bathroom mirror, she is confronted with naked flesh: breasts so white they

look blue in the sterile, fluorescent lighting; violent rounds of yellow, purple, and blue dot her body—a fall in her bedroom, a slip off the sidewalk. Her body is a patchwork of gooseflesh and bruises. Luce tugs her cotton panties down around her ankles, forces her to step out of them. With a heaving breath, she lifts Terry into the shower. The water is lukewarm and she quivers in the spray, her arms held tight across her chest, clutching her shoulders, as Luce soaps her up and down, like a car at the wash.

She has lost her gumption, lost her anger. She has lost the will to fight the nurse's brisk movements. "You don't—" she begins to say, her voice cracking. She feels a shudder in her chest, the press of real, child-like sobs of frustration working their way into her throat. "You don't have to do this," she says through a sob.

"You're right," Luce says. "I don't." She kneels on the mat outside the tub ledge, soaping Terry's lower legs with a pale pink loofah. She scrubs around to the back of Terry's thighs, moving upwards in a wax on, wax off motion. "It'd be much simpler if you'd do it yourself." Having sufficiently scrubbed Terry's legs pink, Luce stands, rinsing her hands under the spray of the shower. She points to the dark patch of hair below Terry's navel. "I suppose you can do that yourself, am I right?"

Terry's throat feels tight, her words lost within her. Tears slip down her cheeks. The spray from the shower pelts her chest, her face, her mouth.

"Will you pull the curtain at least?" Soap slides down the curves of her shivering body to the tops of her feet.

"Sure thing," Luce tugs the plastic curtain between them, leaving Terry alone in the spray.



The water is warm now and she cranks the nozzle up to scalding, squeezing soap into her left hand. She runs her fingers through tangled hair. Her scalp pulses under her touch and her skin burns, becoming numb. She can smell the sour rising off her body, sliding down her legs, pooling at her feet. *But it's not so easy as that.* She stands under the showerhead, allowing the water to pelt her face, holding her breath, as though that can still the aching she feels in her chest, the throbbing in her skull.

If minutes pass, they feel like seconds. Luce tears the curtain back.

“Alright. Let’s keep it moving.” Luce leans down and twists the metal taps. The nurse casts a scratchy blue towel around Terry’s shoulders and begins working it down her back, the sides of her arms, the back of her legs. It’s an unexpected moment of shared intimacy, having this near-stranger toweling down her naked body. Luce pulls a nondescript gray sweatshirt over her head, runs a brush gently through her wet hair, careful not to let it tug. All of it happening to, and yet somehow without her, as though her body is no longer her own.



The Mercy Farm “mess hall” is a single room with a line of collapsible tables at the far end, on top of which rows of metal sheet pans hold steaming food. There is a door just behind it that must lead to a kitchen, and taking up the bulk of the room are more collapsible tables and chairs. The tables are mostly empty, the breakfast crowd already come and gone.

“There’s a Monday morning yoga class that’s pretty popular,” Luce explains.  
“That Catherine can sure draw a crowd.”

A handful of people hover over plastic trays of scrambled eggs and thin wafers of bacon. A chorus of scrape and sip rises up from the crowd that remains. Few words can be heard. In the kitchen, a clatter of dishes and the sound of rushing water. Someone whistles a tune, off-key and a touch too cheery.

“Grab a bite,” says Luce, handing Terry a plastic tray. “I’ve got rounds, but I’ll be back to collect you in time for morning group.”

Terry spoons herself a bowl of gummy oatmeal. Her mouth waters at the smell of coffee, but she’s not sure she can stomach it, so she pours a glass of water instead. The plastic tray shakes in her hands as she selects a seat nearest the window, where she can feel a trickle of fresh air, cutting the dense scent of powdered eggs and greasy bacon. She feels the collective gaze shift in her direction.

“Booze’d be my guess, by looking at her,” she hears a man say.

She pushes the oats back and forth a few times, then brought the spoon to her lips, forcing herself to swallow. The oatmeal feels like glue on her tongue. The flavor is cinnamon. Hard bits of freeze-dried apple stick to her molars. She swallows slowly, and then again to keep it down.

“You think?” A woman says. Her voice has a Spanish lilt. “My first guess was pills. You know, the fancy shit. White girls love them some pills.”

Terry’s stomach groans audibly. She feels it expand and contract, as if in response.

“True,” the man agrees.

Terry looks down at herself: formless gray sweats, cheap white sneakers, a flimsy plastic medical bracelet listing her allergies: *penicillin*, *peanuts*. Her bags have not yet been “processed,” Luce said. It could be another day before Terry will have access to her own clothes, to her toothbrush, her makeup. It’s the first time she has been in public—if such a place as Mercy Farm can really be considered public—without an ounce of makeup on her face. She feels unmasked, ugly. She saw her reflection in the mirror this morning, wrinkles creasing her pale blue eyes and ringed her lips. She looks old. Spent. She did not look like a fancy white woman at all.

There’s a scrape and shuffle as the remaining breakfast crowd stands to leave. Terry keeps her head bent over the table, staring into her bowl of lumpy mush, and wishes for a fancy pill.

## ANOTHER DAY

Lecture begins at eight in the mess hall. The room has been cleared of its tables, the chairs reassembled into rows. At the head of the room stands a poor man's podium, nicked at the edges and decorated with a sign: *IT WORKS IF YOU WORK IT*.

Muted sunlight slices through gritty glass, accenting motes of dust. The stale scent of bacon grease and second-hand smoke cloaks the room. Terry finds a seat near an open window, sucking in the fresh air that trickles in.

"Good to see you, Terry," Donald says. He pats her shoulder with one hand as he passes.

The seats begin to fill, the room thrumming with chatter.

"That fucking prick. It's all a goddamn trauma, as far as he's concerned," one woman says as she comes through the door, her hands gesturing wildly. She has bright red hair—the kind you can only find in a box—and wears a tight pink T-shirt with the words "SHUT UP" in black lettering.

"All I'm saying is, he does have a point. That stuff isn't nothing," says another woman. She has short blond hair and wears dark brown riding pants, a cream cashmere sweater, and gold hoops.

They are about as different as two people can be.

“I know, I know,” pink shirt nods, throwing a thick hard-backed book down on the chair next to Terry. *Alcoholics Anonymous* it reads in gold script. “You’re right. It’s just that it’s hard, talking about all that again.”

The blond woman takes pink shirt’s hand in hers. “I know it is, hon. Trust me, I know.”

They both take a seat. At the front of the room, Donald clears his throat and a hush falls across the rows of chairs.

“Good morning, farmers,” he says. When he smiles, rolls of fat crease his eyes like a paper fan. “And such a beautiful morning it is.”

Terry holds her breath. Her stomach feels weak and quivery and her chest tight. It has been nearly a decade since the last time she went more than a few hours without a Xanax and she can feel the lift of panic rising up from the pit of her stomach, threatening to explode down her arms, across her chest, into her throat.

“Today we welcome a new person into our fold,” Donald says, looking at Terry. “Ms. Terry, can you give us all a wave?”

Terry looks around, nearly a dozen heads turning to study her. “Hello, Terry,” they say in unison.

Terry shivers, does not speak. She does not wave or hold up her hand. Her cheeks feel warm and her there is a pulsing in her temple. *Stop looking at me*, she wants to scream.

“Well then, for lecture today we’re going to begin with a discussion on the first step.” Donald thumbs through a text in front of him. “Lisa, can you please tell the group what step one is?”

“Admitting that we are powerless,” the woman with the pink shirt says.

“Fantastic. And what, Lisa are you powerless over?”

Lisa lets out a low whistle. “Lots of things, obviously.”

Soft laughter erupts across the room.

“Right, so we may be powerless over many things,” Donald says, bringing the group back to silence. “But what, Lisa, shall we focus on today?”

“E, mostly. I am powerless over E, for sure. And sex, too.”

A couple of the farmers chuckle.

“Right, good. You laugh why, folks? You laugh because you are nervous. You laugh because it is true. You laugh because you do not know an appropriate response,” Donald paces behind the podium. His voice fills up the room. He is a preacher at his pulpit. “Lisa is powerless over a drug—a drug which makes her powerless over her own body. Is that laughable?”

The room is silent.

“I asked you all a question,” Donald says, punctuating each word as if each were a sentence. “Is. It. Laughable?”

“No,” the blond says, softly at first and then louder. “No, it’s not.”

“No,” Donald agrees. “You are right, Shae. We laugh because we do not know how to respond. But let me say this, folks: It is not funny. It is tragic. And it is real. *This*,

my friends, is addiction. And admitting it—admitting your powerlessness over it—*that* is the first step to recovery.”

Terry’s stomach seizes again and she launches from her chair, catching the shocked gazes of the dozen or so people in the room as she sprints to the door. She bends over the bushes beyond the mess hall, losing what little food she managed to eat that morning.



“How’d it go?”

David kneels in the blue shag carpet in front of the coffee table. He lays out the plastic carryout containers buffet-style. His vision is blurry with exhaustion, the scent of the hospital hanging in his nose, impressed upon his clothes. Even once he showered, he would not be free of it.

Ana shrugs and spoons a heap of coleslaw onto her paper plate.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t come with you,” David says.

She pushes the strands of cabbage around on her plate, separating out the bits of carrot. “It’s fine,” she says. “She was drunk anyhow. You’d have hated it.”

David picks up a drum from the bucket, absently studying it. “From last night?”

“I don’t know. She seemed OK when we got in the car.”

David sets the drum down on his plate. “I should have been there.”

Ana shakes her head left to right. “No, I really don’t think she’d have gone if you were.”

David feels a pang in his chest, though he knows his niece has not said it to hurt him. And probably, she is right. His and Terry's relationship has always been complicated. The sense of failure that Terry feels—and which she has often, while drunk, verbally blamed David for—began long before her drinking, or the divorce.

It has always been clear to David, as cruel as it felt as a child, that Marie birthed and reared her children out of a sense of duty, rather than love. Their mother had never, David realized long ago, loved her children the way that most mothers do. And has this made his life more difficult? Perhaps. Has he, at times, sought affection in other, often more dangerous forms? Certainly. But it is Terry who has suffered most. It is Terry who has never been able to comprehend what has for so long been so remarkably clear to David.

Though Marie was never a very good or loving mother, she is not a bad person. Rather, she is, like Terry, is a product of her circumstances, and a life—the one she was handed when her husband had died and left her with two young children to raise—which she never intended for herself. When their father passed, Marie watched her life pass with him. David could not have understood this as a child. No, that came later, as her caretaker, when he heard the things she muttered in her sleep, or read her journal, in an effort to understand her.

He does not blame Marie. He pities her. And he suspects, though he has never told anyone as much, that there is something in Terry that Marie cannot stop herself from seeing—something that she has always thought existed deep down inside of her: an untapped, unrealized potential; a sense that she was once capable of something greater.



David spoons a heap of starchy white goo onto Ana's plate. "Have some mashed potatoes."

Ana stabs the thin, wilting strands of cabbage with the tines of her plastic fork. "Do you think it will work?"

David thinks a moment. He thinks of his mother, stubborn still as she has ever been, and how much Terry resembles her.

"I don't know," he answers honestly.

Ana pushes the cabbage across her plate, mixing it into the heap of potatoes until it's a stringy, pale green mess.

"And what if she never gets better?"

David does not know how to answer. Ana is old enough now—has seen enough in her own short life—to know that life has no guarantees.

"Let's not think about that just yet," he says, tearing the flesh away from the chicken bone with his teeth. The meat is salty and warm, and he chews it slowly. Not thinking about things too much, he has learned, is the easiest way to make it through another day.



This time, the chairs are arranged in a circle. Group is about *sharing*.

"Terry, a moment," Donald says as she enters the mess hall. He guides her to the side of the room, while the farmers file in, taking seats around the circle. "I just wanted to say good job today. I know the first day can be the most difficult. And I applaud you for

your work.” He digs a fleshy hand into his right pocket. “If I may, I have something for you.” He takes her hand, pressing something warm and hard into it.

It’s a silver coin, a recovery medallion.

“It *is* an achievement, you know. It may feel small to you now, but it is not.”

“OK,” Terry says, slipping it into the pocket of her oversized sweatpants.

“Thanks.”

“I mean it, Terry. We are so happy to have you here with us.” The creases around Donald’s eyes soften. “And I have no doubt that *you* will get there too.” With that, he turns to address the room. “Good evening, farmers.” He holds out his arms, as if to hug the air. “I’d like to welcome all of you to Group. I’ll start by reminding everyone that what we discuss here is confidential and that we at Mercy Farm hold your privacy in high regard.” He pauses, clicking his tongue against the back of his teeth, and surveys the crowd—thirteen people altogether, including Terry. “Terry, I would love for you to begin.” He turns back to her as he takes a seat.

Terry shakes her head, feeling her throat tense with anxiety. “No, I can’t.”

Donald chuckles. “It’s really quite simple,” he says, as if she does not understand.

“Will you begin by introducing yourself to the group?”

Terry’s head bobs on her shoulders as she surveys the room, a dozen pairs of eyes waiting expectantly for her to speak. The other farmers looked like a platoon of broken soldiers; limp hair, bruised forearms, sunken eyes stained purple underneath. And she: their newest comrade.

“Hi, my name is Terry.” Her tone is bland, hinting at defiance.

Donald appears unperturbed. “Great. And why are you here Terry?”

Terry takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “My daughter.”

Donald nods. “And what else?”

Terry leans back into the hard plastic chair, studying the backs of her hands, tense violet veins under pale white skin, the scar from where she nearly lost her ring finger. She can’t help but recall the moment, staring up at Greg, his face—his angry eyes—glaring down at her, as his right boot pressed down on her left hand.

“That’s it, really.”

She feels a sudden hatred towards Donald, and the other farmers. She does not feel a sense of obligation to explain her life to this room full of druggies and losers. What do they have in common with her? How can they help her?

“I don’t feel comfortable saying anymore.”

Donald’s arms fold over his expansive stomach. “And why is that?”

“Because I don’t know these people.”

“So help them to know you.”

“No,” she says, her voice barely a whisper. “I can’t.” Terry’s eyes meet those of a man across the circle from her. His dark eyes study hers from beneath a furrowed brow.

“Let’s move on. We’ll come back to Terry.” Donald nods to the kid sitting next to Terry. He is fair-skinned, with spiky neon green hair and a chain threaded nose to ear. He can’t be more than twenty-five. “Brian?”

Brian leans forward, elbows on knees. “I been here about nine days now,” he says scratching his forearm nervously.

“And why are you here, Brian?”

His shoulders rise and fall. “Heroin mostly.”

“And?”

“And some pills, a little oxy—when I could afford it.”

“What do you want to say to the room right now?”

“That I’m glad I’m here?”

“Are you sure?”

Brian, the kid, fidgets in his seat. His fingernails dig slivers in the skin of skinny, freckled forearm.

“Why?” Donald’s tone is firm, sharp; he’s found the pressure point and he’s pushing on it.

“I don’t know. Because maybe if I wasn’t—maybe if I was out there, I wouldn’t be anywhere. Maybe I wouldn’t even be alive. I’m grateful to be free of that; away from all of it.”

The man across the room, with the dark eyes, clear his throat.

“Yes, Philip?”

“You’d probably be dead.”

Brian blanches. He didn’t say it outright, and now that it’s out there, it’s too much for him to hear.

“What’d you say?”

“I said that you’d probably be dead.”

Philip’s tone isn’t mean, just matter of fact. Donald nods more furiously now.

“Why don’t you tell the farmers why you’re here, Philip.”

Philip chuckles, a deep, throaty kind of laugh that bounces off of the mess hall’s cavernous interior. “The court, I guess.”

“Right, and how did it come to that point?”

Philip pushes a swatch of dark hair back from his forehead and lets out a dramatic, too-loud sigh. “Lots of things, I suppose. But the kicker happened the night my wife—ex-wife—told me I couldn’t see Mandy anymore.”

“Mandy is your daughter.”

“Yes.”

“And then what happened?”

“I did the obvious next thing—I went out and scored, got high as hell. And honestly, that’s the last thing I could recall until about a week ago.”

“What happened after you got high?”

“Well Tanya says I hitched a ride over to her place. I’d already sold the truck by then—for drugs, of course. Anyways, I guess I forced my way in, got right up in my wife’s face. Tanya said this bit at the trial, so that’s how I know it. Apparently, I roughed her up real good. Which is just nuts. I—“ Philip stops a moment, his breath catching in his throat. He sucked in a ragged breath. “I ain’t ever been that kind of guy. I swear. My father, *he* was that kind of guy and I swore up and down that I’d never be like him. I promised.”

“Drugs and alcohol can turn us into people we don’t recognize—people we thought we’d never be capable of being,” Donald says, looking around at the farmers.

“Philip, why don’t you tell the farmers how long you have been here?”

Philip wipes his eyes with the back of his hands. “Just about four months. And the court says I’ll do two more.”

Donald crosses the room and squats before Philip. It’s difficult for him, but he manages to get down, face to face, in front of him. “What’s going on in there?” He says, tapping Philip’s forehead with his pointer finger.

Terry is fairly certain that if he did that to her, she would kill Donald. But Philip’s shoulders loosen and slump.

“I’m starting to remember a whole lot of things I wish I could forget.”

Donald stands again, his breathing labored. “You have our support, Philip,” he says, placing his right hand on Philip’s shoulder, as if in exorcism. “We aren’t here to judge.” He swallows hard and turns to survey the room. “I think we’ve got time for one more. Terry?”

She shifts in her seat.

“You’ve heard Brian and Philip’s stories. Won’t you share your own?”

“It’s not a story.”

“Sure it is. Every addiction has a narrative. What started you down your path of drinking?”

She shrugs. “Everyone drinks.”

Donald’s eyebrows raise. “I don’t drink,” he says.

“Yes, but you’re an alcoholic.”

“So you drink because you’re not an alcoholic?”

Terry freezes, and her face stings, as though she’s been slapped. “No.”

“No what?”

“No, I am not an alcoholic.”

Donald shrugs. “So why are you here then, Terry?”

“I told you already—for my daughter.”

Donald nods and his eyes close, as to suggest understanding. He turns back to the circle. “I’d like you all to consider what Terry has just said.” The room is silent for a moment. “I need for you to hear this, folks—to understand this place that Terry is in—for *this* is a classic example of what we at Mercy Farm call denial.”

Terry feels herself leap from her chair, surprised by her own agility.

“You don’t know shit,” she says, the words leaving her mouth in a violent spray. She feels the recovery coin, heavy against her right thigh, and she wants to throw it—to hawk it—right in Donald’s fat face. She picture him recoiling, and her skin itches. She can feel the other farmers watching her, waiting to see what she will do next. Donald does not move, does not even seem perturbed by her outburst. “You don’t know anything about me. You don’t know my life,” she seethes. And then she is running, for the second time that day, from the mess hall, the screen door slamming behind her, a hushed whisper as the other farmers lean into one another. *Wow, talk about a mess*, she imagines them saying.

In her bedroom, she turns the metal medallion over in her palm. On one side a triangle enshrines the number twenty-four. *TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE*, its reads in bold letters that arc along the curve of the coin, the words *UNITY, SERVICE, RECOVERY* inscribed on each of the triangles' three sides. Etched on the opposite side is the first stanza of the Serenity Prayer: *GOD GRANT ME THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE, TO ACCEPT THE THINGS I CAN, AND THE WISDOM TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE.*

Fucking serenity. As if such a thing even exists.



## BRAVERY

*Summer 1994*

The ride whirls round and round, gaining speed as it spins. Ana's skin feels like jelly, like it's melting off her bones, fusing with the walls of the Gravitron, spinning *faster, faster*. The music blares and the outside world feels far away, gravity pressing her body flat against the pleather panel. A confetti of disco lights dance across the faces of the other riders. The panels on the wall begin to move, one sliding up as another slips down. The stronger kids flip upside down. There's no fear of falling, gravity pressing them firm against the panels.

She feels a *click* as her panel begins to move, sliding up along a track. Her skull connects with something hard, a sharp ache spreading out across her scalp, liquid and warm. She cries out, but even she can't hear her own voice above the roar of the music. She cannot move her arms, cannot reach to touch the spot on her scalp. She squeezes her eyes shut, suppressing tears, and counts the seconds until the spinning ceases.

Outside, in the bright afternoon sun, the shadow of the Ferris wheel cuts patterns in the flattened grass.

"Is it bad?" she asks her best friend.

“Oh. My. God.” Heidi’s voice is a mix of disgust and excitement. “There’s blood!”

“A lot?”

Her friend looks mildly disappointed. “No. Only a little.”

Heidi’s mother, Mrs. Thurgau insists they go to the sheriff’s tent. Officer Donnell wears a ranger hat with a wide brim and a big red mustache that curls up at the edges. He does not look like a real police officer, more like Yosemite Sam.

“Looks like you got yourself real good.” His rubber-gloved fingers spread the hair on the back of her head.

She sits on a plastic folding chair as the Sherriff douses a cotton ball with rubbing alcohol. The scent burns in her nostrils and she can almost taste it, metallic and bitter, in the back her throat. She grips the edges of the plastic seat, holding her breath as he applies the cotton ball directly to her scalp. It stings all the way down to her belly button; her ears feel like fire.

Afterwards, Mrs. Thurgau takes them for ice cream. Ana orders her favorite: blue bubblegum. She spits out the gumballs one by one into a paper cup. When she gets home, she will tell her mother about the Gravitron; how impressed she will be.

Heidi’s mother pulls into her driveway as the sun dips below the trees. It’s early evening, but her father’s white company sedan is already there. Her throat tightens, the massive gumball stale and tasteless on her tongue.

“Shouldn’t I come in and talk with your mother?” Mrs. Thurgau asks.

“No. It’s ok.”

Mrs. Thurgau's face pinches like a prune.

"Really, I'm fine." She presses the gumball into her cheek, forcing a smile.

"Alright then, have her call me."

Ana promises she will, dashing from the car before Heidi's mother can beckon her back.

She hears her father's voice in the living room as she slips through the garage door into the kitchen.

"And for what?" he bellows—three short words that will echo in her mind a long time after he is gone. Later, they will be the only way for her to recall the sound of his voice.

She catches the door, careful not to let it slam.

Her father whooshes out his breath. "You think we live in *this* house for free? You think the bills just pay themselves?"

"Greg, *really*." Her mother hesitates. "I'm just worried about you."

Ana tiptoes past the kitchen, down the hall. She is standing at the door to her bedroom when she hears the first crash: the crack of glass against the living room wall, a clattering noise as it rains down on the hard wood.

"Worry!" her father roars. "All you do is worry!"

She slips into the dark haven of her bedroom. Gently, she slides the closet door along its track, pushing the clothes to one side. She tugs pillows from the bed and arranges them around her in a protective barrier. With blind fingers, she clicks on her flashlight and opens her book. The paper is worn and wrinkled; it's one of her favorites:

*The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler.* She imagines she is the main character, Claudia. She imagines she has run away.

Later, when the sky has turned opaque and dinnertime feels forgotten, the door slams and he is gone.

Her mother's sobs echo in the hall, muffled, uncontained.

Ana retrieves the first aid kit from below the bathroom sink, tugging her mother up from the bathroom floor.

"Sit," she says.

She soaks a cotton ball with rubbing alcohol, just as she watched the Sheriff do that afternoon. She pats the split skin above her mother's right eye, blowing gently on the crimson slice of half moon.

"My brave girl," her mother says as she squeezes the sides of the toilet, issuing a ragged breath when Ana applies the Band-Aid.

After, they share a meal of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, a single can of root beer.

She chews her mother's words.

Swallows them.

Feels them slide down the back of her throat, sharp at their limits.

She keeps them deep within her.

## MOTIV [ATION]

### *Day 3*

Terry sits at a long bench table, spearing strings of spaghetti with her fork. Laughter rises up around her, fellow farmers with mouthfuls of red noodles, slurping and chortling.

“May I?”

Philip, the man from group, stares down at her, a red plastic tray held to his chest.

She shrugs.

“Not your thing?” He motions to her plate, the contents of which had been transformed into a starchy, red heap.

“It’s fine. I’m just not hungry.”

“I hear you. This is more than I’ve eaten in years.” He holds out his hand. “I’m Philip, by the way.” His lips pull back to reveal a narrow, nicotine-stained smile.

“Terry,” she says, taking his hand.

They sit in silence—Philip slurping, her spearing—for several minutes.

“Is it true what you said during group?”

She leaves her fork twisted in a skirt of red. “What’s that?”

“You know,” Philip says through a mouthful of spaghetti. He pauses, swallowing.  
“About why you’re here.”

“Yeah. I mean, I think so.”

“How old is she?”

“She just turned seventeen.”

“Wow, I wouldn’t have guessed.”

She looks up from her plate, confused by his meaning.

“You just don’t look like you’ve got a kid that old.”

She leans back from the table, watching Philip fork up mouthfuls of spaghetti.

“You’ve got the best chance, you know,” Philips wipes his mouth, his plate all but clean again. He pulls one leg over the bench and then the other.

“I don’t know how you mean.”

“Well, take me, for example: I’ve got no one. No family—none that will talk to me anyways—and no friends. I am just trying to figure out how to be positive about where I’m at, where I’m headed, but I’m wondering what the hell I’m going to do when I get out of here. And you—well you’ve already got the perfect motivation. I envy you.”

She opens her mouth to speak and quickly closes it again. She wants to say something, but what? There’s not a thing to say that won’t make her feel like more of an asshole, so she just nods, like she understands.

“You have a good one,” Philip says and turns, his black motorcycle boots slapping the linoleum in retreat.

## WANTING

### *Day 4*

Luce arrives at 6:30 to wake her, but she's already dressed. Her things have finally been released and she has spent an hour carefully combing out her hair and putting on her face. Already she looks better than the day before. Never mind that she hasn't slept, or that her chest feels like an overfull balloon; never mind that her stomach is a bubbling cauldron of acid, or that she has not been able to keep down so much as a slice of toast since she arrived. *Dress the part*, her mother used to say, one of her myriad success mantras.

"Look at you, Ms. Spiffy. What's the occasion?"

"No occasion. We don't all have to look like we've come through a war," she says, fluffing her hair in the mirror behind Luce.

Luce's shrugs, unconvinced, or just unconcerned. "Right then. Well I'm glad not to have to repeat the events of yesterday morning. I think we'll both be the better for it."

Now is her moment to ask for what she really wants, and she doesn't sugarcoat it. "I'd like to see Dr. Solomon."

Luce sets her nurse's kit on the table next to Terry's bed. "And you will. This afternoon."

“Can’t we make it a little bit earlier? It’s important.”

“Afraid not.” Luce pulls a stethoscope and blood pressure cuff from her bag. “Dr. Solomon is a busy man. Is there something I can help with?”

“No, I really don’t think so.”

“Alright then,” Luce points to the bed. “Have a seat, please, while I take your vitals.”

But she won’t sit. Not until she has a fucking anti-anxiety pill in her fucking hand.

“I need to see Dr. Solomon.”

“I heard you,” Luce says, clearly annoyed. “And you will. This afternoon.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Oh?” Luce loops the cuff around Terry’s left arm and begins pumping. “I’m pretty sure I do. You’re not the first addict I’ve seen Dr. Solomon take off of their meds.”

“I’m not addicted to my medications.” The cuff feels like a form of suffocation, her left arm beginning to numb and her legs suddenly soft and unsteady.

“Right.”

“They’re prescribed.”

“Uh-huh.” Luce places the tips of the stethoscope in her ears. “Just keep quiet for a moment, please.”

Terry feels her jaw clench. Her stomach issues a low keen. She can still feel the porcelain on her left cheek. She had awoken that morning, the tiles of the bathroom floor pressed against her face, her blurred vision studying the underside of the grimy, yellow



toilet. She needs something to make it stop: the fluttering she feels in her chest, the buzzing sensation behind her eyes, the pulsing in her temples.

“I think I’m having withdrawals,” she says.

“You are.”

Luce guides her to the bed. She sits only because she feels she can no longer stand.

“It’s serious.”

Luce removes the stethoscope from her ears. “Yes, you’re quite right. It is.”

“Please,” she begs. “Give me something.”

Luce pulls a doctor’s flashlight from her bag, tilts Terry’s chin up the light. It flashes in her eyes and she feels a searing sensation in the back of her skull, like a pulse of electricity zapping her brain.

“Jesus!”

“OK, OK.” Luce places a firm hand on her right shoulder.

“No!” Terry cries. Her eyes well with the threat of tears. “It’s *not* OK. I need to see Dr. Solomon.”

“Terry.” Luce kneels before the bed. Her face is serious, yet somehow kind.

“Trust me,” she says. Her voice has lost its hard edge and her pale green eyes lock on Terry’s. “I know you’re not feeling your best right now. That’s all part of the process.”

“I can’t eat. I can’t sleep.” It’s hard to breath. Her chest rapidly expands and contracts around each breath like it’s the last one she’ll take. “You’ve got to... you’ve got to help me.”

“Hon,” Luce places a hand on Terry’s cheek. “It’s a goddamn bitch. I know it, because I’ve been through it too. This is all part of the process. And the best I can tell you is that it won’t last forever.”

Her chest feels as though it’s caving in, her lungs collapsing. She falls forward, her forehead caught between her knees.

“I can’t,” she whispers. “I can’t do this.”

“Yes. You can.”

“No,” Terry sobs, sucking in shallow gasps of air from the space between her thighs. “No, Luce, you don’t understand.... *I don’t want to.*”

## A SIMPLE REQUEST

David pulls up in front of the old library around three. The building rises up over Washburn like a sentinel, crouching in the blinding white light of mid-afternoon. Already he can smell the dust of timeworn pages and cracked leather spines, a scent memory so deep he can taste musk on the back of his tongue. He has been coming to the library since he was old enough to stand, often as an escape—from Marie’s wrath or the stifling heat of California mountain summers—and even now it’s one of the few things that he doesn’t mind checking off the long list of chores he does for his mother each week.

On a Tuesday, mid-afternoon there is scarcely another car in sight, but for those of the library’s few employees. Mrs. Newsom’s monstrous old brown Buick occupies a handicap space up front; Arthur’s pearl blue Mercedes is tucked under the shade of a fat, old pine in the corner of the lot. A rusty red pick-up truck, which David recognizes from thirty-five years of living in the same small town, hugs the second handicap space next to Mrs. Newsom’s Buick. It belongs to Mr. Heath, an honest-to-God farmer who rolls into town once a week to collect a few things from the market and exchange his wife’s books at the library. David pulls up next to the Mercedes, feels the power of it humming in his ears.

The library is always refrigerator cool, and the rush of air as he tugs open the heavy glass door sweeps back the hair that has matted itself to his scalp. It's that strange time of year when the weather cannot quite decide what it was about, a touch warm still from late summer, with just a hint of bluster as day eases into evening; enough to convince you to wear a sweater, which you will later sweat through in the last anemic thrust of afternoon heat. In the atrium of the library stands a rack of discarded magazines, most of them long past current. David selects a *Sunset Home* from the rack and slips it under his left arm.

"Afternoon, Davie," Mrs. Newsom calls from behind the front desk, the same name she's used for him since he was too small to see over the counter. The same owl-shaped stepstool he tottered on as a boy is saddled up next to the kid's counter, chipped at its limits, but remarkably intact.

"Morning, Mrs. Newsom," David says. "Anything new I should know about?"

"Hmmm," Mrs. Newsom thinks out loud a moment, closing her eyes. The paper-thin skin of her eyelids twitches as thoughts swim around her tiny little head. Her electric blue eyes snap open. "Why, yes! I had forgotten. We've just got in the new Binchy title. I set it aside for your mother—not supposed to do that, you know, but it's Margaret after all. How is Margaret?"

David takes the book from Mrs. Newsom's curled, arthritic fingers. "She had a rough weekend. But the warm air is good for her. With any luck, she'll be up on her feet again soon."

"It's the hip again, is it?"

David nods.

“Well, I’ve got to get over there to see her. It’s been too long, I know, but with Jimmy’s kids...” Mrs. Newsom’s voice trails off.

David nods again. Jimmy was a year behind him in school, though they’d never traveled in quite the same circles. He had, like so many of the kids from Washburn, moved away to the city and made a new life—that is until tragedy had brought him home again. His wife had died suddenly in a car accident, leaving Jimmy to parent their four children alone. David had only seen him only once since Jimmy returned home to live with his mother, stumbling out of the Liquor Lobby with a pint of Crown and deep creases framing his gentle eyes, blue like his mother’s.

“Yes, well. Tell Jimmy I say hello. I’m going to do some rooting around.”

“You do that dear. Let me know if there’s anything you need.” Mrs. Newsom returns to her chair behind the counter, straightening the threadbare cushion before taking a seat. She pulls her readers down off her forehead, returning to her book with a deep squint.

David heads in the direction of the literature section, acutely attuned to movement: he does not see Arthur. In the back, by the biographies he hears someone cough, low and wheezing, like pebbles rattling around inside a tin can: Mr. Heath. David places the Binky book on the stool at the end of the rack and scans the titles, his fingers trailing the cloth and leather spines until he comes to the one he was looking for, a collection of stories by Richard Ford. How many times has he selected this book? At least five check outs under his name, he sees as he scans the claim card. Maybe it’s the

inevitability of Ford's characters, all a little flawed at their core. He holds the book to his face, breathing in the age of its pages, and more deeply than that, a part of himself.

"I was wondering when you'd come," says a voice behind him.

David turns to find Arthur. Arthur holds a stack of books held against his chest like a shield.

"My mother has been much worse lately," he says. "She keeps asking for Terry." He doesn't know why he does this, chooses to open up to Arthur in this way, largely unprovoked. But he does it every time. And every time he feels vulnerable. Again.

"Have you spoken with her?" Arthur asks. He leans on the rack, his hip jutting out. He's thinner now.

"She's—" David considers telling Arthur the truth about Terry, about Mercy Farm and how he was taking care of not just Marie now but Ana too, but stops himself. "She's been so busy lately," he says instead.

Arthur's gaze shifts to the brown Berber carpet at their feet. "You shouldn't let her do that to you," he tells it.

David exhales deeply, inevitably. "How are Susan and the kids?"

Arthur flinches at the mention of his wife's name. "They're good." He looks up, nods vigorously. "Sue's on track to win PA parent of the year. But of course that's no surprise. And Mazie is adapting well to high school—loving it in fact. Kids are just... so resilient." Arthur opens his mouth, as if about to continue, closes it again.

David feels an aching pulse in the back of his throat and it's just too much now. He's reached his saturation point.

“It’s good to see you,” Arthur says.

The stale musk of the library feels suddenly suffocating. David shuffles his weight back and forth from left to right and Arthur runs his free hand through his thick black hair, peppered with grey. He’s more handsome now, David thinks, than ever.

“Well then,” David holds up the Ford collection.

“Again, huh?”

“You know me,” he says, and it makes his cheeks grow hot, because even though it’s just something people say, it gets at the real problem with all of this. David collects the Binchy book from the stool.

“Please,” Arthur says, reaching out. His hand comes to rest on David’s left shoulder.

His touch ignites a current that spreads out across David’s shoulders, down his arms, dancing into the pit of his stomach, and deeper.

“Take care of yourself,” Arthur presses.

He steps back, Arthur’s arm falling away from him.

“I will,” he says and turns, heading for the front counter. Such a simple request, really. And yet, it seems about the only thing that David does not quite know how to do.

## CONCEDING THE TRUTH

*Day 4*

Terry sits on Dr. Solomon's couch, crossing and uncrossing her legs. She tucks her hair behind one ear, bites her lower lip.

"You seem agitated," Dr. Solomon says. He rises from his perch, walking gingerly around to the front of the desk.

"I can't..." Terry searches for the right words. "Function."

"Are you eating?"

"No."

"Sleeping?"

"No."

"I see."

"I can't." Again, he breathing is halted, arriving in quick, punctuated hiccups. "I told you this would happen." She sounds like an insolent child.

"So you feel anxious?"

"Yes!"

"And what do you think is the cause of this anxiety?"



“This place, obviously.”

Dr. Solomon’s tone is cautious, but firm. “Is that all?”

“No, that’s not all. Jesus. I need my medications. I can’t think straight. My head feels like it’s going to explode. My hands won’t stop shaking. I feel like I might climb the walls.”

“Have you tried exercise?”

It feels as if she has been socked in the stomach. “Exercise? I can’t even eat! How am I supposed to exercise?”

“Perhaps that’s just it. Perhaps you need to get some of this pent up negative energy out of your body before you can take in the good, wholesome energy.”

“Is that your professional opinion?” There’s an edge in her voice, but she can’t hold back. “That my energy is the goddamn problem here?”

Dr. Solomon shifts his weight from his left to his right foot. “Yes,” he says, pushing his glasses higher up on the bridge of his nose. “I think it’s certainly part of it.”

“I haven’t slept in two days. What about that? Is that an energy issue too?”

“All of these things are certainly connected, Terry. If your body is full of this negativity, this anger, surely it will be difficult to sleep. I think we can safely say this has been confounded by withdrawal.” Dr. Solomon reaches for a manila folder on his desk. He opens it, his eyes flicking left to right as he scans its contents. “Nurse Luce says you’ve been having some mild symptoms related to withdrawal. Fever, nausea, vomiting.”

“I wouldn’t call them ‘mild.’”

“Very well then, let’s qualify that,” Dr. Solomon closes the manila folder. “Have you experienced any severe shaking?”

She holds up her hands.

“Any hallucinations?”

“No.”

“And have you lost consciousness at any point—any black outs?”

“No... Not really.”

Dr. Solomon nods. “Well,” he says, returning to the chair behind his desk. “I do think this is all fairly normal. In fact, I think it’s worth noting that you’re actually quite better than I might have expected, all things considered.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Well...” the doctor pauses to consider his words. “With dual addictions, sometimes it is hard to predict how withdrawal will manifest itself.”

“Dual addictions?”

“The alcohol, the medications.”

“I’m not addicted to my medication.”

“You know I don’t believe that, Terry.”

“I’m not.” She shoots up from her seat. “Look at me! I’m a fucking wreck. I’m a literal shit show of anxiety. I’ve been living with this my whole life. Do you have any sense of what it’s like to live with crippling anxiety? There have been points when I couldn’t even go to the grocery store without a panic attack. The grocery store! My medications are one of the only things that has enabled me to live a normal life. And now

you're saying I'm addicted to them? I don't get it. I don't understand how one doctor can give me this, and it can work, and then another doctor can come along and tell me I'm too dependent on it. Of course I'm fucking dependent on it! It's the only reason I am able to function."

"And so I return to my initial question: in the course of all of these prescriptions, has anyone ever asked you to consider where this anxiety derives its power from?"

She feels maniacal now—like a caged animal. She can feel her heartbeat in her throat, reverberating in her ears. She crosses the room, leaning on Dr. Solomon's desk. She's so close she can smell him, his scent a mix of acrid, bitter coffee and something distinctly herbal. Patchouli probably. "Everything gives me anxiety. Don't you get it? My mother, my abusive ex-husband. Where the hell do you think it comes from? I've made no mystery of it."

"Terry, I'd like you to calm down, or we will have to end the session."

She is rocking back and forth now, her hands slippery with sweat as grip the scuffed lip of Dr. Solomon's desk.

"I want to," she says, hiccupping for breath, tears sliding down her cheeks. "Don't you see?"

She feels her knees give, and before she knows what is happening, the room is spinning out above her. The lights blink. She is on the floor. Frozen. Paralyzed. She cannot move. She cannot breathe.



The light surges. Her head rests on something soft—a pillow perhaps—and the hard floor bites the skin between it and her shoulder blades. Dr. Solomon’s milky, sun-spotted face peers down at her. Luce stands to his left, her brow furrowed with concern, her pupils small and pin-like.

“Luce, please administer two milligrams of Lorazepam,” Dr. Solomon says. He’s not looking at her, but into her. Into her mind, into her brain. The room appear, as if through a halo, her vision dull and blurry at its periphery. She feels a cool grip on her left wrist, two fingers pressing into the soft flesh just below her chin. Her body vibrates, as if suspended in a state of turbulence, and there is a thudding sensation in the back her skull, an external pressure coating her skin, pressing her eyes down into their sockets.

She feels the sharp bite as the liquid enters her vein, a warming sensation as the drug travels down to her fingertips, up her arm to her shoulder, to her throat, down, down, into her stomach, her bowels, coursing along the tops of her thighs, her knees, her toes, until her body is full of it. And warmth is the only thing that she can feel, the earth stilling beneath her.

She hears no sound.

Gone.

She sees no light.

Extinguished.

And there is no pressure, no pain, no anxiety. *Ana*. She sees her daughter, the playground in the fore, suspended silver chains, holding Ana’s weight as she lays into the

swing, her legs pumping the air. The sun halos her golden curls as she flies up, up, into the swath of cotton sky, away from Terry.

And then nothing.

## JUMP

“Are you planning to actually drink that, or just let it get warm?” It’s Frank, the kid who will be playing John Proctor. He gestures to the full beer in her hand.

“Have you seen Heidi?” She looks around.

Frank scans the crowded kitchen with bloodshot eyes. His head bobs loosely on his shoulders. “Nope. She’s probably having fun. Just like you should be doing.”

She had not even wanted to come in the first place. “But you never come to any of these things,” Heidi had whined. “It will be good for you.”

Ana watches the crowd of theatre kids, no different than the rest, really. The nuances are different, the hierarchy so much the same. There’s Frank, the classically good-looking kid, who always scores the male leads even though he has the range of cardboard; and Heidi, with her birdsong voice, always the lead in the spring musical; and then there are the nerdy theatre geeks, forever destined to their roles as members of the chorus. Where does she fit? Often, she feels like the wallpaper, the girl whose name you could forget. That is, until Mr. Ritter selected her to play Abigail in the school’s fall rendition of *The Crucible*.

People will see her now. These kids, their parents. *Who’s that girl?* They will say. *How come I’ve never seen her before? Is she new?*

“Shot, shot, shot!” Frank yells across the kitchen.

“You first!” cackles one of the sophomore girls from the chorus. She giggles, takes a sip from her beer, but she doesn’t know how to hug her lips to the bottle and when she tilted it back, beer dribbles down her chin.

Ana checks her phone: no new messages.

*WHERE R U?* she texts Heidi.

“You’re here,” says a voice behind her. It’s Sam, the kid who handles lighting and sound for the theatre. He closes the fridge door, popping the cap off a beer.

“I was just going, actually.”

“Already?”

She looks down at the beer in her hand, which is missing less than a sip. “I’m not really very good at this.”

“The beer?”

“Sure.”

Sam looks down at his own beer. “I’ve been meaning to tell you, you’re a great Abigail.”

Her face feels instantly warm. Is he flirting with her? She is fairly certain no one has ever tried to flirt with her before.

“I mean,” Sam’s cheeks also flush, “I’m sorry. That’s a strange thing to say, because she’s crazy. But well, I don’t know. There’s something about the way you...”

She laughs. “You’re saying I make a compelling crazy person?”

Sam's face ripens to a full flush. "Anyways," he clears his throat, pushing a long sandy curl behind his left ear, "I'm going to step outside and have a smoke." He reaches into his jeans pocket, sliding out a pack of the hippy no additives cigarettes.

Outside, the air is moist and the sky a deep navy, covered with a thick layer of grey clouds, the moon lost somewhere behind them.

"You come here a lot?"

Sam lights the end of a cigarette, draws the smoke into his lungs. "Sure, I guess. Frank's dad is never home. Business or something." He exhales.

She thinks of the empty apartment she will go home to. David will be with Gram. He called to say something about sitting with her through the night to monitor her breathing. No one will know when or if she comes home. No one will worry.

"You want one?" Sam asks. He tilts the open pack at her.

"I don't really smoke," she says. "My dad did sometimes."

"Yeah, mine too. I always hated it as a kid. I guess it's weird I picked it up."

"It's fairly common—for children of smokers to start smoking." She can't recall where she read this.

Sam takes another long drag, staring up at the starless sky. "Yeah. I suppose that makes sense. That's what they say about alcoholics, anyways."

"Well, I guess I'm screwed," she says. It's out before she really thinks about what she has admitted, her words hanging in the air between them.

Sam turns to look at her. "I'm sorry," he says.

She studies him too, the dip of his chin, the tense line drawn between his brows.



“Don’t be.” Her heart thumps double-quick. “I never tell anyone that. I never tell anyone anything.”

Sam flicks his cigarette into a bin at their feet, pulls the warm beer from her hands, and places it on the ground. He takes her hand, his grasp warm and firm.

“Come on,” he said and points to the clearing ahead of them. In the distance, she sees the faint outline of a trampoline. “Let’s go jump.”



#### *Night 4*

It’s the same car, the 1961 Ford Mustang with the white detailing down the side. It’s the car Greg bought for her the year they married; a wedding present, he said, though she knew it was never really for her. The color is different. It’s not the mint green he selected, but a burnt orange, just like the Karmann Ghia that she saved all summer between her junior and senior year to buy.

The top is down and she’s behind the wheel. Her hair dances on the wind, a scarf knotted just under her chin, and her big Jackie O. glasses hiding her eyes from the sun. The landscape is piping past, a blur of dead grass and diamond sky. She must be going at least a hundred. She can hear the wind in her ears.

The ocean uncurls like a blanket across the horizon, too far still to see the fine white lines where the waves break. The wheels grip the road as the car descends. Down, down.

And then suddenly, Greg is beside her in the passenger seat. He's rooting around in the glove compartment.

"Where did you put it?" he says.

She doesn't know what he means.

The car is gaining momentum.

"You're always moving things around." His voice is thick with it; she can tell he's high. He pulls his hands from the glove compartment. He is holding a revolver. She doesn't know guns, but this one is small enough to be a toy.

"Put that away," she says, waving her hand at him like it's a camera he's holding.

"I hate what you've done with the car," he says.

The sun glints off the hood, ruby red as a grapefruit.

*Summertime, and the livin' is easy.*

Ella's voice slices through the radio static like butter.

*Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high.*

"Oh Greg," she says. "Just shut up already."

"You can't—" Greg says. His face is white like the leather seats. His words get lost in the wind.

*One of these mornings you're gonna rise up singing,*

*And you'll spread your wings and you'll take to the sky.*

They're moving faster now, the ocean propelling itself closer. The surf curls up towards them like a wall. It will swallow us, she thinks.

The car is slowing. It's rolling to a stop. The front tires kiss the lip of the cliff.

"I've got to go," she says.

"But you can't," Greg pleads. "You can't leave me."

She steps out the car and she is standing at the edge of the cliff. Below her, the tide sprays white foam against the rock face.



The plastic camp mattress slides beneath her. She's managed to squirm so much that all the blankets are on in a heap on the floor. The clock says it's nine. The sky outside is dark, and it must be night. Her head feels heavy, as if filled with fog.

"Well?" Luce sits on a chair in the corner of the room. She is holding a cell phone and the lights casts her face in an eerie blue glow. "Feel better?"

"How long have I been... sleeping?"

"About six or so hours, by my count."

Her stomach issues a demanding growl. She can't recall the last time she felt the sensation of hunger.

"I asked them to put aside a bowl for you. Chowder," Luce says and slides the phone into her pocket. "You think you can eat?"

Terry nods vigorously.

## PICTURES OF BLUE

### *Night 6*

There comes a point in every night where she finally gives up on sleep. At home, this usually coincided with when she picked up a glass of wine, or a tab of Ambien. At home, there were never real sleepless nights. Only drug-induced ones.

She scrutinizes the ceiling, blank but for a pattern of lacy shadows. The curtain flutters back and forth in the breeze of the open window.

“Clear your mind,” Dr. Solomon said. “Find a quiet place within you.”

She does not know what this means.

“Think of a color. Imagine this color filling you up, head to toe.”

She chooses blue. She starts with her toes, imagines the blue curling along their tops, tingling in the little nobs of ankle bone, pushing up her sharp shins, warming the back of her knees. She imagines a brilliant blue, like a robin’s egg. Like the sky, which isn’t really blue at all.



“I could lie here forever. Look at this place.”

She is lying, flat-backed on a wood planked bridge. She can hear the rushing water passing underneath her; she can feel its energy. In her field of vision: only blue sky and pine. River spray rises up between the slats of wood. This is the top of the cliff. Here the water leaps away from the earth, crushing its way down the side of the mountain.

“What’re you doing down there?”

Greg stands over her. He smiles, his cheeks pulling back to reveal two rows of perfectly white teeth.

“Feeling the energy of the water,” she says. She closes her eyes.

It’s their second wedding anniversary. Greg bought her a pair of hiking boots and a pass to Yosemite National Park. Eventually, they will climb Half Dome. But for starters, they have decided to hike Glacier Point.

It’s quiet, early in the season, but warm already. The ice has started to melt, and the river is high—nearly kissing the wooden slats of the little bridge—and the air smells like wildflowers, honey, evergreen.

“Two years ago today,” Greg says, sitting down next to her. He unties his boots. His socks are mismatched: one red, one blue. He has a goofy grin on his face. He tilts his head up to the sky, breathing it in.

“Who’d a thought you’d have put up with me that long?”

“It’s easier than it looks,” he says and winks.

“I’ll tell my mother you think so.”

“Your mother doesn’t put up with anything.” Greg places a hand on her stomach. There is only the faintest hint of a swell. “When do you think we should tell her?”

She covers his hand with her own. “Does a week before the birth sound good?”

“She’s your mother. She’ll be happy for you.”

“She’s never happy about anything. Least of all children.”

“But this is different.”

“Sure it is,” she agrees.

“I’d tell my parents.” It’s not a slight, but his tone is sharp.



“Marry me now.”

It’s their fourth date.

“Are you serious?”

“Sure, why not?”

“You haven’t even got a ring.”

“Is that all you need to say yes?”

She considers this.

“I want you to do it the right way,” she finally says.

Greg’s face turns stormy. Then, like a passing thundercloud, it softens again.

“Fine. I’ll do it then,” he says.



“It’s ours,” Greg says as they pull up in the drive. Her very own home in Washburn, the town where she grew up.

“We can’t afford a house.”

“Sure we can,” he says. His tone is easy, unconcerned. “You know my parent’s had that money in a trust.”

She is surprised.

“I thought you said you used that.”

He waves her off. “Just let me worry about it all, ok?”



It only takes five years to lose it all.



Her eyes snap open. Her mind is full of a life she can’t forget, a past she can’t help but keep living in.

She stands, shrugs on her sweat pants. She pulls the quilt from the bed and wraps it around her shoulders, tiptoes down the stairs to the common room, past the door to Dr. Solomon’s office and the payphone where her calls have gone unanswered and unreturned. She catches the screen door, careful not to let it slap behind her as she slips into the cool, black night.

Above her, the moon cuts a path to a square of soft grass. She lies down, ignores the damp earth that bleeds through the back of her thin cotton T-shirt. The inky sky is motionless and still, studded with bits of burning gold. The breeze drifts over her. She imagines her body sinking into the wet earth, allowing it to swallow her up.

“Great minds think alike.”

Philip stands over her, his head blocking the brightness of the moon. A pale white corona of light peeks out from behind his left ear.

“What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the very same,” he says, sitting down next to her. His bare feet cut a glacier through the black grass. He wears jeans, torn at the knee, and a long-sleeve flannel, unbuttoned to reveal a curl of dark chest hair.

She is suddenly conscious of her thin cotton nightshirt, her nipples tenting the fabric like fingertips. She pulls the blanket tight around her shoulders.

Philip tugs a cigarette from his pack and looks around. “It’s pretty quiet out here, but don’t let that fool you. Insomnia’s pretty common in these parts.” He places the cigarette between his front teeth and lights a match. It flares to life, issuing the sweet scent of just lit tobacco. “I’m not really sure I know how to sleep anymore.”

“Why do you stay?” she wonders aloud. “I mean, you’ve done like six months, right? So why are you still here?”

Philip holds the cigarette between his index and middle fingers, ash building at the end like a silkworm as he considers his words. “I’ve got some money tied up in a trust. My old man kicked it last year, let me quite a bit.” He looks around, takes a puff,



exhales. “The thing is, I don’t trust myself. Not yet. And anyways, where would I go if I left?”

“So you’re just going to stay?”

“This place isn’t so bad.”

“I’m not sure I agree.”

The ash worm falls to pieces in Philip’s lap.

“Look, I can’t remember the last five years of my life. They say these are supposed to be the best of them, and I’ve got nothing to show for it. My mom’s dead, dad’s dead, my sister won’t take my calls. I’ve got a daughter, but I’m not allowed within a hundred feet of her. I’m not even sure if she had the choice that she’d ever want to see me again. And I can’t blame her for that. Can’t blame my ex either. I went and fucked it all up and this is what’s left.” Philip gestures to the space around them. “Like I told you before, I’ve been trying to figure out what the hell I got. And the first thing I came up with was my life.”

“That seems pretty literal.”

“I mean, it’s not much. That’s for sure. But I’ve done a lot of crazy shit and somehow I’m still here. That’s got to count for something.”

“Is there any point—trying to get people to forgive?”

Philip doesn’t hesitate. “Sure there is,” he says, smoke curling through his teeth.

“Sometimes I wonder if it’s not easier just to let everyone just move on, forget you exist.”

“Jesus, Terry.” Phillip wheezes. A soft chuckle tumbles up and out of him. “What a load of self-indulgent bullshit.”

She feels her throat tighten. Her face is hot and she can feel the anger rising inside of her. “I’m serious.”

But this only makes Phillip laugh harder.

“No you’re not. You’re just feeling sorry for yourself.”

“I’m not,” she says, losing patience. “I’m being serious.”

“About what?” Philip stops laughing. His breathing is heavy. “About killing yourself? Running away? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Is it though? My daughter wants nothing to do with me. I’m a thread away from losing my job—a job I’ve had for 20 years, and then what would I do? I’ve got a drug addict, bipolar ex husband who took everything I had, threatened to kill me, and left me for broke. And yet somehow, I think I still love him. I’m fucked up. It’s easy for you to look at me and think you know what’s going on in my life, but you don’t.”

Philip stubs out his cigarette, falling back on the grass.

In the silence she can hear the wind bristling the branches above them. The sky is getting brighter, the faintest suggestion of morning lighting up the canopy of leaves overhead.

“You’re right, Terry. I shouldn’t laugh. It’s not funny; it’s pathetic. You’re pathetic. I’m pathetic.” He kicks out his legs, rolling up to his feet. “I don’t know you. That’s true. Sure, your life feels real fucked up right now. You don’t get to this place if

it's not. But some of that's the booze still talking. And sooner than you think, it's going start to look a whole lot different."

Terry doesn't speak. Phillip is a fucking loser, a drug addict. What the hell does he know? She bites her bottom lip, refuses to make eye contact.

"Hell, maybe not. Maybe I don't know anything at all." Philip drags his feet back and forth across the flattened grass. "I'll see you in the mess hall for breakfast. And if your ass ain't there, I'm going to come looking for you. No more of this self-pity crap. You've got too much work to do."

"You sound like Donald."

"Hey now, don't be a jerk." Phillips says. He pats her head like a child. "Get some sleep."

In the distance, a loud *thwap* punctuates the breeze as the screen door rebounds.

She lies back. The sky is cobalt now—a true as nature blue. *This is it*, her daughter said. There will not be another chance.



In a hospital three hours away, David's phone lights up the room with an eerie blue.

*I MISS YOU.* It's a text message from Arthur.

Three feet away his mother sleeps, her frail body propped on pillows, her breathing shallow, labored.

He taps out a reply. His thumb hovers over send. Another message comes though.

*I'M SORRY*, it says.

And then, *CAN I SEE YOU?*

David's chest expands and contracts. He knows he should say no. He knows how much he stands to lose—how much he has lost already. He knows what his mother would think about it all. It's as carnal a sin as any the Catholic Church has ever believed in. And if she could look past it, then what would she see? An adulterer? A pathetic, jilted lover?

*I'M AT THE HOSPITAL*, he types back. *RM. 216.*

David waits in the hall. The buzz of daytime has disappeared, the wide corridor remarkably empty. The walls are a pale mint blue: a color intended to soothe.

Eyes closed, the wall holding the weight of his body, David feels Arthur first. He feels his hands are on his chest. His tired eyes snap open to Arthur's searching gaze, spine suddenly erect, as if tugged upwards by an invisible string. David's body pulses like a live wire.

"Arthur." David says his lover's name aloud. It feels familiar and warm on his tongue. But that's all that's all the goodness that's left. He peels Arthur's hands away from him.

"I have to," Arthur says. His tone is sharp, desperate. "I have to touch you."

It feels good to hear Arthur says this. It has been three months. Three whole months, and now here he is, clutching David and telling him how much he needs him. He wants to allow himself believe it. In the glass of the ICU's double doors he sees their reflection.

“We can’t.” This time he pulls Arthur’s hands away from him with force. It hurts too much. He can live with the secrets. His mother never has to know. Eventually she will be gone, and it won’t matter who he loves. But Arthur can’t.

“You—”

“I know.”

“No,” David presses on. “You don’t. You go home and you have someone. Maybe she’s not what you want, but that’s the choice you made.”

“I know.”

“You did not choose me.” There is a bitter edge to his voice. “You did not choose this.”

“I know.” Arthur nods. Tears slip down his perfect, freckled cheeks. He pulls off his glasses, hides his face in the crook of his arm.

“David?” His mother’s voice is faint, croaking. “David, where are you?”

“I’m coming mother,” he calls down the hall. He looks back at Arthur, but doesn’t risk a word. In a single glance he has embraced the distance between them.

He turns and walks away. He is at Marie’s bedside in ten short paces. In the cool band of fluorescent light, her skin is a greenish-blue, like the color of the walls she has come to die within.

“Where did you go?”

“Just out to the hall for a moment.”

“Who’s there?”

“No one. Just a nurse.”

“Don’t leave me,” Marie says. Her tone is low, but not soft. It’s a demand.

“I won’t.”

“Will she come?”

His mother’s eyes watch the door, still ajar.

“I don’t know,” he says. It’s an honest answer, if not the right one.

She closes her eyes, her blue face lolling against the bleach white hospital pillow.

“There’s something I must tell her.”



They sit in Sam’s car in the student parking lot. It’s late—much later than she told David she would be done with rehearsal—but the play opens in a week, and there’s still so much to do. They only have a few minutes, but that’s all she needs, a few minutes. Being with Sam, even when they don’t speak, somehow makes the rest of it all seem so far away.

He turns to face her and she knows that it will happen. The car is dark and she can smell the aftershave on his face, blue like the ocean.

“Is this OK?”

His hand is on her shoulder. It moves across her collarbone to her neck, tilting her face towards his.

“Yes,” she whispers.

His lips are warm and soft, his movements gentle. He parts her lips with his tongue. She feels her body lean deeper into him.

“I’m happy,” he says when they pull apart.

Ana nods, though it’s dark. “Yes,” she agrees. “Me too.”

Sam squeezes her hand across the seat.

“I should go.” She pulls her keys from her purse. “My uncle is probably waiting for me.”

As she slides into the driver’s seat of her car, her phone rings. The number is unknown, but the caller isn’t. She silences it, turns the key in the ignition.

## HOW IT GOES

*Spring 1992*

“Bipolar Disorder,” Dr. Tanner says. He hands Greg a prescription for Prozac and a lighter work schedule.

In the car, they argue.

“I missed today. I have to go in tomorrow.”

“But it’s Saturday.”

“Right, and today is Friday. I was supposed to work.”

“But can’t you work from home?” Her hand rests on Greg’s, which rests on the stick shift. He shakes it off like a gnat, shifts into third.

“No,” he says.

The next day she takes Ana to the library. She searches through the medical texts. She thinks of asking the reference librarian, but she must be careful. In this town everyone talks.

*Expansive mood. Excessive optimism. Grandiosity.*

These are just a few of the words that describe Bipolar Disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – IV*.



Terry hovers over the manual, afraid that someone might see her. Her stomach quivers as she reads. Her mouth is dry. She feels as though she has unlocked the key to something, a part of her husband she has never understood.

She snaps the massive text shut, terrified by what it contains.

Greg doesn't come home by six like he promised, and by eight-thirty she has called the office seven times. On the tenth call, someone picks up.

"Hello?"

"Greg?"

"Terry?" The voice is chipper. "Nope, sorry. This is Jim. Just stopped back to grab a folder."

"Is Greg there?"

"Here?" Jim sounds confused. "Nope, sorry. I'm the only one."

"He said he'd be home by six."

There's a pregnant pause. "Well gosh, I'll have a look." There's a shuffling sound as Jim sets down the phone. The line is silent for what feels like hours, but can't be more than a few minutes. "Terry?" Jim's voice comes across the line. "I even checked the bathroom. He's not here."

Terry's heart feels heavy in her chest, like it's about to slip down into her stomach. The wall clock says it's nearly nine: time to put Ana to bed.

"OK, thanks for checking," she says and hangs up.

As she is putting Ana to bed, she hears the garage door slam. She smooths the hair on her daughter's head, kisses her on each cheek, and tucks the covers extra tight into her sides.

She finds Greg in the kitchen.

"What's this?" he says, holding up the kitchen soap.

"Soap?" she says, because she does not know what else to say.

"Barrett's? You know I hate Barrett's!"

Her mouth hangs agape.

"Well?"

"I'm sorry, I must have forgot," she says. She is sure Greg has never mentioned this before. And besides, she thinks, it's soap.

She stands at the edge of the kitchen, afraid to move nearer to her husband.

Greg's forehead is sweaty. His eyes dart back and forth. He is pacing in front of the sink.

"That's just it, Terry. You want this to work, but you just don't fucking get it. I keep saying these things and it's like you don't hear me. Do you hear me, Terry?" He slams the bottle down on the counter. It slides towards her, falls off the edge. Pink dish soap spills across the hardwood floor between them.

He steps across the pink puddle, coming towards her. Her first instinct is to run, but she can't. Her body feels like lead. His face is maybe inches from her own, his breath hot on her cheeks, on her chin. She can smell the alcohol, and something else. Something faintly medicinal.

"Do you hear me?" he asks.

He grabs her by the shoulders, pushing her up against the kitchen wall. Her heart is thumping in her ears, behind her eyes. She thinks about breaking free, grabbing the keys from the hook, making a run for it. But she can't leave Ana.

And then, as if he's lost all steam, Greg's arms drop to his sides. His head is bowed and he's slumping towards the floor. He is a human puddle, all balled up, next to the pink dish soap. He is weeping, his head in his hands.

Terry kneels beside her husband, pulling his shaking body into her lap.

"Shhh," she soothes. She tells him she hears him. Over and over, she tells him this. She tells him she understands.

She thinks of the manual in the library.

The truth is she does not.

## WHAT YOU KNOW

*Day 8*

It's Sunday, family day and still Ana has not called.

Terry eats breakfast and returns promptly to her room. She can't stand the sight of them, all those happy farmers waiting for their families to arrive.

Steel sky filters dim light into her otherwise dark room. The rain drips snake-like patterns in the filmy window glass. She sits cross-legged on her bed, staring at the empty journal.

"Just go write. Whatever you need to say," Dr. Solomon said. "It's just for you."



Your first glass is the best one. It's the one that makes you feel giddy inside.

Usually it's something white—cheap, easy, smooth. You're just like your father in that way, only he liked whiskey; two fingers, one rock.

Routines are easy. Our lives are full of them. Drop your bag on the table, settle your daughter into her homework, pour yourself a glass. Sip it slowly, make dinner—usually some variation on salad and buttered noodles—and when you're done, pour

yourself another. Because you deserve it. Because this is what you have. This is your life now. And you deserve *something*.

Librarian's salaries don't afford for much, especially not when it's the only money coming in. Here's what they do afford: a two-bedroom shack with piss yellow paint and a sinking foundation, cheap chardonnay. Surely, you can allow yourself that. But never before your daughter's school clothes. Never before groceries. Never before you pay the electric bill.

Since you can't eat anymore—your appetite gone with the rest of it—you pour yourself another. How else will you sleep?

Tell your daughter a story; something about princesses, because she needs to believe that love is real and people can be good. Kiss her goodnight.

You did it. Another day behind you. Another 24-hour interval survived. Pour out the bottle.

It's finally quiet, and you're alone. Really alone. Your husband isn't working late, and he isn't coming home. He doesn't even know where you live anymore. You never thought you'd be that kind of woman. You come from a good family. Not perfect, but well bred. Picket fences, and all of that. You are not the kind of woman who takes out a restraining order against your husband, or anybody.

In your new bedroom, with a Hawaiian beach scene papered to one wall and a faulty heating duct that never seems to put out anything but dust, you find solace in that glass of golden liquid. You lie on the bedroom floor and stare at the taunting white sand and cerulean sky. You think about the moments that led you to this one. You lay on the

floor of that frigid room most nights, muffling your sobs in the cheap shag carpet, hoping your daughter won't hear your sobs, hoping that wherever your husband is, he's paying two-fold for the pain he's put you both through. You hate him so much—for making an idiot of you, for losing everything and stealing your pride. But mostly you know you will never hate him enough. And this makes you hate yourself even more.

You say that you're done, but you're not.

You say that you don't miss him, but you do.

You say you deserve it.

Everyone deserves something.

## MIXED SIGNALS

*Day 8*

There's a knock on her door.

"Terry?" It's Philip. "Are you in there?"

She sets the journal aside, the story far from done, but still she feels lighter.

"Yes. You can come in."

Philip pops his head around the edge of the door, his chin dark with two-day stubble and a cigarette tucked behind one ear.

"Just thought you might want to enjoy what sun we've got left," he says, nodding at the window.

The rain has cleared and the sky is a honeydew melon. Somehow, without her noticing, hours have passed.

"Are they gone?"

"Who?" Philip looks genuinely puzzled.

"The families."

"Oh," Philip says and pauses. "Yeah, most of them." He winks. "I think you're safe."

She stands, stretching out her stiff legs. “I’ll be down in a moment,” she says, tucking the journal protectively into the bedside table.

Philip waits on the porch. A cigarette hangs from his lower lip, the smoke twining patterns in the humid air of early evening. Thick still with the parting rain, the air feels like wet wool against her skin. Philip flicks the butt into a can, holds the screen door for her.

She follows him across the weed-pocked yard, damp grass licking her bare ankles. Philip winds past the mess hall, down a stone path that follows the curve of mountainside behind the old split-level. The stones drop off and a trail of stamped yellow grass ascends the hill. Philip toes one heel in front of the other. She follows close behind, her heart thumping heavily in her chest.

“Do you come out here a lot?”

“Try to.” Philip’s breathing is ragged and irregular. “It’s goddamn beautiful this time of day.”

Belled stalks of purple lupine and California poppies dot the trail around their feet. The air thins, cooling as they summit the hill. Above The Farm in the distance, two peaks trim the horizon, shaded in darkness, a tangerine sun hovering in the plunge between them. The sky bleeds from cherry pepper red to aubergine as the sun begins its descent. Philip takes a seat on a downed tree, heaving. She sits down next to him, the bark soaking the seat of her jeans.

“Sometimes I forget about the sun,” she says, staring down at the canopy of evergreens that flock the hillside below them.



“It’s amazing. If I could count the number of sunsets I’ve wasted...”

Loose tendrils from her ponytail catch the evening breeze, tickling her cheeks. She closes her eyes, breathing it all in: the smell of decay—dead, wet leaves, rotting wood, brackish Pacific wind. She can feel the warmth of Philip’s body next to her.

“I miss her,” she says.

“Your daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Have you told her that?”

“She won’t answer my calls.”

Philip pulls a pack of cigarettes from his flannel. “I want to say she will.”

She nods, brushing back the bits of loose hair. “I want you to say that too.”

“Maybe with time.”

“What I really want is for someone to tell me how this all works. I feel like I’m doing all I can, and I’ve got nothing to show for it.”

“Are you?”

Her gaze narrows, turning to meet Philip’s.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What I mean is,” Philip taps a cigarette from his pack, lights it, exhaling violet smoke into the watercolor sky, “you’ve got to accept how the programs works, if you want it to work for you.”

“The steps, you mean?” Terry thinks of their group sessions. They feel so cultish, sitting in a circle together, sharing miseries.

“I mean all of it,” Philip says.

“You really believe it works?”

He shrugs, tapping ash from the tip of his cigarette. “I believe it can. I think it’s up to the person. I’m no poster-boy, but I’ve been here six months—the last three by choice—and something’s happening. I can feel it.”

“Brainwashed, you mean?”

She means it as a joke, but Philip’s eyes convey disappointment.

“No, Terry. That’s what I mean. You’ve got to stop living like the world is against you. The only person against you right now is you.”

Her face feels warm. Shame. She reaches out, takes a pull from Philip’s cigarette and leans back on the trunk. Stars hint at the arrival of evening.

“And what if it’s not enough?”

“What if it’s not?” Philip stamps out the cigarette, folds it back into his pack.

“Terry, I’m looking at you right now and I know I don’t know you very well, but I can tell you’re smart. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders, you’re beautiful, you’ve got a kid who obviously loves the shit out of you, or you wouldn’t be here. But you’re stubborn as hell. If you let this place work for you, I think you’ll be surprised.”

She feels a flutter in her chest. She tries to process a response but she can’t. Her head is full of a single, momentous word—the one she has not heard in so long.

*Beautiful.* Philip thinks that she is beautiful. Of course, he’s crazy. She’s looks a mess, especially lately. But hearing it makes her heart thump double-time in her chest. She studies the underside of Philip’s chin, rough with pricks of dark stubble, and the soft

etches around his eyes. He turns towards her, his narrow, crooked nose so close that she can feel his breath on her lips. She leans in, the peaty warmth of Philip's lips on hers. A pulsing sensation travels from the pit of her stomach to her groin.

And then it's gone.

"Terry?" Philip's brow furrows, conveying a genuine sense of confusion.

Her cheeks burn, her stomach leaping. She's read it all wrong.

Philip covers her hands with his. "Terry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

She hears herself stammer. "Nnn-no, it's my fault. I'm sorry."

She stands, hardly aware of her movements. She toes her way back down the slope, her feet blindly feeling the ground in front of her. She can hear Philip behind her, trying to catch up. He calls her name, but she does not stop.



David finds him easily. His profile picture was—remarkably—pretty accurate.

"Hey," he says as he approaches the bar.

The man turns. "David," he says and pats the plush leather barstool next to him.

It's a swanky hotel bar, the kind of place David never goes to. "Elliott," the man says, but he doesn't hold out his hand as is customary. Instead, he leans in, kissing David on either cheek, his scent a mix of sandalwood and something spicy.

He feels the heat on his cheeks.

“You’re a shy one,” Elliott teases. He brushes a hand through his hair, sandy brown and roughly cut. He’s handsome. Very handsome. Not usually David’s type. Or is he?

The bartender leans across the well. “What would you like?”

Normally, he doesn’t drink.

“Uhhh,” he stalls.

“He’ll have a vodka soda,” Elliott says, “With lime.”

David doesn’t protest. It will probably help him loosen up. The bartender slides the drink across the bar and he takes a long, slow sip. Soda water with a bite. Hardly any flavor at all.

Elliott’s eyes, an electric blue, narrow. “Is this your first time?”

Again, David feels his face grow warm. “No,” he says, and it’s the truth. Arthur was his first.

Elliott runs his hand over David’s thigh under the counter. “So you’re always this nervous?” He laughs. “It’s kind of cute.”

David sucks in a deep breath, feels the warmth of the alcohol trilling in his veins. “It’s just...” he stops himself. “It’s been awhile.”

“Ah,” Elliott says, as if he suddenly understands. “You’re nursing a heartbreak.” He takes a sip of his drink, chews a piece of ice. “Do you want to get out of here?”

David looks around. The hotel is far from home; it’s unlikely that anyone will recognize him here. But it’s still new, being this open about it all. With Arthur, it was

never like this—stolen moments in dark cars, long hikes out to places where no one could find them. There were certainly no swanky hotel bars or vodka sodas.

“Do you have a room?” He finds himself asking.

Elliott nods. “As a matter of fact, I do. I’m here on business. One night only.” He flashes a plastic key card.

Upstairs, they lie on the bed. Elliott has ordered up a bottle of bubbly and he can feel it going to his head.

“I don’t do this much,” he admits, his inhibitions beginning to melt away.

Elliott nods, like he understands. “Roll over.”

So David does. Elliott’s fingers begin to work the flesh of his upper back. He feels his body sinking into the soft fabric of the bed beneath him. It feels good to be touched and he imagines for a moment that these are Arthur hands, not Elliott’s, moving over the tense knots of muscle. But Arthur never gave him massages. Their time together was always hurried, always rushed.

“You’re thinking about him,” Elliott says, as if reading his mind.

“Nothing good.”

“It’s OK. I don’t mind.”

Elliott’s hands work their way under his shirt, up his back.

He feels a bolt of panic seize his chest, in the space just below his ribs, so close to his heart. “I’m not sure,” he says, turning over.

Elliott pulls his shirt over his head, revealing a lean, muscled torso. He is tan—like Florida tan—and there is a long tattoo, a Phoenix cutting across the left side of his rib cage. “I love indecision,” he says.

## THE FIRST STEP

*Day 12*

Dr. Solomon holds her notebook in his lap, studying it.

“It's interesting, how you choose to tell this story,” he finally says. “How did this come to you?”

“I don't know. It just felt like less pressure, telling it like that.”

“You use the word ‘deserve’ five times in your first entry.” Dr. Solomon pushes his frames up on his skinny beak nose. “What is it you think you deserve?”

She leans forward, blows out a defeated breath. “I don't know. To feel better, I guess?”

“And you think alcohol does this for you?”

She thinks a moment. “No. Not really.”

“No?” Dr. Solomon claps the notebook shut and looks up. His eyebrows arch up over his slender silver frames.

“It used to. But it's not the same now.”

“How so?”

“Well it doesn’t work anymore.” Terry recalls the day her daughter brought her to Mercy Farm, how Ana screamed at her to get out of the car. She thinks of all the calls she has made, still unreturned. “It seems to just be making it worse.”

“So you acknowledge that your drinking is a problem?”

She closes her eyes, let’s the truth shake loose. “Yes.”

“And you’re ready to work on your relationship to alcohol? You’re ready to stop with the self-medicating?”

She had so heartily craved a drink after the mess she made with Philip and the kiss, the thirst intensifying when, for the eleventh consecutive evening, Ana did not pick up her call. And, now that she can at least be honest with herself, there is no point in looking past the fact that even now, sitting on this couch, talking about her path towards sobriety, she still wants a drink.

“I don’t know,” she admits.

Dr. Solomon appears perplexed. “So you want to continue drinking?”

“I don’t know.”

“This seems a rather straightforward question.”

“I wish it was.” Her stomach twists, a mix of frustration and desire to feel understood. How can a man so trained to deal with addiction see everything as so failingly black and white? “I want to stop drinking because it’s hurting my family, and I know I should because it’s literally killing me. But then, sometimes I just really want to say screw it. So what? So what if this is it?”

“So you think about dying?”



“Yes,” she starts to say, then self-corrects. “But it’s not like... it’s not like I want to hurt myself. It’s just that—what if I did die? Sometimes I wonder.”

“Why do you wonder that?”

“Because I think it might be easier.”

“Easier for who?”

She doesn’t skip a beat. “For me.”

Dr. Solomon reaches for his yellow notepad, scribbles something, and looks up. His eyes convey sadness, his mouth fatigue.

“Do you think it’s possible to do this only for yourself, Terry?”

She shrugs. “Maybe.” She falls back against the cushion. “I don’t want it the way Ana wants it for me. I don’t feel sure.”

“Sure of what?”

“That I’m strong enough.”

“You’re afraid of failing?”

“No.”

Dr. Solomon’s eyes widen with confusion. “You’re not afraid of failing?”

“No, not failure.” She leans forward, trying to find the right words. “It’s not that at all.”

“What are you afraid of then?”

She bites her lower lip, pinches the skin of left wrist out of habit. “I’m afraid this is it. I’m afraid I only have one chance to get it right.”

Dr. Solomon sighs, put his notepad down and walks around to the front of his desk, leaning back on it. “Terry, you’ve got to stop thinking about life in absolutes. Your life wasn’t ruined forever when your marriage fell apart. You aren’t destined to be unhappy just because you are an alcoholic. And chances are very good, as with most people struggling with addiction, that you will face a moment of potential relapse.”

“Well that’s comforting.”

“We have to be realistic.”

“You just told me that I’m going to relapse.”

Dr. Solomon shakes his head. “I merely said you must accept the possibility that you will leave here and you will want to drink. And if you are to be strong enough, as you say—if you are to be successful in your sobriety—you will need to begin working the steps. You must prepare yourself for sobriety. You must give up these behaviors, these unhealthy coping mechanisms. You must examine why you drink, and you must establish why you don’t want to drink anymore. This is a process—one that will likely take years, if not the rest of your life—and accepting your powerlessness is the first step. Are you ready to take it?”

She hesitates, the answer at her lips. “Yes,” she says. “I think so.”

“Very well,” Dr. Solomon claps his hands together. “Let’s get started.”

## NECESSARY CHANGES

*Fall 1999*

They sit in the diner, sharing cups of black coffee. It's too late and she knows she won't sleep, but the hot, bitter liquid feels good, scalding the back of throat, burning in her chest.

"When will they tell him?" Mitch asks. He pulls a flask from his left chest pocket, pours a dip into his coffee, and offers it to her.

She doesn't typically like the hard spirits, can't seem to control herself, but tonight it seems appropriate.

"Tomorrow," she says. "They'll serve him with papers."

"And the house?"

She shrugs. "He's all but destroyed it. I went back—to get a few of my things—but it's..." How to explain the mess their home, Greg's life, their collective lives have become? "It's not good."

Luckily, Greg had not been home. In the back yard, the contents of her bureau lay scattered in the grass—once a point of great pride for Greg, now withered and yellow, dying like the rest of it. One dresser drawer stood on its side, another smashed to jagged

splinters. They had been cast from the balcony, along with their contents: a jar of Barbie pink nail polish, the glass split open like a cracked egg, spilling its cheerful contents across the palm tree bikini she wore on their honeymoon to Hawaii; a sachet of dried roses, given to her by her mother to keep her delicacies fresh, now soaked with mud; a single picture frame—the photo taken just before Ana’s first Christmas, the one they had sent to their friends—the glass fractured, the photo scarred.

“Here,” Mitch says, emptying the last of his flask into her mug. “Have a little more.” He shakes his head, doesn’t prod her for details. He knows enough. “I can’t even imagine.”

It’s true. He can’t. But it’s not what she wants to hear, or be reminded of.

“Do you want me to stay with you? Just for the night?” He asks.

She swallows, wants to say yes, but cannot bring herself to. It won’t mean the right thing to either of them. She shakes her head.

“But Ana—”

“She’s with her uncle. David will bring her in the morning, early.” She pauses, knows it’s cruel, but says it anyways. “You shouldn’t be there.”

Mitch studies the last drops in his cup. He’s used to it now, this brutal shade of self-protection. “OK,” he says. He reaches across to take her hand, pressing his own firmly over it. “What you did today,” he says, “will change your life forever.”



*Day 12*

“What’s on your mind?”

Philip swings his leg over the bench seat, setting his dinner tray on the table in front of her.

“Look, I put up with your silent crap all morning. I’m not doing it again.”

“I’m embarrassed,” she says to her tray.

“Christ, Terry. I’ve done a lot of embarrassing crap in my life. I’m not going to let you weasel out of being my friend just because of one fucking kiss. Can’t we just forget it? Water under the bridge?”

Terry spears a piece of chicken parmesan. “Dr. Solomon wants me to talk in Group tomorrow.”

Philip swallows a mouthful of salad, shaking his head in agreement. “You should do that. It’s time.” He points the tines of his fork at her. “I want to know what’s going on in there.”

She chews the chicken slowly. “What step are you on?”

Philip shrugs. “Four, I guess.”

“Which is?”

“Moral inventory. Regrets, embarrassments, fuck-ups—I’m in the process of writing them all down.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“It’s rehab, Terry. It’s not supposed to be fun.”

She takes a sip of milk. “I think this place it making me fat.”

“It is.”

She blanches.

“Oh, come on.” Philip laughs. “Everyone gains a little in here. You look fine. But definitely write that one down. Where’s your notebook? Vanity. That’s definitely one of the things you need to work on.”

“You’re kind of a jerk, you know that?”

Philip wipes his mouth, pantomiming shock. “What? Hell no, lady. I’m your friend. Trust me, it’s better in the end.”

“God, this sucks.”

They carry their trays back to dish station.

“That’s kind of the point, kid.”

“Don’t call me kid.” Terry scraped her food into the compost bin. “I’m pretty sure I’m older than you are.”

“Jesus Christ.” Philip rolls his eyes. “Again with the vanity.”

“I seriously hate you.”

“And I seriously don’t believe that. Come on,” he gestures to the door. “Keep me company while a smoke. I’ve got ten minutes before men’s group.”

## **BELIEFS OF THE SELF-DEFEATED**

### *Day 13*

Donald clears his throat and the group falls silent. Terry crosses and uncrosses her legs, tucks a stray strand behind her right ear. Philip winks at her from across the room.

“Today,” Donald says, “Terry is going to share her story.” He leans over, patting her shoulder gently. “Ready?”

She laughs uncomfortably. A few of the farmers shift in their seats.

“Go ahead,” Donald prods. “Tell us, Terry. What makes you want to drink?”

“Well first of all, I hate that question,” she says. “It’s too simple. It misses the point.”

“Ok,” Donald says. “What’s a better question?”

“The one I have always wondered is why alcohol? What is it about drinking?”

“And?”

“And honestly? I don’t know.”

“Did your parents drink?”

“My mother never did. She’s an absolute teetotaler. My father did, but he died when I was five, and I don’t really remember that much about him. I remember him

coming home, pouring himself a whiskey. I remember them fighting sometimes about it. But my mother could pick a fight with anyone. That's just how she is."

"Do you still speak to her?"

"No."

"Why is that?"

"I wanted to leave Greg sooner than I did. I stayed because she told me to. She kept telling me to be strong, to be patient. I guess I believed her. Maybe I wanted to believe that she was right, because she's my mother and because I loved Greg."

"What changed?"

Terry thinks back to the last night she spent with Greg. She recalls lying on the floor in a dark room. Colors dance across the ceiling, alternating reds and blues, greens and yellows. She wonders where she was. There are pictures on the wall, some of them crooked and hanging at odd angles, and gaps where others should be. She hears something in the distance—people talking—but she can't understand the words. Her ears feel like they're filled with water. And she can't move her head. She can't move her body, or unplug her ears.

"Terry?" Donald says. "Why did you finally leave your husband?"

"He fractured my skull."

The circle issues a collective sigh. Across the room, Philip chews the end of a coffee stirrer.

"The saddest part is that if it had just been me, I probably would have let him kill me. I probably would have stayed." Terry sees her daughter, eight years old, sitting in the



emergency room, holding her hand as her vitals blinked across a monitor. “In a lot of ways, my daughter saved me life.” Her gaze blinks around the circle. “And not just by bringing me here.”

“And you started drinking after that?”

“No,” she says frankly. “I always drank.” She self-corrects. “We always drank together. Even though we would fight like hell.”

“Did you think it was a problem?”

“I was naïve. I didn’t even realize Greg was using until after I left,” she pauses, reconsidering. “Or maybe I did, and maybe I just refused to see it.”

“I sense a lot of guilt,” Donald says. “Do you blame yourself for what happened?”

Her body slumps forward. She feels weak, vulnerable.

“Well?”

“You see what you want to. You ignore what you don’t. My mother taught me that.”

Across the room, Lisa raised her hand. “I get what Terry’s saying.”

“How so?” Donald sounds genuinely intrigued.

“Well, like with all the bad shit that happened to me, I don’t think I *deserved* that. But you know, I do sometimes think that there were times when I just let it happen. I mean, it wasn’t ok, and it’s not my fault. I know that now. But I put myself in those situations. I let myself become a victim. I needed to score and I got to a point where it didn’t matter what kind of danger I put myself in as long as it meant that I could get high.”

“You were a passive participant.”

Lisa shrugs, chews a neon yellow fingernail.

Donald directs the conversation back to her. “Terry?”

“Absolutely, I played the victim. I was a victim, but I also allowed that role to define me.” She pulls her notebook out from under her chair and holds it up. “I just started doing this,” she says. “I hate it by the way.”

The circle erupts with nervous, chattering laughter.

“I go back and I look at some of the stuff I wrote down and I can see how I’ve really framed myself this way, how I’ve used it to rationalize all of the crappy decisions that I’ve made. ‘*You deserve this*,’ I keep writing. But why? Because I stayed in an abusive relationship? *I stayed*.”

Donald is standing in the center of the circle now, nodding. “And then you drank so you could forget the consequences of that choice. But you do deserve happiness. We all do. And if you do the work—if you work the steps, you *will* find it.”

“See that’s where I’m having trouble.” She doesn’t hesitate now, because she’s already said it all, the worst parts. “Maybe that’s true,” she tells Donald and the group. She feels a flutter in her chest, a race of adrenalin. “Or maybe your steps are just a bunch of bullshit.”

“Maybe, Terry,” Donald agrees. He returns to his seat. “But what do you lose by giving this a chance?”

## THAT WHICH IS LOST

*June 1962*

Patrick Brennan died on a Sunday in June.

The clouds glowed like spun gold and the air smelled like summer, baked asphalt and the antiseptic tang of chlorine.

Marie took the kids to mid-morning service, her patience waning when they fidgeted in their seats, visibly irritating Mr. and Mrs. Whitcomb in the pew in front of them.

Patrick had begged off of church that morning, claiming he felt faint. It was a flimsy excuse. Marie knew he'd had a few too many with boys the night before, and it hardly seemed right, him squirming out of the Lord's worship over it. But she had not fought him. "You must pick your battles wisely," her mother had often said. So on this day, Marie sat in the pew clutching her purse until her knuckles turned white, attempting to listen to the blessings of Father Mulligan, silently cursing her husband in tandem, and when it was time to exchange blessings with her fellow parishioners, Marie put on her best church-going smile.

"Peace be with you," she said, taking the hand of the man next to her.

The man's wife leaned across, extending a perfectly manicured hand towards her.

"Peace be with you!" The woman cooed.

They were young, probably no more than twenty, and exuberant with youth. The woman had a delicate smile, porcelain skin and rosebud lips. The man was handsome, fair-skinned and flaxen-haired, "black Irish," as her mother would have said. They had their whole lives ahead of them, Marie thought.

She took the woman's hand. It was soft still, unmarred by washed dishes and folded laundry. "And also with you."

"Such darling children."

She followed the woman's gaze. In the pew next to Marie, Terry and David shook hands with the parishioners behind and next to them. This was their favorite part of mass, when they could finally move about without being scolded or shushed.

"Peace be with you!" they said in unison. "Peace be with you!"

They were good kids. Not so much trouble, really.

"Thank you," Marie said to the woman. She turned back to the children. "That's enough." She patted the pew beside her. "Come, sit."

After mass, Sister Anne watched the children while she made her confession.

"Father, forgive me for I have sinned."

Father Mulligan's eyes were kind. "You are forgiven, my dear," he said, covering her hand with his. It was warm and leathery, threaded with violet veins. "For what must you atone?"

“I am quite without my mind lately,” Marie admitted. “Short on patience, often too firm with the children.”

“Such is the struggle of child-rearing.” Father Mulligan nodded knowingly.

“I feel very much alone these days,” she conceded. She had not planned to be quite so frank, but if not with the Father, then who?

“Marriage is often a test of patience. But patient you must be. You must remember to love unconditionally.”

She thought of her husband, at home in bed with a hangover. She could not be sure that she loved him at all, but this she did not say.

“Yes, you are right.” Marie squeezed Father Mulligan’s hand, a warm relief replacing her anger. “I will try to remember this.” She bent her head as the father enacted the motions of the cross.

“Be good to yourself this week, my dear Marie. Ten Hail Mary’s should help you find some peace.”

She stood. “Thank you, Father. Peace be with you.”

“And also with you, my dear. And also with you.”

On the drive home, Marie tried to heed the words of Father Mulligan. She did try. But as she neared the house, discontent began to squirm its way back into her thoughts, her husband’s faults accumulating one atop the other in her mind. He didn’t pay enough attention to the children; he drank too much and too often; he stayed out late and never called to check in; he never asked her if she might like a moment of peace to herself, without the children—never thought about anyone but himself.

By the time she pulled the station wagon into the driveway, she wanted to scream.

The house was still as they entered. The children hopped up and down with pent up energy.

“Go, run about.” Her temples pulsed with anger as she shooed the kids out the back door into the yard. She imagined Patrick asleep in their bedroom, though it was nearly eleven already.

She called down the hall after him.

The bedroom door was ajar, the sheets twisted in a heap in the center of the bed. To her surprise, the bed was empty. Marie puzzled for a moment, listening for the suggestion of noise. In the yard, the children called out to one another. “Stop peeking!” Terry squealed.

“Patrick?” She turned, about to check the bathroom, when she saw the foot from the corner of her eye, curling out from underneath the far side of the bed. Her husband’s prostrate form lay sprawled on the carpet beside the bed, his skin as pale as the white plaster of the four walls that surrounded them.

Marie pressed her ear to his chest, but could not make out a beat. She placed a palm on his forehead, and recoiled. His skin felt cool to the touch. Her body began to shake, tears welling in the corners of her eyes, her chest so full it felt like it might explode. She wanted to scream—to call out for help—but found that she could not. “No,” she seethed, “you can’t.” An angry sob worked its way up and out of her, an animalistic, almost feral wail. She railed back, gasping for air. “You can’t!” Her fists rained down on her husband’s chest, his body shaking with the fury of her blows.

She thought many things in the moments that followed—about the life she might have lived, the choices she made, the moments that had brought her to this one.

Then she collapsed on the carpet next to her husband, curling into him, and she wept. Not for her children. Not even for Patrick.

Marie wept for herself.

## **F.I.N.E.**

### *Day 14*

Fourteen days come and gone since she took her last drink; fourteen sunrises and fifteen sunsets, three hundred and thirty-six hours and more than twenty thousand minutes. It is, with little doubt, the longest period of time that she has, in her entire adult life, gone without a sip of alcohol.

She feels deeply depressed.

The cravings begin before she is awake. They consume her dreams. Snapshots of a life she can no longer live: in bed, a bottle clutched to her side, at the bar with Mitch, or sitting out back on his porch. These are the moments she is supposed to forget, to never live again. And somehow she is supposed to feel good about that.

All throughout her morning walk, in the shower, at breakfast—these slices of the past are the only thing she can think about. The desire for a drink occupies her mind and body. Her mouth waters and her stomach churns. The yearning she feels today is more persistent than her first full day of sobriety. It burns all the way down to the pit of her stomach. Her body is raw with it; her skin is sensitive to the touch.



And now she had to go sit with a group of people who seemed only too glad to be as sober as newborn babies.

“Welcome, farmers.” Donald stands in the center of the circle, his hands clasped together as if in prayer. “Today represents a significant milestone for many of you and I would like to take the early part of this session to congratulate you on your sobriety.”

The circle breaks into round of claps and cheers.

“Two weeks, Lisa. How do you feel?”

Lisa’s cheeks pull in a wild smile, revealing narrow, drug-rotted teeth. “I feel alive,” she says. She nods her head vigorously. “It’s so crazy. It’s like I’m a completely different person.”

“Fantastic news. Let’s give Lisa a big round of applause. What an achievement.”

Lisa stands and bows dramatically.

Donald looks around. His eyes don’t travel far before they land on her. “Terry? What about you? How does it feel to be two weeks sober?”

Terry swallows. She can hear her heartbeat in her ears and her mouth is dry. She’s afraid to answer truthfully, so she says the most inoffensive thing that she can think of:

“Fine, I guess.”

Donald pinches his lips together in an anemic line. “Well, farmers?” He pivots to face the people behind him “What do we think about that?”

Lisa shrugs, genuinely stumped. Brian bites his thumbnail and studies the gritty floor tiles.

“Would someone be so kind as to tell us what ‘fine’ means here at Mercy Farm?”

He pantomimes quotes.

Philip is the only person to raise his hand.

“Fine:” Philip says, as if reciting a spelling bee word, “fucked up, insecure, neurotic, and emotional.”

Donald claps his fat palms together and a loud smacking noise reverberates off the ceiling of the mess hall. “Wonderful.” He turns back to Terry. “Does that sound about right?”

Her right leg bounces uncontrollably. Her whole body shakes with the weight of her weakness. She clears her throat, but nothing comes out.

“Terry?” Donald prods.

She feels the room watching her. Maybe they pity her. Maybe they wonder why after two whole weeks, she can’t just get her shit together and feel proud of her sobriety.

“I feel hollow.”

This appears to excite Donald. He bounces on the balls of his feet, a rare lightness for a man of his size and stature. “Ok, good. Keep going,” he says, waving her on.

She takes a deep breath, releases it slowly. He’s pushing her and she knows it. She’s losing control. “I feel like I would give my left foot to be drunk right now.”

The circle is tensely quiet. Philip rolls an unlit cigarette back and forth between his palms, scrutinizing it. He does not look up. He does not look at her. It’s like that scene in a movie where you know something bad is about to happen and no one wants to watch, so instead just listen, your eyes watching the carpet.

“What is it about being drunk that you miss?” Donald says.

“I’m sick of,” Terry searches for her words, “feeling. All the time. It’s all we talk about.” The words spill out of her. “It’s all I think about. I feel everything. I feel too fucking much. I’m anxious. I’m restless. I don’t fucking sleep. I miss having a goddamn buzz. I miss feeling completely weightless. I miss,” she stops herself, thinks a moment, and gives in to all of it. “I miss not giving a shit.”

“Good!” Donald is bouncing again. “Keep going, keep digging.”

Her heart beats like a caged animal, rocking around inside her chest, and she feels almost high, free to say what she wants, because it doesn’t matter anymore what these people think. They’re just as messed up as she is—more so even.

“Two weeks is a long time. I’ve never gone this long without a drink. And the truth is, I don’t really feel better. Of course, I want to feel proud of myself. And I know that I should feel that way, but I don’t.”

“How do you feel instead?”

She laughs, the way crazy people do right before they lose it for good and never come back. She’s going there.

“I feel really fucking sad!” She is shouting now—at the room, at Donald. She can’t contain herself, the mania that has built up inside of her, one frustration or disappointment stacking itself on top of the other, like a tidal wave about to crash. “It’s like a huge part of me is missing, like I’m in mourning. And what worries me the most is that I feel like there’s a pretty strong likelihood that I will feel this way forever.”

Donald balls his right fist, pounding it into his left palm. “Yes, Terry!” He says. “Good!”

She has never seen Donald so animated. He walks around the perimeter of the circle, pointing at each of the farmers as he passes. “Don’t you see?” He says. “That’s the thing that unites us!” He stops in front of Terry, his fat chin shaking with excitement. “If you could have that drink right now, would you?”

“Probably,” she says, without hesitation. It feels good to admit it. “I feel completely out of control.”

“Good. Get there. Why does this make you angry? What do you want to say to the group?”

“What the fuck is wrong with everyone?” She stands, looks around the circle, her gaze falling hard on Philip. She is practically screaming. She has become the mania. And the loss of control, it feels so familiar. This poking, prodding thing that Donald is doing reminds her of how Greg used to needle away at her until she snapped. She is out of control, so easy to provoke. “I don’t understand how you’re all sitting here like this is the best, most rewarding thing you’ve ever done. This fucking sucks. I’m not ecstatic that I am sober. I feel like I am losing my goddamn mind! Am I the only one who feels this way?”

Donald is by her side now. He gestures to the group. “A show of hands, please. Who can relate to what Terry is feeling?”

She watches as every person in the circle, including Donald, holds up their hands. Her eyes are wet, tears crowding her vision. She swallows again and again, until she can find her breath.

“Terry!” Donald thunders, “for Christ’s sake, it’s natural to feel a sense of grief. “You *have* lost something. You’ve lost something huge! You’ve lost your best friend. That’s why you’re here. *Now* is the time to redefine—to create a new identity. It’s time to stop living your life for and around your addiction.”

Donald places one hand on his protruding belly, reaches into his pocket with the other. He holds out a handful of silver coins, recovery medallions like the one he gave Terry after her first twenty-four hours sober. He arranges them in his palm, holding them out for the rest of the group to see.

“Count them, folks,” he says. “One, two, three, four, *five*.” He holds up his hand, shaking the coins in his fist. “This is how many times it took me to get sober. And every single time I missed it. I still do. I miss it every day.” He shoves the coins back in his pocket. “The thing you absolutely must remember is that we’re all in this together. We all have days when we feel sad, or alone, or like we’re just barely getting by. That’s what addiction does to us. We are powerless over it. We are sick with it. I will always be addict. *You* will always be an addict. We will have good days and we will have bad days. We will wish that we were drunk. We will wish that we were different. But it’s very important to remember that we are not alone.”

## THE TEST OF TRUTH

*Day 16*

Dr. Solomon's face appears pinched, as though he's been sucking on a lemon.

"We don't welcome relationships between patients," he says. He sits on the edge of his desk, his thin lips formed a hard line, his teeth visibly clenched behind them. "This could seriously hamper your recovery."

"I don't think I understand."

"I think you do."

"But, I'm not having a relationship with anyone."

Dr. Solomon's jaw makes a seesaw motion.

"Why don't you help me understand what you would call what's going on between you and Mr. Avery."

She had come to the session excited, giddy even. Today had been her best day at Mercy Farm to date. She had slept the whole night through. She had run in the morning, eaten breakfast, gone to group—and all without even a hint of crippling anxiety. She thought about drinking, but even that hadn't made her feel anxious. "Philip and I are friends. He's helping me."

"How so?"

“He believes in the steps, and all of this stuff you and Donald and Luce are always going on about.”

“And you don’t?”

She laughs, but it’s not the right response, and Dr. Solomon cringes.

“This isn’t a joke, Terry,” he says “The late night meetings? The hikes together?”

She feels suddenly violated, as if every moment she has spent at the farm has been under surveillance. “I’m sorry, but I don’t really see how our friendship is your business.”

“Terry, I’m your therapist. If you can’t be honest with me, who can you be honest with?”

“Philip makes me feel better. He pushes me to think about things in a different way.”

“How so?”

“Well I told him about Ana—about how sometimes I think it might be better if I just left her with my brother, just disappeared from her life and stopped complicating it.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said I was full of shit. He told me to stop pitying myself.”

“I’m inclined to say I agree with Philip.” Dr. Solomon’s lips relax, but his squinty eyes are hard and stern.

“He told me that this pity party I’ve been throwing myself is a detriment to my treatment. And he told me to knock it off.”

“Is it nice to feel like you have someone who cares?”

She feels a plummeting from her chest to her stomach. “What?”

“Since your daughter hasn’t called and you’re not on speaking terms with your family, is it nice to have someone who seems invested in your well-being?”

“Philip is a friend.”

“Right.”

She studies the spotted ceiling of Dr. Solomon’s office, blinking back tears.

“I imagine you’ve thought about this Terry, but I have to ask,” he leans forward, his face returning to its puckered origins. “What happens when you leave?”

Terry leans into the soft fabric of the sunken couch.

“What about Ana? What if she still doesn’t want to talk to you when you finish your treatment? Can you be successful in your sobriety if it means having to go it alone?”

She bites her bottom lip to keep it from trembling.

“I don’t know,” she admits.

Dr. Solomon looks at her over the tops of his glasses. “That’s the thing, Terry.”  
He sighs heavily. “I think deep down you do.”



## PROMISES MADE

*Day 17*

“Terry. Wake up.”

“Luce, no.” Terry rolls towards the wall. “For once, just let me sleep.” She is tired of the six AM wake-up calls and the cafeteria food, the sweatpants, and the therapy and all the goddamn *feeling*.

“Terry, it’s your brother.”

Her eyes snap open. “What? What happened?”

“He’s on the phone.”

The red numbers on the clock are too blurry to read.

“What time is it?”

“Late,” Luce tugs her up to a seated position. “Get dressed.”

Downstairs, Donald sits on couch, groggy-eyed. Luce holds the receiver out to her.

She can hear someone breathing through the other end of the line, a labored sort of hiccup: sobbing.

“David? What’s wrong? Is Ana ok?” She pictures the smashed up bumper of Ana’s car, her mind alight with horror. “Goddammit, David. Say something.”

“It’s Mom.”

Her heart stills its wild beat.

“I think you should come.”

Her knees go weak and she leans against the wall, sliding down it towards the floor.

Another hiccup. “This is probably it,” he says.

“David, this is rehab. I can’t just leave.”

She hears her brother, younger by a mere ten months, crying on the other end of the line. “Fuck,” he says. David doesn’t curse.

“David, where are you? Can you put Ana on?”

“She’s not here. I’m at the hospital. Terry. You have to come.”

She looks up at Luce, who appears asleep on her feet. On the couch, Donald snores quietly.

“Ok, I will. I’ll have to wait until morning. But I’ll come.”

“Do you promise?” David’s voice sounds small.

“Yes. I promise.”

The line clicks. David has hung up.



“What do you mean you’re leaving?”

She is shoving the contents of her room into the duffle.

“I have to go. It’s my mom. She’s dying.”

“Yes, but you hate your mother.” Philip watches her like a hawk, dancing around her as she moves about the room, picking up socks, books, remnants of her rehab life.

She turns to face Philip. “She’s dying,” she repeats.

But still it doesn’t quite register. “But what about your treatment?”

“I don’t know,” she says, because she doesn’t. She doesn’t know anything right now—only that her mother is dying.

“You can’t just come back, pick up where you left off. Rehab doesn’t work that way.”

“I know.” She places each of her hands on Philip’s arms. They hold steady, staring at one another. Philip’s eyes convey concern, the skin between them stitching together in a mess of creases. “I’m not coming back,” she says.

Philip’s olive complexion turns pale. “What?”

“I can’t. If I leave—and I promised David that I would—then I have to start all over again. And my insurance won’t cover it. I could barely afford the co-pay on this. I can’t come back.”

Rehab is a truly expensive endeavor. And though she hates the place, the fact that she is leaving on day seventeen—more than a week short of completion—terrifies her.

“You’re not ready,” Philip says, as if reading her mind.

She nods. “I know.”

“You have to tell David you can’t.”

“Philip—“

“No Terry, this is your life. You could die. You don’t even speak to your mother. She was terrible to you. You told me that yourself.”

“She *was*. But if there’s one thing this place has taught me, it’s about forgiveness. Whether or not it goes both ways. My mother might never forgive me for not being perfect, or living up to her wildly irrational expectations, but I have to forgive her. If I don’t, if I wallow in this crap forever, I’ll never be stay sober.”

Philip releases a sigh of defeat. He pulls her into him, hugging her hard. She smells tobacco and spice, leather, pine. It’s a scent she will heartily miss and it occurs to her that this isn’t just about his concern for her wellbeing. It’s about Philip too. And what he needs, what is missing from his own life.

“I will always be here for you,” she says.

He continues to hold her.

“We are going to be friends a long time. I promise. It does not end here.”

## **PART 2: THE MADNESS**

## SOBER TRUTHS

### *Day 17*

There are very few people left in her life she can call for a favor. Bridges torched, friendships forsaken. With most, she can't even remember how, what she did, though she doesn't doubt the validity of these facts. When she is ready, she will add them to her moral inventory.

Mitch's rusted silver pickup truck pulls up the gravel driveway of Mercy Farm, and with it, her two worlds collide. She feels dizzy, like when you've drunk too much too quickly and you can't control the rush, a surging in the chest and down your arms, a firing of synapses, like lightning bugs in your brain.

"Are you sure this is the right decision for you?" Donald holds her duffle in his right hand. The flesh around his eyes wilts with exhaustion, threatening to melt down his cheeks and off his face.

She shakes her bug-filled head. "I have to do this."

The rusty old pickup idles before them, but she doesn't move. She is terrified to get in it. It's a lot; too much, in fact. She imagines Dr. Solomon's pinched lemon face, those quivering liver spots. She hears the tsking of his tongue against his cheek.

“Technically,” Donald says, pulling a piece of paper from his pocket, “I shouldn’t do this.” He places the folded white square in her palm. “But you should call if you need to.”

She slides the slip of paper into the side pocket of her purse and Donald pulls her into, a crush of flesh, the scent of castile soap and perspiration.

“Be good to yourself,” he says.

Mitch does not get out of the pickup, and she does not want him to. As she approaches, he leans across the seat and pops the passenger door.

“Hey you,” he says as she lifts herself into the cab.

She can smell it immediately: that raw, honeyed scent. The air is thick with it.

“Thanks for coming,” she says.

“Of course,” Mitch says. He shifts the truck into reverse. The tires struggle to find purchase in the gravel. They peel away from the tired white split-level, the looming oak, Donald and Philip and the rest of the farmers.

Mitch sighs heavily, but doesn’t speak. There is sweat at his temples and he looks like he hasn’t slept since she left, crow’s feet guarding his tired, gentle eyes. She should offer to drive—he’s probably already at least a fifth in for the day—but she knows it won’t come off the right way. It would feel like an insult. So instead she says nothing, shifts her gaze to the blur of fauna screaming past the glass. She’s used to this feeling, a lack of control. Her life has been this way a long time, the options never any good.

They drive in silence, winding down a barren stretch of the Carneros Highway, flanked by rows of zagging vines. It’s a strange place for a rehabilitation clinic; strange,

or brilliant. They pass a dirt pull out along the side of the road, the site where she knelt down seventeen days before this one, the cool, wet earth kissing her knees, and heaved up her last drink. It's gone in a single blink.

"Can I ask you something?" Mitch says, breaking the spell of silence. His gaze fixes on the road ahead.

"Sure," she says, though she doesn't really want to talk, about them or any of it. But he did come all this way, so she feels like she must.

"Why'd you do it? Why'd you go?"

She gnaws her bottom lip. "I had to," she says. Her answer comes quickly, her tone childish, defensive even. She's chosen her words carefully. She didn't want to. She didn't need to. She *had* to, as if the choice was never really hers to make.

Mitch shifts in his seat, bites his cheek. He's beginning to feel it again. She still knows that feeling well, still feels it too.

"It was time," she adds; it's all she can manage.

"That's just—" Mitch starts to say and stops himself.

Terry knows what he wants to say. She knows what getting sober means for them. There is a pulsing ache in her chest, the dull used-up kind. The kind you can try to square away and not think about, that stays with you late at night, when your mind is racing, but you're thinking about nothing, because you're too drunk for any of it. Taking care of herself means hurting the one person who has tried, in his own fucked up way, to take care of her.



But it can't work, she and Mitch. And that's why asking him to come makes her feel so self—makes her wonder if she's really changed at all.

“Which hospital again?” Mitch asks. His brow twitches.

Terry knows how hard he is trying. His hands shake on the wheel. Three weeks ago, he would have pulled the silver flask from his chest pocket and taken a swig without thinking.

But he does not do this now.

## COPING

*June 1962*

“Touch him,” she chides.

She and David lean on the cold metal lip of the casket. The inside is lined with creamy, white satin. It reminds her of the bow she wore on her First Communion the year before. Her father’s head rests on a matching pillow. His skin looks grey, like the molding putty she uses in art class, or the color of the sky before a thunderstorm. His lips are baby doll pink.

She hears the whir and click of a lighter. In the back of the small parlor a cigarette flares to life. Her mother sits on a chaise lounge, one leg crossed over the other. She is wearing the black dress that reminds Terry of a witch, high at the neck, with small black buttons. She draws the long stem of tobacco to her lips as Father Mulligan whispers to her, holding her free hand in his. Her smoking hand shakes, threatens to throw ash down the front of her dress. Her brow is stitched together in a frown. She does not look sad. This is her angry face.

Thick lace curtains make the room feel dark even though it’s summertime and she wishes she be at the pool with her best friend Gemma.

“It smells funny in here,” David whines. “I want to go home.”

She shushes her little brother, younger by a year. “Don’t be a baby.”

The man in the casket does not look like her father. She has never seen her father sleep. *This* man’s skin is too pale, his lips too pink. Two days ago, her father stood at the dinner table, carving up the ham. He watched the news on the television. He kissed her goodnight with his sweet whiskey breath. Now the neighbors won’t stop coming over, arms full with trays of lasagna and tuna casserole, saying they’re sorry. But they are wrong, she thinks, because this man cannot be her father.

“Are you going to do it or what?” She hisses.

David whimpers. “I’m scared.”

She looks back at her mother to make sure she isn’t watching.

“You’re such a whiney baby.”

David sucks his thumb, his bottom lip trembling beneath it.

“Fine,” she huffs, reaching over the edge of the casket. She pushes the tip of her pointer finger into the man’s bottom lip. But it isn’t soft, as she had expected. It’s cold and hard as the ice her father drops into his drink each night. And more terrifying even than that, the man’s lips don’t move; they don’t part like normal lips do. There is something there, between them—the end of a string, like the thread from her mother’s sewing kit.

She feels her knees wobble and go weak. She is falling backwards, collapsing on the prickly mustard-colored carpet, her eyes crowding with tears. She can’t see., the

lingering chill of the man's icy, unmoving lips on her fingertip. In her mind, she sees the little black string.

Someone has sewn her father's lips shut.

*Present Day, October 2009*

They arrive at the hospital in the waning afternoon.

“You don’t have to stay.”

Mitch’s right hand wavers on his chest pocket, a nervous tick of sorts, like the way she still pinches her left wrist, even now that she’s sober. A shaft of dying sunlight penetrates the cab’s interior. Mitch squints at her across the bench seat and she is reminded of that day, years ago now, when they first met.

He clears his throat. “Well if that’s what you want.”

It is. She knows she must do this part alone. And Mitch knows it too. “I don’t love you,” she said once, during a hazy moment of inebriation. “I never will.” The alcohol had turned her hard and spiteful, as it sometimes did, and later she cried through an apology. Such a rotten thing to say, she thought at the time. But her brash liberation of this fact does not make it any less true. Even now, she does not love Mitch.

“My brother is inside. I’ll be ok,” she promises.

This time Mitch throws off his seatbelt, walks around the front of the pickup and holds the door for her. He slides the duffle up her arm to her shoulder. His nicked, calloused palm lingers there a moment. He shoves his hands in his jeans pockets, as if to conceal their unsteadiness.

“So I guess just call me then?”

She nods, though she knows she won’t. “Yeah, ok.”

She pulls him into her, his scent—motor oil, whiskey, Old Spice aftershave—  
heavy in her nose and on the back of her tongue. She allows her body to mold to his, his  
gruff hands, warm and at once firm on her back, drawing her in, holding her up.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers as she pulls away.

Mitch wipes his eyes on the back of one hand, shakes his head at the ground. He  
throws up one hand, two fingers, in a soft wave. And then he lifts himself into the cab of  
the silver pickup. A friendly double-honk rises above the mill of noise as he exits the  
hospital parking lot.

## FAREWELLS

*December 1999*

It's Christmas somehow, her first without Greg. Ana waves from the passenger seat of a stranger's car. The mediator will take her to see her father for three days of supervised visitation. She hates the agreement, but Greg is doing the work, trying to stay clean, taking his meds and the judge thinks it's important.

After Ana leaves, Terry stands in the shower and cries, the weak stream pelting her eyelids, pouring down her cheeks. She leans against the piss-yellow tile, cool against her shivering skin, painful to the touch. Eyes closed, she can feel her body drifting off; she is headed somewhere else, not here, in this depressing old rental that does not feel like home. It's not even noon and she's well into her second bottle.

She comes to on the floor of the shower. Her blood thins in the water, turning an anemic pink, like a swirled cone of cotton candy. Her brain jackhammers against her skull. She reaches to touch the source of the pain and feels the slice of swollen skin. Minutes pass before she can gather the strength to lift herself up. She presses her hands to slippery tile floor, uses everything left within her to pull her body up, turn the knobs of

the shower, fasten a robe around her waist. She collapses in a wet heap on the couch, the pulsing throb of her cheek stinging as the skin hardens in the air.

The bottle is already there, waiting for her on the coffee table where she left it and she presses it to her lips. The cheap gold liquid burns as she opens her throat to receive it. It warms her insides.

The clock on the VCR blinks, but does not display time. The power must have surged and come back, but she hasn't noticed. There isn't a single light on in the house. The gas fireplace pushes out dancing blue flames above a fake plastic log. Her body quakes, hardly dry—the fireplace hardly a source of heat—and she curls into the couch for warmth.

“Terry?” Her mother is standing over her, slapping her back, gently at first, and then harder. “Come now,” she says. “Get up. We’re going out.”

Her vision is clouded by a layer of thin grey; translucent fog. *Out?* It’s so clearly absurd that Terry laughs, a rich, lively kind of laugh. Maniacal even. She’s not going anywhere and both she and Marie know it. Flames dance in her peripheral vision.

“Mother.” Her voice is weak, barely a whisper of defeat. “Just stop.”

“Is this how you live?” Marie gestures to the small living room, sparse but for the coffee table, an end table, a single sixties era lamp that she found at the Goodwill. A towel lays heaped in the middle of the floor, wet from the shower, brickish with her blood. “My beautiful, smart daughter. What have you become?”

Her tone is sharp, like the talons of a hawk. The insults are building, rolling into one another and gaining momentum. It’s a downhill sprint and Terry doesn’t even have to



say a word; they will arrive there soon. Her mother wrenches her body up into a seated position, her head bobbing atop her shoulders like a rag doll. Marie's bony fingers grip her arms, threatening to bruise her already tender skin. But it's nothing. She doesn't even flinch. The dull ache is an old friend.

"I've had just about enough of this, laying around like a pathetic, whining child. You think I did this after your father died? Of course I didn't. I got up, I put on my face, and I went out into the world and kept *living*."

"Mother," she concentrates now, trying to focus her gaze on Marie's beady black pupils, "I don't care," she spits.

Her mother hiccups once, finding her patience. "Good Lord, Terry. You have got to be strong. Come on, now," she says, cradling Terry's chin in her hand, tender but firm. "We will get you dressed, and we will go have a nice lunch, and then we will go see Father Mulligan. It's obvious that you could use some faith in your life."

They are careening towards the bottom now. She can feel it; only moments from crashing and burning.

"Don't you get it? I don't want to pray. Praying won't fix shit." The vitriol, the hate she feels for her mother, gives her strength. She peels her Marie's brittle fingers away from her arm.

"Watch your mouth," Marie cautions, her lips fixed in a crimson line, her eyes narrow and militant.

"Or what? You'll put me in a closet?"

Her mother blanches. It's low, bringing up the closet. But she doesn't care anymore. Marie deserves it. She might be a God-fearing woman, but she's no better than Greg in the end.

"Leave me alone." She stands, her legs like a Barbie dolls, all bendy and unstable. She stumbles, falls back down.

Marie snatches her purse from the coffee table.

"You're just like him," she seethes, "so stubborn and self-involved. I can't believe I raised such an obstinate little brat."

She pushes herself up, her feet finding equilibrium, her toes gripping the shag carpet. She leans in, clutching the arm of the couch for support, her face inches from her mother's. Her words punctuate the air. "Get. The fuck. Out of my house." *Pop. Pop. Pop.*

She has never cursed at her mother and it's like coming up for air. She has nothing left to lose. Her head throbs, bloods rushing in her ears, like it might explode. Part of her hopes it will.

"You," her mother says pointing a sharp, perfectly manicured fingernail in her face, "are a mean, nasty young woman."

Terry searches for her words—the meanest, nastiest ones she can find within her. "Perhaps if you cared as much about me as you do about yourself, things might have ended up differently."

Marie's pupils are so small they seem to have disappeared. The veins in her temples pulse, her lips pulled tight and churning, as if chewing Terry's words.

"Perhaps," she finally says.

Terry falls back on the couch, the atmosphere so thin that she can scarcely capture a breath. There's a woosh as the door slams, casting a shiver through the house's foundation.

"Cunt," she yells at the empty room. "Cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt!" Like drinking blood—this word, like iron in her mouth, salty and sanguine. A cut of absurd, breathy laughter rises up and out of her, bouncing across the ceiling.

## DEATH WATCH

### *Night 17*

David is waiting at the nurse's desk of the intensive care unit. He is almost unrecognizably thin. His chinos hang from his hips, his body hunched like an old man's.

"You made it," he says. There is a note of surprise in his voice.

"How is she?"

David fidgets, scratches one ear, glances down at the tile floor.

"She's sleeping now." He clears his throat. "She has been asking for you."

The hospital room is plain. There is an arrangement of flowers on the bedside table. The scent of death—lilies, urine, medicinal decay—reminds her why she is here.

Her mother is so small, dwarfed by hospital pillows, tubes feeding into either arm, a ventilator mask covering the angles of her narrow face. Weak and fragile, but dangerous still. Even like this, Terry knows what she is capable of.

"Should I wake her?" David asks.

Terry shakes her head. "Let her sleep."

They hunch together on the small, turquoise pleather loveseat next to the bed. It's a shade darker than the room, this aqua death theatre.

“How do you feel?” David’s voice is gentle.

“Oh, you know.”

“No, actually,” David laughs. “Not really.”

She realizes she must give a real answer. “I feel a bit out of sorts. After you called, I couldn’t get back to sleep. And well, it’s a lot to take in—Marie, leaving rehab.” *Mitch*, she wants to add, but doesn’t. They aren’t those kind of siblings.

David nods. “I can imagine,” he says, because that’s what people say. But of course, he can’t.

“You look thin.” She pinches his bagging shirt. “Are you eating?”

“Sure,” he says. “Cafeteria food, mostly.”

“That makes two of us.” She pats her stomach. “Though I’d argue it’s going much better for me than for you.”

David rubs his temples with either thumb, ignoring her vanity. He looks at their mother, asleep in the bed beside them.

She considers this, pinches her left wrist. It’s real, this moment. Not clouded by the artificial edges of anything.

“Have you forgiven her?”

David shrugs, blows out a tired sigh. “I think I’ve made my peace with it.”

“Really? All of it?”

“I’m trying to.”

“It’s not ok, you know—what she did to us.”

“I know that.”

“It’s child abuse.”

“Your relationship was different.”

She throws herself back against the loveseat, staring up at the ceiling, blue like everything else.

“Let’s not do this,” David says.

“Why? Are you afraid she’ll hear?”

“Terry.”

His tone is a warning. She is pushing, but it’s difficult to stop. She learned this from Marie. And she is well practiced in the art of jabs.

“She’s dying. You will have plenty of time to hate her when she is gone. But for now, can you just show a little respect? Acknowledge that she’s the woman who raised you and put clothes on your back and worked two jobs to feed you? She wasn’t perfect. I’m not trying to argue that. But she’s going to die, Terry.” David stops a moment, attempts to recapture his breath. “I can’t do this without you.”

She knows he is right. She doesn’t have to make her peace with Marie, and maybe she never will.

“I’m sorry,” she concedes. She leans into David, looping her arm in his. He smells like Patchouli and toothpaste. He is thin, but firm.

He rests his chin on the top of her head.

Their collective gaze returns to the bed, where Marie still sleeps.



It's the beeping that wakes her, high-pitched, punctuating the dim hospital room. One of the monitors is going haywire. Terry jumps to her feet and switches on the nearest wall light. Her mother is thrashing, as best she can for a woman who has been confined to a hospital bed for more than a month. David is gone. Her mother's brittle fingers claw the air.

"What? What is it?"

Marie's eyes are wild, as though the very incarnation of death itself is stalking towards her.

"Nurse!" Terry calls.

A woman appears at the door in scrubs, rushes to her mother's side. Her shoulders soften. "Oh, Marie," she says, pulling back the ventilator mask. "Will you just calm down." She glances back at Terry. "She hates the mask," the nurse explains; she switches off one of the machines and the beeping ceases.

"I said," Marie croaks, "that I don't need it. Doesn't anyone listen to me?"

The nurse rubs her mother's arm, gives it a gentle pat. "Ok then. Glad to see you're just as feisty as ever." She turns back to Terry. "Call if you need anything?"

She nods and the nurse disappears out the door.

It's only the two of them now, squared off and staring at one another like caged animals.

"So you came," Marie says. Her voice is different than before, low and gravely, thick from years of smoking.

“Of course.”

“Sit with me,” she says, patting the side of the bed.



## WHAT SHE CAN'T

*Day 18*

Terry sits in the middle of the bed, near her knees. It's as close as she will allow herself to come.

"David says you're better." Marie is sitting up, her nightgown smoothed. She pats her soft white hair, brushing it behind one ear.

"It doesn't really work like that. But yes, I went to rehab."

Marie clears her throat at the mention of the word. She pulls a hankie to her lips, coughs gently at first and then harder. A rattling noise rises up through her chest.

Terry stands, but Marie waves her off.

"I'm fine," she says, capturing a breath. "Sit."

They sit in silence. A slice of morning sunlight penetrates the gauzy window curtain. Outside, on the limb of a tree, a sparrow tilts its head, studies them with a single suspicious eye.

"I suppose I should just say it," Marie says. "That's why you came after all, isn't it?"

"What's that?"

“That it’s my fault.”

She is careful with her words; their conversation, like every one before it, a guarded tête-à-tête of sharp words and stiffened limbs.

“I don’t think it’s quite so simple,” she says.

“No, probably it’s not.” Marie reaches for her bedside table. She has decorated the sterile metal with a crocheted doily, and atop it sits her holy water, a bible, a prayer card, and a black leather journal, the spine cracked and worn to brown. “That,” she says, gesturing to the journal. “Bring it, please.”

Terry hands her mother the journal.

“It’s all in here,” her mother says cryptically. She thumbs the pages, decorated with her spidery scrawl, timeworn as an old newspaper.

“I didn’t know you kept a journal.”

“I don’t,” Marie says, smacking it shut. “Not anymore.” She hands the journal to Terry. “It was a girlish fancy.”

Terry takes the journal in both hands, surprised by the weight of it. She starts to open it, but her mother’s hand clamps down on hers. Her fingers are soft and icy, the skin on the back of her hands papery, rising with a tangled thread of violet veins. An electric trill crawls up Terry’s right arm, across her shoulders, down her spine. It isn’t a gentle or loving touch, but it is a touch nonetheless.

“Not now,” Marie says. “Just wait.” She coughs again. Her eyelids crease deeply, the rattling wet and sharp.

Terry nods. “I think I’d rather hear it from you anyways.”

Her mother draws her hands back. Her eyebrows arch like a question mark. She hasn't said she is sorry and Terry knows she probably won't. It's not her way. To apologize is to admit fault.

Marie worries the threads of the hankie between her thumbs. "It's in there. All of it."

"The closet too?" They're back to the jabs now. "You left us there. For two days, mother."

"I didn't hurt you," Marie says, her head bent.

"Yes, you did. We were children. Do you have any idea what that feels like, to be abandoned by your own mother? Our father had just died. We needed love. We needed comfort."

"I was confused. It was a complicated..." Marie's piercing blue eyes flick up, darting back and forth, like a trapped animal's. "You won't understand. You aren't meant to. And," her eyes jump back to the journal in Terry's lap, "I can't say it."

"Because?"

"Because I didn't do it."

"Yes, mother. You did."

She shakes her head. "No, not the closet." She squeezes her eyes shut, a painful memory passing behind them. "Please," she says. Her gaze cuts to the ceiling, as though the Lord himself might be listening. "Just wait. I can't say it."

Terry stands. She is backing towards the door, the distance between them growing, her mother's words pushing her further and further away. She clutches the journal to her chest like a shield.

"I don't know how to forgive you," she says.

Marie nods in agreement. "No," she says. "You never were any good at that."

## A LIFE LIKE MAD

She doesn't look for David as she passes the nurse's station. She is striding, nearly running, for the sliding doors. She has to leave, to get as far away from Marie as she can.

The air outside is like liquid gold, coating her lungs. She gasps it in, her chest burning, as though she has been holding her breath, her head like a helium balloon. To the right of the doors is a taxicab stand. She tugs open the door of the nearest cab and collapses into the soft leather of the backseat. The glass window cradles her head as the hospital moves away from her, fading into her peripheral, disappearing into nothing. She feels the weight of the journal in her lap.



Twenty minutes have passed since she pulled up to Duke's Liquor Lobby and still she has not unlatched her belt. The air is stifling, the noon sun beating down through the windshield, refracting heat. Her vision blurs from staring at the neon-pink letters of the open sign, the letters morphing with the florescent blue of the Bud Light below them.

A number burns in her brain. 18. She tries to force it from her mind, but she can't. Her tongue waters with anticipation. At the margins of her vision, cars honk along Main

Street, people out to lunch or running afternoon errands. Her car sits alone in the lot, but for Duke's early-nineties Ford Taurus.

She holds her keys in one hand and her cell phone in the other. She should call the Farm. Phillip will just be leaving Group. She can catch him before lunch.

These are the seconds that matter most, the moments between the idea and the resolve. But instead, she resorts to rationalizations: Donald slipped up five times, Philip slipped up too many to count. Greg is sitting in a halfway house right now because of all his slips. All of these models should be reason enough for her to push the key back in the ignition and throw the car in reverse, but still she stays, frozen in place.

She thinks of her mother, imagines her brother standing at Marie's bedside, combing her hair, fluffing her pillows. What would her mother say? Would she tell Terry to have faith? She can hear her mother's words: *With faith, anything can be overcome*. She imagines her mother's bony fingers worrying the gold pendant that has hung from her neck for decades. It is etched with the twelfth station of the cross: Jesus' crucified body, the letters *INRI* inscribed above him, his head heavy with a crown of thorns. It used to terrify her as a child, taunting her as her mother leaned down to kiss her cheek before bed, the picture of Jesus' deathly form hanging inches from her face. *Trust in Him*.

She tucks her phone back into her purse. She can't call Phillip. It feels too much like an admission of failure. He will tell her to come back, that she isn't ready to be tested like this. But she can't go back. She has to live with her decisions. Life is about choices, as her mother would say. Life is about choices, she would agree, none of them ever any good.

The bell jingles. The fall breeze sweeps her across the threshold into Duke's peaty cocoon. It's not about the drink, she tells herself. She has already failed. Just coming here, just thinking about the drink, means she has failed. Maybe she will only have a glass. She will find a meeting and she will go. That's the compromise: it feels like a good one. Just one glass and she will pour the rest down the drain.

"Terry," Duke says, looking up from his crossword. He looks surprised to see her.

"Duke," she says with a nod. In many ways, he knows her better than most. He has seen her in her darkest moments. And now for another.

She turns down the second aisle on the left, the one that leads through the shelves of clear-glassed vodka bottles.

*We are powerless over alcohol*, Donald's words boom in her head. He relapsed five times before finally getting sober, and maybe he will again. But there's always tomorrow. There's always another day to get it right. Donald's failures feel strangely comforting in this moment.

In the blue florescent refrigerator light the green glass bottles glow a sickly shade of yellow, like stomach-bile. She guides the glass door along its tracks and tugs a bottle from the case. It has a creamy white label with gold script. Before her forced leave of absence from the school library, her visit to Mercy Farm, the promise she had made to Ana, this bottle seemed like the answer to everything.

But maybe she was different. Maybe she didn't need five times to get it right. Her hand rests on the handle.

She feels the cool interior of the fridge on her skin.

She's never been different.



She sits in her car, the bottle is squeezed between her thighs, the cool damp of the glass penetrating her jeans. One drink. Just one. She has repeated this again and again in her head for the better part of five minutes, but still the bottle remains sealed. She cannot convince herself that it's worth it. She cannot bring her hands to twist the cap.

"Goddammit!" Her fists rain down on the steering column. "Fuck!" She yells into the vacuum of the empty car.

Fuck *this*.

Fuck everyone.

Fuck Marie,

and Mercy Farm,

and David,

and Donald.

Fuck having to think so much about the one thing that used to feel so simple.

Terry throws open the car door, bottle in hand, and stalks around the backside of Duke's. She's been here before, out back with the trash. It's the perfect place to take down a bottle, inconspicuous, quick. She wants to do that now. Swallow it all in one long gulp. Be done with it. Not one sip or one glass. She wants to drink the whole fucking thing.



She kicks the dumpster with her boot and a fire flares in her big toe. “Fuck!” She screams again, dancing around on one foot. She can feel her heart beating in her temples, an electric *zing* running through her chest, lighting up her nerves. Her grasp tightens around the bottleneck. And before she can contemplate it, she is raising the bottle over her head, its round butt thrust skyward. She pictures the yellow glass splintering into a million pointed shards, the precious golden liquid spilling out on the pebbled asphalt. She stands like that for several seconds, the bottle upended, its neck held tight between her palms.

*Just*

*Fucking*

*Smash it.*

But she can’t even do that. She hugs the bottle tight, her chin resting on its neck as her chest heaves against the cool glass, dry, angry sobs.

She never should have left the Farm. Phillip was right. She wasn’t ready. And now she is here, alone, contemplating a drink like it’s the goddamn Holy Grail.

“Terry?” Duke is standing behind her, his forehead pinched. “What’s going on? Should I call someone?”

His voice sounds far away, like he is speaking to her underwater.

She tries to focus on her breathing. *In and out. In. And out.*

“It’s fine,” she says, holding up her right hand, waving him off. She cradles the bottle in her left arm like an infant, supporting its neck with the crook of her arm. “I’m fine,” she says again, as if repeating it might somehow make it true. “I’m fine.” She

walks back towards the car, patting Duke on the shoulder as she passes. She feels his watchful gaze as she opens the car door, laying the bottle on the passenger seat next her.

She catches her reflection in the rearview mirror. Her skin is porcelain pale and her eyelids rimmed with red, the skin below them grey where her mascara has smeared and left black snakes slithering down her hollow cheeks. She looks tired, so much older than her forty years. She holds her breath and tries to force her arms to stop shaking. She throws the car into reverse, ignoring the *beep, beep* of the seatbelt warning, her foot hard on the gas, the undercarriage bouncing off a dip in the pavement as she peels back out onto Main Street.

At the light, her fingers drum the steering wheel and her gaze shifts back to the passenger seat. The greenish glass throws prisms off the passenger-side window. In the lane next to her, a school bus full of smiling children pulls to a stop. A little boy, one finger in his nose, studies her from behind smudgy school bus glass. He crosses his eyes and sticks out his tongue, dissolving into noiseless laughter.



In the driveway, she dials Ana's number. The width of the car seems to narrow with each hiccup of half-breath that escapes her throat. Only fifteen feet and twenty stairs separate her from her apartment, but her body feels like hardened concrete, sinking deeper into the car seat, the mechanical revolutions pinging around in her brain like a pinball.

"You've reached Ana's phone..."

She knocks her head back against the headrest. She wants to launch the phone at the windshield, to punch something, to scream. She squints up at the apartment complex, its hovering bulk threatening to suffocate her in its shadows. She can't go in there. If she does, she knows she will take the bottle with her.

She finds the strength to extricate herself from the car. She begins to walk. She starts up Meridian Drive, headed north. Probably, she knows where she is going even before she has made the conscious decision to do it.

## WHAT REMAINS

The home she and Greg built together looms less than a mile from her apartment complex, but in the years since she left, she has never been able to force herself to walk it. She heard the rumors about what Greg did to it before the bank finally foreclosed. He had to be physically removed from the premises. She knew this from the local paper. She tries to picture an image of the Greg she married, but even now all she can see is his mug shot: those dead, black pupils, his dark hair falling in stringy knots at his shoulders. He has received two years in a state penitentiary for possession. And she, sweet sheltered Terry, didn't even really know what crack was.

"It's meth, Terry," he brother said like she was the only one in the world who didn't get just how serious it all was. She pictured David hunched over his desk late at night, the eerie glow of the computer lighting his face, tapping the words "crack cocaine" into the Google search bar. And all so he could tell her just how bad it was, as if the electric ache that had taken up host in the pit of her stomach wasn't already an indication. "*How* could you not know?" He'd said, like an accusation.

*How could she not know?* This was suburbia, for God's sake. They had a white picket fence, a gardener, game night with the neighbors. Besides which, she had never experimented with drugs; not unless one could count the one time she took a hit off a

joint at a Springsteen concert her freshman year of college. *How could she know?* She wanted to scream aloud. Instead, she was silent, receding into herself, into the glass.

She does not know what she will gain by going, or if any of it even matters anymore. But suddenly she's walking up the hill, her breath leaving her body in heaves, and it's happening. Her feet stomp the pavement like a willful child, crushing spears of grass growing up between the cracks in the sidewalk, and her fingers tug the bushes of the perfectly manicured yards. She passes brightly colored houses that all seem like a variation on the same flawless box, with flowery front yards and a *Welcome* mat on the stoop.

At the top of the hill, it's a hard right onto Stone Lane, and there it is. The house itself has a steep, private drive that curls around and into it, so that to turn onto Stone Lane is to see the backside of the home, perched on the hillside. The back steps to are rotting, caving in the center. The grass is high and yellow, choking with weeds. Back when she still spoke to Terry, her real estate friend, Karen, had said the place was cursed. Two different families in three years, in and out, their marriages dissolved. And when she said it, it was as though she was somehow blaming Terry and Greg for the scorch of hatred they had brought into it. Now the house sat vacant, the foundation sagging, the windows clouded with webs, the roof weeping shingles.

After the truth came out, the pieces began to fit into place; Greg's lies gleaming in the light of Terry's dissipating denial. They had been working for more than a year with a psychiatrist to get Greg's moods in balance, to get his medications right. But it had only been in vain. No amount of mood stabilizers and anti-depressants could combat the

violent highs and lows of a bipolar meth addict. She didn't know that part, of course, but by the end, in the months before she left, she knew his moods felt different, his highs somehow more manic, his lows darker and more painful than before.

To think about Greg again—to force herself back into that world, her old life—makes her stomach twist and seize. Even a decade later, a single day does not pass without his presence clouding her thoughts. Such is the vulnerability of first love, the plague of blind trust it incurs. She can no more forgive Greg than she can herself, for it was she who so badly needed that love—to be loved—that she couldn't even see the man she married for what he truly was. She had allowed herself to be fooled. Even when she knew first hand that even the pious could be cruel, that no one was truly good.

Terry climbs the rotting steps up to the balcony where she once sipped coffee under the lazy Sunday sky. There is the awning under which Greg grilled his famous ribs in the summertime; the railing by the stairs where Ana knocked out her first tooth; the corner by the sliding glass door that once led to their bedroom, where their black lab, Alice, had her first litter of puppies: proof that she was happy once. How desperately she tries to reconcile this patchwork of memories with her life today. She was happy, which means that happiness was something she knew how to be, and maybe even that she could be so again.

But she's living in the past, trying to hold on to the goodness it contained so she can somehow make a future, to find something worth hoping for. But what future? One of solitude and loneliness? She wishes she had never met Greg. Love breeds instability, breeds mania. It allowed her to be consumed by something she could not control, lurking

in the dark spaces of her mind, rearing its ugly head to remind her just how stubborn the heart really is. She will never be free of it. Of *him*.

These fractured slices of her past cannot be kept, sealed up in her memory and saved for later. They cannot protect her from the cracked sliding glass door and dipping curve of the front porch, which remind her of the sickness that dwells just under the surface, rising up through the foundation like a stubborn bloodstain. She slips down the crumbling steps and sinks to her knees in the scratchy yellow grass. She sees it as it was the day she left, the contents of her bureau strewn across it, and she knows she cannot be free of any of it.

## **A GRAND DEBUT**

Two honks signal David's arrival. After walking home from Stone Lane, she sat in the bottom of the shower and sobbed, releasing her past into tears that slid down her naked limbs, across the porcelain tub and down the drain, away from her. Maybe it's exhaustion, but something has left her now and she hopes it won't return.

She checks her reflection in the mirror by the door, pats down the strands of hair that have wriggled free from their clasp. Her eyes are soft with makeup; tones of flesh hide the tired purple patches beneath them, and her lips are painted a dusty rose.

Outside, David stands by car, his back to her, perfectly erect. But he isn't alone; another man stands next to him, tan and strong, his muscles cutting the fabric of a well-formed linen button-down, rolled at the elbows, his strong forearms leaning on the car. He is a stranger to her, though they might have met before.

"David?" Her voice is tentative, confused.

David turns to face her. The car idles between them.

"Terry!" David says and she is surprised by the lightness of his voice. He bounces on his toes as he walks around the front of the car to greet her. They don't hug, but he reaches for her hand, takes it in his own, squeezes it lightly. "I want you to meet someone. This is Elliott."



Terry takes Elliott's proffered hand, his shake as steady as a rushing river.

"Terry," he says, "a pleasure. I have heard so much about you."

She nods, because her words seem to have somehow escaped her. There is an itching sensation in the back of her brain, as though finally she realizes something she has always known. They climb into the car. On the stereo, Madonna belts out "*Like a virgin... touched for the very first time.*"



They arrive at the theatre and she fears she might lose her stomach.

"What if she won't talk to me?" She has forgotten Elliott is there with them, in the back seat of the car, humming lightly; or maybe she doesn't care.

David's eyes go dim a moment, then brighten again. "She will," he says, with conviction.

"But have you spoken to her?"

"Yes, of course."

"About me?"

"Well no. Not since last night."

They sit silently. In the back seat, Elliott undoes his belt. "Should we go in?"



On stage, Ana is so unlike her childlike self. Who is this woman that her daughter has suddenly become, her spine so straight, her body so commanding of attention, which the audience—rapt in silence—is only too happy to give her. Her skin gleams under the golden stage lights. Ana screams, a piercing shriek that rings in Terry’s ears. She drops to her knees on the black stage floor, dissolving into tears so convincing that the mother in Terry nearly springs to her feet, the aching want to soothe her only child causing her chest to seize.

“Why—? Why do you come, yellow bird?”

A boy behind Ana wears an indignant expression. “Where’s a bird? I see no bird!”

Ana cups a cheek in one hand: “My face? My face?”

The audience holds a collective breath, captured by her daughter’s power.

“You cannot want to tear my face,” Ana cries to another girl, who cowers upstage. “Envy is a deadly sin.”



They wait outside with flowers. Ana is the most important member of the cast and it takes her the good part of half an hour to extricate herself from a crowd of cooing parents and other audience members.

When she sees her mother, her face contorts, her brow puzzling together.

“Mom?”

She wraps her daughter in her arms, pressing her to her chest. Ana's body feels stiff in her arms. "You were amazing," she whispers.

Ana pulls away from Terry, struggling to piece together a full sentence. "But how... I mean why?"

"It's Gram," David explains. "She's very sick. I called your mother last night." David hands her the bouquet of wildflowers. "You were really brilliant, kiddo."

Ana's face is flushed. She stares at David wide-eyed, then Terry. Her eyes finally fall on Elliott, who hangs back, seemingly unperturbed by Ana's stilted emotional response and the palpable uneasiness between the three.

"Oh, and this is Elliott," David says, ushering him forward.

"Great job, truly," he says, taking her hand. "I do a bit of theatre myself."

Ana shakes his hand, looks back towards the theatre, and then at Terry. "I have to go back," she says, gesturing to a group of kids, other actors.

"Right, of course," Terry nods. "I'll see you at home then?"

Ana kisses Terry on the cheek, then David. "Yeah, but don't wait up. We're going to the diner."

She has already turned, moving back in the direction of the other kids, her shoulders hunched.

"Ana?" Terry calls.

Her daughter turns.

"I love you," she calls across the courtyard.

Ana brushes a strand of hair behind one ear, her expression stoic. “I love you too,” she says. She waves in retreat before dissolving into the ring of kids.

Terry looks back at David. Elliott’s hand is on the small of his back and David smiles. “Well I think that went pretty well, all things considered.”

Terry starts a moment, suddenly dizzy. She feels as though she does not know the world at all. Without the rose colored lens of inebriation, the world is so much sharper. How much, she wonders, has she missed? She feels faint, holding the railing just beside her to steady her shaking knees.

David’s phone issues a shrill beep. He pulls it from his pocket, the muscles in his forehead tensing.

“We need to go,” he says. “It’s Mom.”



“Why is she even here?”

She and Sam stand in the parking lot of the diner, sharing a cigarette. She shivers from the chill of early autumn. The sky is light, the moon so full it feels like blue day.

“It’s a good thing isn’t it? Isn’t this what you wanted?”

Ana thinks a moment. Is it? She doesn’t know what she wants anymore.

“I want her to be healthy.”

“And maybe she is,” Sam says. His eyes are sincere and she knows he cannot understand. His parents are just the kind of normal that she can be envious of, not perfect like Heidi’s, but happy enough.

“What if she dies?”

Sam is confused. “Your mom?”

“No, my gram.”

“I thought you weren’t close.”

“We’re not, but it would totally wreck my mom.”

“Ana,” Sam sighs.

“I know,” she says. Her head falls against his chest. He wraps his arms around her.

She can hear his heartbeat in her ear, like a metronome, perfectly timed, recalibrating her own.

## WE SEE WHAT WE CAN

They leave Elliott in the hall and enter Marie's room. She is lying against the pillows, her skin grey and ashy, wearing the ventilator mask she hates. Her eyes are dim, heavy lidded, but just slightly open. Though she doesn't have the strength to lift her arms, Marie's hands claw the blankets, as if reaching for her children.

"Mother." David collapses next to her.

Marie's lips move behind the mask, her words lost to the plastic barrier. She is too weak to lift it from her face and after a moment she stops speaking, her gaze dropping with resignation.

"She's close," said the nurse in the hall, as she had so many times before this one. "I would be surprised if she makes it through the night." David had nodded at the scratched tile floor and Terry swallowed gulps of sterile hospital air, feeling the same shade of green.

Now in the room, the truth of what is coming hits her square in the chest.

David pats the opposite side of the bed. "Come," he says. "Sit with us."

Obediently, she takes a seat to the left of her mother. Marie smells faintly of violets, a perfume she has worn for decades. A single item of jewelry, her gold cross, hangs from her neck.

“She’s in a lot of pain,” David says. “Her lungs, they’re so weak now.”

Terry bites back the pinch of sobs rising in the back of her throat, threatening to erupt. Tears well in the corners of her eyes. She is reminded of a time when she was fourteen, just months into her first year of high school. She had come down with mononucleosis, her throat closing up until it was no wider than a dime, the pain so great that even a swallow of saliva made her body seize with pain. She had landed in the emergency room at four in the morning, an IV hooked to her arm. She recalls the harsh cast of the fluorescent lighting, the white curtain separating her bed from the others. In the stalls next to hers, a man called out in pain, a dull, heaving moan. She had never been in a hospital—not that she could remember, anyways—and she sobbed with terror. Marie had sat at her bedside as she wept, holding her hand just as she did now. “We’ll go home soon,” she had said. “You’re so brave. My little girl, so very brave.” It was as warm, as motherly as she had ever been, before or since, and Terry tries desperately to clasp onto that moment, to remember that love.

“Don’t worry, Mother,” she whispers, leaning into Marie. “You’ll be home soon.”

Marie’s hand squeezes her own. Her lips move beneath the mask, and though she cannot hear them, she knows what they say.



They hunch around a table in the cafeteria. There isn’t much to say, or perhaps there’s too much.

David blows his nose into a brown paper napkin. The skin of his upper lip is chapped and swollen. "I'm sorry," he says.

"For what?"

"For bringing you here to watch her die."

His words are sharp with grief and she understands something in them.

"That's not why I came." She covers his pale, freckled hand with her own.

"Yes, but I knew. I knew once she saw you she would." He flinches at his own words. They sound harsh, though she knows it isn't what he intended. Her head is a mess of words and axioms, things grieving people in movies say to one another. "She's been asking for you for so long," he adds.

Her chest feels loose. In the darker recesses of her mind, she knows it's with relief. But there, on the surface, a singe of anger lingers. Death alone won't heal those wounds. "She couldn't even say it," Terry says.

David nods, as if he understands. "She loved us in her own way."

She studies her brother. His body yields to the support of the table. She does not know how to be like him, how to forgive her mother for her flaws and delusions. She thinks of the journal, tucked in the lining of her purse, replacing the other thing, which has occupied that space for so long.

Elliott walks towards them, holding a tray with coffee, an orange and an apple.

She lifts her hand from his. "She's not here anymore, David. So let's just say the things we mean."





In the early hours of morning, the house bathed in shadows, Terry tiptoes across the scuffed wood floor. She twists the knob to Ana's bedroom door, opening it to find her daughter curled around a gingham blue pillow, the one with the giraffe stitched on the front that she had hand-sewn during her sixth month of pregnancy. She moves without sound, crawling under the white eyelet comforter. Her eyes adjust to the darkness and in the pale slip of moonlight she sees the smooth white features of her daughter's sleeping face, her forehead calm and her eyelids smooth as paper, her lips a petal pink. A strand of hair has fallen across her face and Terry tucks it delicately behind her left ear. Her breathing is soft and shallow. It smells sweet, like warm milk and honey. She feels her eyes begin to close, but blinks them open again. She saves this moment to her memory. Later, she will need it.

## **EACH DAY ITS OWN**

*Many Days Later*

It's takes practice, as with anything. She does not grow stronger every day. That's just something people say. Recovery from addiction is not like physical healing. Some days she knows she will survive, push through the anxiety to find the other side. Others, she wonders why she should. Today, she fiddles her 24-hour medallion between her fingers, watches the slope of sky turn from brilliant orange to crimson. The leaves lift off the trees, finding flight. The air is thick with autumnal decay.

*God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change;  
the courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

The bottle is hidden in a suitcase in her closet, the cap unbroken. She knows even now that she might drink it. But she did not today, or yesterday. Or the day before. And for now, that will have to be enough.

## EPILOGUE

*May 21, 1962*

*We will leave. In the fall, we say. When the kids are back in school. We will pack the trunk of the Buick. We won't need much. Arnold is a simple man. He is good and he loves me and soon it will be enough.*

*I have saved a little, but I know we will be poor. Arnold says he saves a dollar for every day we are not together. Every day a dollar from his children's mouths, I think, and I don't even feel ill anymore. I am wicked. And yet, when I am with him, I feel like the person I was always meant to be, a woman capable of loving and being loved. Soon, I will not just be a mother and a wife. I will be a woman with passions, with freedom.*

*When I go, I will have to leave it all. Terry and David will understand, but Patrick, with his ego and his need to be loved—Patrick never will. And for every night he climbed into our bed, thick with the scent of love that was not made, but taken, I will be glad. I will have to leave the lord too. I will have forsaken too much. I will ask Him to forgive me for choosing the wrong path, for marrying Patrick when I did not love him. And if He should not forgive me, then very well. If I should spend eternity in hell, it will be worth the little time that Arnold and I will have on this earth together. Everyday I will*

*pray for forgiveness. Everyday I will think of my children and I will hope that they know love. But I know that I am not the one to give it, and for that I am deeply sorry.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Meghan McNamara grew up in the small mountain town of Placerville, California. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Government-Journalism from California State University, Sacramento in 2008. Upon graduation, she relocated to Washington, D.C. to pursue a career in journalism, where she covered environmental policies and technologies until Dec. 2009. After attending several creative writing workshops at *The Bethesda Writers Center*, she went on to pursue her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing beginning in 2011, with a concentration in fiction. She is the author of four previously published short stories, including “Bravery,” which first appeared in the Spring 2016 issue of *Door is a Jar Magazine* and is featured in this work. Her work has also appeared in *Magnolia Review* and *District Lit*.