

BACK HOME

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the

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of

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in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Spring Semester 2015  
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Fairfax, VA

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

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated in memory of my great-grandmother, Martha Bryan Holmes. Thank you for teaching me through the years by your loving example, for always making sure I had plenty of reading material and free range of your house to play make-believe, and for sharing with me your time and your stories.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	vii
Cement House.....	1
Cross My Heart.....	3
Rose.....	20
Gram's.....	28
Black Paint.....	35
Escape.....	35
Music.....	37
Halloween.....	39
Memory.....	41
Back Home.....	44
London.....	55
Boston Common.....	56
Fosters.....	56
Subway.....	61
The Fair.....	68
Collin.....	68
Rachel.....	76
Trivia.....	96
Centerfield.....	107
Biography.....	109

## **ABSTRACT**

### **BACK HOME**

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This collection of short fiction centers on themes of home, homelessness, family, nature, and identity. A brother and sister try to uncover the cause of their grandfather's death. A young girl is taken from her family and raised by cyborgs. A college student watches as her colorful, free-spirited roommate transforms into someone she no longer recognizes. A foster kid runs away to search for his mother in the streets of Boston, and in the title story, *Back Home*, two sisters meet again in their home town after nearly a decade apart.

## CEMENT HOUSE

I am with one of my friends in a house made of cement, un-airconditioned in the summer heat. Our bare legs touch the hard floor as we sit cross-legged, and the rain crashes down on the roof of the house, making it sound as though we will be buried here in darkness.

“Pass me the lighter,” my friend, Abi, tells me, her short blonde hair cutting up toward the ceiling.

I pass it to her, and she lights a white candle on the cement floor next to her knee.

The room feels bare except for the two pull-out cots we slept on last night.

Tomorrow Abi will have to return. The light dances across the wall.

“I want to go out on the porch, Abi says. “I want to feel the rain and the wind against my face.”

She springs up, opens the wooden door at the other end of the room, and I can see the rain rushing down on the dirt road and the green of the trees, the gray of the sky.

I go out after her and stand next to her on the porch, all wood. We stand on a red rug with yellow triangles, millions of little blue triangles inside yellow ones.

Abi’s nose scrunches up as though she’s smelling something—not an unpleasant smell—and the breeze lifts her blonde hair off of her forehead.

“Let’s go out and dance in it,” she says.



“What?” I say.

And she is running to the end of the porch, running down the steps. The water collects in her hair, the fabric of her clothing, darkening them.

I run out after her. My bare feet slap against the wooden porch, and then the mud coats my toes. The rain is cool against my face. I have never felt raindrops this big—the size of quarters.

## CROSS MY HEART

Outside the gray stone church, Rachel asked her brother if he wanted to know how it happened.

“Aunt Peggy says you can never know how it happens,” Collin responded, cross-legged beneath the branch of the hickory tree. “It just happens in its own time, and you have to trust it was right.”

He picked a blade of grass from the wet ground and twirled it between his fingers, leftover rainwater seeping through his Sunday slacks. The black bowtie his mother had secured around his neck that morning pressed against his throat, and his black jacket squeezed his shoulders. His leather loafers suffocated his feet so they felt swollen and throbbed inside their bandages. More than they usually did. The best of their church clothes on a Saturday—it didn’t feel right.

He watched his sister hop onto the wooden, mildewing seat of the tree swing, which Collin surmised to have hung from the hickory branch since biblical times. The small stone church, too, seemed a permanent extension of the mountain, an outgrowth of the rocky earth. It hovered behind their backs like a nosy neighbor.

“You can’t possibly believe all of that,” Rachel said. She slid off her white gloves and tucked them underneath the black bow around her waist. “Aunt Peggy just doesn’t want to tell you. She said I’m allowed to know because I’m an adult.”

*Adult*—his sister’s favorite word since she had graduated sixth grade and turned twelve earlier that month. Her key to suddenly understanding all the mysteries of the grown-up world. Now, their Aunt Peggy and Uncle Jerry let her stay up a full hour after him when they spent the night at their house, even let her watch *I Love Lucy* and listen to one side of a Perry Como album—Teresa Brewer or Doris Day if they were feeling a little bolder. At home, their mother occasionally pinned her hair up in fat aluminum rollers, if she promised to sit still on the couch long enough. Like a regular, full-grown lady, Rachel said, patting the rollers on either side of her head and smacking a fat piece of Bazooka gum.

“You’re only four years older than me, you know,” Collin said.

“Course I know,” she said. “I know it even better than you do. But four years can make alotta difference when it comes to these things.” Rachel twisted her hands around the splintered ropes of the tree swing. Kicking out her patent leather Mary Janes, she swung herself high above Collin’s head. The white lace lining of her petticoat fluttered overtop her black dress, her thin black hair breaking free of its braid.

Collin tucked the blade of grass into his shoelace, forming a cross, or an X—X marks the spot, he thought, like the buried treasure game the other boys at school would play, yelling *ARGH* like pirates. *Clubfoot*, they called at him. *Crooked-foot can’t keep up with us!* The girls leaned against the wire fence in their plaid jumpers and looked on with sympathetic eyes. Collin wondered why none of them had showed at the church with their parents.

“You can take them off if you want to,” Rachel said, chucking her black hair ribbon so it landed across Collin’s loafers in a bundle. “Hell—I’m about to take mine off.” She slid the heel of her left shoe off against her shin, then kicked her right one off with her toes. Both shoes dropped like crows from a wooden fence. A bad omen, their grandfather would have said, the death of two blackbirds.

Collin set his sister’s crumpled hair ribbon to the side, by the foot of the tree. “Mom’ll get mad,” he said, squeezing his ankles, scratching the bandages under his slacks. Dr. Petry told him to practice wearing regular shoes as long as he could, as many days of the week he could. The tighter the shoelaces, the better. They would straighten his feet out faster. “And she doesn’t like it when you curse either.”

“Suit yourself,” Rachel said. “‘Hell’ isn’t a real curse word, anyway. The pastor says it all the time.”

“Only during the sermon,” Collin said.

“I hear Daddy say it too sometimes. On special occasions.”

“You do not,” Collin said.

“Sure I do,” said Rachel. “Hey—hand me my lemonade, will you? Mom’ll kill me if I get any more grass stains on my stockings.”

Collin lifted Rachel’s checkered paper cup from a patch of dandelions. “Here you go,” he said. The lemonade at the top of the cup swished as he walked it over to her.

“Thanks.” Rachel finished the lemonade in two sips then crumpled the cup and tossed it under the swing.

“Figure we oughta go back in?” asked Collin.

“For what?” Rachel said. “So we can sit around with a bunch of old town folk?”

“Why didn’t they bring any of their kids?”

“For goodness’ sake, Collin, don’t be such a melon,” Rachel said, rocking her legs back and forth beneath the swing. “This isn’t any place for children.”

“You and I are here.”

“That’s because he was our grandpa,” Rachel said. “And all those people in there just want to make over us. Don’t you understand anything?”

Collin had never known a dead person before. Sure, he knew of other folks in the town who had *passed* (the polite way of saying someone had died, his Aunt Peggy explained, like a quiet slipping away, a drifting off, a simple crossing to the other side of the river or a gentle shaking off of a glove), but with them, he could pretend they had left town to stay somewhere else for a while—a peaceful holiday the next town over, perhaps, to visit distant family members. They would return one day, knock on his parents’ door—smiling in the sunlit porch by the pink rosebushes—and offer up a Mason jar full of amber-colored jam from their holiday away. His mother would invite them inside and they’d pile the jam on top of warm puffy biscuits and it would taste almost too sweet and also too bitter, like thick nectar on a warm summer day.

Clementine jam, Collin decided. And his mom would ask them how was your morning, as though no time at all had passed.

“Just think about it. They’re all in there right now just sitting around, talking, crying—blubbering, even. Shoveling a bunch of food in their mouths,” Rachel said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they all gained one-hundred pounds, with all that casserole and

potato salad and pasta salad and fruit salad and pudding they got in there. Can you imagine—” Rachel laughed. “A fat Mrs. Ferguson?”

“That’s not nice,” Collin said.

“She’s not nice,” Rachel said.

Collin sat back down on the damp grass and looked out at the gray stillness of the town. On a clear day, he could see the creek that ran through the woods at the foot of the mountain and the trains rounding into the station at the border of Carta Rock and Drayton, their neighboring town. Carta Rock isn’t a big enough town to have a train station of its own, Collin’s father explained to him once. But I’m going to change that, he said, I’m going to put this place on the map.

Rachel kicked the swing forward, pointing her toes out toward the station.

“How did it happen?” Collin asked.

“How did what happen?”

“Grandpa,” Collin said. “How did he go?”

“Oh, that,” Rachel said, folding her legs back then kicking them out again. “It was a ghost.”

“A ghost?”

“Yeah. Aunt Peggy told me.”

“What kind of a ghost?”

“A bad one,” Rachel said. “It’s all hairy and see-through and it lives in our basement. I’ve seen it.”

“You have not.”

“Have too.”

“Where?”

“Grandpa’s study.”

“Are you making this up?” Collin said.

“Not making anything up. You should know. You’ve seen Casper.”

“Sure I’ve seen it, but that’s not real. It’s just a cartoon.”

“How do you know?” Rachel said. “Where do you think they got the idea for the cartoon from? Except Casper’s a friendly ghost. The ghost in our basement isn’t so friendly.”

“What it do?” Collin asked.

“It crawled into Grandpa’s throat,” Rachel said. “And it went down, down, choking him as it went. And finally, when it got down far enough, it carried away his heart.”

Collin remembered how his grandfather had looked, bent over his desk, his mouth open in a V over a book, his eyes cloudy and unresponsive as a caught fish. And then again at the viewing—body stiff and gray as one of his dry clay figures, mouth still open wide in the casket, open wide for the ghost to crawl down.

“Is it still in our house?” Collin asked.

“Maybe,” Rachel said. “Pastor Bowerman’ll have to come over and see.”

“What if it’s still down there?”

“Don’t be such a worrywart, Collin, really. It happens all the time.”

“It does?”

“Sure,” Rachel said. “Happened to one of my friends, even. And it’s an easy enough problem to fix. All we’ll have to do, if it’s still there, is light the end of a broom on fire and lead it around the house, until we’ve gone into every room with it, and when the ghost sees it, it’ll get scared and know it’s time for it to leave. Make sense?”

It didn’t make sense, but Collin nodded his head anyway. “Rachel?” Collin said.

“What?” Rachel stood up on the swing, gripping the rope with both hands, balancing on one foot then the other.

“Why would a ghost want to take away Grandpa’s heart?”

“Good question,” Rachel said, switching feet. “The ways of a ghost are very mysterious. But if I had to guess, I’d say he probably wanted to eat it.”

“Eat it?”

“Sure, eat it. A heart makes a tasty snack for a ghost.”

“Wasn’t the ghost a person before too?”

“What are you, writing a book or something?” Rachel said, sitting back down on the swing. “Yes, of course it was a person before, a long time ago for all we know. All ghosts were people at one time, unless of course they were animals before they died. But they have no memory of it. That’s why they can do things like haunt people and eat their hearts for supper. They don’t remember ever having a heart, and so they just think, why not, I’m a ghost and I’m hungry, and a heart sure sounds nice.”

Collin rubbed the soles of his shoes and stared out at the train station, its bright lights breaking through the treetops, illuminating the final stretch of tracks, the ashy concrete of the empty bay platform, the dead end. How could a ghost not remember



anything from its life before—even if it could only view the memory from the other side of the river, the way Collin looked on at his classmates when they sprinted home after school, or played baseball in the park, or rode their bicycles down the road?

“Still seems they oughta know better,” he said.

“You’d do the same thing, too, if you were a ghost,” Rachel said. “I know I would.”

“I would not.” Collin felt himself warm behind the ears.

“You would too,” Rachel said. “You wouldn’t know any better.”

“I’d find some way to know,” Collin said.

“Oh, yeah?” Rachel leaned her cheek against the rope. “How?”

“I don’t know,” Collin said. “I’d write it down somewhere.”

“Wouldn’t do you any good.”

“Why not?”

“Because ghosts can’t read.”

“Who said?”

“Nobody said. Everybody just knows.” Rachel stretched her legs out and leaned back in the swing. “And besides, even if you could write it down, and you could read it as a ghost, how do you know you could even find the place where you wrote it down again? You couldn’t, because you’d have no memory, and the place you end up may not even be your home town. The place you end up may be halfway around the world—in China or something—where they all write in pictures instead of words.”

“Is that what Aunt Peggy told you?”

“Sure is.”

“Did she tell you where Grandpa’s going to end up?”

“Maybe,” Rachel said. “It’s a gamble.”

“What do you mean?”

“You see those tracks down there?”

Collin nodded.

“There’s a phantom train that comes through, the night of every burial, and there’s a mad conductor who runs it. Our grandpa’s waiting down there somewhere for him, and when he gets there, the train doors are gonna open and the conductor’s gonna ask Grandpa for his ticket. And that’s what’ll tell him where he goes.”

Collin stared down at the station lights. One closest to the center of the platform blinked on and off, like the belly of a giant firefly trapped inside a glass bowl. Collin could almost hear the buzzing of its wings below them, could almost feel them vibrating beneath his feet. He drew his knees up to his chest and crossed his arms around them, anticipating the coldness of the light gone out.

“That doesn’t sound right,” he said. He pictured the conductor who’d checked his ticket before his trip to the zoo at Pine Springs—the only train ride he and his father had ever taken, just the two of them. That conductor had worn a navy blue coat with gold buttons and smelled of Grandfather Monty’s aftershave. He had smiled and placed a warm hand on Collin’s shoulder as he made his way to his seat.

“May not sound right, but it is,” Rachel said.

“What about heaven?” Collin asked.

“What about it?”

“Isn’t that where folks are supposed to go? Isn’t that what Pastor Bowerman says?”

“Gee wiz, Collin, is that what you’ve been worrying about? He’ll get there, eventually. Some folks just take the long way around, that’s all.”

“You better not be fibbing to me.”

“I’m not fibbing.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart, hope to die,” Rachel said, and she drew an X across her chest with her pointer finger and raised her right hand to her forehead.

“Good, because I’m gonna ask Aunt Peggy if you’re telling the truth. And I’m gonna tell her you crossed yourself too.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I wasn’t supposed to tell, and if you ask her, then she’ll know I told you, and I wasn’t supposed to tell you because she knew you’d just get scared, and if she knows I told you and you did get scared, then I’ll never be able to tell you anything ever again.”

“I’m not scared,” Collin said. “Just want to make sure you’re telling the truth.”

“Oh yeah? Sure you’re not scared,” Rachel said. “If you’re not scared, then why you gotta go run and tell Aunt Peggy about it?”

“I’m not,” Collin said.

“Promise?” Rachel said. “If you tell, then I’m gonna tell everyone we know you’re a scaredy.”

“Fine,” Collin said. “Promise.”

“Swear it?”

“We’re not supposed to swear.”

“Goodness’ sakes, Collin.” Rachel twisted herself around in the swing so the ropes tangled together, and she stared down at him, the black part of her eyes nearly swallowing the blue. “Swear it like a man,” she said. She coughed until Collin thought she’d fall out of the swing, then spit into her right palm and extended it for a shake.

Here goes, Collin thought. He stretched out his legs and stood up and put his right hand out for his sister.

“Nah uh,” she said.

“What?” Collin said.

“You gotta spit in it first. If you don’t spit, it doesn’t count.”

Collin brushed his bangs from his eyes and looked around. Last thing he needed was for the whole congregation to see. He imagined Old Lady Peddington and the other town ladies crouched behind the stained glass window of Noah and the Ark and the Animals, Two by Two, watching him spit all over himself as they wiped overdone tears from the corner of their eyes with lace handkerchiefs, his mother and Aunt Peggy looking on in horror.

“Well?” Rachel said. “What’re you waiting for? We don’t got all night.”

Collin filled his mouth with saliva and spit half-heartedly into his palm.

And they shook on it.

Rachel's hand felt as sticky as over-handled dough in his grip, and he couldn't wait for it to be over.

"Good," Rachel said, pressing her thumb into Collin's wrist then finally letting go. "We have a deal, then, not to tell. Like a blood-promise."

"Blood-promise?" Collin asked.

"Yeah," Rachel said. "Like the knights and noblemen of the Roundtable. We're lucky nowadays we can use spit instead of slicing our palms open. Lot less messy." She untwisted the tree swing and began to push herself, up and up again, soaring overhead. "And besides," she called back, "I don't know where we'd hide the sword." The coarse ropes creaked against the hickory branch, sending scales of gray-brown bark down to meet mud-red earth.

Collin wiped his hand across his slacks. Beneath the treetops, the blinking light at the station faded and fell dark, and Collin felt a cold wind tickle the hairs on the back of his neck. The trees rustled below as though sensing the onset of a storm—as though the giant firefly had escaped its bowl and had gone darting through the branches, in no particular direction, releasing a haphazard magic over the wood. The tree leaves toppled over, turned upside down. They swayed under the gray sky like outstretched palms. *Look*, he heard his mother's voice whisper in his head. *The rain is going to come.*

The shadows in the wood danced, holding hands, slithering into and out of twists, falling backward and twirling up, folding around each other and unfolding, whispering secrets on the wind Collin tried to make out.

A group of shadows bowed together on the forest floor and collapsed into one still, quiet shadow. It sat before the clearing as the others danced around it.

Collin waited for the shadow to stand up and resume its dance. It sat still, a tombstone-shape looking out at the creek. He took a step forward, watched it closer. It didn't move.

"Rachel," Collin whispered, reaching for the tree swing.

"You know, I suppose we could always bury it in the backyard or something," she said, still talking about the sword.

"Rach." His fingertips brushed her arm on her swing backward.

"What?" She turned her head back as she swung forward.

"There's something out there," he said.

"What?" she said, swinging back.

"We need to go back inside," he said. "There's something out there."

"In the woods?" Rachel asked. "Of course there's something out there. It's the woods."

"No," Collin said. "There's something sitting out there."

"Out where?"

"By the creek."

"The creek?" Rachel squinted. "Don't see anything."

"It's right there, I promise, right before the tree line ends."

"Uh huh. Still don't see anything."

"I think it's watching us," Collin said.

“So? You’re watching it,” Rachel said. “Serves you right.”

“What if it’s a ghost?”

“Could be. So what if it is?”

“What if it heard us talking?”

“So what if it did? I didn’t say anything wrong.”

“It’s just—”

“It’s just—what?” Rachel said.

“What if comes up here?”

“It won’t.”

“What if it does?”

“Then I’ll fight it off.”

“What if you can’t fight it? What if it’s hungry?”

“Calm down, would ya?”

What if it’s Grandpa, Collin wanted to say. What if he’s forgotten us and he wants—? “I want to go back inside,” he said.

“Then go,” Rachel said.

“You come too.”

“But it’s so boring in there.”

“Please,” Collin said. “I don’t want that thing to get you.”

“It’s probably just a squirrel, Collin. I swear,” Rachel said. “You are such a scaredy cat.” She threw her legs back hard, then kicked her heels forward and flew out of the swing. For a moment, Collin thought she’d glide off the edge of the mountain and

keep floating away, over the shadows, over the trees, over the station, into the darkening sky.

She landed on her feet in the soggy earth by the church picnic tables. “Great,” she called up at him. “So much for keeping my stockings clean.”

“Shhh,” Collin said.

“Can’t say I didn’t try, I guess.”

“Quiet,” Collin whispered.

“Quiet?” she said. “What for? So I don’t scare off the squirrel?” As she stomped up the hill, Collin saw fresh mud and grass stains on her stockinged feet, speckles of green and brown on the shins.

“It’s not—” He stopped. He felt the wind rush and the shadow-eyes watch and he could hear something building in the distance, like the steady beating of a drum. “Just hurry up, would you,” he said.

“You hurry yourself up,” Rachel said. “What am I—”

A light flashed, washing the whole mountain in brightness—the green churchyard, the picnic tables, his sister’s freckled face. In an instant, the sky returned to gray, and the air cracked with thunder. The force of it made Rachel slide backward onto her knees.

A bell clanged, clanged, clanged in the distance, and a whistle blew.

Lightening flashed again, and Collin scanned the woods for the tombstone shadow.



Thunder crashed, and the whistle let out again, louder this time, charging against the storm, blaring over the sound of metal chains clapping together.

Collin felt it all thump against his ribs like birds' wings, beating.

Rachel twisted around, still on her knees.

Two lights broke across the train tracks. The train, Collin thought. The phantom train. The wheels crashed onto the tracks and echoed like buildings collapsing around them. The train released a smoke over its steel back, covering its body in gray cloud so all Collin could see was the two lights staring back at him and the black wheels driving against the tracks.

When Rachel looked back at Collin, the downpour started. She ran up the hill, scooping her black shoes up as she ran toward him. She cradled them in her hands like two dead birds. Her black hair stuck to the sides of her face.

“Do you see it, Collin?” she said. “It’s the phantom train—I told you it’d come. It’s coming to carry Grandpa away.”

Collin saw the two lights. The whistle rang in his ears.

“Hurry,” Rachel said. “We have to get to the church before the train sucks us in.” She ran past Collin. “Hurry,” she said, now at the wooden side door of the church. “Don’t let the conductor see you.”

Clothes heavy with rainwater, Collin struggled to catch up with his sister. The bottoms of his feet ached and burned, and he wished he could take off his shoes so he could feel the cool rain soak through his bandages, the smoothness of the grass under his toes.

“Don’t look back or you’ll turn into salt,” Rachel said. “And the rain will rinse you down the mountain, and the ghosts will suck you in.”

Collin dug his shoes in the ground, straining to hike up the hill. When he made it to the door, Rachel opened it and ran inside, leaving a space for him. The light inside the church warmed his cheeks and he could smell the onions from Aunt Peggy’s green bean casserole.

Before he slipped inside, he turned his head and glanced back at the creek. Beyond the clearing, atop the forest floor, fog gathered around tree trunks like dust. Something silver now glinted where the tombstone shadow had sat, like a broken wind chime, Collin thought, or a tin whistle set, or the lone pendulum of a grandfather clock.

## ROSE

My mother, with her muddied blouse sleeves rolled up at the elbows, calling my name—*Rose, Rose*—over the green, dandelioned hills. The last sound I remember hearing with my own ears.

How many years ago? Two? Three? Too many to count, too many to remember, too easy to lose track. I use the global holidays as markers as best I can. I count three Unification Day celebrations. Three years, then.

I carry my mother's voice with me in the soundless ocean of gray uniforms at the Prosperity all-girls home. We shuffle about the halls in silence, making fleeting eye contact, crossing our arms about our waists, aching for one another's fingertips.

One final glimpse of home: the brown farmhouse past the butter bean fields, my older brothers' bare feet slapping against the wooden steps of the front porch, their faces pale white and fierce. And then, a cold metal hand grips my nape, making me go limp as a scruffed cat. Its fingers penetrate my ears with something sharp and spinning. The other hand covers my face, my eyes, swallows the world in darkness.

The other girls, if we could communicate with each other freely, would share with me their memories, of home and their families, in the country, in the city, in the time before they were taken away. I catch myself, at times, inventing the history of their lives for them, as one would do for the stranger sitting next to her on the bus. The blonde girl

there, with the heart-shaped face and moist green eyes, grew up in the suburbs with her mom and dad and a multicolored parrot named Charlie. Her mom drove her to school every day in a yellow Volkswagen Beetle, and on weekends, she visited her aunt in the country, where they rode horses until their legs felt like gelatin and settled down on the couch at night with popcorn and hot chocolate, marshmallow foam at the top.

These memories we repeat in our minds, over and over again, like echoes. They whisper to us beneath the information that floods our minds each day and inundates our senses. I collect them at the faucet when I wash my face at night. I catch them in my cupped hands, close my eyes, let them swim over my cheeks. I rinse myself with them as often as I can.

Our beds sit next to each other in long rows. Opaque plastic curtains hang from a metal maze at the ceiling, dividing us, reminding me of an ancient hospital room with the scuffed-up concrete floor, the single cotton sheet and wool blanket on each bed, the metal bed frames on wheels. The same hospital-air, sanitary and medicinal, fills Prosperity home. It is fitting, I think, this air that smells of human expiration, just around the corner, the struggle to suck in the next breath, and then the next. We are all patients here—each of us with our own handicap. Some girls cannot see. Other girls, like me, cannot hear. They alternate our beds—deaf, blind, deaf, blind, deaf, blind—so that we cannot easily communicate, cannot befriend.

On the top floor, sitting cross-legged on our beds before Ms. Krafton draws the curtains between us, those of us who can see watch the city lights peeking in through the

windows. I study the tall buildings, dark except for the windows and the twinkling lights, and wonder if any of them holds my two brothers. Four years older than I am, they would be nineteen now, old enough for one of the specialized vocational schools. The Machines do all the farm work for us now, but I imagine Ari and Liam have been assigned to other jobs that they can take pride in. I tug the thin straps of my white nightgown and pray that this is so. I send them an imaginary kite on the wind, or a paper airplane, declaring I am still alive. My mother, too—maybe she will look up and see it.

The other half of us, the not-seeing girls, clasp their ankles with their hands and whisper gently to themselves, rocking. The fluorescent light crowns the frizziness of their heads—gold, copper, black, and brown. Their white, cloudy eyes, floating this way and that, seem to search the room. I can tell by the sacred movement of their lips that they take this time to remember their families too, to send a prayer up for them on the quick night air.

All right, girls, quiet, Ms. Krafton's metallic command breaks through the static.

Half of us, the not-hearing, jolt at the sudden buzz in our brains, brush our temples with our fingers. The Powers That Be have ways of making us hear what they want us to hear.

The cochlea—this is the part of my ear that, I understand, was destroyed when the Machines carried me away from home. A snail's shell, or the curved tail of a lobster. The Bony Labyrinth, the whole of the lobster.

During education hours, Ms. Krafton tells us that we have received a lucky punishment for our families' refusal to have us micro-tagged and shipped off to group

homes with the rest of the population—lucky because the Global Powers found us despite their rebellion. In the group homes, the Powers disable what senses they feel we have no need of. They experiment with different ones in different homes, to create the correct social fabric, Ms. Krafton says, to preserve global peace, she says, a delicate business.

In place of our hearing, our sight, or whatever else they have robbed us of, the Powers inject a microchip into our skulls. It clings to our brains with the wiry legs of a cockroach, emitting signals there, recording everything we see, touch, taste, feel, think in an invisible, all-knowing database.

The microchip lets me into and out of buildings, rooms, places I must go during the day. It provides me with food, shelter, medicine, education. It is the measure of us all, finally, being equally provided for—technological equality. It simulates my hearing. It is the reason I can hear Ms. Krafton's orders in a deep, electronic voice. The microchip sends the mashed-up signal to my brain. My brain receives the message. I hear. I obey. I suppose her voice may sound robotic even to the not-seeing girls, but I have no way of knowing this, no way to pose the question to them.

Ms. Krafton scans the room with her one robot eye to make sure the murmurs in the room have ceased and we are all lying still in our beds. Her other eye, the right one, a pale green, looks unmoving at the concrete wall past my head. Very well, girls, she says, goodnight. She nods her graying head and flips a switch at the door frame that drops the opaque curtains from their ceiling-maze in between us.

I do not know if all Wardens look like Ms. Krafton, graying and part Machine.

The microchip buzzes in my brain for a lingering moment after she turns out the lights. The cockroach chirps: my unique identifier, my intricately encrypted code—myself, summarized. Still, I like to think there is a part of me they cannot access—the more latent thoughts, the underwater memories—a part of me that would not go dark if the microchip switched off, if the database crashed.

In the unhearing darkness, we drift into sleep. The not-seeing and the not-hearing, we dream the same dreams.

At the door of Prosperity, we form a line that stretches down the hall, toward the bare silver and white kitchen, fifteen of us in total. Ms. Krafton, in her usual mauve button-up dress, opens the door and begins to organize us into pairs—one not-hearing to one not-seeing—so that we can guide each other in the streets. A light rain collects in puddles on the concrete sidewalk. It mutes the color of the streets to gray but makes the store and vending signs more vibrant, deep reds and bright greens.

I miss the sound of rain rushing down the roof of the farmhouse. On days like this, my mother would let me have my first cup of tea in bed, under her warm home-knit blankets. It seems newly impossible to me that rain could be divorced from its sound, and yet...

You three, together, Ms. Krafton says, grouping me with the last two girls, one not-seeing and one not-hearing. She squeezes us with her long corn-husk arms, smushing me in the middle, and scoots us out the door.

I expect you all back promptly at 9 a.m., she shouts and shuts the door behind us.

Standing outside on the concrete steps, the three of us link arms. The other girls have already run ahead of us across the street, smashing through the puddles. The girl with the moist green eyes and blonde hair—Meredith is her name—stands at my left. She smiles at me with her eyes, but her mouth stays still. Gemma, the smallest of the not-seeing girls, stands at my left. She looks shrunken in her too-big gray uniform and raincoat. Her thin brown hair wraps around her red cheeks, shielding her from the elements. She squeezes my arm tight to make sure we don't lose her.

I hear chimes as we walk past the porch steps, begin to make our way across the street.

Already, red numbers, like those on an ancient digital clock, crowd the top of my vision, counting down the minutes, and the seconds, until we need to be back at Prosperity, so that we cannot lose track of the hour. The internal map, too, shows me three dots clustered together, lets me know exactly where we are, where the vending stands are and the other group homes across the street. A digital voice tells me it is 15 degrees Celsius and raining, even though I feel already the cool air on my face and close my eyes toward the sky to welcome the drizzling raindrops.

It occurs to me that I have never wondered until now what Ms. Krafton does for the hour we are away at the vending stands. The semblance of freedom from our daily walk held me too captivated, until now, for me to wonder. Now, though, I realize that the whole world tracked and catalogued in a database means no possibility for us to escape or hide away, or spend even a few extra minutes out of doors, or enter any buildings where we do not belong. I picture Ms. Krafton inside by the window, watching the rain, waiting



for our small gray figures to start drifting back from across the street, preparing our daily crafts and our lessons and our chores.

The three of us, still linked, run across the street. We purposefully stomp the puddles to feel the water crash into our shins. I swing Gemma up by her right arm and land her safely on the sidewalk. I see her smile underneath strands of brown hair, and her body vibrates, and I understand I have made her laugh. I nudge her shoulder with my elbow so she knows I see her, and she squeezes me tighter and rubs her nose against my sleeve.

Meredith leads us to the red vending stand, her blonde hair turning into ringlets. A lady who looks as though she could be Ms. Krafton's sister stands at the register, peers down at us with two robot eyes instead of one. She makes a noise that I translate as, what can I get for you?

Gemma stands on tip-toe and pipes up first, her mouth chattering. The lady takes out two metal cans, opens them with her Machine hand, dumps steaming grits into a bowl and cold orange juice into a cup. Our food is always sorted, sanitized, and canned by Machines so that we do not catch diseases from the water, the air, the land. This is why the Machines do the farming.

Meredith and I point at Gemma's breakfast so that the lady understands we want the same thing. She digs for four more cans. When she places them on the counter, I see a moth land on her human hand. He flutters his black and brown wings against her skin, brushes her finger with his fuzzy body. Beautiful, I think, like a butterfly kissing the top of a dandelion.

The lady shoos him away. She lifts a scanner to each of our heads. I hear a chime when she hovers over mine. We are allowed three meals per day—this, too, is micro-tracked.

Meredith and I nod in thanks. I pick up Gemma's breakfast, place the bowl and the cup in her small hands, then Meredith and I pick up our own. We begin to carry our things toward the indoor cafeteria when Gemma stops short, causing me and Meredith to halt, the three of us a string that cannot stretch too far without snapping.

Gemma turns her face instinctively toward the street, where a noise that Meredith and I cannot hear must be coming from. I follow Meredith's gaze to the street. Not seeing anything, she turns to lead us inside. I feel Gemma's trembling grip at my arm. I stand still, pull Meredith back. A pulse thumps underneath my feet.

A figure cloaked in rags scuttles from the gutter to an alleyway. From beneath her brown hood, the figure's misty eyes meet mine. I snap my eyes shut, but too late. The microchip begins to search, flips through pictures like a shuffling deck of cards. It lands on one and sounds the alert for everyone in the immediate area. An image of a girl about my age surfaces next to the red-number countdown in my vision: long white-blond hair, gray eyes, female, sixteen, runaway from Liberty's home for girls, microchip malfunction, return immediately if found.

Three Machine cops roll past us like military tanks, and I feel a knot in my throat for spotting the runaway first, for giving this anonymous girl away.

## GRAM'S

When Mama brings me to the gate, she drops to her knees. Her hands clamp my shoulders, and she watches me real close, straight in the eye. Adjusting the pink straps of my backpack, she tells me to behave myself and mind my manners, not to talk to strangers, not to be afraid when I'm in the air, not to give Gram a hard time. To be a lady. To be brave.

“And I'll call as often as I can,” Mama says. She wears her favorite pair of overalls, faded blue and musty with too much time. A bright green scarf covers her brown, unwashed head.

I stare over Mama's overalled shoulder at the metal airplane, sitting outdoors in the hot sun, that means to carry me from Texas—the only place I have ever known—to Virginia, where Gram lives in a candy-red house I have never seen except in pictures. I want to ask Mama how the plane can fly, big and shiny as it is, but other questions press harder against my mind.

“And you'll meet us out there?” I ask.

Mama's eyes flutter, and she says “soon” in a way that tells me she does not know when.

“And Daddy?” I ask.

Mama cannot answer before a lady in a navy blue suit with big gold buttons walks up to us. “Ready to board?” she asks me, her lips too red, her blond curls too big with hairspray. She ties a red hanky around her neck and extends a pale hand for me to hold onto.

Uncertain, I turn to Mama. Her eyes and lips narrow as they do when she has just finished braiding my hair, searching it for bumps and stray pieces.

“Well, go on now,” Mama finally says.

“You told me not to talk to strangers,” I say.

“She isn’t a stranger,” Mama says. Turning to the lady: “What’s your name?”

“Lisa,” the pale hand responds.

“Go on and go with Lisa,” Mama tells me.

I nod and take Lisa’s hand.

Lisa says what’s your name and I tell her Maisy and it means pearl. She tells me we will have great fun as we turn from Mama to walk away.

I used to think my mama was the most beautiful woman in the world. Now, as I glance over my shoulder on my way to the plane, Mama stands by black suitcases waving me goodbye. A scarecrow in a lonely field of corn.

Lisa and I get along just fine. On the plane, she lets me color as much as I want inside flight magazines tucked into front seat pockets. The feeling that I probably shouldn’t color them only makes me scribble faster, circling lawn chairs and bird baths, things I fancy buying one day when I am grown. She reads me a story about a bunny who

gets fat eating too many vegetables in someone else's garden. The gardener nearly catches him and dresses a scarecrow with his shoes and jacket, but the bunny gets back home to his mama sick but safe enough.

Lisa teaches me about turbulence. "Never you mind it," she says when the plane bumps and bumps. "The captain'll tell us if we have anything to worry about." Lisa loosens the red hanky from her neck and rests her head against the oval window, just big enough for a face.

I lift the arm rest and scoot closer to Lisa. Up close, she smells of apple butter. Beyond the curve of her nose, miniature cities bustle about the day. Square cars pull up to triangle-roofed buildings. Tree tops cluster like heads of broccoli out of red-brown earth. Hiding for moments from the sun, we make secret passageways through thin white clouds.

Lisa lets me draw eyeballs framed with long lashes on her pale blue sleep mask. Leaning against her arm, I fall asleep, the mask balancing over my eyelids and pressing into my cheeks.

Gram meets me on the other side, in a gate nearly identical to the one I left Mama in hours ago—so much so that I expect Mama to appear from behind one of the long black rows of seats, wide-eyed and reborn and beautiful after the long plane ride, her hair washed and her head uncovered. But she does not come.

Gram has a cheery face, her nose the carrot-nose of a snowman. The curly white-blond hair that sits on top of her head smells like powder when she scoops down to

tangle me in her arms. “Oh my lans, have you gotten so big, child,” she says. Her silver eyeglasses reflect a little-me once she pulls away.

“I have?” I say, rocking my yellow-shoed foot back and forth on the ground.

“You most certainly have,” Gram says. “When I last saw you, you were only this big.” She touches her hand to my shoulder to show me how big. “Let’s see, how old are you now?”

“Four and a half and three quarters,” I say. I do not know what I need the three quarters for, but it makes me feel important so I tag it along.

On the way from the airport to the candy-red house in Gram’s gold car, Gram sits at the wheel, and my legs dangle over the seat next to hers.

“Gram?” I say.

“Yes, Maisy?” she says.

“Can we call my mama soon as we get to your house?”

“Your mama said she’d give us a call tonight,” Gram says.

Outside the car window, wild-color leaves perform a witches’ dance on wet-black tree branches. Other cars pass along the road slow motion here, a day that feels like rain without the rain.

“Gram?” I say.

“Hmm?” Gram says through her nose.

“What makes you Gram?” I ask.

Gram has already told me this story once long ago, but I ask her again so I can hear her tell again because I do not remember, and the answer goes and goes in circles

bending in on itself and stretching ahead and onward and behind. And so Gram tells me simply that she is my gram because she's my mama's ma, and that my mama would not exist if she did not exist, and so then that I would not exist also if she did not exist. And that we are all flesh and blood and bone of one another.

“And I would not exist if my daddy did not exist,” I say.

Gram's bottom lip covers her top, and she squeezes my knee closest her, and she says, “that's right, but it's most important to remember what I said about your ma and me.”

“About being flesh and blood and bone?” I ask.

“That's right,” Gram says.

I know that my leaving Mama has something to do with Daddy, but no one lets on. Gram only squeezes my knee tighter and watches the road ahead, silent with my mama's silence.

We turn into a neighborhood of cottage-houses, and a band of dark trees greets us, these ones only red-leaved.

“I have another question,” I say. “Just one more. I promise.”

“Go on,” Gram says.

“Why do the trees look on fire?”

“It's this time of year, all of the leaves start a slow fall from the trees, and they become aware of their dying,” Gram says. “And they decide to make the prettiest colors before they go.”

“Why?” I ask.

“You know, Maisy,” Gram says, and she pauses to really think about this, then she says, “I’m not quite sure.”

We make a short turn on a new street, and I see the candy-red house I know from the pictures, the first one on the corner with the long brick face, and bushes and trees all around. We pull up to the drive, and Gram turns the keys in park.

And I realize I did not know there could be things Gram does not know.

From the big dark windows of the house, something of a face seems to stare out at me. And I cannot tell yet if it wants me there.

As soon as Gram opens the heavy red door, the black streak of an animal darts out at me and slobbers my face. I raise my hands to try to block the pink tongue, and I want to drop to my knees in a ball, and then I hear Gram yell, “Andre!” And I see the dog sit in front of me. A fluffy black ball with a dumb look in its eye—it cocks its head at me then turns back and looks up at Gram.

“Git,” she says, real stern, and points in the door, and the animal hangs its head and walks back inside the house.

Gram looks at me, helping my suitcase inside, and she says, “let’s go on in and get you fed and cleaned up.”

I follow Gram into the dark house, and I feel instantly warm to the core, and Gram flicks on the light and I can think of no better thing than to get washed up and have something warm on the insides of my stomach.



Gram takes a turn and leads me down a long, dimly lit hall with hanging pictures of different shapes, some of people who look ancient and from another time. The hall leads to a bedroom—Gram’s—and the dog Andre sits at the doorframe of the room scratching behind its curly ear, making the metal charms around its neck jingle, and I do not want to step any closer because I do not want it to dart at me again.

I see Gram take a turn just before she gets to the bedroom, and yellow light spills out into the hall with the sound of drawing bathwater.

I hold my breath and run past the black dog and into the small yellow bathroom, and I close the door tight behind me.

## BLACK PAINT

### Escape

I run inside to escape the April rain. It collects in puddles at the bottom of cement hills to remind us that, in spite of the construction of the university here, we are still in the mountains. The civilization here is not, cannot be, civilized.

Inside, the dorm building has the feel of an ancient cave or an indoor swimming pool—the echo of rushing water and the faint smell of chlorine—and my jeans are soaked to the knees as I climb the stairs to my suite on the third floor. I look forward to an hour alone, when my roommate will still be in sociology class and Tiffany, our RA, will have already left to spend the weekend with her boyfriend, a horticulture major at Virginia Tech.

I open the door to the suite and spot a pale, bare leg dangling out of our usually empty third room. The leg disappears into the room. “Hang on,” a female voice calls out. “I wasn’t expecting anyone so early.” Some scuffling like shuffled papers, and then she springs out of the room—green tank top, black gaucho pants springing out like bells at her shins, eyebrow pierced above a lovely blue eye, black bangs swept to the side hiding another blue eye.

“Finally,” she says, pulling her glossy hair back into a knot behind her head. “I’m Myra,” she says. “You live here?”

“Yeah,” I say, raising my eyebrow toward my bedroom door behind her head.

“I’m Phoebe. What are you—“

“I just escaped,” Myra says. She walks to the brown couch in the middle of our common room and sits cross-legged. “Had to transfer to this dorm—my old dorm was unbearable.” She uncrosses her legs and dangles her feet in the air as she speaks, watching them. “Bunch of sorority sisters,” she says. “You’re not in a sorority, are you?”

“No, I—“

“Good,” she says. “You didn’t look like the type anyway.” She crosses her hands in her lap.

“Go sit over in the chair,” she says. “I’m going to draw you.”

“Draw me for what?” I say.

“You’ll see.”

I sit in the chair, and Myra twists me into a pose: one leg straight up in the air, the other resting on the chair’s arm, my elbow balancing on the other arm behind me.

Myra turns on a lamp, and my shadow casts itself onto the wall. “Lean your head back,” she says.

“What?” I say.

Myra walks over to me and pulls my hair tie out of my head, setting my curls free from a messy bun. She shakes her fingers through my hair. “You have the prettiest yellow curls,” she says. “I want to be sure to get them in the picture.”

I lean my head back, place my hand over my forehead, fainting, falling, frozen this way. How did I get here? I don’t even know this girl.

Myra traces my silhouette on the wall. She squirts black paint onto a paper plate and saturates her brush with it.

“Are we allowed to paint on the wall?” I ask.

“What are they going to do?” Myra says. “They have to allow us to live.”

This does not feel like something I can argue with.

Two weeks later, after who knows how many coats of wet black paint, my shadow on the wall is permanent, or at least it seems so.

## **Music**

When I first tell Myra I am not interested in dating men, we are giddy with wine in her room. We giggle behind our short glasses of chardonnay, the TV the only light in the room. She snorts with laughter and wiggles her legs underneath her blanket. She touches her bare toes to my thighs.

“You’re freezing,” I tell her.

We are no longer in our sophomore-year dorm room. We are in an apartment now, our junior year, with two other girls: a music major and a psychology major. The psych major is always over at her boyfriend’s, and the music major never leaves her room. We hear her playing the piano now, over the sound of Myra’s TV. It travels through the thin walls into Myra’s room. Debussy.

I touch the white wall above Myra’s headboard with my hand. It’s cold. It vibrates through my fingertips. This is the wall Myra and I share. My bedroom is on the other side.

“It makes no difference to me,” Myra says, giggling into her pillow. The movement causes her wine to spill onto her white night shirt like two tear drops on her chest. “Men. Women,” she says. “They’re all the same.”

They’re not all the same, and that’s the whole point, but I don’t say anything. I am relieved that to Myra this is no big deal. We can still be friends. It will be something we will laugh over at breakfast tomorrow, over scrambled eggs and soggy pancakes, and apple juice, for our hangovers.

“Have you ever tried...?”

“Tried what?” I say.

“A man,” Myra says.

“No,” I say.

“Then how do you know you wouldn’t like it?” Myra asks.

“I just know,” I say.

“You should try it,” Myra says, pressing her cheek to her red pillowcase and closing her cat eyes. Her long eyelashes create a shadow on her freckled nose.

“I don’t think I’d like it,” I say. “Does it even feel good?”

“Of course it feels good,” Myra says, taking a sip from her wine glass, sideways.

“I wouldn’t keep doing it if it didn’t feel good.”

“Good point,” I say. I hear her tongue click against her teeth, the sound she makes right before she falls asleep, and take the wine glass from her hand. “Night,” I say, getting off the bed and heading for my room.

“Phoebe,” Myra mutters when I am at the threshold of her door.

“Hmm?” I say. The two wine glasses are wet and sticky in my hands.

“We’re all a little bi inside,” she says. “Let’s get bagels tomorrow. You owe me coffee.”

“Deal,” I say and shut the door.

## **Halloween**

Our last Halloween in college, Myra dresses up as a pilot, and I dress as a Native-American chief. While Myra’s curls set, she french-braids my hair. Her fingers rip through my tangles, and she pulls each strand close to my scalp. The tightness gives me a headache, makes my eyes water. She weaves feathers into the braids. They slither down my chest, down my body, touch the top of my hips.

“There,” she says, and I see her bite her lip in the mirror. “Your hair’s gotten so long,” she says. She untwists her own hair from the warm curlers, brushes it through with her fingers, leaving a wave. She applies bright red lipstick and squints into the mirror, glues on long, fake black lashes. I see the two scars above her eyebrow where her piercing used to be. When she is done applying blush to her cheeks, she looks vintage. A pinup girl. Bettie Page in a faux-leather flight cap.

We walk to an apartment building across the street in the cold. We shiver. We do not cover ourselves with jackets. We do not want to hide our costumes. We can feel our bodies tingle from the shots we took before we left our apartment, feel it in our knees, our toes, our fingers. We taste warm tequila and coarse sea salt on our lips.

Myra grabs my hand and runs up the stairs of the dim-lit apartment building.

Outside the door of the party, Trevor greets us dressed as a knight in shining armor. How typical, I think.

Trevor and Myra have been dating for a year. They're moving in together after graduation. He leads us to the keg out on the patio, through the warm, sweaty bodies, dancing in the dark apartment, close up against each other. Trevor hands us two red solo cups full of beer.

Myra clicks her cup to mine. "Chug," she says. "There's one thing I learned from those sorority girls and that's how to chug."

We chug. The foam fills the back of my throat. When we finish, we wipe the streaks of cold beer from our chins and grin at each other.

"Nice costume," Trevor tells me.

Later, when the three of us are drunk, Trevor dares Myra to kiss me. She does. Her lips are cold and soft, and they taste of lime and salt. I see Trevor watching us while we do it. When my girlfriend, Krista, gets there, we pretend it didn't happen. She is dressed as a black cat.

You look nice, I tell her.

Thanks, Krista says. Her face is rosy as though she's been drinking all day. Her hair is golden and curly, not black and straight like Myra's.

"I want to go back," Myra says to Trevor, biting his neck. "Let's go back to my place."

Trevor and Myra walk in front of me and Krista. The walk back is not as cold as our walk to the party earlier. Myra holds Trevor's hand, swinging it back and forth.

Krista holds my hand, brings it to her lips.

Inside our apartment, Krista runs toward my bathroom, still holding my hand. She closes the door, and the lights are still off. Kissing, she picks me up and puts me on the bathroom counter. I lean my head back. My hand knocks a picture off the wall. *Crash.*

Shit, Krista says.

We both laugh and run to my room.

That night, I fall asleep to crashing sounds coming from Myra's room. Her headboard knocking against our shared wall. Trevor's whispers.

## **Memory**

I don't know if this next part actually happens, but I can see Myra standing there, in her purple graduation cap and gown, a gold rope around her shoulder to signify she graduated with honors. *Summa cum laude*, or something like that. Anyway, she has tears in her eyes, from being angry. Myra doesn't cry when she's sad, only when she's in extreme anger.

"Why do you have to be such a liar, Phoebe?" she says. She punches her knuckles into my blue van, the one my parents let me borrow when my silver Subaru finally broke down. She's highlighted her hair blond, and I don't know why she'd do a thing like that, let all her bangs grow out.



My back is against the van door. Myra leans forward, places both her hands on either side of me. Her sweet vanilla smell turns my stomach. “If my relationship’s ruined because of you, Phoebe, I swear to God—“

She does not get to finish. I grab her arms and twist her around so we’ve traded places. I shove her back against the van door, squeeze her wrists.

“Did you ever think,” I say, “that maybe—just maybe—it isn’t about you, and Trevor, all the time?”

Myra’s blue eyes look up at me.

We are so close I can feel her breath on my mouth, can almost swallow it like something tangible.

“I didn’t think so,” I say, gripping her tighter. “I didn’t think you did.” I push her hard into the van door and turn to walk away.

“Phoebe!” Myra yells after me.

I keep walking. I do not turn around. I will never turn around.

It’s this kind of moment that you look back on and realize you’ll never see that person again, or have a chance to apologize for what you did. You don’t realize it at the time, but you know when you look back on it that that’s when everything changed, that’s when you screwed it all up and you’ll never see that person again.

Except I do see her again. A year or so later. Miraculously. At her new townhouse with Trevor in Charlotte, North Carolina. I got a speeding ticket on the way down. Myra

and I sit across from each other at her white kitchen table. Everything in her townhouse seems to be white. Why?

“I’m pregnant,” she tells me, and her blue eyes are beaming. Her hair is still the highlighted blond, not the sleek black. But if I look close enough, I can still see the scar over her right eyebrow. And maybe, if she lets me, I can trace her silhouette against these white walls.

## BACK HOME

The Denny's at the corner of 50 and 123 stirs with the clatter of overlapping conversations and 15-year-old silverware, just as it always does, and I wait for her. Thirty minutes have passed since I walked in through the glass doors—shaky and in my freshmen year of college—thirty minutes since the waitress, folding her notepad open for my drink order, asked, “Will someone else be joining you?”

“Still waiting?” she asks again, her blonde curls escaping from her hair tie and her pink acrylic nails clicking against the wood table.

I nod and check my phone again for the time. One o'clock. No missed calls.

As the waitress walks away, carrying with her the muddy smell of coffee, I have to look twice to register the woman walking in through the glass doors. Her curly shoulder-length black hair and her dark brown eyes, the same as mine, reflect the entire room. The sunlight flowing in behind her shows the dust in the musty restaurant air in swirls. She wears the same shade of red lipstick she left me with when I was nine, when she went back to art school in Pittsburgh, when she hugged me and not our dad goodbye, the last time I saw her.

*I don't mind talking to you but I have no desire to reconnect with Dad again, her last email had said. See ya then, kid. -Cassie.*

Before I can decide how to greet her—a slight gesture, a handshake, a hug—she’s plopping down on her side of the booth and flinging her flimsy black backpack to the other end, sending the ashy smell of cigarettes—potent but comforting—across the table. Her painted fingernails are Ninja Turtle green against my water cup. “Sorry I’m late,” she says, taking a swig. “Traffic was a bitch.”

“Always is,” I say, trying too hard to act natural. Nonchalant. “Who you staying with?”

“No one you know,” she answers, studying the menu. “You order yet?”

“Nope. I was...uhhh—”

The waitress walks up, tapping her pen against her notepad. *So you’re the mystery guest*, she seems to say as she shoots a look at my sister. “Ready to order?”

“Pancakes. Bacon. Eggs. Scrambled. Coffee. Black,” Cassie shoots back, closing the menu as a little kid would an ancient dictionary or concordance.

The waitress scribbles this down and looks at me with a raised eyebrow.

“Same,” I say. “Whatever she’s having.”

The waitress’ ponytail swishes as she makes her way back through the swinging double doors of the kitchen. I glance backward, watching her disappear behind them. There’s something hospital-like about their whiteness and the metal circles where their handles should be, a chaotic industrial world of iron kitchenware and breakfast foods peeking for a second through their opening.

“What’s her problem?” Cassie asks, half laughing. Her smirk is just like Dad’s when he’s lying or self-amused. The same telltale dimple curls at the left corner of her

mouth below a light brown mole that I can't remember from before. And so I can't help but think a decade of these lost details lies between us.

I shrug. "Sunday afternoon crowd?"

"Must be....So you like coffee now, huh?" Cassie leans in, directing her smirk toward me.

"I...panic-ordered," I say.

"Guess you can't go to college and survive without it," she says, examining my purple hoodie with the letters "J-M-U" centered in gold. "What're you majoring in?"

"Haven't decided yet," I say, twisting my long brown hair into a messy knot behind my head. We catch each other's eyes. "Do you still paint?" I ask.

Our waitress' arm falls between us, setting down two stained coffee cups that I can only assume were once white.

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In my memory, I am six years old and sitting on the queen-sized bed in an impossible pose, all of my limbs forming a sort of soft pretzel. Cassie and I are in our basement, and it's 1996. Cassie calls this room in the basement her studio.

"Are you done yet?" I ask, now bouncing from side to side, feeling the curls Cassie took forever to style slap against the left side of my neck, then the right. I can't remember how long I've been there, but it feels like ages and the hairspray's sticky.

"Finishing up," she says, then: "Michelle!"

"What?" I jump up like a Jack-in-the-box, sitting up straight.

"Sit still, punk. You're gonna mess up your hair."

“Kay!” I slump back down again.

She dives into the thick paint with her brush, the solitary green now swimming across an ocean of cream-colored canvas. Her eyes squint to the size of an almond, like they do when she is concentrating on something closely.

I feel my knees sink into the floral down comforter and discover I’m rocking again. I look up. Cassie still hasn’t noticed, so I sway faster, making the bed creak.

“Uh!” Cassie’s wide stare stops me mid-sway.

Her deep brown eyes return to her canvas, and my rebellious knee returns to the comforter. I start to open my mouth to tell Cassie I’m hungry, but my eyes fix on the only painting hanging up in the room, just beyond my sister’s head: a ballerina in red leaps across white canvas, her graceful hands holding a black, indiscernible something over the beige blob of her face.

“Who’s that one for?” I ask about the ballerina.

“Almost...” Cassie trails off, biting the bottom corner of her lip, not hearing me.

“Done!”

I untwist myself and scramble over to see. I halt in front of the painting. “Eww! Why am I green?” I demand, crinkling my nose.

“It’s abstract art,” Cassie says. “Duuuh.”

“Well, it doesn’t look like me!”

“And why not?” Cassie says.

“It’s *green!*” I repeat.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

Cassie dips her brush again into the green paint and wipes it swiftly across my face. The wet feels cold against my nose and cheeks. We stand silently for a moment, hands on our hips, mirroring each other—then suddenly, I scream.

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The steam rises mazelike above the cup as Cassie brings it to her lips, takes a sip, holds it there. “I quit,” she finally says.

“Painting?” I ask, competing with a screaming baby a table or two down from us.

She nods. “I do some photography here and there, though.” She grabs for her backpack, retrieving a lighter, a box of Marlboro lights, and a professional-looking digital camera. “Mind if I—?” She holds the purple lighter up to a cigarette.

\*\*\*

The last night Cassie spends at home, my last memory of her before my father makes her leave, Cassie stands outside with me in leftover snow, the soles of our feet cold inside our tennis shoes. She lights a cigarette with an expert flick, blows smoke into the crystal night air. It mingles for a while with the leafless trees then disappears into the atmosphere. It’s 1999, and Oldies music is streaming through our basement stereo and out the back screen door. *I Want to Hold Your Hand* has just ended, and the CD’s transitioning to Simon & Garfunkel, *Mrs. Robinson*, our favorite. It’s nearing the end of Cassie’s winter break from the art institute, and I do not want her to go back but I also do not tell her this.

Cassie inhales again, lets out another puff. The air's cold enough that I can mimic her exhale, creating fake smoke.

She shakes her head. "You're too young for that, Meesh." She grabs a tube of lipstick from her bag. "Here," she says, dotting the red shade onto my lips then blending it in with her thumb. She puts the lipstick in my pink coat pocket and doesn't have to tell me I can keep it.

"Cassie!" We hear our dad yell through the open kitchen window upstairs.

"Shit," she says, throwing her cigarette into melted snow slosh and stomping it out with the bottom of her black Converse.

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"It's illegal inside now," I try to tell her before she lights it, but the smoke's already spiraling out the end of Cassie's cigarette.

"What?" she asks.

"Smoking inside. In Virginia."

"You've gotta be shitting me." She puts the cigarette out on her Marlboro carton, wiping the ashes under the table and swatting away the smoke. "Is there a state left that hasn't gone mad?"

"Weren't you wondering where the ashtray was?"

"Yeah... hadn't gotten that far yet."

The waitress walks up with her arms full of food. Setting our pancakes, eggs, and bacon in front of us, she eyes Cassie. "Were you smoking just now?"



Cassie looks around. “Wasn’t us,” she says, scooping a hefty mouthful of eggs onto her fork. “Mind if we get some hot sauce?”

“I smelled smoke,” the waitress says.

“Well, I happen to be a smoker.” Cassie dangles the box of Marlboros at her.

“Look—I don’t care,” the waitress says. “If I smell it again, I’m sending my manager over.”

As the waitress walks away, Cassie jumps up in the booth: “Oh!” She says, turning on her camera. “This is what I wanted to show you.”

She holds the camera out to me, and I see a man with shaggy brown hair and a hoop through his ear standing in front of a brick apartment building.

“That’s Tyler,” Cassie says, winking at me.

“You two married?”

“Nope.”

“Engaged?”

“Nope.” Cassie’s eyes catch mine over her coffee cup. “We don’t believe in marriage,” she explains.

“Oh,” I say, setting the camera back on the table. “He’s cute.”

Cassie stuffs a three-layered bite of pancake into her mouth, bouncing as she nods. “You have a boyfriend?” she asks before she’s done chewing.

“Nope,” I say, pausing with my fork above my plate.

Cassie keeps eating. Her plate is a pool of maple syrup surrounding soggy islands of brown batter. “Never did get that hot sauce,” she says.

“What happened?” I ask.

“I dunno...” Cassie sits up to look for any sign of life coming from the swinging kitchen doors. “Maybe she forgot.”

“No, I mean, with you and Dad.”

“Oh.” Cassie sets her fork on her plate and takes a sip of coffee. “He didn’t tell you?”

“He doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“Well...” Cassie starts. “I wasn’t making good grades. Dad told me he didn’t have enough money to pay for school if I wasn’t making good grades. And so he kicked me out.”

“That’s it?” I ask. “You weren’t making good grades and Dad kicked you out?”

“Dad takes these things like grades very seriously,” Cassie says.

“So, what? Dad’s going to kick me out too if I don’t make good grades?” I ask.

“You got nothing to worry about,” Cassie says. “You’ll make good grades, I know you will. Besides...”

“Besides, what?” I ask.

“Well,” Cassie says, circling her coffee cup with her index finger. “Just that I may have gotten into some other trouble too.”

“Like what kind of trouble?”

“Like stuff Dad told me not to come home with once he found out.”

“And you never tried to talk to him about it?” I ask. “You know, make things right, come back home?”

“Nope,” Cassie says. “I never wanted to after that.”

“I always wondered,” I say, pushing pieces of pancake around with my fork, “if it was somehow my fault. I never understood why you left.”

“It wasn’t you,” Cassie says. “I couldn’t take Dad anymore. I was done with the whole damn thing.”

Something feels so final about the word “done” that it is almost too much for me to bear, and I do not press further.

“Did you ever finish?” I ask. “School, I mean?”

Cassie shakes her head. “Nope. Tried paying my own way for a while, but couldn’t afford it. So I dropped out.”

We finish the meal in silence. My eyes lock on an elderly couple that’s just been seated behind us: He’s lost a hearing aid, and she can’t stop talking about Dr. Phil. The waitress drops off the black leather folder with the bill. I leave a couple tens, and Cassie throws in a few coins and crumpled ones for the rest.

We make our way through the glass doors, and the sunlight in the parking lot reminds me it’s still daytime like the jarring experience of leaving a movie theater. I follow Cassie to her car, a beat-up blue Honda with rust near the tires.

“I have something for you,” she says, opening the back door and disappearing in the backseat.

I pull my hoodie close around me, hugging my waist, and Cassie emerges from her car with a piece of white canvas.

I recognize it immediately. “I thought you didn’t paint anymore,” I say when I realize it’s changed.

“I lied.” Cassie winks. “See ya, kid,” she says, now opening the front door of her car.

“Will you?” I ask.

“We’ll see.” Cassie jumps into the front seat.

“Hey, Cass?”

“What?” Cassie leans her head out the door.

“What’s she holding?”

“What’s who holding?”

“The ballerina,” I say, pointing at the painting.

“Oh.” Cassie scratches her head, making her thick black curls move in clumpy unison. “Hell if I know.”

We shrug at each other, and she slams the door shut, rolls the window down, pulls out of the spot.

I look back down at the painting.

“Hey!” I yell and start to run after her, and Cassie brakes at the end of the parking lot, cranks her head out the window.

“Hey, what?” she yells back.

“Maybe it’s a tube of lipstick,” I say. “Or a baton. Or a UFO.”

“A UFO?” She asks. She has already forgotten what I’m talking about.

“The black streak,” I say.

She laughs. “It can be whatever you want it to be, Meesh,” she says, turning back into the car. She waves her hand out the window, telling me goodbye, turning her radio up.

I wave back.

She keeps waving out the car window until she disappears down the highway, her car now a small blue dot that I can barely see past the gas station and the other Sunday cars making their way back home.

## LONDON

The man on the street corner in the green flannel sleeping bag. Gray hair covering his face, red kissing the skin on his cheeks, his forehead, his eyelids. Sleeping hands crossed over chest. A mummy pose. The man walking next to me kicks a clear plastic fork that has been lying on the gray cobblestone sidewalk. Skidding down the pavement, it makes a noise like a hollow bell, like pennies hitting the bottom of an empty Folgers can.

We walk farther down the street and, before our hotel, a mother sits in a red sleeping bag mending the strap to a black purse. I wonder for a moment if she has stolen it, plans to sell it for money. By the hotel's glass doors, her children sleep in a row, three lumps beneath a stretched out rose-patterned blanket. Brown hair peeking over the edge. The group I walk with does not look at them. They walk briskly into the hotel with their hands in their pockets, talking of how beautiful the city is with its balls of lights strung across the street posts like yarn, how they cannot wait to skip out of work early on Friday to go shopping down the strip. One store takes up a whole block. It is as tall and as wide as any other building around it, where everything is twice as expensive as it is in the States.

## BOSTON COMMON

### Fosters

One Saturday his mom just didn't show. They were all cramped in that red brick rowhouse up in Bay Village, and the bacon from Teresa's cooking filled the whole kitchen with smoke, saturated it so it felt all humid inside even in Boston, mid-October. The twins, Sean and Vincent, were crashing fire trucks into the crumbly beige wall by the pantry, orchestrating their own sound effects and traumatizing the cat. The two of them were fosters too, five years old. Some people collect fosters like other folks collect pets. Roy and Teresa were like that.

"Hey—knock it off over there," Roy said, swatting at a mosquito then dabbing his forehead with a checkered dish towel, grimy with soap-water. He sat down beside Riley at their makeshift coffee table—a barrel with a thin board on top, a school project of Riley's from shop class—and Riley just sat there texting a friend on his phone, planning their senior skip day. Trip to the ballpark, break into the stadium somehow. He didn't even look up.

Sean and Vincent fled the kitchen and resumed their fire truck game by the front door. One of the upstairs tenants—some twenty-six-year-old yuppie in an all-blue sweat suit—nearly tripped over them as he left for his morning jog. The fluffy blue *Welcome* rug rolled up into itself, pressed against the wooden door, a kaleidoscope shape.

Teresa set a plate of bacon and scrambled eggs on the table in front of Riley and Roy. “Bon appétit,” she said, walking around the back of Roy’s chair. “And try not to eat it too fast this time.” She wrapped her arm around Roy, patted his belly over top his white T-shirt.

Roy swatted Teresa’s ass as she walked away, and she squealed, and Riley picked over his food with his fork pretending not to see. Roy dug into his eggs, and Riley checked the clock. It hung over the pantry looking like a moon face, wide-eyed.

Riley felt it then. A lump in his throat that also felt like a hallowness. Already half past nine, and they hadn’t called to say they’d be late.

The doorbell buzzed and the sound of it sent the whole house bouncing, a kind of internal tingling, and it sent the cat sailing up the stairs.

The boys sprinted to the kitchen. “Here she comes, here she comes,” Vincent chanted along the way—failed attempt at a whisper, more of a hiss. Teresa usually shut them up in their room Saturday mornings, or sent them over to a friend’s with a haphazard lunch in a crumpled paper bag—a bruised banana, soggy PB&J, fruit snacks if they were lucky. But today Roy had promised to take them to the park after breakfast.

“Nah uh, Stoopid,” Sean said.

“What did I tell you about calling your brother stupid?” Teresa pointed at Sean with a fingernail file and adjusted a black bra strap that had just slipped out from under her lime green tank top.

Sean huffed and kicked the fire truck across the carpet.

“Roy, would you help me out here a little or what?” Teresa said.



“I’m eating,” Roy said.

Teresa set the fingernail file on the kitchen counter and threw a bathrobe over her shoulders.

Riley was already up and at the front door, and when he opened it, the only person standing there was Sandy. She wore a burgundy dress suit and carried a beaten-up work bag—the same faux leather satchel all caseworkers own. Riley stood there frozen holding the door open, and the twins ran up behind him, nearly colliding into his back.

“Riley,” Sandy said. She nodded at him and forced a closed-mouth smile. Thick lipstick the same color as her outfit.

“You’re late,” Riley said. “Where is she?”

“Sandy!” Teresa chimed. She peeked around Riley and squeezed his shoulders too tight. “Well, what, Riley, you’re not going to invite her in? Come in, come in.” She waved her arms.

“Where’s Mom?” Riley asked again, not taking his eyes off Sandy.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” Teresa asked.

“What’s going on? Why isn’t she with you?” Riley said.

“No, nothing to drink, I’m fine. I was hoping,” Sandy started, “that I could talk to you and Roy in private for a moment.” She said all this very close to Teresa’s face.

“Of course. Is everything alright?” Teresa said.

“I just—we need to—”

“Roy!” Teresa yelled into the kitchen. “Get over here!”

“Coming!” Roy said.

Saturdays they blocked Roy's "office" off for visits with Riley's mom and the caseworker, and this time Riley's mom wasn't there and Riley was left on the other side of the swinging door with the twins. Sean and Vincent started karate chopping each other, and Riley told them to keep it down for a second, and Vincent said *make me*.

--We can't find her: Sandy's voice from the other side of the door.

--What? Teresa said.

"Ouch!" Sean whined then slapped Vincent's arm. "Stop hurting me!"

--But don't worry, we're still looking, Sandy said.

--What a class act, Roy said, disappearing right before the kid's eighteenth birthday.

"Stop touching me, Loser!" Vincent said.

--It happens sometimes, Sandy said. It's not uncommon.

"Would you two sit still for two seconds?" Riley said.

--He won't know what to do with himself, Teresa said.

Vincent pinched Sean's stomach, and Sean screamed.

--Roy mumbled something.

--Now don't panic just yet, Sandy said.

"I'm telling Teresa on you!" Sean said.

--She could still turn up, Sandy said. They do that sometimes.

--Uh huh, Teresa said.

--There's something else, Sandy said.

Riley stared straight at the door to Roy's office and then he walked over and pushed it open. "What's going on?" he said. "Where is she?"

The three of them—Roy, Sandy, Teresa—looked up at him from the small green sofa against the wall. Eyes blank. Shell-shocked.

"Isn't anyone going to tell me what's going on?" he said. "Don't you think I have a right to know?"

"Riley," Sandy said calmly. "We don't know. We don't know where your mom went."

"What do you mean you don't know where she went?" he said.

Vincent rolled the fire truck into the office, just past Riley's foot.

The room went still.

"She just...left," Sandy said.

"And you all can't find her?"

"Riley," Sandy said. "We're looking for her, Riley, I promise. I know what you must be feeling right now, but this kind of thing, it happens all the time—"

"Don't tell me," Riley started. He picked the stray fire truck up and threw it against the wall. Front wheel rolling loose across the carpet. As he headed toward the front door, threw on a light jacket, Riley heard their voices through the Styrofoam-thin wall:

--Riley, Teresa called after him.

--I'm sorry, Sandy said. There's one more...issue. We thought, she hesitated...we thought we'd be able to keep Riley here until the end of the year, to finish school, but—

The front door slammed shut.

--What are you saying? Teresa said.

--I'm sorry...

## **Subway**

The first time he met her, she was peering over the edge of the platform, staring down at the tracks. The light in the underground subway station bore down on him, and his eyes felt heavy with sleep. The girl, pale-faced in the unnatural light, stood on tip toe and teetered for a moment over the ledge, then sat down on the cold concrete, leaned back, dangled her feet in front of her.

Riley had heard a story of a homeless man once who had leapt in front of the train, just as it was rounding into Park St. Station. The whole Green Line had to be shut down for hours, delaying the evening rush. Riley looked down at the tracks and imagined the body there: pale and lifeless, a tuft of black hair and an anonymous white face, flattened and bloodied. He wondered if his mom had known this man. She had tears in her eyes when she told him about it, and the caseworker had to cut their meeting short. *That's enough for today*, Sandy had said, edging off of the couch in another one of her dress suits, and there were always things Riley's mother couldn't say to him in front of her. They had to speak to each other in a sort of code, a compressed language.

But why had he jumped?

The girl inched over closer to him, and Riley felt her staring at his neck, saw her in his periphery.

He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, the leather thin and floppy as paper, and thumbed through its contents: a picture of him and his parents from Christmastime eight years ago (the only picture of them he had); his CharlieCard peeling up at the corners; a ten and two fives, just enough for the taxi ride from Copley Station back to Roy and Teresa's. His high school ID.

Riley returned the wallet to his pocket, breathed in deep and closed his eyes. When he opened his eyes, he saw the girl only two steps away, smiling.

"Never a good idea to close your eyes on the subway," she said.

She looked about seventeen, Riley thought, his age, dressed in all black and gray shades that blended into the concrete background. Her hair was short and messy as though she had just rolled out of bed and it was all black, too, except for one streak of a lighter in the front, a blondish orange.

"Nice kicks," she said, nodding toward Riley's brand new gray and white high tops. Nikes. They were all Riley had to show for countless after-school shifts at Antonio's deli, the smell of salami sticking to his skin, the manager handing him ten percent of the tips from the fat plastic jar by the cash register.

"Thanks..." Riley said. He looked down at the platform just in time to see a cockroach skitter by his feet.

The girl stuck her foot over the edge of the platform: a grungy Converse shoe with writing all over the toe.

"Would you stop?" Riley said.

The girl pulled her foot back and started playing with a cigarette lighter. “Stop what?” she said.

“Stop standing over the edge,” he said. “You’re going to fall over.”

“What if that’s what I want?” she said.

A silver button on the girl’s black jacket gleamed in the light, and her eyes looked ghostly blue against thick black eyeliner.

“Is it?” Riley asked.

“Maybe,” she said. The word echoed in the concrete tunnel. Her eyes looked up at the ceiling, revealing the whites of them.

Riley looked straight ahead, across the tracks.

The train rumbled into the station, and everyone got on except for Riley and the girl. And Riley thought, what is the point of going back.

After the train roared past, the girl asked him where he was staying for the night.

“What do you mean?” Riley said.

“I mean, there’s only two kinds of people who don’t board a perfectly good train this late at night. Crazy people and people who got nowhere to go.” The girl flicked her lighter again. “You don’t look crazy,” she said, “so I’m asking you if you got a place to stay.”

“I guess you’re looking at it,” Riley said.

“You can’t stay here. They start kicking people out come closing time. Believe me, I’ve seen them.”

“Then I’m heading back,” Riley said.

“Back where? You just missed your train.”

“There’s another one coming in two minutes,” he said.

“What brings you out here in the first place?”

“Why are you asking me so many questions?”

The horn of another train entering the station echoed off of the walls, its headlights further illuminating certain objects: the hobo asleep on the bench, the graffiti on the subway map, the girl’s translucent eyes.

“I know you’re looking for someone,” the girl said once the train had stopped.

“Your mom. I know where you can find her.”

When the door of the train opened, Riley turned to board. “Whatever, have a nice night,” he said.

“All the Boston homeless,” she called after him, “we all know how to find each other.”

Riley turned back around, stepped out of the train, allowing its doors to shut behind him.

The train rolled away, and the girl said, “I’m Pumpkin.”

“How do you know my mom?” Riley said.

“What, you aren’t going to tell me your name,” she said.

“Why should I?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, let me just explain to you how this works.” Pumpkin tossed her lighter from one hand to the other. “I told you my name. Now you got to tell me yours. It’s called manners.”

“Fine,” he said. “Riley.”

“Okay, *Riley*,” Pumpkin said. She pulled a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket inside her jacket. “I need a smoke. We can talk this whole mom thing out outside.”

Pumpkin took a cigarette out of the pack while she headed for the escalator. “You coming or not?” she asked him over her shoulder, cigarette tucked in the corner of her mouth—a Marlboro Red.

Another train clamored into the station, but Riley followed after Pumpkin without looking back.

As soon as they reached the top of the escalator, the cold night air slapped against Riley’s cheeks and he could just barely make out the smell of saltwater. Pumpkin reached her arm out, blocking Riley from walking any farther while she lit the end of her cigarette. Her eyes squinted ahead, and Riley took in the wide squares of gray sidewalk, an abandoned hotdog stand with a giant blue umbrella, a streetlamp bending over a stack of newspapers, and a large brick church just across the street.

From this angle, the church looked taller than the dark office building right behind it, and the windows of both buildings still had light peeking out of them. Who works this late into the night? Sits up at church? The thought gave Riley the creeps.

Pumpkin made a clicking sound as she inhaled the smoke and let it drift out into the clear air, contaminating it.

“Mind if I bum one?” Riley said.

“I don’t know. You sure you can handle it, kid?”



Riley nodded.

“It’s like smoking a brick,” she said.

“You act like I’ve never smoked one before.”

“Well, shit, then,” Pumpkin said, pulling another cigarette from her jacket and handing it to him. “Allow me.”

She leaned in closer to him and flicked the lighter on—a steady orange flame leapt in front of his face, making Pumpkin’s features go blurry. He sucked the smoke in and released it. The smoke formed a fog around her face.

He expected her to say something like *not bad*, but she didn’t. The pedestrian symbol on the crosswalk lit up, and Riley followed Pumpkin across the street, stopping in front of the white entranceway of the church.

“So, you never answered me,” Riley said. “How do you know my mom?”

“Oh, you know,” Pumpkin said, looking around the church gate, not bothering to make eye contact. “There’s this church we all go to—Gems.”

“Church?” Riley said. “My mom doesn’t go to church.”

“No, no, no, stupid,” Pumpkin said. “They pass out free food and shit. A bunch of us go. Including, what’s her name? Your mom.”

“Does that mean you’re homeless?” Riley asked.

“Born and raised,” Pumpkin said.

They walked around to the back of the church, where an old man was dragging a dirty-looking duffel bag down the sidewalk with half a pant leg sticking out the zipper

behind him. His back was turned to them, and Riley wondered if the man was warm enough in his dusty flannel shirt.

Pumpkin threw her cigarette down in the churchyard and stomped it out in the grass.

Riley flicked his cigarette into the bushes. “How do we get there?” he asked. “To the church, I mean.”

“I got a shortcut right through here,” she said.

Riley followed her farther behind the church, underneath trees with leaves of changing color and black branches. Then they stopped at an iron gate, and Pumpkin grabbed onto it with both hands, shimmied up and over to the other side of it.

“Come on. Don’t be shy,” she beckoned, the iron bars casting shadows across her face.

Riley put both hands on the gate and tried to copy Pumpkin’s movements. His shoe started to slide off when he got to the top of the gate, but he finally caught it and jumped to the other side.

“This is it,” Pumpkin said, leading him under a wide oak tree and through ancient tombstones, rows and rows of them. Some of them were carved with skulls and crossbones, the kind that looked like they belong on Horror flicks or bottles of poison.

Riley heard a rustle of leaves and a voice behind him. Pumpkin pulled a knife out of her pants pocket, and then the night went black.

## THE FAIR

### Collin

Elise Tanner sits at the piano in her bright orange sundress, which spreads across the wooden bench in floral wallpaper-like patterns. This is where Collin loves her best. He lies against the scratchy brown carpet of their modest two-level home and watches his mother's black hair whip against her back in a long French braid, her sandaled foot pressing against the gold-toned pedal, liquidating the piano's sound. As Elise plays Beethoven's Opus #13, the *Pathétique*, Collin imagines a great chase between the trickling high notes and the pattering lows, his mother's right hand running after her left and back again, the silences just as important to the motion as the crashing chords that follow them. At her bench, his mother is simultaneously impassioned and controlled, and Collin knows better than to interrupt before the first movement is over to ask her when they are leaving for the county fair.

The boy sends his legs kicking toward the ceiling—an unpredictable metronome of movement: tender with the music and then violent with it. A piece of these two contrasts that never overlap. Beyond sheet music. His feet ache from yesterday's trip to the baseball lot with the other neighborhood boys, but the cool rush of the ceiling fan soothes them.

The opus's first movement takes its final climb and ends in one leaping chord followed by two last descending ones. The tiny family room is at last filled with silence

and sunlight. There is music here no longer, only echoes that linger against the room's white walls.

Collin holds his breath, stills the kicking of his legs.

Elise lowers her hands to her lap and looks back at her son with a thin, closed-mouth smile. Her brown eyes nearly match the color of her dark hair. There is a slight shimmer in them before she gives a sharp nod, dissipating it, and the front door opens.

Collin's older sister, Rachel, comes sprinting in through the open door, a streak of pink and white in her gingham sundress and tennis shoes. At nine years old, she is all leg and all Clark, the elderly ladies down the street say, except for her jet black hair, the color of her mother's.

"Elephants!" Rachel says. "They have elephants there, and *I* saw them first!" She stops short of her mother's wooden piano bench and bites into a melting orange Popsicle. Her shoulder-length hair catches up with the rest of her in wisps that stick to her cheeks.

"Rachel Louise Tanner," Elise says, standing up from behind the piano. "What do you think you're doing with that in the house?"

"Daddy got it for me, and *we* went to the fair" Rachel says. "And they have clowns there and they have ponies and they have face painting and they have cotton candy and games and I'm going to ride on the elephant!"

Clark catches the door behind his daughter and remains standing there, leaning against the white frame.

"I thought you were going to the deli," Elise says to him.

“We did,” Clark says. His complexion is ruddy. His blue eyes, refreshing. He rubs the blond stubble on his face and fishes for something in his pants pocket. “I figured I may as well get us tickets for the Ferris wheel so we wouldn’t have to wait in line.” Clark pulls the tickets from his pocket and holds them up for Elise.

“I don’t mind waiting,” she says.

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go,” Rachel demands, bouncing around the piano bench. A line of orange syrup drips from the corner of her mouth.

“What did I tell you?” Elise says, nudging her daughter toward the door. “Now go take that outside before you get it on the carpet. Clark—” She nods at her husband and hands Rachel off to him. “Go start the car, will you?”

Clark twirls his car keys and takes Rachel’s hand in his, walking her out onto the front porch that he and Elise painted last summer. Forest green.

Elise pauses at the doorway and looks back at Collin, now sitting up on the brown carpet. “You ready, *mon coeur*?” she says, putting on a yellow, wide-brimmed sunhat and securing it beneath her chin with white ribbon.

Collin scrambles to his feet and runs to the door.

Once they are outside, Rachel points to a small orange puddle on the gravel driveway. “Gross!” she says, now holding only the wooden Popsicle stick that the orange slush slid off of. A crowd of black ants begins to circle around it. “Don’t let them crawl up your legs,” Rachel says to Collin, who has just squatted down to get a closer look at them. “Those are the kind that sting you.”

“Rachel,” Elise warns as she opens the door of their beat-up gray Ford.

“What?” Rachel says. “That’s what Aunt Peggy told me.”

Elise raises her eyebrows at Clark before she puts on her cat-eye sunglasses and sits down in the passenger’s seat, closing the door. You deal with this one, she seems to say.

Collin pokes at the ants with a stick he finds in the grass. His green eyes widen. His wavy blond hair falls in his face.

Rachel leans down to whisper in her brother’s ear. “One time they crawled up cousin Tyler’s legs and—”

“Rachel,” Clark says. He opens the back door for her and Collin to hop in.

“What?” she says. “They had to spray him down with the hose!”

Collin drops the stick on the ants and starts for the car door.

“Can it,” Clark says. He walks to the driver’s side of the car and climbs in.

In the car, the windows are down. The radio plays *Music! Music! Music!*—Teresa Brewer—and Rachel dances to it, mouths the words, wind blowing through her hair, hand out the window.

“All limbs in the car, please,” Elise says, reaching back toward Rachel’s seat to squeeze her daughter’s knee.

Rachel pulls her hand back inside the Ford but sticks her tongue out as soon as her mother isn’t looking.

Collin stares at her from the other end of the seat while she does this. He tries to turn and look out the window before Rachel catches him, but he knows he's already been spotted.

Rachel puts on a big, Hollywood smile. Her teeth stick out over her bottom lip, and she starts to sing along with the Brewer song: "Put another nickel in, in the nickelodeon, all I want is having you, and music, music, music!" She waves her fingers in Collin's face with each time she says *music* and scoots over toward him, settling in the middle seat. Her volume rises as she reaches an open palm toward Collin's head. She swings back and forth, closer to his head then farther away, then closer again: a pendulum.

"Hey!" Collin says, reaching up to smack her hand away.

"Rachel." Elise's eyes catch her daughter moving around in the rearview mirror. She lowers her sunglasses and turns off the radio so that all the family can hear is the air blowing into the car and the command, "Sit still."

Rachel stops swaying and sits up straight in the middle seat. Both she and Collin drop their hands and remain still, eyeing the back of their parents' heads in the front seat.

Clark and Elise do not hold hands. They do not need to in the memorized rhythm of their daily lives. It is enough for now to concentrate on the silence and the short drive toward South Second Street, where the fair is held each year. They drive past tall grass and miniature country homes, a younger couple walking an energetic Golden Retriever toward the fairground, under the noonday sun. Finally, Clark parks the gray sedan in a large, unpaved lot among dozens and dozens of other cars.

“Here!” Rachel squeals. She slaps Collin on the thigh, squirms out of her seat, jumps out of the car. Collin follows suit, trying to keep up with his sister, who has just left a pink mark on his leg. Elise hops out of the car in time to catch both children while Clark closes the driver’s side door and lights a cigarette.

“Turkey?” Elise asks, pulling two slices of bread out of a basket in the front seat. Clark reaches in through the open car window and tosses a bag of deli meat to her. Elise catches it, puts a sandwich together: two pieces of spongy white bread collapsed on top of a lump of moist turkey. She hands it to Rachel. “Here,” she says, then to Clark: “Which one are you taking?”

“But I want another Popsicle,” Rachel says, flapping the sandwich around in her hand.

“Either,” Clark says. “Ferris wheel first?”

“Later,” Elise says. “You can take the easy one. I’ll take Rachel.”

“Can I get a red one this time?” Rachel says.

“Do we have to split up already?” Clark asks. “We just got here.”

“Just for now,” Elise says, putting together another sandwich. “I don’t want them fighting.”

“Hello? I’m still here.” Rachel says. “I can still hear you.”

“They won’t fight,” Clark says.

“You haven’t answered my question!” Rachel says.

“No,” Elise says, turning toward Rachel. “You are not getting another Popsicle.” She hands the second sandwich to Collin then nudges him toward Clark. “Meet you at the



Ferris wheel in an hour. Bring him back in one piece,” she says and saunters away toward the fairground.

“Can I get cotton candy, at least?” Rachel says, chasing after her mother. The two disappear in the crowd, leaving Clark and Collin alone by the car.

Clark shoots his cigarette down like a dart toward the ground and smears it into the grass with the bottom of his once-white tennis shoe. “So,” he starts, looking down at his son, who is wearing a navy and red striped shirt and blue shorts, brown leather sandals around his swollen, clubbed feet “What do you want to do first?”

Loud carnival music streams from a pink and gold carousel as Clark approaches the fairground with Collin riding on his shoulders. A group of men gather around a metal cage that Clark does not remember seeing earlier that day. They are jeering at each other, stifling the sound of the music. The smell of beer is fresh on the breeze, the reflection off of the carousel mirrors disorienting as it distorts the men’s red faces.

A man stands on top of a raised platform by the metal cage. He is speaking into a giant red megaphone, and Clark draws closer, strains to hear him. The man is dressed like a circus conductor: suit and tie and top hat accompanied by a long black whip. “Do I have any challengers?” the conductor says. He gestures toward the cage.

“What is it, Daddy?” Collin asks. He places a hand on top of Clark’s thick blond hair, matting it down.

“I don’t know, buddy,” Clark says, placing Collin on the ground and standing on top of a folding chair in the audience. He peers over the crowd and finds a small reddish animal curled up in the center of the metal cage, holding its legs to its chest. It has a black and puffy human-like face—a type of monkey, Clark does not know what.

He sees a chubby, balding man at the front of the crowd stretching his arms out. Someone from out of town. His white Oxford shirt is just barely big enough to button over his bulging stomach. The crowd around him grows rowdy, but the conductor quiets everyone down. “Wait a minute,” he says, “What is this I hear? Do I have a taker?”

“Here, here,” the man in the white shirt says, raising his hand.

“Will you dare to fight it?” the conductor asks.

“Huh,” the man laughs, strutting toward the cage.

Clark feels a slap on his back. He looks down—the rugged sunburned face of one of his neighbors—and steps down from the chair. “What is that thing?” Clark asks his friend.

“You should get in there,” Dale says. “Say there’s some good earnings for the winner.” Dale clicks his tongue behind his yellow teeth and readjusts his red baseball cap.

“Yeah?” Clark says, eyeing the metal cage.

Collin tugs at his father’s pant leg. “Dad,” he whispers, but Clark does not hear him.

“Yeah,” Dale says, grinning and smacking his gum, hard.

“How much?”

“Five-hundred.”

The orange animal leaps up in the cage, hangs onto the metal bars, irritated. It shows its teeth, nearly human, and howls out.

The heavy bald man in the white Oxford stumbles back. “I ain’t fighting that thing,” he says.

“Ow,” the conductor frowns. “Do I have another taker?” He searches the crowd from his platform.

Dale shoves Clark forward, and Clark feels himself walking toward the cage, hears his voice say *here*. His hand raised, the crowd parts.

“Very well,” says the conductor. “Be my guest.” He walks down the steps of the platform, unlocks the padlocked cage, and gestures for Clark to enter.

## **Rachel**

Rachel followed her mother to a shaded picnic table on the outskirts of the fairground, just behind the striped circus tent she and her father had visited earlier. She knew the elephants were sheltered inside there, doing laps around the sawdust arena, blowing up at the canopy with their long, wrinkled trunks.

Proof dinosaurs still exist, her dad said.

Nah uh, Rachel said. But when she looked at their giant, scaly feet, their bony toenails the size of cracked ostrich eggs, the imprints and the grassy piles they left behind on the ground, Rachel thought maybe this time her dad wasn’t just trying to sell her one of his tall tales.

Maybe this time he was right.

Clark tugged the back of Rachel's ponytail and winked down at her in his magical way. Rachel forgot her urge to slug him in the arm.

And then, in the center of the arena, the spotlight followed as a baby elephant ran to its mother's side, its skin a soft, milky pink. Curling its trunk over its head, it stood on its hind legs and blew pink bubbles into the dusty tent air. The bubbles sparkled then burst in the spotlight, as if they had never been there at all.

A white elephant, Clark said. I've never seen a white elephant before. Promise me, Rachel, you won't forget?

Now, the smell of hay and elephant mingled in the breeze with the smoke drifting over the tents from the grill—hotdogs and hamburgers and fresh corn on the cob, sizzling to a charcoal black. Enough to make Rachel's mouth water.

The spongy white bread of her turkey sandwich melted into Rachel's fingertips, and she realized she was jumping from one foot to another on the crunchy, sunburnt grass.

Elise sat down on the wooden picnic bench beneath a low-hanging branch on the hickory tree. "Sit down and eat your sandwich," Elise said.

"Mom?" Rachel said, still hopping.

"Yes?" Elise peeled off her short, white gloves and tucked them into her white pocketbook, clipping it shut.

"I want to ride on one of the elephants," Rachel said. "It's a baby white one, white as a bar of soap. Dad promised I could."

“Well, sure,” Elise said. “If they let you and if you sit down and eat your sandwich first.”

“They’ll let me,” Rachel said, hopping onto the bench. She bit into her turkey sandwich. The bread dissolved on her tongue. “Do dinosaurs still exist?” she said. “Dad says they still exist, and they’re just like those elephants in there in that tent.”

“No, dear,” Elise said, looking over Rachel’s shoulder as if she were waiting on someone. Rachel wondered who.

“Are you sure?” Rachel said.

“Dinosaurs are extinct, dear. Didn’t they teach you that in school?” Elise pressed her lips together, bright and full with a careful, waxy red. Her black eyelashes fluttered like fans.

“Have you ever seen an elephant up close?” Rachel asked.

“Not too close,” Elise said.

“Then just you wait and see,” Rachel said. “They’re giant and they’re just like those woolly mammoth things from dinosaur times.” She placed the rest of her sandwich on the picnic table. “I’m done. Are you ready?” she said.

“Elise!” A woman’s voice called.

Rachel swiveled around to see Mrs. Ferguson walking toward them in a green polka-dotted navy dress. Her curly red hair twisted on top of her head like a stack of flapjacks. She waved at them, showing off her red-lacquered nails, filed to a fanglike tip.

Elise gave her a heavy smile and waved back. “Carol,” she said. “I was just thinking about ringing you the other day. How are the boys?”

“An absolute handful, as usual,” Carol Ferguson said. “They’re just so glad to be done with the school year, though. I can only imagine Rachel is too.” Carol blinked her large green eyes at Rachel and smiled.

Rachel crossed her legs Indian-style on the bench. Mrs. Ferguson wore a pearl necklace and pearl earrings, almost identical to her mother’s, only larger. Rachel didn’t know why women always wore pearls. She knew, when she grew up, she’d never gallivant around with them like that.

“Rachel, keep your legs together,” Elise said. “Mrs. Ferguson asked you a question.”

Rachel nodded and put her feet on the ground.

“Miss Tye was nice and all, but she sure didn’t know a thing about what she was doing,” Carol said.

“First year teaching,” Elise said. “I can understand.”

“Well, I suppose you’re right,” she said. “And it’s just so hard to control sixth-grade boys.” Carol let out a nasally laugh. “I should know.”

Two twin boys, about Rachel’s height, with curly tomato-colored hair sprinted to either side of Mrs. Ferguson.

Ernest, the chubbier of the two, stuck a plastic cowboy gun in the right pocket of his pleated slacks and tugged on his brown rope belt.

“Hey!” the other boy, Allen, said, smacking a piece of grape Dubble Bubble and popping it in his mouth. “What’s she doing here?”

“Yeah,” Ernest said, pointing at Rachel. “What’s she doing here?”

“Ernest, Allen,” Mrs. Ferguson said. “Now aren’t you two glad to see your classmate?”

“I got a right to be here just as much as anybody else,” Rachel said.

“Maybe you three would like to run along and see the elephants,” Elise suggested. “Rachel was just telling me they have a white one in there.”

“Elephants are stupid,” Allen said and swiped a black fly off of his freckled nose.

“Yeah,” Ernest said. “Stoo-pid.”

“Now, boys, you two be nice.” Mrs. Ferguson giggled. She looked at Elise. “I’m selling makeup this summer. Would you like to take a look? Lots of women are selling it nowadays. It’s a good brand.”

Allen pretended to shoot Rachel with his plastic gun, and Rachel placed her thumbs in her ears and stuck her tongue out at him.

“Sure,” Elise said. “I’ve been meaning to get a new powder.”

“I’ve got a fresh case in the car,” Carol said. “Now you three run along and see the elephants, and stay where we can see you. We’ll meet you in the tent.”

Carol and Elise walked toward the crowded parking lot, across the hot, matted-down grass. Rachel watched the bottoms of their dresses sway back and forth in unison as they disappeared behind a red pickup.

Rachel kicked a rock up from the ground and threw it at Allen’s feet.

“Hey,” Allen said. “What’s the idea?”

“That one’s a warning,” Rachel said. “If either of you tries to mess with me, I won’t miss the next time.” She sprinted for the elephant tent. “And I get to ride the

elephant first,” she called over her shoulder. “You know, since you think they’re so *stupid* and all!”

Ernest and Allen pulled out their plastic guns. “Get her!” Ernest yelled.

Rachel lifted the striped fabric of the elephant tent and peered inside. A crowd sat in metal bleachers surrounding the arena, their mouths half open in laughter, hands buried in large buckets of buttery popcorn, boxes of ripped-open cracker jacks. The tent could hold everyone who lived in town, Rachel thought. All the residents of Carta Rock were probably there in the stands, the light shining through the tent casting rainbow colors on their faces, star shapes. Even Mrs. Ferguson and her mother had probably slipped in through a secret flap opposite the entrance, just waiting to pull Rachel in with them on the bleachers and tell her to sit still.

Rachel heard gun sound effects behind her (*bang, bang*) and crawled under the bleachers to escape Ernest and Allen, their cowboy lassos and their cowboy guns. Her mother didn’t even like Mrs. Ferguson, the way she always talked about Daddy behind her back. Rachel didn’t know why the two of them always went off together, why women always pretended to get along all the while spreading rumors about each other. It’s town gossip, her mother would always say—rolling up her sleeves and stretching out the pie dough—and I’ll have nothing more to do with it. Quit giving them reasons to talk, Rachel



would hear her say to Daddy just before bed in the dark of their room, when she thought she and Collin were fast asleep beneath their blankets.

What's the difference between me giving it to them and them making it up, Clark would say.

Underneath the stands, Rachel could see the heels of people's shoes—loafers, sling backs, sandals, wedges, saddle shoes. Her tennis shoes filled with sawdust as she ran. Dirt and peanut shells stuck to the ruffles of her bobby socks. She ran faster when she felt the twins gaining on her, sensed their heavy stares on the back of her neck, heard their labored breathing over the laughter of the crowd. She ran through ticket stubs and spilt beer cans, the hard shells of sunflower seeds. The crowd cheered and clapped, mesmerized. Rachel searched past their ankles for the white elephant. She saw mother elephant balancing a hula hoop over her head, propping herself up with her front legs, while father elephant tossed rings at her. A group of clowns rode out on unicycles and then—

Rachel crashed into the moist belly of large mustached man.

“Hello, there,” he said. “What's the hurry?” He had a gold tooth and wore black liner around his eyes.

“You have a gold tooth,” Rachel said, looking up at him. He was the tallest man she had ever seen.

“Hey, mister,” Allen and Ernest shouted, finally catching up.

“We want to ride an elephant,” Allen said.

“I was here earlier, Sir,” Rachel said. “And I saw a baby white elephant. Do you know where he is?”

“I see,” the man said. “I’m sorry, he’s not here anymore.”

“Where’d he go?” Rachel asked. “See, my dad said I could have an elephant ride, but I don’t want to have one unless I can find the white one I saw earlier. Can you help me find him?”

“Wish I could help you, kid, but that one isn’t coming back out today. Maybe if you head to the fair the next town over. Next place we’ll be is Drayton.” The man turned to walk away.

“I should’ve known you were lying the whole time,” Allen said.

“Yeah,” Ernest said. “There’s no such thing as a white elephant, you liar.”

The mustached man stopped and turned to the side so Rachel could see the curl of his nose. “You might try the trailer by the house of mirrors,” he said. “Sometimes they let them stretch their legs a bit before they put them up.”

Rachel ran past the mustached man, past a clown with a tragic face juggling a thousand magic eight balls. “Thank you, Gold Tooth!” She called behind her. “You won’t be sorry you told me!”

Allen and Ernest followed closely behind.

Rachel ran through the rainbow tent fold. The cloth felt coarse and heavy as it scraped across her arm—not how she expected it to feel. At the other side, a skinny shirtless man walked across a path of burning coals like a swimmer balancing across a high dive.

Rachel halted.

The man wore a blue towel around his waist and had another wrapped around his head. His face and body glimmered with sweat, and Rachel could count each rib as the droplets rolled down his hairy sides. The man would have been her grandpa's age, she guessed, but his face had a hardness to it as though he'd never smiled, and she didn't think his chest would smell of minty resin or sweet pipe tobacco. More likely, this man never had a family to build things for or smile across the table at each night. He spent the better part of his days walking across this fire, thin arms out to his sides like an airplane, untouched and un-reacting, moving steadily forward. Black heel first, then charred toe.

Rachel wondered if her grandfather had a new family in the place the Lord had whisked him away to. The Lord is good to give, Aunt Peggy always said. Faithful to provide us what we need. Rachel wondered what the otherworldly version of herself looked like. Gray-and-blue zombie Rachel—bruise-colored—with her zombie grandpa, a zombie Collin and a zombie Clark.

A moist ball pelted the back of her neck. Rachel peeled it off her skin and turned around. "Dirt clod," she yelled at Allen and Ernest. "You two don't know who you're messing with." She flung the dirt clod back at them. Allen ducked. Rachel rolled another and pelted Ernest in the forehead.

“I’m gonna pummel you,” Ernest yelled, his freckled face turning the color of his hair.

“Oh, no you won’t,” Rachel yelled.

“Yes, I will,” Ernest said.

“No, you won’t,” Rachel said.

“Oh yeah,” Ernest said. “And why not?”

“Because I’m a lady, that’s why,” Rachel said. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you any manners?”

“Our mother didn’t teach us nothing,” Ernest said.

“If you’re such a lady,” Allen said, twirling his cowboy gun on his index finger. “How about you walk across those fire coals and prove it?”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” Rachel said. “And you two don’t have to follow me around all day, you know, just because our moms went off together.”

“You promised us a white elephant,” Allen said.

“Yeah, a white elephant,” Ernest said.

“Say, where’s your brother at anyway?” Allen said. “I’d like to see him walk across those hot coals.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Rachel said.

“It’d just be funny to watch a cripple try,” Allen said.

“My brother is not a cripple,” Rachel said.

“Oh sure,” Allen said. “That’s not what everybody else in town says.”

“Yeah,” Ernest said. “Everybody talks about it all the time.”

“Do you think I give a rat what stuck-ups like you and your mom have to say?” Rachel said. “And what are you two munchkins supposed to be, anyway, the Lollipop Guild? You two always have to repeat each other? I’m still bigger’n you, you know.”

Rachel held her shoulders up and marched toward Ernest and Allen. She’d been waiting to use that line on them since she and Clark saw *The Wizard of Oz* at the drive-in two weeks ago—the first drive-in movie she and her dad had gone to, just the two of them. Clark had laughed up at the screen and thrown popcorn at the windshield when Rachel said the munchkins looked like the Ferguson twins. I can see it, he said. Just don’t tell your mom.

How’d they get the movie in color back in those days? Rachel had asked.

Painted it, Clark said.

Painted it so true-to-life it looked fake, Rachel thought.

“Bigger than us or not,” Allen said, peddling back toward the elephant tent.

“Least we don’t have a cripple in our family like you do.”

Rachel eyed a small hill of elephant dung just behind Allen’s foot. “Say that to me one more time,” she said.

“Your brother,” Allen said. “Is a cripple.”

“Not any more than you’re gonna be.” Rachel shoved Allen into the elephant hill and took off running in the other direction.

“Don’t just stand there,” Allen called to Ernest. “Go get her.”

Rachel turned to see Ernest huffing behind her. She ran full speed toward the old man on the burning coals, the flames licking his heels. She'd show the Ferguson twins she could walk on hot coals if she wanted to.

Rachel took one leap where the burnt grass met the coal path. The fair stood still. The tragic clown suspended his magic eight balls in the air, his black frown frozen. Rachel landed on one foot in the middle of the coal path, sending the turbaned man wobbling. The smell of melting rubber reached her. She leapt up again and landed on the crunchy grass at the other side.

Ernest would have to run around the entire coal path to catch up to her now.

The white elephant—her mind raced—where could it be?

She would find it, and she would ride it, and from its height, she would spot her dad and her brother and pick them both up with the elephant's trunk, then the three of them would trample over Ernest and Allen and their cowboy guns—and their mom, too, if need be.

Gold Tooth had told her to look for the house of mirrors. She hadn't seen one when Clark brought her to the fair earlier. Did it really exist?

Rachel passed a happy man flipping burgers on the grill, children in cotton candy lines, sun-burnt and sticky-fingered. She ducked through crowds of teenage girls, heavily perfumed and cackling about if he'd kissed her yet and why not and if she'd known he

was such a dolt they'd never've gone out in the first place. She walked by dignified fathers rolling skee-balls up wooden slopes, determined to win small plastic baggies of bright goldfish for their daughters. A man swallowing fire on a thin wooden stick.

In a quiet corner, away from the crowd, a boy sat cross-legged atop a bundle of hay, leaning against a small red tent. A black felt fedora covered his eyes, and he played a harmonica in a low, mournful way. He slid the knot of a black spotted tie up and down his loose button-up shirt and hummed softly into his lap.

*Take me home, he sang. Where Mama won't cry nomore, where the waters rise, and I don't have to be ashamed.*

Something about the voice made Rachel want to tiptoe past, to get a good look at the singer and run away before she could be spotted.

She could not tell if it was a male or female voice.

*Take me home, it sang. I need to be near the shore. I ain't comin' back—no, ain't comin' back until I'm free.*

The singer looked up, pressed full red lips against the steel harmonica, sending more notes into the smoky air. Big green eyes from under the fedora met her. Haphazard black hair swept over the singer's face, a tattoo effect on pale-white skin. The singer grinned at her with the corner of her—his?—mouth, even as notes escaped from the harmonica.

Maybe he knew where she could find the house of mirrors. She knew she should keep searching, but she couldn't look away from the green eyes, the way they seemed to

look through her and know exactly where she was trying to go and what she needed to do to get there.

A gray and white poster hung by the singer's shoulder with red letters circling a woman's face: "THE WORLD'S MOST BEAUTIFUL BEARDED LADY," the poster said in all caps. The lady in the poster had a short, prickly beard—the length of her father's the month Elise referred to him as the Mountain Man and made him shave it all off.

"Hello, there." The singer hopped off the bundle of hay and tipped the black fedora at Rachel.

"You don't look like a lady," Rachel said. "And you don't have a beard."

The singer nodded and tucked her harmonica in her trouser pocket.

"Not to mention, you don't look like a gentleman, either. What are you?"

"I'm a gentleman, or a lady," the singer said. "Whichever you please."

"Then you're neither," Rachel said. "What do I call you?"

"I'm Chance," Chance said.

"I'm Rachel," Rachel said.

Chance nodded. "I know."

"Oh," Rachel said.

"Come in," Chance said, tying the flap of the red tent open with a golden rope.

"We've been expecting you."

"Expecting me?" Rachel said.

"We have something to tell you. Won't you come inside?"



“No, thanks,” Rachel said. “I can’t right now.”

“Then, you don’t want to know your fortune?” Chance said.

“I’m kind of in a hurry, you see,” Rachel said. “I’m looking for this elephant. Do you know where the house of mirrors is?”

“I know exactly where it is,” Chance said, grinning at her.

“Well?” Rachel said. “You gonna tell me? I’m good with directions. Tell me once and I’ll remember.”

“That so?” Chance said.

“Yes.” Rachel nodded.

“You won’t find the white elephant there,” Chance said. “But the house of mirrors will be your first stop.”

“And then what?”

“If you want to know the rest, you’ll need to come in.” Chance untied the golden rope and disappeared inside the red tent.

“Wait,” Rachel called after her. “The rest of what?”

Rachel stared at the tent’s motionless entrance and wondered what would meet her inside. What if the bearded lady breathed fire? What if beardedness was contagious and Rachel caught it, and it spread throughout the town? Could a lady with a beard really tell a fortune?

Never take any wooden nickels, Clark always told her.

That’s silly, Rachel would tell him. There’s no such thing as a wooden nickel.

Outside, Rachel would've guessed the tent was empty, made quiet and miniature by the bustling stands and games around it. She looked both ways to make sure no one was watching, then slipped inside the red fold.

The warm glow of a tall oil lamp greeted her. The single flame at the top of its golden spout was where the jinnee was supposed to escape after countless years of sleep. Rachel both dreaded and looked forward to the jinnee's release when her grandfather had read his copy of *A Thousand and One Nights* aloud to her and Collin one night in their Aunt Peggy's dimly lit guestroom.

What will your wishes be, my boy? Grandpa had said, rosy-cheeked, blue eyes wide as dinner plates.

Rachel laughed when Collin ran out of the room terrified. The dark jinnee in the picture floated above the tiny fisherman like a devil in king's clothes, seeking revenge for his captivity. A storm gathered over the sea behind him—purple and blue thunderclouds.

What will your wishes be, Rachel repeated. What an offer, she thought, to have anything your heart ever hoped for.

But for some reason—a mystery to Rachel—the fisherman tricked the jinnee back into his lamp. How does a jinnee, big and powerful as yourself, fit in such a small lamp, the fisherman said.

The fisherman was smart, you see, her grandfather said when only he and Rachel remained in the dark room. He knew a man ought not gamble with his fate. He knew a man ought not know certain things before his time. Grandfather stared off at the wooden rocking chair in the corner of the room when he said this, as though he were thinking of a

long ago time, as though the future could be his to decide if he wanted it. He didn't want it.

Dust flew from the pages when Grandfather clapped the book shut. I suppose it's time for bed, Little One, he said.

A sheer red curtain separated the rest of the tent from the oil lamp entrance. The lamp sat on a small cherry wood table with soft floral engravings: small roses and delicate leaves. The hay beneath Rachel's feet itched at her ankles. She saw Chance's thin black frame at the other side of the curtain, her white face blurred behind the sheer fabric, an underwater face.

Chance drew the fabric back and gave Rachel a half-smile. "Welcome," she said. "Come in."

The inner room of the tent opened to lamps, rugs, furs, furniture, objects from other worlds that collected at all corners of the tent, draped over chairs and tumbled across tabletops, stretched farther back than Rachel would have guessed possible from outside the tent. A burning stick on a small canoe of wood sent soft smoke into the air, warm and sweet and calm, the smell of rainwater. A small porcelain cherub looked on from a nearby treasure chest, next to a golden, Indian-style sitting man with his eyes closed, hands resting in his lap, small ruby dot between his eyebrows.

"Where did you get all this stuff?" Rachel asked.

"Here and there," Chance said. "We've been around for a long time."

"How long?" Rachel asked.

"Longer back than you can remember," Chance said. "Travelled around a bit."

“One day I’d like to travel,” Rachel said. “I’d like to travel the whole world. Fight outlaws. Discover new lands. Find a buried treasure.”

“Shh,” Chance said, covering her red lips with her index finger. “Do you hear that?”

“What?” Rachel said. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Listen,” Chance said. He grabbed Rachel’s shoulders and led her farther back in the tent.

Their feet shuffled across a plush leopard-print rug. As Rachel watched her tennis shoes fall next to Chance’s black loafers—right, left, right, left, teetering—she saw the black leopard spots melt together then spread out again, forming the outline of small white elephants, stacked head to head, heel to heel, on top of each other, balancing each other like stone statues or large clay jugs of water, a string of repeating reflections.

“White elephants,” Rachel said. “Did you see that?”

Chance kept walking straight ahead, his eyes fixed on a three-paneled room divider that said, “TROUPE” and “CENTERS OF ATTRACTION ON EARTH.” Images of women covered the panels: two women breathed fire into the air; another woman wrapped her hair into a bun and smiled in the basket of a hot air balloon. The woman on the middle panel danced on tiptoe, with a gold plate on her head, and stroked a brown beard with her right hand.

As they approached the panels, Rachel heard a woman’s voice humming a lullaby in high, sustaining tones. The notes lingered in the air and surrounded her—high, low, middle, high. Their echo off the objects in the tent felt strange to her even though the

song sounded familiar, a tune her mother may have hummed to her as a baby, rocking her to sleep in her arms, wrapped in a warm knit blanket.

The farther back they walked, the more the tent seemed to expand outward. Rachel peeked over her shoulder at the small dark fold of the entrance. The flame of the jinnee's lamp grew and cast lively shadows around her: an elephant reaching for a bamboo shoot in a sea of grass, a tiger chasing a long-legged doe, a wild hare laughing with sharp witch's teeth. The lullaby, too, grew louder. It shot out of the shadow-hare's mouth like smoke. A shadow-lady with long eyelashes and a feather in her hair caught the song in her mouth. Twirling a string of beads in her hand, she laughed and spat the song out again.

The tune hummed around Rachel and vibrated the panel of fire-breathing women. Rachel imagined them waving at her. *Goodbye*, they seemed to say. *We shan't see you here again.*

Chance held Rachel's hand and pushed the panel inward. Three chairs surrounded a circular wooden table. Behind the center chair, a woman with long, white-blonde hair dug through a stack of books as tall as her shoulders. The woman's hair waved down the back of her white lace dress.

As Rachel approached the table, she could not tell if the humming was coming from the woman or the books.

"Is she the bearded lady?" Rachel whispered.

“Have a seat,” Chance said, loosening his tie. At his wrist, a collection of six red-beaded bracelets clicked together as he took a seat at the table. Rachel sat down next to him.

The light-haired woman pulled a thick green book from the stack and turned around.

“Here it is!” the woman said. She slammed the green book on the table, allowing it to fall open at the middle. The humming stopped.

Another jinnee lamp with two tubes spiraling out of it sat at the middle of the table and blocked Rachel’s view of the woman’s face.

## TRIVIA

It's two weeks out to Thanksgiving and the Christmas creep is already upon us. The DC streetlights are decorated with wreaths and fake candles, entwined with the same red tinsel that, doubtless, coiled around them last year. No matter how you package it, the creep is the same in every city. It's so familiar that everyone either embraces it as part of the spirit of the nation or indifferently accepts its inevitability.

Catching the last ten seconds of the crosswalk, I run toward the metro station across the street from my office building. I invite the cold fall air whipping against my cheeks and the smiling faces of the metro greeters, their brilliant white teeth against full brown lips, their cerulean blue windbreakers and Nationals baseball caps, the incarnation of the Navy Yard's beautification program. Have a good evening, the greeters tell me, and I sprint down the escalators—immobile for the third time this week—disappearing into the darkness of the underground tunnel.

The concrete floor rumbles underneath my feet, and I spot my train on the platform below: green line toward Greenbelt. When I first moved here from St. Louis, I'd had to print off my metro route, emailed to me by the office's business executive along with my orientation information. You'll have to go around to the front gates and show the guards your ID, Dave had said. Nearly two months later, catching the train is now instinct.

I touch my SmarTrip card to the picture of its twin on the gate. It does not grant me access.

“It’s dead,” a bald, red-faced man tells me after my third or fourth try. “You’ll have to buy a new one.” He gestures toward the machines behind us and shuffles through the neighboring gate.

My large brown purse hits my hip when I spin around and run to one of the SmarTrip machines. Come on, I tell it—touch SmarTrip, select credit, swipe card, retouch SmarTrip, transaction complete. Two months working for the government and the Department of Transportation still hasn’t processed my request for Smart Benefits. I run back to the gate, touch my card, and run down the stairs to the platform just in time to see the tail of the train pulling away from the station. I check the yellow lights against the black monitor—three minutes till the next train. Thank goodness for five o’clock rush hour.

For the next three minutes, the honeycomb shapes on the metro floor and ceiling make me feel like I’m stuck in a beehive, and then I hop onto the train. Waterfront, L’enfant, Archives, Chinatown, Mt. Vernon Square—five stops, I used to have to count them all, watching every sign against the station walls and checking the map above the handicap seats, but now I settle into the orange seat nearest the doors and text Paul from my blackberry. *Turkey cutlets for dinner?*

It smells like burnt plastic in here. I wait for my phone to vibrate, holding it in my hand, staring at it. It doesn’t. I look up and see a young woman knitting something—a rainbow-colored something with circular patterns like the honeycomb tunnel. I look at the



woman's face. Our eyes lock like linking puzzle pieces, both of us wanting to look away but neither being able to.

I can't find my keys. Hugging two paper grocery bags, I prop the third against my thigh and the door and search my pockets. I'm considering how unfortunate it is that it's already getting dark and no one left the porch light on when the door opens from the inside. The third bag falls onto the wooden floor in the entrance way and two oranges roll down the hall.

"I'm so sorry," Lou says, picking up the stray bag, egg yolk already staining its outsides.

"Don't worry about it," I say. I set the two bags in front of my apartment door and retrieve my stubborn keys from my black coat pocket. I open the door, and Lou hands me the bag.

"I'll chase those oranges down for you," he says.

"Thanks, Lou."

The TV is on in the living room right inside the door, but it's offering the only light in the apartment. Paul still isn't home. I flip on the lights, check the clock, and walk to the kitchen, where I start unloading the groceries.

Lou peeks his head through the open door. "Think fast!" he says, fake tossing the oranges.

I jolt, nearly dropping a loaf of bread and packet of rice.

“Gotchya!” Lou walks to the kitchen and puts the oranges in the fruit basket.

“Do you know where Paul is?”

“Haven’t seen him today.”

“He said he’d be home right after work.”

Lou shrugs. “I’m not saying a word,” he says, inching toward the door.

“Trivia night tomorrow?”

“You bet,” he says. “I’m bringing a date.” He grins, biting his tongue.

“Anthony?” I ask.

“Anthony is so last week,” he says. “Someone better, this time.”

“Who?”

“You’ll see,” Lou winks and disappears into the hallway.

“Lou!” I shout after him.

“What?” Head popping in through the door.

“Shut that for me, will ya?”

He does, and I’m left to put away the groceries in the bare kitchen alone.

“You have to put the yarn in a loop then pull it across the needle,” she says. “I always thought of the yarn making camel humps, or mountains.” There’s a smile in her voice even though her face isn’t smiling, and our eyes lock again.

Somehow I am sitting on the orange seat next to her, not sure how I got there but it doesn’t matter now. I feel the pull. The lights in the metro tunnel streak across the

window behind her head, making weird designs against my eyelids like after you've just gotten your picture taken. I notice she is beautiful. She looks like color, or like she's just rolled out of something, like someone knit her together. I am mesmerized by the movement of her delicate tan fingers, weaving like spider's legs.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Holly. What's yours?"

"Stephanie," I say.

She tells me she has lived here all her life. She works as a waitress a couple blocks down from my building. I should visit her, she says. I figure she's around my age, about 25 or 26.

"Where'd you learn how to knit?" I ask.

"Just something I picked up."

It's my stop. I have to go, I say. We exchange numbers. I don't know why.

"Stephanie," a voice taunts me from the other side of the darkness.

I open my eyes to a red rose petal on my nose. It's Paul. I groan and roll over on the black leather coach.

"Stephanie." Paul tries again, shaking my shoulder this time. "Come on, I made dinner reservations."

"Dinner reservations?"

"Yeah, that sushi place I told you about. Remember?"

“You didn’t tell me about it.”

“Are you cooking something?”

I hear his shoes clink across the wood floor in our living room to the tile in our kitchen. “Turkey cutlets,” I say, rolling over again, still groggy.

He opens the oven. “Smells delicious.” Closes it. “I’ll pack this up for my lunch tomorrow while you go get changed.”

“Get changed?” I sit up and tiptoe in my sock feet over to him.

“Yeah, the restaurant’s kind of fancy.”

“Can’t we go some other night?”

“We’re going tonight.”

“I already made dinner.”

“How ‘bout you wear that blue dress you got hanging in the closet.”

I put my arms around his waist. “Why are you getting home so late?” I ask.

“Tell you at dinner.” He kisses my forehead then turns me around. “On second thought,” he says, eyeing me up and down. “Why don’t you wear the red one?” He gives me a slap on the behind, sending me toward our bedroom.

“You gonna come help me zip it up?” I ask over my shoulder.

“Maybe I’ll come help with the zipper after dinner,” he says, already digging out a plastic container for the turkey.

I've gained weight since I've been here, I can feel it in the way my red dress clings to my stomach. Paul says he doesn't notice, but I'm bundled in my black coat so I try not to think about it. He puts his hand around my back, and it's in this way he guides me through the streets of Chinatown. The uneven pavement challenges every step I make in these pointed black pumps, and I wish I hadn't worn them. I wish I were free to run across the street like the group of gray figures walking ahead of us, chased away by the streetlights.

"Are we there yet?"

"Almost," Paul says smiling down at me.

I hold the single red rose he brought me against my face, feeling ridiculous. Paul looks polished in his red tie and gray suit, the same one he wore earlier today to work. We moved here for his new job at the R.T. Camson Law Firm, and I lucked out falling into my government job with the help of some of Paul's old friends. We lucked out, the both of us, getting as far away from the city of the Arch as possible, away from Paul's ex wife, Eugenia. Paul doesn't like it when I bring her up.

"I met someone," I tell him.

"Yeah?" He asks, still navigating.

"I think I'm going to meet her for lunch tomorrow," I say, looking at his profile, his dark brown beard with interspersed grays, the crescent shape of his squinting green eyes. "She knits."

A bell jingles again and again down the block, calling people to give to charity.

"Here we are," Paul says. "Best sushi in DC."

The entire restaurant seems to be made of glass. It illuminates the sidewalk like a chandelier, and Paul opens the door for me. We pass through strips of cloth like torn bed sheets hanging from the ceiling to get to the hostess, who leads us to our seats.

An arrangement of red roses and white lilies centers our table. "I called ahead for those," Paul says, nodding toward the flowers and pushing my chair in for me. He's buttering me up for something, I don't know what.

"They're lovely," I say.

We write our order down on the sushi list using one of those mini pencils. Paul tries not to act irritated when I put a numerical "2" sign next to the salmon and avocado roll instead of two tallies. He starts talking about the guys at the firm and I stare at the chef artfully chopping chicken and fried rice on the open grill, a crowd of grinning spectators watching his performance at the table surrounding it. The orange gleam from the grill makes them look like kids telling ghost stories around a campfire.

"So what's going on?" I finally ask.

"Well," Paul starts then takes a sip of his water, iceless like he always drinks it. "Eugenia," he pauses with the name, eyeing me. "Eugenia is allowing Jason to stay with us."

"What do you mean? For how long?" My heart beats faster.

"Just a month or so. Thanksgiving into the holidays," he says.

The waiter comes by and scoops up the paper with our order.

"She's not going to visit, is she?" I ask.

Paul takes another sip of water, says he isn't sure.

I staple papers together for Dave's afternoon briefing. I know my position as staff officer is just a glorified name for secretary and I staple the papers harder against my desk.

"Bad day?" Gina asks. She's my only friend at the office, but isn't necessarily the kind of friend you would ask to hang out with outside of work. She's somewhere in her 50s, has been married and divorced three times, wears green-rimmed glasses and chopped black wigs—the kind of woman who puts on bulky bead necklaces and bright-colored lipstick. I remind her of her two children who are both in their mid-twenties, she tells me.

"Jason's staying with us over the holidays," I say.

"The son?" Gina asks, lowering her glasses on her nose.

I nod.

"What about the ex?" Gina asks.

"Paul says he doesn't know."

"I see. Let me finish with those papers. Sounds like you need a lunch break."

"I'm done with them." I stack the papers neatly in a pile and grab my coat. "I'm going to try a new place down the block. Want to come with?"

"No, ma'am. I'm staying in today. They're having a baby shower for one of my friends on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor."

Leaving, I pick up stack of papers and drop them in Dave's box hanging on the outside of his closed office door.

"Stephanie," Gina calls after me.

I turn.

“Don’t let him get away with it,” She says. She points to her left ring finger, which lets me know that the *him* she’s alluding to is Paul.

The light outside spills onto the sidewalk, and my eyes have to adjust. I call Holly from my cell phone and get an automated message. She must have a pay-by-the-minute phone. I walk down the block in the direction she told me her restaurant is and realize these are all office buildings. What was she talking about?

I’m about to give up and head back down M St., toward my office, when I see the back of Holly’s head a block away, her fluffy hair playing with the wind. She sits down on the curb, and her attention is fixed on a small object on the sidewalk next to her.

As I walk closer, I realize it’s some sort of doll she’s knitted: black hair, purple sweater, green pants, red shoes—colors that don’t even go together thrown into it, intricately combined.

Her honey-colored eyes look up at me from brown eyelashes when she hears my footsteps on the concrete come closer.

“What is that?” I ask.

“Just a doll I made,” she says.

We don’t have to greet each other in any way other than this, too familiar or too estranged for a warm smile or an ordinary hi.

“So where’s this restaurant you were talking about?”



She continues to play with the doll but leans her head back and I see a warm furnace of a building next to me that I hadn't noticed as I was walking. Far from being a restaurant, it looks like some sort of soup kitchen. The same homeless man I've seen begging for spare change or a banana in front of the Starbucks down the road is lined up at the door with his tray.

I look at Holly, her quilt-like skirt, patches of patterns. "Do you like it?" she asks.

"Like what?"

She holds up the doll.

"It's pretty," I say, noticing beadwork on the doll's purple sweater that I hadn't seen before.

"I can make one for the baby," she says.

Had I told her about Jason? "I don't think he'll want that," I say.

"No," she says. "Yours."

"But I'm not—" I try to laugh it off. She doesn't smile back. "Look, my friends and I do trivia night at Sunny's on U St. every Wednesday," I say. "You want to come?"

She nods, and I give her the directions from the metro as best as possible. I tell her to call me if she gets lost, but I know she can't if she doesn't put more minutes on her phone. She tells me she has to get back to work and slips into the furnace-room, its heat warming my cheeks on the way down the street.

## CENTERFIELD

Clark flicks his cigarette onto the field as he walks to the passenger-side door and lifts Collin, five years old, out of his seat.

“I’m gonna be just like Babe Ruth, huh, Daddy?” Collin asks.

“Why don’t we start with pitching?” Clark mumbles, setting the boy down and eyeing the metal braces surrounding both of his son’s dimpled legs. The braces gleam orange in the sunset, and Clark throws the miniature bat over his shoulder, fingering the baseball in his corduroy pocket and listening to the squeak of his son’s steps behind him.

They arrive in centerfield, and Clark studies the squares other kids had outlined with sticks for bases. “Here,” Clark says, tossing the ball to Collin, whose open leather glove allows it to roll past. Collin’s thin blond hair rides for a moment on the wind as he retrieves the ball.

“Come on now, slugger,” Clark says, squinting and wiping the sweat from his brow.

Collin returns the pass, landing the ball in his father’s lowered glove. “You pitch it to me,” the boy says.

“I don’t know, buddy...” Clark rubs the rough five-o-clock shadow on his chin.

“Mom says I can hit a homerun if I want to,” Collin says, kicking up dust with his foot.

Clark nods toward home plate, and the boy teeters over to it, bat in hand.

“Ready?” Clark asks.

Collin nods, biting his lip and positioning the bat behind his neck.

Clark releases the ball from his grip. It swims across the air, makes contact with the bat. *Thwack!*

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Chrystine A. Kern graduated from Ad Fontes Academy in Centreville, Virginia, in 2005. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English – Creative Writing from James Madison University in 2009. Her poetry and short fiction have been featured in three of JMU’s literary magazines: *Hopscotch*, *Gardy Loo*, and *Sister Speak*. She is co-author and editor of four young adult novels published by Tate Publishing and Enterprises, LLC. The most recent novel, *Atlantys*, was released in January 2015.