

Little Accidents

by

Laura Ashworth

A Practicum Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Approved April 2012 by the  
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Melissa Pritchard, Chair  
Tara Ison  
Peter Turchi

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2012

## ABSTRACT

This thesis contains stories about loss and the trauma that's felt in its wake. Within all of these stories, characters struggle with the notion of "healing" and "moving on." Whether it be a young boy who deals with his grief by cannibalizing his mother in "A Simple Request", or a teenage girl who wishes her chronically suicidal mother would finally kill herself in "Little Accidents," all stories within this collection explore the very unique, and human ways, in which people deal with grief.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
1	CRACKED..... 1
	Section 1..... 1
	Section 2..... 1
2	STAR SWALLOWER..... 2
	Section 1..... 2
	Section 2..... 2
3	THE YELLOW DRESS ..... 3
	Section 1..... 3
	Section 2..... 3
4	LITTLE ACCIDENTS ..... 4
	Section 1..... 4
	Section 2..... 4
5	COME AGAIN ..... 5
	Section 1..... 5
	Section 2..... 5
6	FROM THE SEA..... 6
	Section 1..... 6
	Section 2..... 6
7	A SIMPLE REQUEST ..... 7
	Section 1..... 7
	Section 2..... 7

Page	CHAPTER	
8	VLOG, CECILIA .....	8
	Section 1.....	8
	Section 2.....	8
9	TO AUSTRIA!.....	9
	Section 1.....	9
	Section 2.....	9
10	WHERE SHE'S FROM: A JOKE TOLD BY THE PREACHER ..	
	10	
	Section 1.....	10
	Section 2.....	10
	REFERENCES .....	10

## CHAPTER 1

### CRACKED

Andrea watched from the window of her beach house as hundreds of glowing amber eggs arrived with the waves during hurricane Ophelia. The eggs were the size of baseballs. After the storm she stepped onto the beach and touched the sea-soaked spheres. Their glow reminded her of nightlights. Small blue veins circled each egg's thick shell in various patterns. She held an egg in her palm and placed it deep within the pocket of her bathrobe. Andrea felt the warmth from the egg press against her outer thigh as she walked toward the house. Her next-door neighbor, Rita, crouched on the ground nearby and examined the mysterious arrivals.

“Hey Andrea,” Rita called. “Hold on a sec.”

Andrea stood on her front porch. It was dark outside and there was only a sliver of moon in the sky. “What is it?” Andrea asked. The egg shone through her thin bathrobe. She placed her hand inside the bathrobe's pocket and cupped her palm around the egg to dim its light.

Rita held a large piece of driftwood in her hand and poked at an especially bright egg on the beach. “I called the local university.”

“And what did they say?”

“They're going to send some Marine Biologist out to collect them.” Rita threw the piece of driftwood towards the ocean. An egg rested close to her foot. Andrea worried she might crush it.

“Okay,” Andrea said. “Be careful.” She pointed to the egg near Rita’s foot.

“Can you help me watch the eggs until they get here? They don’t want anybody stealing them.”

“Sure,” Andrea replied. “Just give me a minute.” Andrea reached inside her bathrobe’s pocket and ran her thumb along the smooth surface of the egg’s warm shell. This bathrobe was older than her. It used to be her mother’s. She’d taken the bathrobe a few days ago when visiting her in the nursing home.

“Take your time,” Rita replied. “I’ll be here when you get back.” Rita put on yellow gloves, the kind of gloves people clean toilets with, and began collecting the eggs scattered along the beach. She placed their glowing, round bodies into an old fishing net. The net was filling up fast. “Also, Andrea, if you’ve got anything net-like lying around inside your mother’s house could you bring it? One of those laundry bags would even work probably.”

Net-like? Sure. “I’ll look.” Andrea replied. For about two months now Andrea had lived at her mother’s house. She couldn’t pay the mortgage on her own house anymore. She’d lost her job.

Andrea placed the egg from the beach inside the bathtub. She ran water over the egg and left the faucet on. She thought the running water might mimic the movement of the ocean and make the egg feel more at home. She closed the shower curtain around the bathtub and sat on the toilet to remove her tampon. The tampon appeared bloodier than usual. The light from the egg bled through the red shower curtain and made the bathtub look like it was on fire. She took a pair of scissors resting by the sink and held a large chunk of her curly hair between her

fingers and cut. Her long hair had become burdensome lately. She had tired of how the dirty blonde hair knotted and clumped. She wanted it gone.

Next, Andrea searched for anything net-like. She peered out the window onto the beach. It was so dark outside. Barely any stars were visible. The eggs looked like balls of light in Rita's hands. Rita tossed the eggs into the fishing net and then collected more off the beach. She worked well by herself and Andrea thought Rita might not miss her company after all. Andrea avoided company as much as possible these days. Being around people made her skin burn with anxiety.

She checked on the egg again. The tepid bathwater continued to run from the bathtub's faucet. Andrea touched the egg with the back of her hand. She ran her knuckles across its warm body. When Rita knocked on the front door, Andrea ignored it at first. But the knock continued for some time and eventually she answered.

Andrea opened the front door only slightly to address Rita. "What happened to you? I thought you'd be right back?" Rita took off her yellow gloves and placed them over the front porch's railing. "I could've really used some help out there, you know."

"I'm sorry," Andrea replied, but she wasn't sorry. "I forgot."

"You don't look okay," Rita remarked. "What's wrong?" Andrea's hair appeared distinctively shorter and uneven. "Why did you do that to your hair?" Andrea ignored the question. She placed a short tendril behind her ear defiantly. Rita asked, "What's going on with you?"

“I’m fine. Just like I was fine yesterday and the day before that,” Andrea replied. “Don’t worry about me, please.”

“But what would your mother say? Lord save me, if she could see you now. I promised her I’d watch over you. You’re not making this easy on me. Not in the least.”

“You really, really don’t need to watch over me. Like I said before, I’m fine.” Andrea hated when Rita referred to her mother in the past tense. Her mother wasn’t dead. She just couldn’t remember anything. She had Alzheimer’s. Andrea looked past Rita to the beach. There were a few dots spread across the sand like small points of amber fire on the horizon. “Do you still need help getting those eggs?”

Rita sighed loudly and put her yellow gloves back on. “Well come on then.”

Andrea knelt down next to Rita and reached for a particular egg with blue veins in the shape of a heart. Rita slapped Andrea’s hand away. “What on earth are you doing? Don’t touch that thing with your bare hands. You just don’t know. They might be poisonous.”

“I wasn’t thinking about that, I guess.” Andrea never thought about danger anymore. Rita handed her a pair of yellow gloves.

“You know, I’ve lived on this beach for over twenty years and I’ve never seen anything like this.” Rita held an egg up to the night’s sky. It made the egg look even brighter. “These eggs worry me. I can’t explain it, but they worry the living daylights out of me.”

“Yeah,” Andrea replied, but she wasn’t paying attention. She’d spotted an



egg off in the distance and it burned like a warning. "I'll be right back," she said. She walked towards the egg and farther away from Rita. When she reached the egg she realized this egg looked very similar to the one in her bathtub. She glanced at Rita to make sure her nosey neighbor wasn't watching and took off her gloves. She felt the egg with her fingertips and pressed its shell against her cold, wind burned cheek. The egg's shell felt like her husband's forehead when feverish. Normally, Tom's feverish forehead wouldn't bring comfort to Andrea, but anything to remind her of Tom comforted her now. He'd been dead over a year. She heard Rita shouting her name. "Andrea, Andrea!" There was another person on the beach next to Rita. This must be the Marine Biologist.

Andrea put the new egg in her bathrobe's pocket. She waived at Rita, but pretended she couldn't hear anything Rita shouted. She took the long way home across the sand dunes. As she walked towards her house, Andrea felt something kick from inside the egg's shell. She tapped her index finger against the shell in return. She thought the light tap might soothe whatever lay inside. Let it know she was there. I'm here. Right here.

Andrea placed the new egg in the bathtub next to the egg she'd found earlier that night. She turned the bathtub's faucet off. She had devised a better plan. The eggs had arrived with the waves, Andrea deduced, and so were most likely from somewhere deep within the ocean. She would recreate this ocean in her bathtub.

Rita sat on her front porch repetitively clicking a pen with her thumb. She watched her neighbor. Andrea carried buckets to and from the beach. It was almost three o'clock in the morning and this activity alarmed Rita. "What on earth

are you doing, Andrea?"

Andrea put the heavy bucket filled with seawater onto the sand. She scratched the bridge of her nose. "I forgot to get water earlier."

Of course, Rita thought. "For what?"

"It's for a project I'm working on," Andrea replied. Why did Rita have to know everything? She always bothers me, Andrea thought. "I told you about it, right?"

"No?"

"I'm doing this artsy, crafty thing in my house, a little redecorating, nothing special though. "

Rita stopped clicking her pen. "You need any help?" She hoped Andrea didn't, but felt she should offer. It was the neighborly thing to do.

"No, don't worry yourself. I've got this," Andrea replied. "I'm enjoying the fresh air."

Andrea picked up the bucket and walked towards her house, but stopped suddenly. She couldn't help herself. She had to ask. "By the way, Rita. Did the Marine Biologist take all the eggs? I mean, are there any left on the beach do you think?"

"Oh, no. He took the lot away. Thank goodness."

"Oh," Andrea replied. One more egg. That's all she had wanted.

Andrea carried the final bucket of seawater into the bathroom. The water splashed from side to side within its plastic container and made the same sound waves make while bumping gently against docks. She'd always liked the sound of

contained water. She used pillows and Tom's old sweatshirts to make a bed that night. She slept by the bathtub. She wouldn't leave the eggs alone. If something happened and she wasn't there to save them, Andrea would never forgive herself. She played a CD of whale songs. These songs had helped her sleep ever since Tom's death. She thought these songs might help the eggs, too. She put a particular song on repeat. It was a song that made Andrea feel like there might still be something bigger out there, something stronger than grief. It gave her hope.

The next morning Rita knocked persistently on Andrea's front door. The knocking woke her. She didn't invite Rita inside and only opened the door a crack. Body language speaks volumes about people, Rita always said. And so Andrea wondered, why didn't Rita ever pick up on hers?

"I'm here to invite you to tea," Rita announced. "Say in an hour?"

"I really can't. I'm extremely busy with all this redecorating. Thanks though." Andrea slipped on a piece of seaweed by her front door. She closed the door on Rita and waited for the inevitable knock. Knock. She opened the door again. It wasn't that easy to get rid of her neighbor.

"What are you busy with?"

"My arts and crafts, like I said. I'm redecorating," Andrea answered, too quickly.

Rita sensed Andrea was lying. "Andrea, it can't wait. We have to talk about something." She placed her hands assertively on her hips. "I know about it, about what happened, and I can help."

Andrea worried Rita was talking about the eggs. If Rita knew about the eggs then Andrea had to reason with her. She had to beg her not to tell anyone. If she didn't beg, Rita would call the Marine Biologist and he'd take the eggs away. Andrea couldn't handle that scenario. It would kill her. "Fine, you're right. We should talk. I'll be over in an hour."

Rita smiled. Her smile caught Andrea off guard. "Good," Rita said. "I'll make scones, too."

Before Andrea left for Rita's she gathered seaweed from the beach. She felt guilty about leaving the eggs alone. She wrapped the eggs in the seaweed's leathery, green chords and hoped they'd remain safely cushioned inside. "There, there, now," Andrea said to the eggs. "Don't worry. I'll be back soon."

Rita's house looked like the inside of a very messy Mermaid's treasure chest and smelled like the moist inside of a cupcake. Rita was a hoarder. She had lived in England from the ages of nine to twelve. "She thinks she's British because of it. She's always inviting me over for tea and scones," Andrea's mother once said. She used to talk behind Rita's back all the time. This was before she forgot who Rita was, a small blessing her mother's illness had afforded, Andrea thought.

Rita poured Andrea's tea into a white teacup. The teacup appeared to be the only thing clean and orderly within Rita's kitchen. "I hope you like Yorkshire tea," Rita said. Her British accent was back. Rita never spoke with a British accent unless drinking tea. Usually, she sounded very American. "Yorkshire tea was my mum's favorite," Rita continued, and placed the teacup to her lips.

“Was your mother British?” Andrea couldn’t remember if she’d asked Rita this question before. She blocked most of their conversations out.

“My mum was from the Bronx,” Rita replied. Her British accent grew stronger. “That’s in New York.” Rita’s mother died when she was twelve. She died in England and was thrown from a car into a grassy, wet field.

Andrea blew into the teacup because it was something to do. Her breath created a whirlpool within the cup. Rita’s hand snaked towards Andrea’s head from across the table. Andrea flinched when Rita touched her. What the hell was she doing? Andrea wondered. Rita opened her fist. She produced a piece of seaweed in her palm like magic. “How did you get seaweed in your hair?” But Rita didn’t give Andrea time to answer the question. “More tea?”

Andrea glanced down at her teacup. It was almost empty. The tea, she now realized, had burned her throat. She hadn’t felt the burn while drinking. “Listen,” Andrea said. “Let’s just get this out of the way. About the eggs, I—”

“What about the eggs?” Rita interrupted.

“You know about the eggs, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t know anything about the eggs yet. The Marine Biologist hasn’t called.”

“That’s a shame,” Andrea replied. She let out a deep breath. “Let me know if you hear anything. I’d like to know more about those eggs.” Andrea was relieved. Obviously Rita didn’t suspect anything. She looked at the seaweed on the table and wondered if the eggs in the bathtub missed her.

Rita snapped her fingers in front of Andrea’s face. “Andrea, hello?”

“Oh sorry, what?”

“We need to talk about something.”

“Talk about something?”

Rita readjusted her posture and cleared her throat. “We need to talk about Tom. We need to talk about what his death is doing to you.”

Andrea felt flushed. Absolutely not, there’s no way. “No, I don’t want to talk about that. Let’s talk about something else instead.” She meditated on the eggs in the bathtub. They shone so brightly in her meditation. She opened her mouth and the light moved into her. There was no Rita in this light-filled place. No sick mother. No Tom. No death. She steadied her breath. Rita swam back into view. “On second thought, Rita. I better go. I’ve got a lot of work to do tonight.”

“Listen Andrea, I know about things.”

“What things?”

“I know what it’s like to lose a husband.”

Andrea bit her lip until she felt pain. It took so long for her to feel things nowadays. Sometimes she placed her hand on the hot kettle in her kitchen for minutes before feeling the burn. Finally, she asked, “When did you lose your husband?”

“In Vietnam,” Rita replied. “It’s been almost forty five years since he died.”

“I’m sorry,” Andrea replied, and she meant it. This was the first time she’d ever felt sorry for Rita. The first time she’d ever felt anything other than irritated towards the older woman.

“Let’s talk about Tom,” Rita said. “How did it happen, if you don’t mind

me asking? How did he die?"

But I do mind you asking, Andrea thought. I do. It's none of your business. How did it happen? How exactly did it feel? They told me, Tom, that you died from an improvised explosive device. You were three days into your fourth tour in Afghanistan. These devices, the Army informed me, are homemade bombs. The explosive device that killed you, Tom, was buried in the desert on the outskirts of Kandahar. The Army assured me it happened quickly and that you didn't feel a thing.

"I have to go, Rita."

After escaping Rita's, Andrea stood outside the bathroom door and wondered if the eggs could sense her presence. She felt they grew brighter whenever she entered the room. It was only the second day since she'd found them, but already she worried they might not hatch. That night she decided body heat might speed the process along, act as an incubator. In the ocean the eggs most likely had a mother and they were probably grieving her loss. Andrea would be their mother now.

She took off her clothes and stepped into the warm saltwater bath. She nestled the eggs between her thighs and felt their warm shells press against her and moved her arms in circles, creating small currents in the water. The eggs welcomed the movement and kicked their replies against Andrea. She placed her hands against her breasts and traced a line with her fingertips down her chest, stomach, pelvis, until she reached the warm eggs between her legs. The eggs' shells felt smooth. She closed her eyes and cupped her hands around the eggs.

This must be what birth feels like. The head, the warm orbs between her legs, pushing out into the world.

She was pregnant once, but lost the child. Another time she wasn't pregnant, but told everyone she was. The pregnancy lie began at Tom's funeral. She felt so empty. And Tom's mother, Harriet, wouldn't stop crying. She cried and cried and it hurt too much. Andrea had to make Harriet smile. And so Andrea said, "I'm pregnant." After this admission, Andrea spent months living inside the lie of the pregnancy. She bought a padded stomach and wore it everywhere. Everyone thought Andrea was eight months pregnant when she broke the news of the lie. "There was never any baby," she'd said. And Harriet never forgave her.

In the bathtub Andrea removed the eggs from between her thighs and closed her eyes. She placed their bright shells against her chest. The eggs' warmth beat their way into her. "It's twins," she whispered. "Harriet, it's twins." She pretended Harriet was there. She opened her eyes and stared into the empty space above the toilet. She willed herself to believe Harriet sat down in that empty space and held the eggs towards Harriet like an offering. And Harriet reached for the eggs. She cradled them in her arms, saying "Tom, Tom, Tom's."

Rita knocked on Andrea's door the next morning, but there was no answer. She found the spare key and let herself in. None of the lights inside the house would turn on. She flipped every switch. She wondered how long Andrea had gone without power. Rita opened the curtains and let natural light seep into the house. Her surroundings became clearer. The house had changed since Rita last entered it a few months ago to visit Andrea's mother. There were seashells super



glued to the walls and seaweed, which smelled of rotten fish, draped over the furniture like cushion covers.

Rita made her way towards Andrea's bedroom. The air conditioning, like the electricity, wasn't working. Rita needed gills. It was too humid. Andrea wasn't in her bedroom and there was only one room left in the house that Rita hadn't checked.

The bathroom door was closed and covered in seaweed. "Andrea," Rita called. She heard splashing from inside the bathroom. "Andrea, are you in there?"

Andrea had slept the night before in the bathtub. She hadn't left the water, or the eggs, for over twelve hours. Rita's voice surprised her. "Don't come in," Andrea shouted from behind the door. She held the eggs in her hands at the time. They grew brighter when she talked. "Don't-open-the-door-Rita, please."

Rita ignored this request and jiggled the door's handle. It was locked. "But I want to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine. Just go away, please."

"Like hell you're fine. I've seen what you've done to this house. Redecorating my ass Andrea! It's total chaos in here."

"You don't like the seaweed?"

Andrea's earnest tone worried Rita. "That's it," Rita said. "You need some professional help."

Andrea remained in the bathtub. Moments passed and Rita said nothing. She assumed Rita had left, but then heard a strange squeaking noise coming from the other side of the door. Rita never gave up that easily. She had taken the bathroom

door's handle off with a screwdriver.

When Rita entered the bathroom everything was dark except for the two glowing amber orbs between Andrea's splayed legs. Rita took her glasses off, dusted the glasses on her shirt, and put them back on. But it looked the same. The eggs were still there, still between Andrea's legs.

"I told you not to come in here," Andrea screamed. She had covered the eggs as much as possible, but knew Rita had seen them by now.

Rita pointed to the faint glow of the eggs, a dim pulse, beating from underneath the water. "Are those what I think they are? I can't believe you did this. What if they hatch?"

"That's the point. I want them to hatch," Andrea replied. She placed one of the eggs against her naked chest.

Rita felt faint. She couldn't believe any of this. "Are you kidding me? Anything could be inside those things? They could be extremely dangerous. Don't you get it?" Rita sat on the closed toilet seat. She appeared defeated for a moment, but then regained her composure. Andrea remained in the bathtub. She would not budge. The amber glow of the eggs illuminated her naked body like firelight.

"I won't abandon these eggs," Andrea said. "I won't do it. I don't care what hatches. I'll love whatever's inside them. "

Rita moved towards the bathtub. "You've lost it, Andrea." She reached into the water and attempted to grab the eggs. Andrea bit her arm.

"Don't you dare," Andrea said. "If you come near these eggs again I'll bite you harder."

The bathtub's water appeared pink from the droplet's of Rita's blood. There was blood around the edges of Andrea's mouth as well. She wiped it away with the back of her hand. Rita would need stitches. The bite was deep. She took a clump of knotted seaweed from the door and applied pressure to the wound. "I'll figure this out later," she said. She used her free hand and pointed towards Andrea in the bathtub. "This needs to be figured out."

A police officer knocked on Andrea's door a few hours after Rita left. The Marine Biologist, who collected the eggs off the beach three days ago, accompanied the Officer. He carried a small aquarium. Andrea was much calmer than earlier that day.

She ushered her guests inside. The Officer found a small section of the loveseat in the living room that wasn't covered in seaweed and sat down. The Marine Biologist stood. "Are you Mrs. Andrea Parker?" the Officer asked.

"Yes. I am."

"Rita Brown has agreed to drop the assault charges she's filed against you if you cooperate with us."

Assault charges for what? Andrea wondered. What did I do? "Cooperate how?"

The Marine Biologist was a short man with a bald spot in the shape of a tooth. He tapped on the glass of his aquarium and said, "If you give us those eggs you've got stashed away somewhere Mrs. Brown said she'd drop the charges. We don't understand what's inside those eggs yet. It will be safer for everyone if you hand them over."

Andrea laughed for an uncomfortable period of time. She ran her hand back and forth over the seaweed on the couch as if petting an animal. “I don’t know what Rita’s been telling you gentlemen. I mean, yes, I bit her. But I bit her because she broke into my house and attacked me in the bathtub. Did she fail to leave that part out?” The officer took note of this new fact. Andrea continued. “Also, I don’t have any of those eggs you’re talking about. I never took any. In fact, I’m the one who helped watch them while you took your damn time getting to the beach that day.” Andrea glared at the Marine Biologist. In response, he tapped on the aquarium’s glass much louder.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Parker,” the officer replied. “Mrs. Brown failed to mention her bite took place during a breaking and entering.”

“It’s alright, misunderstandings happen.” Andrea paused and considered something carefully. “I don’t want to press charges Officer. Rita’s heart was in the right place. She just gets confused sometimes.”

“We’ll see what we can do about this,” the Officer said. “I’ll be in touch soon.”

After they left, Andrea knew she’d be seeing them again. Rita would not back down. She never did. But let them lock me away if Rita wants, Andrea thought. They’ll never find anything. Never find my eggs. It was already done. She had done it. There were no more worries. She had hid the eggs in the only place no one would ever think to look. Andrea had placed the eggs between her legs that afternoon and pushed and pushed their amber moons into her body, into her womb, until she felt them kick from the inside.

## CHAPTER 2

### STAR SWALLOWER

Sheryl fiddled with the medical bracelet around her wrist. She took a dull knife from the cafe table and cut into the plastic band. “I was just a small girl when I ate a piece of the meteorite,” she said.

“Yeah, mom, I know. You’ve already told me this story.” Elise took a napkin and dried the damp ends of her hair. It was raining outside. She sat across from her mother at the cafe and examined the menu. “Do you want the chili cheese fries or just the plain ones?”

Sheryl ignored the question. “I was just eleven and it was a dare. The boy from down the street told me that if I ate a piece of the meteorite he’d give me a dollar and he did. I found a hammer in your Grandpa’s toolbox. I crushed the fallen star into little bite-sized pieces.”

Elise sighed. “I think the plain fries sound better. Plus, less fattening.” Elise needed to lose weight so she could fit into her old clothes again. She couldn’t afford to buy new ones. She’d gained twenty pounds this time. She always ate more when her mom was in the Psych ward. She wore a pair of her mom’s pink sweatpants today, instead of her usual skirt and blouse, and even the sweatpants felt constrictive.

“I still don’t see why we couldn’t go for a picnic in the woods.”

Elise put her hands underneath the table. She loosened the strings on her sweatpants. “You know why. You’ll just start eating rocks again if we go for a picnic. You’ve gone five months without eating them, Mom. I really want you to stop this time. Plus, it’s raining like crazy outside.” Elise stood. She removed the white string from her sweatpants and suffocated the string inside her fist.

“It’s just hard to stop once you’ve gotten a taste for it. Nothing tastes better than rocks, not even caviar.” Sheryl tapped her index finger against a glass of water and looked outside towards the earthy ground beyond the parking lot. Elise placed her hand gently over Sheryl’s.

“You’ve never even tasted caviar,” Elise replied. She put a straw between her lips like a cigarette and wished she’d never quit smoking. Elise looked out the window. The wind picked up and trees bent as if they might break. Inside the cafe Elise heard a weatherman on the television talk about the hurricane. The hurricane was supposed to turn into a tropical storm before it reached Virginia, but had picked up speed somewhere off the coast of North Carolina. Elise had always wanted to visit North Carolina, or anywhere for that matter, but she’d never even left Richmond. Her mother required constant supervision and there was no one else to help Sheryl but Elise.

The weatherman on the television in the cafe looked a little like Elise’s Father. He said *gale force winds* and *hale* much like her Father used to, but she knew it wasn’t him. Elise’s Father was a weatherman. He left almost thirty years ago when she was four. He said, “I’m just going out to get you a birthday present,

sugar,” and never returned. Sheryl thought that maybe a storm had gotten him and told Elise, “Your Daddy was taken away by a twister like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*.” But Elise eventually figured it out. Her Father left because of Sheryl and the rocks. He left because he couldn’t take it anymore. It hurt too much.

The rain beat against the windows of the cafe so hard Elise worried the glass might break. “Judging from the looks of this storm, I think we’re going to be here for awhile,” she said. Sheryl nodded her head. The waitress finally took their order. Elise ordered the plain fries and a Long Island Iced Tea. Her mother asked if the cook could make the fries extra crispy. I like my food hard as a rock, Sheryl said, and tough to chew. The waitress smiled a false smile. Elise felt the sweatpants dig into her stomach and couldn’t breathe. The lights flickered inside the cafe and turned off. Outside, a tree fell in the wind and onto a car.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE YELLOW DRESS

Eileen's gardener found the starlet floating face down in the pool. He held begonias at the time, the feel of their fresh stems against his sweaty palms. He dropped the flowers into the water during his rush to save her. There's a famous, maudlin picture of this scene now. Eileen's neighbor took this picture with his telephoto lens from his balcony while he waited for his coffee to cool. He sold the image of course. In the picture, Eileen's wearing a purple bathing suit as she's dragged from the water by the gardener. Begonias decorate the pools cool blues with their pink and white hues. Her margarita waits by the side of the water. This margarita glass has since gone missing. It's rumored to have a dark red lipstick print of Eileen's on the salt-heavy rim. *Her lips have gone missing*, a tabloid misprinted. *Someone stole them for a final kiss.*

\*\*\*

On the ride from LAX to Eileen's mansion in the Hollywood Hills, Rose sat in the backseat, attempting to drown her mother's voice out. "Everyone knew this would eventually happen," Mrs. DeWitt said. She offered the taxi driver a stick of gum, but he declined. "Dead at forty-two, well, I'd say it was a shame if I hadn't known the woman." Mrs. Dewitt sat next to the driver, her pale, doll-like hands resting in her lap. She wore a large fake diamond ring that Rose's father



had given her twenty-eight years ago. They were married a month. He left his wife and their newborn daughter while she waited in a drugstore checkout line to buy diapers. He said, *I've just got to go get some sleeping pills for when the baby cries tonight* but never returned. But Mrs. DeWitt hasn't taken the wedding ring off since though, believing in the eventual decency of husbands.

"We're only staying three days. It's just long enough to get Eileen's things in order. Of course we have to go to the funeral. It would look terrible if we didn't go. The house, obviously, we're putting the house up for sale. Rose can't live in a house like that. It wouldn't be good for a girl like her." Mrs. DeWitt spoke as if Rose wasn't there. She did this often. "No one knows we're in town. The press would have a field day, wouldn't they, sweetheart?"

"You're talking to me?"

"Don't be silly. I'm asking you a question."

"I guess so." Rose replied. She wished her mother had stayed in Syracuse like she'd begged the older woman to do. The meddlesome woman always visited Rose back home. And Rose needed a vacation, time to herself. Every daughter deserves a break from her mother. Back home in Syracuse, Mrs. DeWitt stopped by almost everyday. *Just checking in*, she would say, code for, *Just making sure you're staying sober*, code for, *Just making sure we don't have to send you packing back to rehab again*.

"Rose was a child actress." Sybil continued. She looked at the Taxi driver to make sure he was still listening and concluded that he was. "But we decided

acting was too stressful for her fragile constitution.” We did. More like Mom did, Rose thought.

“I don’t think he needs to know all this,” Rose said. “He’s not writing my biography.”

“Nonsense, I’m sure he wants to hear it. He must get bored driving people to and from the airport all day long. A little conversation is welcomed. I’m sure it’s welcomed. Isn’t it sir?”

Mrs. DeWitt thought she saw the driver nod his head, although he didn’t. She took this slight nod as an invitation to continue her daughter’s life story. “You might’ve heard of the sitcom Eileen and my Rose starred in. It was quite popular there for a while, *Single Mom*?”

Silence.

The Taxi Driver changed lanes rapidly. He did so repeatedly. A car honked. Another driver yelled an obscenity through the open window: *You fucking moron. You’re going to fucking kill me man.* But the Taxi driver didn’t slow down.

There was a billboard off the 101 advertising a movie called *Lost and Found*. Eileen was on the billboard. In the picture, she leaned back to back with a man who looked like Richard Gere but not as attractive. Two years ago, that’s the last time Rose saw Eileen. Her former television mother looked different. Her face, once round and dimpled, appeared gaunt. Her smile was forced. This smile looked as if the corners of her mouth were attached to invisible strings; her smile pulled and pulled, stretched wider, until her lips almost snapped. Her blonde hair

was drastically thinner. Rose wondered why she hadn't worn a wig. Everyone wore wigs in the movies these days.

"That movie's going to do well in the box office because of her death," Mrs. DeWitt commented. She pointed to the Billboard. They were stuck in rush hour traffic. The Driver kept his eyes on the road. "I bet the studio's already pumping extra money into the ads."

"Mom."

"What? It's the truth. You remember what they're like."

"Well you don't have to say it. Just think it next time."

"Fine."

Lost and Found was her final movie. The movie that Eileen hoped would save her career. I need a one to pull me out of the swamp and back onto dry land, Eileen told Rose. This was the last phone conversation they had. It took place a week before her death. Since the hey-day of their sitcom careers the aging actress had become almost invisible within the industry. Drugs had a lot to do with this. She was uninsurable. Who knew what antics Eileen would get herself up to on set? No one did.

"Rosie-Roo, I miss you," Eileen said.

"I miss you too," Rose replied. Although not exactly. Rose missed Barbara. Barbara was her television mom, a character Eileen played for eleven seasons on their sitcom. "I'll come visit soon," Rose continued. "I promise I'll visit you as soon as I can." She heard someone listening in on the phone, a third party present.

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Get off the phone.”

“Sybil, is that you? You old cow,” Eileen remarked. She did not sound apologetic for her brazen remark. Mrs. DeWitt hung up. She would not engage in that kind of rude discourse anymore with that drug-addled whore. She’d decided to cut off all communication with Eileen the previous week during a particularly enlightening therapy session.

“I named you Rose,” Mrs. DeWitt informed Rose. Rose knew that Eileen’s nickname for Rose would stir jealousy in her mother. She’d delayed getting off the phone because of it.

“You shouldn’t have been listening to our conversation, Mom. We’ve talked about this. Listen, I’m not trying to be rude. I appreciate you stopping by. I really do,” although she didn’t, not always. “But I’ve got a date tonight. I need to get ready.”

“Not Rosie-Roo, not Rosalee, Rose,” Mrs. DeWitt continued. “Just who does Eileen think she is changing your name? She might have played your mother on television, but I’m your mother. I’m your mother, Rose. I’m your mother, not her, okay?”

The Taxi snaked around the windy roads of Laurel Canyon, driving up to the very top—the view of Los Angeles below, a smoggy, haunted landscape. Rose

focused on the orange tinted city. She envisioned Eileen below, somewhere down there in the landscape. Eileen in her favorite yellow dress, the dress she'd worn on their Sitcom back in 87' for a Christmas Special. There she was on Santa Monica pier with a rocky road flavored ice cream in her hand. There she was. Eileen waved at Rose, her fingernails long and pink. But no, it wasn't so. It couldn't be. You can't see Santa Monica Pier from this direction on Laurel Canyon. You can't see Eileen either. She died two days ago. She's on an autopsy table right now and her heart is being weighed. It's a heavy heart, one of the heaviest. But the Doctor won't put this in his official report. When the heart reaches the scale it's no heavier than the rest. It just feels heavier. It's funny how that happens sometimes.

They reached the mansion. It resided at the end of a long road marked PRIVATE. Rose left the taxi driver a large tip. He deserved one after listening to her mother talk. The hundred-dollar bill contained an indecipherable sentence on its back. She'd written this sentence on the ride over. It said, *Child Star Rose DeWitt Dies of Drug Overdose: A Premonition.*

The architecture of the mansion was Greco-Roman. There were large white pillars out front, pillars that were pearly white, the color of Eileen's favorite pills. A statue of Athena stood watch by the mahogany front doors. Rose had never visited this particular mansion before. Eileen's last mansion, the one in Mulholland Falls, was the last Rose saw. The mansion in Mulholland had been decorated in the style of Old Hollywood. Rooms filled with paraphernalia that once belonged to the likes of Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, and

Fred Astaire. These were Eileen's icons. Eileen wished she'd be an icon one day, too.

Water poured from Athena's eyes and fell into a large birdbath below her folded skirts. Her alabaster arms remained outstretched, reaching towards whoever stood in front of the angelic, mahogany entrance to the mansion. Mrs. DeWitt bent down and fiddled with something behind Athena and the statue stopped crying. She had unplugged Athena's chord from an electrical outlet. "That's such a waste of water. That thing shouldn't be running all the time like that. She only needs to cry when guests come over or when someone's home to enjoy the sound."

Rose removed the key to the mansion from her pocket, brushing away a tendril of pink lint. Eileen mailed Rose this key a few months ago. It came with a note that read, *Mi Casa et Su Casa, Rosie-Roo*. At the time, Rose was in rehabilitation for her drug problems, primarily cocaine and prescription pill use, and Mrs. DeWitt thought it best not to relay the message. Eileen and Rose enabled each other, although Mrs. DeWitt blamed most of this enabling on Eileen. *She's older. She should know better.*

Mrs. DeWitt received a phone call a week into Rose's last visit to Eileen's. Rose had suffered a slight overdose and was being treated at Cedars Sinai. *You're never seeing her again. Over my dead body*, Mrs. DeWitt told a hospitalized Rose. *She's nothing but bad for you, honey. Don't you see what happens when you're together?*

“Hurry up. I’ve really got to use the little girl’s room.” Mrs. DeWitt fidgeted back and forth, favoring one foot and then the other with the bulk of her weight. It was a slow march in place.

Inside the mansion, the alarm beeped. Rose punched in the code: 12-06-80. This code was Rose’s birthday. She kept the code’s numbers from her mother. It would only make her jealous, she thought. During the days of *Single Mom*, fights between the two women often took place. The most famous fight occurred at a restaurant called The Ivy. Eileen and Mrs. DeWitt had met at this restaurant to discuss fifteen-year old Rose’s drug problem. The conversation veered off track. It became a battle over who-was-the-better-mother. Eileen brought the subject up, saying that she was, obviously, she said.

“It’s a moot point and utterly ridiculous, Eileen,” Mrs. DeWitt had pointed out. “I’m Rose’s real mother and that’s that. I know what’s best for her and what’s best for her is to stay away from you as much as possible. Look at you. You can barely keep your head up off the table. You need help. Lord knows I’ve tried to help you. Are you willing to go to rehab this time? We can call them right now. I’ll take you over there myself.”

“But I’m her mother, too, Sybil. Sybil, don’t you see that?” Eileen completely ignored the later half of Mrs. DeWitt’s conversation. “I play her mother on television for hours and hours. I’ve practically raised her. I’ve known her since she was three years old. You can’t take those years away from me.”

“I’m not trying to take anything away from you, but you need to stay away from her. That’s it. I’m hiring a bodyguard. He’ll be there to make sure you to

don't sneak off with her in between scenes and use drugs. It's reached that point. Don't you see the point?"

Eileen laughed frantically. Her nose was red and her nostrils inflamed around the edges. She'd just returned from the bathroom with an ounce or so of cocaine saved for later in the pocket of her denim jacket. She didn't know what else to say. She felt so many things, but she didn't know how to say them. In this absence of speech, she threw a glass of water in Sybil's face. The Paparazzi arrived shortly after this.

The mansion's kitchen was spacious, but contained very little. Mrs. DeWitt boiled water for some mango herbal tea that she'd found while rummaging through the pantry. Food in the pantry was scarce. There were only a few cans of gourmet dolphin friendly tuna and a lone generic orange soda. Eileen cared about dolphins, but couldn't care about herself, Mrs. DeWitt concluded. It made no sense. There was a turquoise bowl in the kitchen sink and it was dirty. Remnants of cereal stuck to its interior. Mrs. DeWitt did not clean this bowl. It had belonged to Eileen. It felt wrong washing the dish so soon. She sniffled, her eyes watering, and she lied to herself, chalking the incident up to allergies.

A chandelier stood above the curved, Victorian stairs in the main entrance of the mansion. This chandelier looked eerily similar to one which frequented Rose and Eileen's sitcom during Season Six when Eileen's character Barbara dated a self-made millionaire. Could it be the same chandelier? No, it couldn't, could it? Rose didn't know what to think, but she intuited that it was the same



chandelier. The body of light, the fake diamonds, Rose couldn't take her eyes off the history above her.

Rose continued to look around the mansion.

The long hallway upstairs that led to Eileen's room was painted a warm sage. Circular lights flickered from the ceiling. Rose found the switch, a dimmer, and attempted to stop the pulse of light by turning the brightness up. This only made the flickering worse. The bulbs were dying. Rose couldn't help but wonder how long the lights had been like this. She imagined Eileen opening the door at the end of the hallway. She walked towards Rose in her silk bathrobe. This bathrobe was baby blue with white feathers cuffed around the wrists. Eileen moved her arms up and down, faster and faster, until the feathers multiplied, spread like a rash from her wrists, up her arms, and to her shoulder blades. These newly formed wings soon turned to powder. Cocaine fell from Eileen's arms onto the floor. She pressed her face into this floor and inhaled. Rose tried to stop her, but Eileen grabbed hold of Rose's auburn ponytail and pushed her face into the cocaine, too. She would not let Rose get up and the young woman began to choke as the drug caked her the inside of her mouth, her nose, drying everything out.

Mrs. DeWitt called from downstairs. The dream stopped, Rose opened her eyes. "Do you want some tea? Can you hear me Rose? Is everything alright up there?" Rose didn't answer. She felt something wet running down her legs. There was a dark puddle on the beige carpet in the space between her ankles. She heard footsteps. Her mother's perfume— rose scented and too strong— hit the air. "No need to come upstairs, Mom. I'm fine. No, I don't want any tea."

“Alright then, if you change your mind though.”

“I’ll let you know.”

Rose walked to the end of the hallway and opened the door to Eileen’s bedroom. Her jeans were stained with urine and she needed something to change into. Inside the room Rose was immediately taken aback by the décor. Fake gold frames of various sizes with pictures of Eileen and Rose acting out scenes from their sitcom, happily ever after, occupied the walls—the perfect mother and daughter, a duet of hope. Rose fell to the floor. Loud sobs escaped her. It was all too much. She wanted to go back, wanted to live inside the sitcom, make her home burrowed within her favorite episode, the happiest one. Why couldn’t life be like a sitcom? She wanted a laugh track.

She needed to change. The wet jeans felt too uncomfortable. Inside Eileen’s walk in closet Rose found hundreds of dresses that looked familiar. Eileen’s character wore all these dresses on their sitcom. Eleven seasons worth of clothes in this closet, tucked away, long forgotten by everyone but Eileen and Rose. She ran her purple fingernails along the fabrics. Yellow, I’m looking for yellow, she thought, and there it was. She couldn’t believe it was there. There was that yellow dress, the one Rose hadn’t realized she’d missed until now.

Rose removed her jeans and t-shirt and took stock of the yellow fabric: the scooped neckline, the plunging back, the embroidered bodice covered in small sunny gems shaped like honeycombs. It was all there. Everything looked the same. Rose took a handful of the taffeta flowers blossoming from the knee length train. The fabric sounded like tissue paper, a present being opened. She put the

dress on. The sheer, long sleeves were tight around her wrists. These sleeves were the color of a pale, bleached moon, she thought. No moon could rival this dress. This was the dress Eileen wore the first time she offered the then fourteen-year old Rose a taste of Cocaine. They'd just finished shooting a scene where Rose's character Margie attended her first day of high school. In the episode, Eileen's character Barbara cried while sending her daughter off to school. *You're growing up too fast*, she'd said.

\*\*\*

"You haven't taken that dress off in over two weeks Rose. You're starting to smell awful." Mrs. DeWitt attempted to coax her daughter into the bath. But to Rose, the running water sounded like death.

"I've got to get the mail," Rose screamed. It was an excuse. Any excuse to leave the dress on would do. She couldn't go in the water either. That's where Eileen died, in the water, water meant death.

"No, don't go out there. The Paparazzi's out there!"

"I don't care." Rose ran down the stairs. Her mother was too slow to catch her. She'd become quite good at outrunning her mother during these past few weeks. There was an art to running away from people. You needed a head start. Walk as far away as you can from the person you want to leave first, pretending to comply, then run! Run away!

Outside, the Paparazzi waited. Rose often gave them a show these days. One time she sang a song, a song from *Single Mom*. *Doodle, doodle da-di-da, doodley, day*, she'd sang. She hadn't remembered the words, only the melody. Mrs. DeWitt called the Police and had the Paparazzi thrown off the property daily. She'd even hired bodyguards, but Rose didn't like the bodyguards. They scared her, she'd said, and so Mrs. DeWitt let them go.

Rose dropped the mail. She bent to pick it up and the yellow dress pinched around her generous midsection. A photographer took a side shot of her flabby stomach. No doubt there'd be a picture of her fat rolls tomorrow with a catchy headline like: *Grief's Pantry* or *Rose's Death by Chocolate*. Rose crossed her arms defiantly in front of her ample chest for the cameras. The sleeves of her dress tightened around her elbows. She worried the material might break and so uncrossed her arms.

Eileen was buried almost a week ago. They'd put her to rest in a bright pink coffin. Rose wore the yellow dress to the funeral against her mother's wishes. Her mother hated the yellow dress and Rose didn't know why. She even caught her mother a few nights ago attempting to cut it off Rose's body. Luckily, she'd awoken in time to stop her, her mother only managing to make a small incision in the back of the fabric.

"When are you taking that thing off?" The Paparazzi asked. "Are you making some kind of statement? Why are you wearing that ugly dress?" Always the same questions, but Rose never answered. Why did everyone care so much about whether or not she changed her clothes? She wondered.

“Here,” she said. “You can have this.” She handed a coupon book to a member of the Paparazzi. “There are a lot of good deals in there. There’s a two-for-one deal on Diet Coke and stuff. All the bags of chips you can eat for five dollars. Pack a lunch next time. Stay a while.”

The Paparazzi member looked confused. “You’ve really lost it, huh?” He took a picture.

“No. I know exactly where it is.” But Rose and the Paparazzi member were not referring to the same thing. He referred to her mind. She referred to a stash of drugs she’d found hidden underneath a loose floorboard in Eileen’s bedroom. She hadn’t taken these drugs. Not yet at least. She was trying so hard to stay clean. She didn’t want to go back to rehab, but it seemed inevitable. How much longer could she avoid the temptation of this love affair? How much longer could she abstain from managing her pain? She didn’t know. But if she could keep a yellow dress on for weeks and weeks, surely she might possess the needed willpower to abscond from snorting cocaine, or popping a precious pill, she thought. Yes, she would go as long as she could down this sober, clean road. She would try and try not to fall back into the well. She owed this attempt to her mother. Attempting to do something is almost as good as doing the thing completely, forever, she thought. An attempt at willpower meant something. It meant that she wasn’t completely bad, wasn’t just a junkie loser. Within her there was half a year here and there spent in goodness, in the resistance of temptation. All her life she’d lived like this, half in, half out—teetering between sobriety and a lack thereof.

\*\*\*

“It’s been a month now Rose. We really need to put the mansion up for sale.” Mrs. DeWitt sat on the red velveteen couch in Eileen’s living room. This couch eerily resembled a couch that had occupied the set of Eileen’s character’s living room in *Single Mom*. Perhaps it was the same couch. Mrs. DeWitt wouldn’t put this purchase past Eileen. It was strange and a little sad, just like the dead starlet, she thought.

“But I don’t want to sell the house,” Rose said. The yellow dress was stained now. A red ketchup line painted the front of the fabric across her chest and looked like a mark of where a surgery must take place. “I’m the one who owns this place. We’ve already talked about this. How many times do I have to tell you? I don’t want to sell this house.”

“Alright, alright. We’ll wait a little longer.” Mrs. DeWitt couldn’t give up hope that easily. This house would sell. It must go away and leave Rose alone. She placed her hands on the sofa with her balled up fists at her sides. The sofa’s texture reminded Mrs. DeWitt of a party she’d rescued fourteen-year old Rose from once in Malibu back in 85’. Rose had gone with Eileen, snuck out of the house. When Mrs. DeWitt arrived at the party, she’d found Eileen in a bedroom wearing nothing but a pink thong—topless and too tan—with her rail thin body lying limply over a pile of fur coats. Mrs. DeWitt left her there and the image of Eileen in that room continued to haunt Sybil throughout the years. On those

haunted days, Mrs. DeWitt felt she should have done something differently. *I should've taken Eileen away, too. Saved her.* At the party, she found Rose in one of the many bathrooms with a forty-something year old actor. They were snorting lines of cocaine off a porcelain bathroom sink using rolled up dollar bills. Rose was almost completely naked except for a purple bra wrapped around her neck. The man was completely naked, standing too close to her young daughter.

“When are you finally going to take that dress off and take a shower? I can smell you from over here. It’s getting to be too much, Rose. You really need to do something about that stench.”

“It’s my body,” Rose said. She stood by the bay window in the living room and watched as a Paparazzi member jumped out from behind a large bush and took a picture of her waving. “I can wear this dress for as long as I want to wear this dress. It’s-my-body.”

“I heard you the first time, dear.” My body, mine, this ownership scared Mrs. Dewitt. Rose wasn’t good at owning herself. Some people need a keeper.

\*\*\*

“I’m leaving,” Mrs. Dewitt said.

“Then go,” Rose replied.

Three days had turned into four months in Los Angeles and Rose still refused to sell the Mansion. The drugs remained underneath the floorboard. She hadn’t touched them yet, but liked knowing they were there. She hadn’t taken off

the Yellow Dress either. Her mother had begged her to take this dress off. Mrs. Dewitt even had her committed on two seventy-hour psychiatric holds because of this refusal calling her daughter a danger to herself and others, saying, *It's not normal. See what you can do to help her.*

But, *We can't keep her any longer than seventy-two hours*, the psychiatrist's had replied. *We've run psychiatric tests and she's not a danger to herself. There's no indication that this is anything other than a choice she's made, a choice you don't agree with, but a sane choice nonetheless.*

*That's preposterous.* Mrs. DeWitt couldn't understand how wearing the same dirty dress and never washing yourself for over four months was a sane choice. The sight of Rose refusing to take off Eileen's dress repulsed her. If she was honest with herself, this loyalty Rose showed to Eileen was the real reason Mrs. DeWitt wished to leave. She couldn't take it anymore. All the years of seeing Rose strung out, messed up, and sometimes bruised and battered from drug abuse and this yellow dress, this damn dress, Eileen's dress, was the real reason she wanted to give up on her daughter? No, Mrs. DeWitt thought. It can't be. It won't be. I'm not that weak.

She stayed.

\*\*\*

Rose finally took the Yellow Dress off after six months. Mrs. DeWitt was there to witness the joyous event. Mrs. DeWitt couldn't remember ever being



more proud of her daughter. She was finally letting go of Eileen, Mrs. DeWitt thought. Choosing me instead. I've won her affection. I've finally won it all.

But no one wins in this story.

That day the birds sang from the orange trees. The sun shone bright and warm against Rose's skin. Everything looked perfect. Sounded perfect, too. That day she decided it was finally time to let go, give in to managing her pain, to the love affair, to the precious pills upstairs. She'd shown her mother that she possessed willpower. She'd proven this point. But willpower comes and goes. It ebbs and flows in people like Rose and cannot stay true and strong forever.

"Bring me some soap will you Mom?" Rose stood by the side of Eileen's pool, naked and anticipating the dive into the water.

This wasn't the way Mrs. DeWitt would usually encourage her daughter to bathe, naked for everyone to see outside and in the pool where Eileen had died no less, but she must make compromises sometimes, she'd learned that she must.

It was all over now, Mrs. DeWitt thought. My daughter is free.

Rose dove head first into the deep end of the pool. Her mother, smiling, handed her a bar of blue soap and went inside to make sandwiches for lunch. Rose ran the soap along her body and the chlorinated water became bubbly. When she was done washing herself, she floated face down in the pool for a moment and opened her eyes. She wanted to see what Eileen saw before she died. Perhaps she saw this, Rose thought. There was a penny at the bottom of the pool, a copper circle too far away to touch, but beautiful nonetheless. A bird chirped above the water. It was loud enough for Rose to hear from underneath the still waves. The

melody of this birdsong sounded like the theme song from *Single Mom*, Rose thought. She closed her eyes, still holding her breath underneath the water and listened. She wanted to open her mouth and sing, but could not because the water held her back. *La, di, da, dee, da, Doodle, doodle, die, die.* The bird sang. *La, die, da, dee, da, die, die.*

## CHAPTER 4

### LITTLE ACCIDENTS

1.

When you love someone sometimes all you can do is keep them breathing. I know this for a fact. I've resuscitated my own mother three times. I took CPR classes and everything because over the course of my sixteen years my mother has oops almost died more times than I can count on my two unnaturally large hands. I have as much medical training as a sixteen year old girl can possibly have. I'm a survivor's guide to suicide prevention. My social life is lacking.

Mom calls these near death experiences, these suicide attempts, little accidents. Her latest little accident involved cleaning products. "I was cleaning," she said from her hospital bed, an IV in her arm. "And I guess I confused a cup of Windex with my iced tea."

My mother sucks at making iced tea but it definitely doesn't taste like Windex. I moved the uncomfortable plastic chair that I'd slept in closer to her. "But Mom, the smell alone would—"

"I have a cold. My nose is all stuffed up." She grabbed a tissue and blew her nose— just in case I didn't believe her. My hand was balled up in a fist on her hospital bed and she spread her hand over mine. Her skin felt like cold plastic. I unclenched my fist because this is something Mom's good at, getting me to stop fighting for things. She noticed blue ink on my palm. "I love you," she said. "Who wrote that?"

My phone vibrated from my back jean pocket. It was probably my boyfriend. He's the one who drew the sloppy heart all over my life line earlier today when I received the pink slip at lunch that said: come to the hospital immediately. "James did," I replied.

"Is he still coming over for dinner Saturday?" she asked. Her voice sounded raw. Like someone had put a tube down her throat and pumped her stomach, which they had. I hate thinking about mom's almost lifeless body being carried away by EMT's who know her real name but still call her "Mrs. Suicide" instead. It must be nice to have that kind of distance when mom's in front of you maybe-dying, must be nice to be able to crack a joke. . I tried to joke about it once. I was fourteen and walked through the door after soccer tryouts. She was sitting on the couch and I wasn't paying attention because she was taking her meds that year and felt better. I said, "Hey Mom, I did it. I made the vars—" and that's when I noticed Mom slumped over on the plaid couch, deep cuts from her elbows to her wrists: a letter opener stained, the yellow carpet covered in bills, my soccer ball still by the front door, so I kicked it. "There goes Mrs. Suicide," I tried to say when the paramedics arrived. But it wasn't funny.

2.

Dad found her this last time. It's like we took turns. Switched off discovering mom's little accidents, some cosmic joke, some God laughing somewhere. I was the one who found her the time before this, a dull pulse on the bathroom floor. When I showed up at the hospital Dad sat in a red, plastic chair

with his chin resting against his chest. "How long will they keep her this time?" I asked.

"I'm guessing a couple weeks." He looked past me, down the hallway. "Here he is." Her psychiatrist's face appeared expressionless. I, on the other hand, cried my blue-like-mom's-eyes out.

"So I take it she's off her meds again?" he said. I didn't like his tone. Dad and I did everything we could to keep her medicated. We bought her a pillbox with all the days of the week and double-checked every time she took one. I manned Monday-Wednesday. Dad held down Thursday-Sunday. "Open your mouth, Mom," I'd say. "And let me check."

3.

It's only a matter of time before one of her little accidents does the job. Dad and I both know this. We talked about this certainty at the hospital once. I said, "I just don't want to be the one to find her." Dad didn't reply. He looked down at his coffee and stirred the black liquid with a spoon. "Sometimes I wish she would just get it over with," I continued. "I know that's wrong of me. But sometimes I really do, Dad."

"I don't know." He said, and twirled some hospital-style-spaghetti around his fork. He didn't eat much. The fork just hovered below his mouth like a spaceship and I thought about travel.

“How did your English exam go?” Dad asked. My dad’s an English Professor at a local community college. His obsessions are Fitzgerald and keeping mom alive.

“It went okay, are you done with this?” I took his plate and finished the spaghetti. “You know me though, I’m much better at math.”

Dad laughed. It’d been awhile since I’d heard him laugh. “I don’t know where you got that Math brain of yours from,” he said.

But that was a lie. He did know. Mom is a math whiz. Used to teach math when she could function. “Maybe you were adopted,” he said, and sounded hopeful. But of course I wasn’t.

Wouldn’t he know that? Yes. I guess he was trying to joke. But he’s no good at telling jokes. His inflections are always off. And when he says maybe you were adopted. It sounds like he’s just wishing for this, praying I’m not like mom. Hoping something inside me won’t shift and that I won’t pick up a cup of Windex one day and drink it.

## CHAPTER 5

### COME AGAIN

Paul grew up a happy, healthy child with a passion for all things sand instead of sea. At the age of sixteen he spent a summer in the Sonora Desert of Arizona and returned with a love of lizards. Lizards, Paul felt were all he needed. Give me an Iguana, a Leopard Gecko, a Red-Sided Curly Tail, and I'm in heaven, he thought. Paul gave lectures on lizards in the dimly lit basements of churches—very few people attended.

At a coffee shop, Paul walked in with a small blue gecko in a glass box. He sat at a table near Daisy, a girl he had a crush on, and held the gecko's box up to his face. He pretended to look at the lizard, but watched Daisy instead. You see talking to women was never Paul's forte. In fact, his mother Mirabelle often wondered if he'd ever meet a nice girl or any girl at all—praying he wouldn't. Mirabelle felt she deserved to be the only woman in her son's life and often encouraged Paul to remain unkempt, smelly, and attend as many lizard conventions as possible. Was this evil of her? Mirabelle often wondered this while eating cake—her guilty conscience moving fluidly from baked goods to her son's love life.

Daisy noticed Paul staring at her through the translucent glass of the lizard's box, or aquarium, or whatever-you-call-those-lizard-things, she thought. She always attracted guys like this; guys that looked like their mother kept them in cages. Guy's that looked pale and trough fed.

What about Daisy attracted these men? Was it the tattooed moth on her shoulder, the nose ring, and the streak of pink in her bleach blonde hair? Or was it something deeper, some darker element that swam inside her veins like an eel, hissing, I'll crush you. Why did Momma's Boys always want to be crushed? Daisy placed her palm flat against her thigh and pressed down hard. Paul kept staring at her, pretending to look at his blue gecko, and unable to conjure a word.

\*\*\*

Mirabelle and Howard married during a light rain off the coast of Florida in the spring of 1973. Howard couldn't help but gaze at the dolphins while the preacher conducted the service. I do, do you? Mirabelle asked Howard. But Howard wasn't listening. What a beautiful fin on that dolphin, he thought, and only looked at his bride-to-be when Mirabelle pinched his arm. I do, do you? She repeated. Howard cleared his throat, and it sounded like there were things moving around in there, bugs or something. I do, of course I do, he said, and then gazed out towards the ocean again.

Howard died in a fishing accident two years after he and Mirabelle married. A giant Marlin pulled him overboard. It's the Marlin, or me he said, and the Marlin won. By the time the Coast Guard found the Howard's body his skin looked like wet clay in need of a kiln, clay ready to be shaped and fired. When they fished him from the water Mirabelle screamed so loud the shrimpers heard her. In Florida sound carries, sound swims; it breaststrokes down the bay.



\*\*\*

Howard always wanted to be a Marine Biologist but had to join his dad's furniture company instead. He made things like rocking chairs, tables, and occasionally, when work slowed to a sloth's pace, whittled dorsal fins out of wood—and on those days Howard felt joy.

Paul never knew about his past as Howard. Mirabelle decided it was better to leave the past in the past. Paul didn't need to know he used to be her husband, her lover. Things like this just sully mother-son relationships. Plus, the people at Reincarnate Inc. advised against it. They said it's better if the spirits who are reincarnated don't know about their previous lives. It just causes too much confusion. Makes them feel strange. Mirabelle talked to one woman in particular at Reincarnate Inc. over the phone. The year was 1978.

“Hello?” Mirabelle said. She always started with hello on the telephone.

“Well hello,” the woman said. “I'm calling from Reincarnate Inc. We've been contacted by the spirit of a Mr. Howard Pierce and would like to talk to you today about the possibility of—”

“Excuse me, what?” Mirabelle dropped her dishtowel. “What's-it-now? What did you say? Howard did what?”

The woman chewed on something. Mirabelle hated when people ate and talked at the same time. Crunch, crunch, crunch— a chip, Mirabelle thought, that woman's probably eating chips. “Well ma'am, my names Llewellyn and I'm

calling from Virginia. I'm with an organization called Reincarnate Inc. We specialize in reincarnation, a second chance." Llewellyn picked a thread of celery from between her front teeth.

"Isn't that some Buddhist thingamajig?" Mirabelle asked. She'd grown up without any real religion. Her parent's never took her to church. But she'd read about Buddhism in college. It sounded like something Howard would've liked.

"Sort of, Ma'am. Anyways, we're a family business. We're mediums and try to fulfill the wishes of the other side." Llewellyn paused and slurped some Diet Coke through a straw. Dang, she thought, that celery just won't get gone. "You'd be surprised," she continued, "how many people want to come back, Mrs. Pierce. So many, you'd be surprised."

Mirabelle scratched an itch on her neck. Her Mom told her some superstition a long time ago about how if you're neck itches it means the dead are thinking about you. But this didn't faze Mirabelle. "Well I don't really know what to say. I—" she began.

"It's a shame not all of the spirits get to come back," Llewellyn said. "Some of them aren't lucky enough to have people in their lives that are willing to sacrifice." Got her just where I want her now, Llewellyn thought. Need to pay rent this month, working on commissions hard right now in this economy.

Mirabelle didn't know what to say. "Sacrifice?" she asked. "What kind of sacrifice?"

Here it goes. Now I got her. Hush, Howard. Your wife's talking. Llewellyn tired easily of the dead hanging around. They were always so chatty.

And Howard was a talker. He sat by the fish tank in her living room and told her all kinds of things about goldfish, things nobody care about other than Howard.

“Can I ask you a personal question Mrs. Pierce?” Llewellyn asked, her voice softening, because softening the voice always makes you sound more inviting.

“How old are you?”

“Thirty one”

“Well, you ever thought about having babies?” Babies, Llewellyn thought, babies. I’ve got plenty of them around. She felt her two year old daughter, Sue, drawing with a marker on Llewellyn’s leg and watched as her six year old son ran around the room, playing with the spirit of a child. He’s got it too, she thought. We’re all damned. All my babies are damned with the vision. The vision is what her family calls their psychic abilities. And what a vision to behold, Llewellyn remembers seeing her first spirit in the cradle, an old man, a great-great grandfather, hovering about her, telling her to hush, stop crying, your Momma’s trying to sleep girl. Sometimes she wants to poke her eyes out. But she knows it wouldn’t do any good. She’d still sense them; hear them inside her head, forever.

\*\*\*

Reincarnate Inc. called Daisy on a Wednesday. A woman on the other line said, “Hi, my name’s Sue. I’m calling in regards to the spirit of a Miss Evangeline Hughes, your sister, she’s asked me to contact you.”

“Um, spirits?” Daisy believed in a lot of weird crap but spirits weren’t one of them. “I don’t believe in ghosts. Try another number lady.”

“Your sister says to stop being so difficult Debbie,” Sue replied.

Cold water ran down Daisy’s spine. Debbie was her real name. She changed it in college because she hated the name Debbie. How did the woman know this? “You could’ve easily looked that up somewhere. You’ll have to do better than that if you want to convince me.” Daisy almost hung the phone up, usually would’ve hung the phone up, but something stopped her.

“Fine,” Sue said. “What do you want me to ask her?” Sue dipped some buffalo wings, extra spicy, in ranch dressing. Some of the dressing dribbled down her chin. When you ate things, the spirits, for the most part, left you alone. They didn’t like the smell of food. They couldn’t eat and so usually stood at a distance, whispering, and weren’t so loud and obnoxious. Sue ate a lot while Evangeline visited because that girl sure did talk about the most depressing things, Sue thought, mentioning sad things, things nobody should think about, things like dead puppies and the way moldy fruit tastes.

Daisy tried to think of a good question, something that only Evangeline would know. Oh, I’ve got it, she thought. “What was our hermit crabs name?”

Sue put down a buffalo wing and mumbled something on the other end of the line. Daisy wondered if she was pretending to talk to Evangeline. “She said Louie-Louie,” Sue replied. What’s that? Sue asked Evangeline. Oh, okay. “She wants me to tell you that he died because your daddy accidently stepped on him.”

Daisy's body shook. Suddenly she couldn't feel her legs anymore. Could it be? Oh my God, she thought. She wished her parents were still alive. She wished they could hear this. "Evangeline," she screamed into the phone, "Evangeline."

Evangeline killed herself ten years ago. Daisy was fifteen and her sister was eighteen at the time. Evangeline used a razor. She ran the blade from the inside of her wrists to her elbows. When they found her, her body was folded over the side of the tub, with her arms and head reaching towards the orange tiles of the bathroom floor.

Sue took a sip of her iced tea. Evangeline smiled. Do you know what a dead sea turtle all washed up on the beach looks like? Evangeline asked. Sue dropped a buffalo wing back onto her momma's nice china plate. That girl sure does know how to kill a girl's appetite, Sue thought. Sue pressed her ear harder against the phone. "Now that you believe me, are you interested in pursuing this option?" Sue asked. She heard Daisy breathing on the other end of the line, anything, anything, Sue thought, to get Evangeline gone.

"What option?" Daisy replied. She still couldn't feel her legs and sat hunched over on the floor with the phone resting between her chin and neck.

"Oh I'm so sorry hon, I haven't told you yet. Well, we specialize in rebirth. You see, your sister contacted us because she wants another shot, wants to be reborn. And she needs you for that. She said you were the only one, said that her only other relative is a cousin who's addicted to pills."

"What do you mean, help?" Daisy asked. Her throat felt dry.

“Are you fertile dear?”

“As far as I know, yeah, but why does that matter?”

“Well, first thing we’ll need to do is run some fertility tests to make sure.

You see you’ll be having the child.”

“What child?”

“Your reincarnated sister,” Sue replied.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“First we’ll need your credit card number. You’ll need to put down a security deposit and then we’ll need to bring you in for some run-of-the-mill psychological and physiological exams. You know,” Sue said, with her voice sounding like a bubble Daisy wanted to pop, “You know, hon, make sure you’re fertile and psychologically fit for the task and all that.”

“Psychologically?” Daisy asked.

“Uh-huh,” Sue replied. “It can be confusing as all get out when a loved one comes back as another person. Why a few years ago we had a woman rebirth her mother as her daughter. She started treating the five-year old daughter like her mother, asking her daughter if she could go out and play, if she could have some more ice cream, and all that. Well, in the end they had to take the girl away.”

\*\*\*

A few days after the encounter with the blue gecko, Daisy saw Paul at the coffee shop again. This time instead of a blue gecko he brought a red one. Daisy

felt nauseous from some medicine they'd given her at Reincarnate Inc. to help increase her chances of conceiving. The medicine was some special purple herbs from a field behind the farmhouse where Reincarnate Inc. was located. Sue picked them herself. Daisy had decided to go through with the rebirth. She couldn't say no to her sister. And plus, she'd always wanted a child.

Paul sat at the table next to her and pretended to observe his red gecko while really looking at Daisy out the corner of his green eyes. He knew nothing about reincarnation. Naturally his mother never discussed the concept with him. But deep down Paul knew his soul was antique, that his soul looked like a bronzed butterfly wing sold at a market in eighteenth century France. A bronzed wing, he thought, now scuffed a bit with age—but bronze and beautiful nonetheless. Paul held a very high opinion of his soul. He thought it quite a superior soul to others. In fact, it's the only thing he liked about himself, his soul, and the part of him he couldn't see.

Daisy planned to seduce Paul later that day. She didn't want to sleep with him but time was of the essence. She was ovulating. Reincarnate Inc. said they could provide her with donor sperm but said her chances increased if she fucked someone. Well, they didn't say the word fuck. But Daisy hates all other words for fucking. Making love is her least favorite. Paul on the other hand possesses a romantic spirit and on many occasions has dreamed of what it would feel like to make love.

\*\*\*

Howard wasn't a saint by any means. Although he loved the sea and whittling wood into shapes of aquatic creatures, he also loved cheating on his wife. He kept a studio apartment in Miami, about thirty minutes from his house, and on weekends when Mirabelle thought he was away on furniture business, Howard picked women up at bars. He wasn't particularly attractive either so he made sure to frequent bars with an ocean view—wooing drunken women with his knowledge of tide pools and barnacles. You'd be surprised how interesting tide pools are when you're drunk.

\*\*\*

Mirabelle had a whole host of problems. But the most pressing problem was the one involving her lustful intentions towards her son. Whenever Paul wasn't home Mirabelle snuck into his room and lay naked on his bed. Often she wanted to touch herself and sometimes she did. She pretended Paul wasn't her son but was Howard instead. She couldn't help but think about Howard and Paul as the same person. She had dreams about her son, dreams where Paul touched her breasts, and it felt good, felt right, she said.

\*\*\*



“I want to have a baby,” Daisy said. Paul sat beside her in the passenger seat of Daisy’s red Honda. They left Miami’s city limits and headed towards Tallahassee. “Do you want children?” The red gecko sat in Paul’s lap.

“Never really thought about it,” he said. “Between my mom and my lizards I don’t have much time to think about much else.”

“Oh, you close to your mom?”

“Sort of,” he replied. “She keeps a close eye on me.”

“Well, I bet she doesn’t know where you are now.” Daisy took some chewing tobacco out of the glove compartment. Her hands shook. “Want some?”

“I didn’t know people still chewed tobacco.”

“I can’t smoke anymore because of my asthma. So I started chewing,” she replied. Paul wondered why she didn’t just quit but decided not to ask. Daisy looked at Paul when she should’ve been looking at the road. It made him nervous. She made him nervous. “So, Paul, want to help me out?” She spit some tobacco juice out the window.

“How, what do you mean?” Paul asked. The red gecko crawled into the palm of his hand. It tickled. Of course he wanted to help Daisy. He loved her, or at least, liked her a lot.

“Baby,” she said, “I want to have a baby and I can’t do it by myself. Help me, Paul, help me.”

\*\*\*

Daisy drove from Florida to Virginia to meet with Sue. She'd passed the psychological and physiological exams that Sue sent by mail but still felt she needed to meet with Sue before moving the reincarnation process forward. Sue said she was going to send Daisy some herbs from her garden, herbs that helped increase fertility, and so Daisy decided to just drive to Sue's and get the herbs herself.

The farmhouse looked old; a sand colored paint peeled off the house in many places, and underneath the peeling sand existed traces of baby blue paint. Daisy felt out of breath when knocking on the front door. When Sue opened the door, she couldn't even wait, Daisy had to ask, now, immediately, "Where is she, where's Evangeline?" Until that moment, Daisy didn't fully comprehend how desperately she'd wished to see her sister again. I guess I blocked it out, this feeling, and the one that makes my breath feel like water, Daisy thought.

"She's in that red chair right there," Sue replied, and pointed towards an antique chair, stained with jam. Sue stained that couch with her raspberry jam soaked hands as a child and now her kids, all six of them, did the same. Back behind the farmhouse the best wild raspberries grew, lots of things grew wild behind that farmhouse, things for eating and nobody knew why.

"Oh," Daisy said. "Can I say hello?"

"Sure, hon," Sue replied. "You just won't be able to see her is all. But she can hear you fine." Sue watched as Evangeline made silly faces at her sister, sticking her tongue out, crossing her eyes, things we used to do to make each other laugh as kids, Evangeline told Sue.

“Hi, E,” Daisy said. She stood by the chair, so close to her sister, and didn’t even know how close she stood, Sue thought. Sue’s dog, a miniature poodle, a very uncharacteristic dog for someone like Sue, came into the room and started barking at Evangeline. The poodle, Mindy, sensed Evangeline’s presence and didn’t like it. Mindy barks a lot which is why Sue’s momma never let them have a dog, only cats, she said, because cats don’t mind the spirits too much, but Sue couldn’t help it, she loved that poodle.

“Mindy, hush,” Sue said. “Kids go take Mindy outside and play,” she shouted. Six kids, from the ages of five-sixteen, came running down the stairs. That’s a lot of kids, Daisy thought, and wondered how many of them were reincarnated.

“If you’re wondering,” Sue said, watching Daisy looking at the kids. “Only two of them are.”

“Are what?”

“Reincarnated,” Sue replied. “My oldest, Jolene, she’s got my daddy’s soul. And my youngest, Fern, she’s got my momma’s.” The front of Fern’s dress was covered in mud. “Fern, you been in the hog pen again?” Sue ran her hands across her face. Fern never wanted to stay clean, hated baths and everything, and Sue’s momma would die if she knew this. Sue’s momma, Llewellyn, was the cleanest woman you’d ever meet, always washing her hands, always combing her hair. “Alright now,” Sue said, and gave Fern a kiss on the cheek. “Leave me and Miss Hughes alone and take Mindy outside to play.” Fern did as her momma said.

\*\*\*

Mirabelle wondered why Paul wasn't home yet. He usually always came home from his job at the pet store by five or six. Sometimes he stopped off for coffee on the way home, she thought, but he never stayed out past seven. Mirabelle took a pillow from his bed and inhaled his scent. The pillow smelled like him, smelled good, and this made her wet. Her pulse raced.

When she was done touching herself, moving her fingers within that dark cave between her legs, a cave that no one had explored in years, no one since Howard, she felt out of breath with pleasure, and her lungs burned from contorting her body in ways she no longer possessed the stamina for. All the while thinking, Paul will be home soon. What if he catches me?

\*\*\*

In a motel room somewhere off the highway, a motel with free cable TV, Daisy and Paul fucked. Daisy turned on the TV while Paul unhooked her bra. Paul had never unhooked a bra before and so it took him an unusually long time to do so. Daisy didn't help him though. She just kept her eyes glued to the TV screen and watched images of butterflies. She forgot the name of the show, but it was some bug show that came on Animal Planet, and she liked it. On this episode the narrator talked about the life cycle of butterflies. The narrator said; as a

cocoon split open on screen, a sharp wing jutting out; “Some species of butterfly can lay dormant for years within the pupa stage of development.”

Eventually, Paul unhooked her bra.

After they fucked Daisy and Paul sat on the bed, naked, sweaty, and watched some show that came on after the bug show. This show was about sea turtles. “The female sea turtle, ready to lay her eggs,” the narrator said, “moves from the ocean to the beach to find suitable sand to nest her eggs. She uses her hind flippers, digging circular holes into the sand, and fills these circular holes with soft-shelled eggs.”

\*\*\*

Howard often took walks on the beach. One night he stumbled across a turtle’s nest. The nest hatched. It’s a glorious thing to witness the birth of sea turtles, Howard thought, and watched as the small bodies ran towards the salt licked ocean. Little did Howard know, tomorrow a giant Marlin would pull him overboard.

Tomorrow,

There are reasons to love less, Howard thinks while the giant Marlin tugs on the fishing pole. The oceans spray mists Howard’s face and droplets gather on the dark circles underneath his eyes.

There are reasons to love less, Howard thinks. But he can’t think of those reasons right now.

Right now,

The giant Marlin pulls him overboard and through the water. His body sinks down and down, down into her depths. And Howard opens his mouth to scream but breathes instead, breathing her in—his lungs damp and blossoming.

CHAPTER 6  
FROM THE SEA

Thank you for reading *Zombies at Sea*. All events depicted within this book are based on historical research I undertook at the Sunderland Library between the years of 1960-1967. Little is known of what happened to the illegitimate child, nom de guerre: Persephone, which Priscilla gave birth to before leaving for Virginia. We do know she died at the age of 91 in Paris, France and that she is survived by one great-great-granddaughter: Jillian Huppert. And a great-great-great granddaughter, whom is currently missing, named Marina Huppert. I contacted Jillian Huppert, who lives in Jacksonville, North Carolina, and received no response.<sup>1</sup>

Marina kept the dentists secret. His secret: he liked monsters like Marina, liked the way they felt against his skin. He had a wife and three kids. His wife, he said, was typical looking, blonde hair, and fake tits. He ran a finger over the silicon near Marina's ribs, her makeshift gills. But you're different, the dentist

---

<sup>1</sup> *Zombies at Sea* was printed in London, 1967 by Serpent Books. The author's name is Cecily B. Davies. She has one other published book, currently out of print, *Unicorns and Phantoms: A Love Story*. This passage is highlighted in purple and underlined in blue ink (the ink possibly underlined at a later date, most likely by a different reader.) There appears to be a jam stain, raspberry, which bleeds into the binding at the bottom left hand corner. The current reader of the book is a tattoo artist and piercer named Vincent. He often reads this book when bedridden with flu-like symptoms.

whispered, and licked the green tattooed surface of her legs. He expected her scales to taste like the ocean, like the Atlantic he'd played in as a child, but she didn't taste like that, not in the least. She tasted like a rain soaked brass handle, or a rusted aluminum can.

She'd begun hooking six months ago. She only hooked when she needed something new added to her body: another tattoo, another piercing, her ears shaped elfin. She found the dentist in the yellow pages. His office was close enough to where she and her boyfriend Vincent lived; close enough to get there without having to ask Vincent for a ride. He disapproved of her surgeries, her new tattoos and piercings, and all the rest. He couldn't touch her anymore. She'd seen him cringe when she brushed her arm against him accidentally, or sat too close on the couch. It didn't use to be this way. He used to touch her all the time. But now they slept in separate beds. Now the only time he let Marina touch him was when he suffered from a bout of his mysterious illnesses, flu like symptoms—symptoms immune to everything but Marina's healing touch. She made him sick, but he remained unaware of this. She poisoned him, afraid he might leave her if she didn't, and for the simple, human reason, that she missed the feel of his body, the way his breath felt against her fingertips when they hovered above his mouth.

The dentist sharpened Marina's teeth within two hours. "This'll be an easy procedure," he said, and couldn't wait to file her teeth into sharp edges, and feel those edges with his tongue later when they kissed.



Marina felt the dull surface of her teeth one last time. “You’ll have an hour of my time after that,” she replied. “Nothing too kinky though. I’m not an amusement park. I’m a person, you know?”

“I understand,” he said, and wondered what she considered too kinky. But he dared not ask, afraid she might take the trade off the table, rethink having her teeth sharpened.

He’d never entertained the thought of sleeping with her before she propositioned him. He’d seen her around the neighborhood before, felt a slight tingling sensation, a small desire, but never thought a girl like her would go for someone as dull as a dentist.

Marina was hard to forget. Not many people in Brooklyn duct-taped their calves together to make a mermaid’s fin, but Marina did. She used clear duct tape she specially ordered from a shipping supply company off the Internet. Wrapped her calves up every morning, angling her feet out just so until the fin looked perfect. She was twenty-one and had lived in Brooklyn for the past seven years. Her wheelchair was the color of the ocean. And she painted her toenails algae-green.

The dentist dusted small shavings of Marina’s newly sharpened teeth with his tongue. With his fingers he traced the horseshoe shaped indentions, which lay underneath her legs, and Vincent placed the metal horseshoe rings there when he still agreed to make such alterations<sup>2</sup>. “Horseshoes are lucky,” the dentist said and

---

<sup>2</sup> The name Vincent (pronounced vin-cent) is of Latin origins. The name means to prevail. The latin word “vincere” means to conquer.

immediately wished he had remained silent. Sweet little nothings were not his strong suit.

“Horseshoes are lucky,” he repeated; as if saying it a second time might make it all better, heal the wound of the word, suture it.<sup>3</sup> Marina felt the dentist’s tongue press like a pulse against the inside of her thigh. “Lucky,” she said, but did not feel lucky.

Her lungs felt soaked, a cotton ball pregnant with rubbing alcohol. The water pooled inside her like the ocean had the day she almost drowned, swelling like a bruise. She was only five when the sea almost washed her away. Marina’s mother saved her life, the rush of adrenaline never leaving Mrs. Huppert’s bones afterwards. She saved her daughter on the beach, mouth-to-mouth, breathing air back into Marina’s lungs. The people who crowded around the young girl and mother cheered. They said to Mrs. Huppert, *what a devoted mother you are, and what a lifesaver!*

Mrs. Huppert’s husband, Marina’s father, had died only a month before Marina almost drowned. His illness, pancreatic cancer, had been something no CPR could mend and no doctor’s visit or love could cure. Mrs. Huppert liked the feeling of bringing Marina back from the brink of death after the almost-

---

<sup>3</sup> Instructions for suturing a word: take a needle and bright thread—preferably a neon color of some kind so that you can see the thread through the water clouding your eyes—take the last letter of the word (let’s say the word is Bitch for the purposes of this exercise) Now, take your needle and neon thread and sew the H to the B and then the I to the T and so on until you can no longer recognize the word. Being unable to recognize the word will help. However, the word will fight the stitches to form itself again, to make its letters heard in your heart. Note, I’m sorry: there is no cure for a “word attack.” You cannot suture the wound of a word which is thrown at you repetitively by another. “You bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch.” This sticks. I’m sorry. It changes you.

drowning; it sparked a latent desire in her, a small flicker from a dying match, a desire almost completely extinguished without her realizing it. She liked controlling the ebb and flow of her daughter's breath with the CPR, the power she felt, omniscient, god-like. She felt like a God with the salt water still on her lips, hovering above her five year old who had just found her own breath again, it made her feel important, powerful, alive.<sup>4</sup>

Marina let the dentist cut and unwrap the duct tape from around her ankles and calves and separate her mermaid's fin. Some people liked the fin; other's said it got in their way. This one guy, a guy who pierced her nipples, said he liked ankles, liked to lick them, and so separating the fin was a must in their transaction. No ankles, no nipple piercings. Fine with me, Marina had replied, as long as you don't suck on my toes. Marina hated having her toes sucked. It tickled too much.

The only time she refused to separate her fin for a customer was when it was raining outside, or if she saw a pool in the apartment complex where the customer lived. I need to be prepared to swim, she'd think, and touch the silicon gills along the side of her ribcage. She knew the gills weren't real but prayed they might work underwater if they had to, if she started to drown again. *Why did you choose to be a mermaid if you're afraid of water?* One customer asked. He wanted to have sex in the shower and she refused. She showered in a very specific way, making sure to keep a towel on hand to wipe her face often so that she

---

<sup>4</sup> Almost drowning does something to the soul, sings the edges a bit. Strange nightmares, odd sensations of drowning while breathing, gasping for breath in malls, in movie theatres, feeling the curled wet edges of the wind against your ribcage during a rainstorm, worried you might breathe in too much rain and drown for good this time.

wouldn't drown in the water. Too much water on her face, Marina feared, could sink into her lungs and invade.

*Because mermaids can survive underneath the water, she replied.*

*Mermaids can't drown.*

*But you're not a mermaid.*

*Maybe I could be though, if I had to be. Maybe I could be.*

*How?*

*I don't know. It just makes me feel more prepared. I can't explain it. It's just something I feel.*

*Oh.*

"You have twenty minutes left," Marina reminded the dentist. Her ankles burned a little from where the duct tape was peeled off. She shaved her legs meticulously to make sure the duct tape wouldn't hurt too much when removed. But sometimes her skin, from whatever glue they used in the tape, became irritated. She felt the dentist's tongue run along the inside of her thigh.

"Remember," she reminded. "Twenty more minutes and then I'm gone. I've got to get home soon. My boyfriends sick."<sup>5</sup>

Marina removed her lime green panties, trying to speed up the process. She ran her green thumb, tattooed at the age of sixteen by Vincent, his initials

---

<sup>5</sup> When you're with strangers: Tell them someone's waiting for you. There's someone out there, a phantom, who knows you're alive. Drop this phantom causally into the conversation. "So and so, is waiting for me at home." "So and so is expecting me by five."

underneath her fingernail—she ran *this* thumb, Vincent’s thumb, across the dentist’s bottom lip. She placed the thumb in his mouth. He began to suck. “Come on baby,” she said. “That’s it. Oh yeah. Right there. You’ve got it, yeah, yeah.”

He touched her like Vincent touched her. He covered the same ground. All the men, and sometimes women, covered the same ground, mapped the same route along her body, but none were him, were Vincent<sup>6</sup>. With her panties off, the dentist marveled at how the green of her tattoos covered every inch of her. She clutched her panties and thought about how she liked the word panties. She felt the dentist move deeper, gaining territory. She distanced herself, a fog filled day, and by listing all the presidents she remembered from a U.S. History class: Pierce, Polk, Fillmore, and Grant. The word underwear sounded too much like underworld, she eventually decided.

*Excerpt from Chapter 1: The Boatman, Zombies at Sea<sup>7</sup>:*

“Mrs. Meriwether no longer loved the sea. She crouched with the other remaining passengers in the hold of the cabin and

---

<sup>6</sup> Vincent split Marina’s tongue. This is one of the many things he’s done to her. For the tongue bifurcation, the splitting, he used the scalpel method. First, he heated the scalpel to limit bleeding, to cauterize. Then, he cut the tongue down the middle and sutured the fresh wounds. Healing the split, reversing the procedure, is possible. However, reversal is even more painful than the initial wound.

<sup>7</sup> This excerpt, page 11 and 12, was highlighted by Marina. The sentence “Mrs. Meriwether no longer loved the sea,” is underlined in blue ink. Vincent wondered why this sentence was underlined but never asked Marina. She saw him reading the book on occasion but never mentioned anything about her relationship to the historical novel.

thought of her daughter. Where was she? Mrs. Meriwether did not know but missed her child terribly.

A scream ran through the hearts of the remaining passengers. There was a half-eaten arm pushed through a small opening at the bottom of the door. The arm made its way into the hold. "Heaven's have mercy on us," one of the remaining passengers screamed. The woman's name was Clair and she clutched at the Crucifix around her neck.

Mrs. Meriwether felt faint. She noticed a bloodied charm bracelet attached to the half-eaten arm. Could this charm bracelet be her daughter Priscilla's? "Oh, thank the gods," Mrs. Meriwether said. The charm bracelet was not her daughter's. She pushed the severed arm across the room with the pointed tip of her riding boot. She acquired these boots last year in London. Her husband bought them for her before he died of syphilis.

Authors footnote found at the bottom of the above page in *Zombies at Sea*.

The zombie plague began small in the southernmost region of France. Priscilla is said to be one of the first carriers of the disease. On her return from France she spread the disease to friends and family in England. It's unclear how the virus was spread. Some say kissing was involved and that the strain of virus resembles that of mononucleosis.

Symptoms exhibited by those infected with the zombie plague of 1872-1874 were fevers, insatiable hungers and desires, fear of water, forgetfulness, and disfigurement.

Eyewitness accounts of Priscilla after she returned from France, and was infected with the zombie virus, say she looked as if she was deteriorating. The zombie virus infected its host slowly. First, the infected host's skin turned a dark purple and shifted to the blue of a stillborn child towards the end stages of the disease. Reports verify that towards the middle stages of the virus's infection the hair would fall out and open sores would begin to appear on the body. When Priscilla left for Virginia she was still able to hide these sores most likely with makeup.

In one of Priscilla's diary entries, dated around the time she left for Virginia, she says: *I fear the childbirth has made me ill. Strange sores have appeared on my chest. I awoke up this morning and my face was the color of the lilac dress I bought in Paris. Dear god, what is happening? How will I ever explain this to Mama?*

It was Marina's middle school counselor who opened Marina's eyes to what her mother had been doing. "Marina," the counselor said, "You're going to have to repeat the sixth grade at this rate. We're a bit concerned about the number of sick days. Is something wrong?" The school counselor's voice sounded far away, like a voice on a radio playing from another room, coming through softly and muffled against the walls. Marina glanced at a picture of the counselor in a pink dress with a crown. The photograph said, "Miss Topsail Island, 1999." Marina's mom wanted to be Miss Topsail Island but never won.

“I don’t think I should talk about it,” Marina replied, and shifted in her seat.

“Why can’t you talk about it?”

“I don’t know. It just feels wrong to talk about it.”

“Marina, tell me about your illnesses. It’s all right. I’m not going to tell anyone. No one’s going to get in trouble.”

Marina stared at her blue flip-flops for a while and couldn’t look the counselor in the eye. She imagined her feet melting, turning to water, and then imagined herself falling to the floor in a giant splash and running from the room fast, a coursing river.

“Marina?” the counselor persisted, “Please talk to me. I’m here to help. Your grades have dropped lately. You’ve missed more school than ever. What is happening to you?”

“The doctor’s can’t figure out what’s wrong with me,” Marina spilled, and the words rushed in like waves. “Sometimes I have a fever and other times I throw up. This one time I felt nauseous for so long that doctor’s had to take a tissue sample from my pancreas to make sure I didn’t have cancer like my dad. And then this other time was the worst, they made me stay in the hospital for a month and ran a tube into my chest to monitor my heart.” Marina paused and looked down at her blue flip-flops. “Sometimes I get sick from my mom’s cooking, too,” she whispered. “And last week I caught my mom putting Windex into my orange juice. And when I asked her why she said it’s an old remedy passed down in our family to prevent illnesses but then I got sick afterwards so



that doesn't make any sense. Last week I had to give the doctor a urine sample and I found mom putting her blood in the sample. When I asked her why she said the doctor's needed a little scaring. She said they needed more motivation to uncover what's really wrong with me. And I asked what if nothing's wrong with me? And mom just looked sad. I'd never seen her look so sad actually and then she said, there is definitely something wrong with you sweetie. You're sick. And I told her that maybe I'm healthy instead and she didn't believe me." Marina caught her breath. She never meant to say so much, to realize so much. Until someone asked her the question, she'd never wanted to find the answer. But there the answer was, all along the answer was there, floating in the air above her, hovering like a large water drop above her head. The answer read to sink her.

"I see," the counselor replied and wrote on her notepad: *Possible case of Munchausen's by Proxy Syndrome. Inquire further.* The counselor opened her mouth to say something else, inquire further, but the school secretary spoke first.

"Sorry to interrupt," the school secretary said, and poked her head in from behind the door. "But Ian Jones father's on the phone and he wants to know what happened at lunch today with his son."

"Tell him I'll be right there, Olive." The counselor looked at Marina. Ian's father was on the school board and quite the meddler. If the counselor didn't take this call from him immediately she'd never hear the end of it. "I'm so sorry, Marina. I'll be just one moment. I promise," she said, and placed her warm hand over Marina. "We'll get to the bottom of these sick days."

The bottom of what? Marina wondered, and imagined the bottom of the ocean. She'd watched a documentary about the deep sea and all the undiscovered creatures, which lived down there in her biology class. Sometimes she thought about the deep sea when she was at the ocean's edge, easy to be at edge on an island, and she thought about how nice it would be to never be found, to slip away from her mother, hiding undiscovered like those deep sea creatures, and run away from hospital visits and needles in the arm to check her white cell count. Her mother's latest fear was that Marina might be suffering from a rare form of Leukemia. She didn't trust the doctor's findings that Mrs. Huppert was wrong and so she'd dragged Marina to every pediatric oncologist in the state for testing.

Marina felt terrible about spilling the nature of her illnesses to the counselor. She felt like she had accused her mother of something that she couldn't name but felt. She felt that her mother was doing something wrong to Marina, but that it wasn't all that wrong, couldn't be, Marina thought, because it made her mom happy. While the counselor was in the other room talking on the phone Marina decided to see what she'd written on her notepad. She'd placed the notepad face down, the writing smothered against the wooden desk, a secret, but wasn't it Marina's life? The notepad said: *Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome*.

She searched for the syndrome on the Internet that same night. The computer said on [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com):

“What is *Munchausen syndrome* by proxy<sup>8</sup>?”

---

<sup>8</sup> The syndrome is named after Baron Münchhausen. Münchhausen was known for telling tale tales. He was born in Bodenwerder, Germany in 1720 and died childless in 1797. Münchhausen

*Munchausen syndrome by proxy (MSBP) is a mental health problem in which a caregiver makes up or causes an illness or injury in a child under his or her care. The caregiver is usually a mother, and the victim is her child. Because children are the victims, MSBP is a form of child abuse.*

*The caregiver with MSBP may:*

- *Lie about the child's symptoms.*
- *Change test results to make a child appear ill.*
- *Physically harm the child to produce symptoms."*

The counselor called her mom that night, too. She asked to meet with Mrs. Huppert about her daughter's sick days and Marina felt guilty, worried she'd gotten her mom into trouble. It's all my fault mom," she said. "I shouldn't have told her about my sick days."

"Sh, honey, it's okay," Mrs. Huppert replied. "We don't have anything to hide." But Marina knew know that they did. She watched her mom sprinkle a small amount of Clorox onto Marina's dinner that night and the memories came flooding back to her. So many dinners, so many sick days, so many times her mom had made her sick, so many lies Marina had told herself. *I'm sick*, she would tell the doctors. *When did the symptoms arise? I don't know*, she'd answer, even though she did know. *They started with my mom. My mom makes me sick. She poisons me.* But she never told the doctors this, or told herself, for so many years.

The counselor called social services to investigate Marina's home environment. Social services, and then the police probably, would find out about

---

claimed to have travelled to the moon and once said he pulled himself up from a swamp using only his hair.

her mom and this frightened her. She didn't want her mom to get into any trouble. She couldn't help what she did, Marina thought, and argued with her mom while Mrs. Huppert tried to make Marina drink a glass of water before bed. But Marina knew better now. The glass of water was sprinkled with some kind of cleaning product. "No, Mom," Marina replied, "You need to stop this. You're going to get in big trouble."

"Stop what?" Mrs. Huppert asked, and pushed the glass of water towards Marina's lips.

"You know what I'm talking about. I'm not drinking that."

Mrs. Huppert began crying. "Please, baby," she said. "Drink it for me, please."

"You're sick, Mom."

"No, you are, and I'm only trying to help you. Water is good for headaches. You're probably just dehydrated"

"But I don't have a headache. I never said I had a—"

"Just drink it, Marina," Mrs. Huppert screamed. She took her daughters closed lips between her fingertips and pried them open, separating her teeth, Marina's jaw slackening. She pushed the glass of water up to her daughter's mouth and Marina turned her head away from the glass, poisoned water slid down her cheek towards her neck. "I don't understand why you're acting like this. You're acting like a child. Why won't you just drink the water? You've never acted like this before. What the hell is going on? I'm just trying to give you some water. Why won't you take the water?" Mrs. Huppert's pupils were dilated,

hungry for her fix. She was a true addict and Marina felt this. Marina felt that her mother could not stop, and would stop at nothing to appease her desire. She knew what she had to do. It was all so clear now.<sup>9</sup> To save her mom, she knew what she must do—leave.

An Article taken from the Jacksonville Times, dated January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1998 and glued to the page, a previously blank page, which follows the end paragraph of *Zombies at Sea*:

Marina Huppert, fourteen years old, has been missing since Friday, January 14th. It is believed she left her home with very little money. Her mother is desperate for her return. Marina is said to have altered her appearance slightly. Hair shorter, cropped at the chin, and dyed red. She might be seen with a pink book bag and a book, her mother's book, called *Zombies at Sea*. It is uncertain why she left. An older picture of Marina is seen below this article. "She looks like a young Catherine Deneuve," a neighbor said.<sup>10</sup> "Why would someone with so much potential run away?"

---

<sup>9</sup> Some people don't deserve a womb. Womb: A hollow space, a space waiting to be filled. When you say the word "womb" you can't help but pucker your lips. Say it: womb, womb, womb—the words like a kiss.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Deneuve is a French actress. Her movies include: *Dancer in the Dark*, *The Girl on the Train*, *Mississippi Mermaid*, *I Want to See You*, *Après Luis*, *Dangerous Liaisons*, *Genealogies d'un Crime*, *Tales of Paris*, *Strange Place for an Encounter*, *Frequent Death*, *The Hunger*, *Je vous aime*, *The Diary of an Innocent Boy*, *Male Companion*, and *It Only Happens to Others*.

Her best friend, Kiki Saunders, is quoted as well. Saying, “She came over and like cut all her hair off. And I was like, are you crazy? I wish I’d known she was going to do this. Maybe I could’ve stopped her. Marina, come home!”

Her mother’s pleas for her daughter’s safe return can be found tonight on the 6 o’clock news and the ten o’clock as well. She will also be holding a candle light vigil for her daughter’s safe return at the Westchester Presbyterian Church on Sunday. Donations for the “Marina D. Huppert Foundation” will be accepted at the event<sup>11</sup>.

Marina boots soaked, stumbled into a brightly lit tattoo shop in Brooklyn a few days after running away from home. She’d seen posters of herself plastered everywhere along her journey. Her mother would never give up the hunt to find her. It brought Mrs. Huppert too much pleasure, a parting gift, Marina thought. The tattoo shop was vacant, except for one man, presumably the owner.

“I need a disguise,” Marina said. Her bones even felt wet. The rain outside poured.

Vincent laughed. “Well aren’t you a drama queen,” he said, and continued cleaning his tattoo gun. He never questioned whom she was running from. Why

---

<sup>11</sup> This news article was found online by Marina when she visited the Marina Huppert foundation’s website. She visited the website five years after it was initially started by her mother. Mrs. Huppert blogged daily about her daughter’s disappearance and Marina sometimes commented on her mother’s blog posts under the screen name: Sailor2u. Mrs. Huppert was never aware that Sailor2u was her daughter. She just assumed it was some middle-aged man who’d also lost a child. “I’m a 44 year old man, ex-navy,” Sailor2u once posted on the blog. “My daughter went missing, too. I know how hard it can be. My prayers are with you.”

didn't he? Later he found the website dedicated to the missing girl: Marina Huppert. He put the pieces together. The book, *Zombies at Sea*, her only possession, and her first name: Marina. Of course it was she. The descendent of Priscilla, the runaway girl from the photographs on the foundation's website, the girl all over the news...she might look something like this now, the website said, and showed a digitally enhanced picture of Marina, three years missing, and was Marina at seventeen. But she didn't look like that, Vincent thought, and closed the link on the website when Marina asked why he was looking at her all-weird. Green scales covered every inch of Marina now. No one would recognize her now. She could never be found.

“I need a disguise,” Marina repeated. “Are you the owner?”

“Yeah,” Vincent replied,

“Well, can you help me then?”

Vincent realized she wasn't going away easily. “How old are you, kid?”

“Eighteen,” Marina lied.

“Bullshit.”

“Okay, sixteen.”

“Bullshit.”

“Sixteen,” she lied again, and clenched her teeth.

The girl looked fifteen at most. But he didn't say anything. He possessed radar for these-kinds-of- things: damage. So, why didn't he say anything? Why didn't he call the cops and report the missing girl? Because he wanted her to

himself, deep down he knew this from the moment she walked in. Clean, fresh skin in need of a disguise—this was something Vincent excelled at.

“Take a seat, kid.”

“I’m no kid.”

“Sure, ok. Now, what did you need again?”

“I already told you, a disguise.” Marina was too tired for this. Some man on the bus had tried to feel her up, touch her between her legs, while she slept. But she awoke in time to stop him from unzipping her jeans. But she didn’t sleep much after that.

Vincent decided to indulge her a little longer. “What kind of disguise?”

“A mermaid,” she said. She felt rainwater between her toes, collecting inside her boots. <sup>12</sup>It rained all the way here from the subway station. Usually that would scare Marina. Stop her from going outside. But she needed to keep moving. Her mother was looking still. Police officers were on every corner, she felt, and getting closer and closer to recognizing her face from the Missing Girl photos.

Vincent agreed to help her. Something about how desperate she looked. Later, he’d realize, it was the biggest mistake he’d ever made. He had no right, he’d tell himself. She was only a girl.

When Marina awoke from her slumber her leg felt bruised. She peered down and noticed gauze wrapped around her shin, her calf, and her foot. “What

---

<sup>12</sup> Sirenomelia: mermaid syndrome. A child is born with his or her legs fused together. Marina’s mother found the term while glancing through her Medical Dictionary. She was looking for the symptoms of tetanus. She’d cut Marina with a rusty nail on the bottom of her foot. It was not an accident.



did you do to me?” she asked, and wasn’t afraid. Most girls might be, but not our Marina.

“I gave you some scales, kid. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Marina,” she replied, and then instantly regretted giving him her real name. “I mean—”

“From the sea.”

“What?”

“That’s what your name means,” he answered.<sup>13</sup>”

She undid the gauze and looked at her new scales, puffy, tender. “Will they always look so puffy?” she asked, and wished they would.

“No,” he replied. “Your skins still agitated. The swelling will go down in a week or so.”

“Oh,” Marina replied. “Well, can you tattoo some more?”

“Not so fast. One thing at a time.” Vincent pointed upstairs.

“What?”

“You need a place to sleep?”

“Yeah.” That’s how it began, Marina living with Vincent, living above his tattoo shop in her own apartment. “I used to rent this apartment out,” he continued. “But it’s been vacant for months. Some people don’t like the smell of the ink; it seeps through the walls.”

“I’m fine with that,” Marina replied. “I’m used to weird smells.

“Hospitals,” she said, and then stopped herself. She was slipping up, giving things

---

<sup>13</sup> Out to Sea: at a loss, perplexed, confused.

away. "I'm going to head up. Thanks." The scales on her legs ached. And the ache felt alive, breathing, like she was really here.

Before the zombie plague erupted like Mount Vesuvius, Mrs. Meriwether sat with her young daughter on *Helen of Troy Two's* deck. It was six o'clock in the morning and already the sun felt hot against their skin. Her daughter freckled easily and so Mrs. Meriwether covered Priscilla's shoulders with a cardigan. "Oh mummy," Priscilla cooed, "you fret too much, you old dear, you."

Mrs. Meriwether pressed a hand against her daughter's forehead to make sure she wasn't feverish. Mrs. Meriwether was always fearful of fevers and anything else concerning her daughter's health. Priscilla must marry well in Virginia. Mrs. Meriwether's husband, Priscilla's Papa, had spent most of the Meriwether money on prostitutes and gambling. Little money was left but Priscilla remained in the darkest dark on this subject.

The young woman always ordered the most expensive items on the ship's menu: fillet mignon, caviar, and glasses upon glasses of the finest champagne to quench her thirst! "Joie de Vivre!" Priscilla would toast to whoever was lucky enough to be sitting close to her. She was a real Marie Antoinette. "Les enfants de le riche est tres contentment, non?"<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Vincent never spoke French, so he skipped the next page and a half, which was all in French. Mrs. Huppert was originally from France and so this aspect of the book obviously appealed to her. She took Marina to Paris, Mrs. Huppert's birthplace, when Marina was little. All Marina remembered from the trip were the smells from the hospital: rubbing alcohol, cotton balls, vomit, and feces. She fell ill beaucoup temps dans le voyage. The only word she later retained from the trip was malade, translation: malady, sickness, sick- as- a- dog, sick-o. Her mother spent the trip

Footnote found at the bottom of this page of *Zombies at*

*Sea*:

In 1871 Priscilla vacationed in Paris with relatives. During this year she had an affair with a count. The result of this affair was a daughter named Persephone. Persephone was left in France and raised by a friend of the Counts. Mrs. Meriwether remained in the dark about the child's existence. As far as scholars know, Persephone was not infected with the zombie virus. Although new research is beginning to show that a new strain, a milder strain, might be present in some descendants of the survivors of the plague. Perhaps Persephone's offspring still carry the zombie gene? But this has yet to be proven.

Vincent was tattooing scales on her left breast when Marina grabbed his crotch for the first time. She was only fourteen and a half at the time and had been living above his tattoo shop for a mere two months. She worried he might become bored with her and she'd read somewhere that sex keeps men interested. When

---

by Marina's bedside. Their distant relatives, aunts and uncles, stopped in to see their brave, devoted Mrs. Huppert and her poor, sick daughter.

Marina grabbed Vincent he flinched and accidentally tattooed a line across her breast.<sup>15</sup> “What?” she asked Vincent. “You don’t like it?”

“That’s not the problem. The problem is your age.”

“I look older. Don’t I?” She unzipped his pants, placed her hand inside, and touched his warm skin.

“I can’t go back to prison,” he replied. He’d done time for house burglaries in the 90’s. He’d stolen little things like fine china, silverware, and jewelry—things he could pawn.

“You won’t go back to jail,” she whispered, and never wondered why he’d been there in the first place. She was touching a guy’s penis, she thought, I’ve never done this before. What am I doing? “I won’t tell anyone,” she promised.

Vincent kissed her then. A neighborhood boy had only kissed her once before this, but it didn’t count because he hadn’t used his tongue. Vincent used his tongue. Their relationship lasted the next seven years.<sup>16</sup>

After Marina’s legs were tattooed, Marina wanted more. When Marina was sixteen, she shaved her head and Vincent tattooed scales on her scalp. He

---

<sup>15</sup> Years later Marina would lift up her shirt and look at this line across her breast in the mirror. When you mark someone, when you draw a line across their chest, you shouldn’t just leave that person. When you mark someone it should at least be hard for you to leave.

<sup>16</sup> An excerpt from *The Little Mermaid* (1836) by Hans Christian Anderson, the Little Mermaid saves the Prince from drowning: “But he must not die. So she swam about among the beams and planks which strewed the surface of the sea, forgetting that they could crush her to pieces. Then she dived deeply under the dark waters, rising and falling with the waves, till at length she managed to reach the young prince, who was fast losing the power of swimming in that stormy sea. His limbs were failing him, his beautiful eyes were closed, and he would have died had not the little mermaid come to his assistance. She held his head above the water, and let the waves drift them where they would.”

took the tattoo gun and pressed the needle to the hollow of her ear. *Get everywhere*, Marina said. *Don't leave anything untouched*. Vincent kept his promise. He even tattooed her tongue and the inside of her lips. He flipped her bottom lip, pinning the lip into a frown and drew scales on the slick, wet surface of her mouth. Tattooing her tongue was Marina's favorite feeling. Her tongue pressed between his fingers for hours, a butterfly's wing pinned to paper, and then framed. The scales covered every inch of her body and inside her body as far as the ink could reach.

Marina couldn't stop. She was a true addict. Vincent begged her to. He said, *you're addicted Marina. I've seen this kind of thing happen before. Stop this now before things get worse. Stop, Marina. Or, I swear, I'll leave you.*

*Okay, okay, Vincent.* But she would not stop.

A link at the bottom of the video directed you to his website. You could donate money for his future cosmetic surgeries there if you felt so inclined. Cat Man Harold had whiskers sewn into his face, a surgically placed tail, and beads underneath his forehead to give it extra definition, more oomph. "See." Marina pointed to Cat Man Harold's prominent forehead. "That's what I want. I want my scales to pop like that." Vincent couldn't help but notice how hungry her eyes looked. "Everywhere," she said.

Vincent watched Cat Man Harold meow and lick his paws, fingers sewn together, cleaning them—he felt a sudden urge to slap Marina in the face and he'd never been a violent man. Who did this to Cat Man Harold? Tears swelled, rain collecting on a curled leaf, and Vincent held the rain back. Everybody has an

accomplice to his or her pain, he thought, and I'm the knife. "I think you look good the way you are," he said. "I don't think we should take this any further. Don't you want to be able to recognize yourself a little bit?" He paused and washed her tattoos away in his mind. "I know I do," he finished. "I want to be able to still see you."

"But I am me."

"You know what I mean. You."

A heavy rainstorm occurred within Vincent's mind, and if Marina had been aware of this rainstorm she might have panicked, and felt like she was drowning. He'd observed her panic like this before around water. When it rained and she was outside, which was rare, she would hold her breath and run to the nearest shelter immediately. *What are you doing?* He'd asked once. She never panicked when drinking water, *because I'm in control of it, she'd say, I monitor how much of it I drink. I make sure not to drink too much at one time.* Vincent knew her logic was off but he let her believe what she liked to get her through the day. *Obsessive compulsive with a touch of paranoia*, one friend, a psychology major said, when Vincent told him about a *friend* he had who needed to control water. *When she sees a waterfall on TV she starts hyperventilating into a paper bag. That's not normal, man.*

*No, it's not. Not at all,* Vincent's friend replied, and had never met this mysterious Marina Vincent talked about. *Have you thought about therapy? Maybe she needs a good dose of cognitive behavioral or some of that old fashioned Jung stuff. Maybe she's got a fear of the collective unconscious or*

*something, or the womb, yeah, water stands for the womb. Maybe she's got mommy issues.*

*Maybe, Vincent replied, and knew this was probably right. Yeah, I could see that.*

Marina never told Vincent about almost drowning at five, the way the waves pressed her body down against other waves, and then other waves, and about how at some point she just wanted to reach the ocean's floor and rest. She imagined the floor of the ocean, if it truly existed, to be a peaceful, warm place where the waves and coursing currents could not disturb her because she was at the root, the place where life is born. Often when she felt upset she closed her eyes and heard the stillness call to her from underneath the waves. She felt small sea creatures, still undiscovered by scientists, nameless but alive nonetheless, nestle against her warm body like a young child does their mother's when it's cold.

"I'll help you," Vincent decided against his better judgment. He watched instructional videos about how to insert metal underneath the skin.

"I want them to really pop," Marina said, and stood naked, her green scales dotting her body like constellations.

Vincent showed her the horseshoe shaped metal he was going to slip underneath her skin to frame her scales. Hundreds of little horseshoe rings, hundreds of scales. "Let's start with the legs," he said. "We'll start with the legs and see how far we get, or want to take this."

He watched instructional videos Marina found online. Over and over, he studied how the tattoo artist in the video cut a small incision into Cat Man Harold's forehead, slipping metal balls underneath his skin, suturing the wounds, and wiping away the excess river of blood. He did the same with Marina, except he never touched her forehead, refusing. He loved her face too much, he told her, even with the scales. *I love the expressions you make. The way your forehead crinkles a certain way when you're thinking, or, the way the dimples on your cheeks show when you laugh, so no, I won't do it.*

*Please. Please, Vincent, please.*

*No.*

Vincent started with Marina's legs. He cut a small incision into her skin, just through a few layers. He slipped the horseshoe ring into the incision like slipping a locket into an envelope. After three months, her scales were popping with their inked beauty. But it didn't stop there. There were more experiments, small cuts into Marina. She wouldn't let him stop. She took the scalpel herself once and threatened to make the incisions into her own skin, saying, *I don't know if I'll do it right. I might hit an artery or something.*

*Here,* Vincent would reply. He placed beads and trinkets underneath her skin. *A treasure chest,* she once said, and felt his lips press against her breastbone<sup>17</sup>.

---

<sup>17</sup> The breastbone, or sternum, is a flat bone. This bone is not found in a fish.



Vincent slept little and ate little the first few months Marina stayed above the shop. She spent most of her time in between tattoo sessions resting her swollen skin. She liked being kept a secret and knowing Vincent was downstairs in his shop all day with customers and that she was nothing more to those customers than the occasional footstep against the ceiling. She played games with them, stomping on the floor above. *That tattoo shop is haunted*, a customer said once, until everyone in Brooklyn wanted a tattoo from that haunted shop. Sometimes she even made noises from the apartment upstairs on purpose. She would howl like a wolf: awooo, awoooo, awooo! And there was a rise in wolf tattoos during this time. This made her laugh later when she'd pass someone on the street with a wolf tattoo and she'd wonder if her howling had anything to do with its existence. She liked to think she'd connected people unknowingly this way. All those people with the same tattoo forever, sporting a connection in a cold world, and all because of her.

\*\*\*

“The moment came when Mrs. Meriwether realized she could no longer deny what Priscilla was. She felt her daughter moaning in agony, in need of human flesh. The girl was hungry, starving. And Mrs. Meriwether knew what she must do. “My smelling salts,” she whispered to the wind, as she walked from the hold of the ship onto Helen of Troy Two's deck. The Atlantic

roared beneath her, Hades calling to his mistress, a waiting grave—all that was left.

She removed her yellow cardigan and folded the fabric, shipped from Paris to a special boutique in London, neatly on the rain soaked floor of the ship. “Priscilla,” she whispered, “Mummy’s coming, dearest.”

Priscilla, skin peeling, face half gone, walked slowly towards the sound of her mother’s voice. She moaned in agony, in hunger. “Come closer, dear. That’s right, you’re almost here. It’s just a few more steps. There, there, that’s it sweetheart.” Mrs. Meriwether felt her daughter’s teeth sink into her arm. The bite hurt less than she had expected. Pain always hurt less when there was a purpose to its sharp edges. “Sh, shhhhh,” she whispered to Priscilla, and stroked her daughter’s once golden locks, now blood soaked, “Mummy’s here. You have me now. I’m right here, always.”

## CHAPTER 7

### A SIMPLE REQUEST

When dad brought the red cooler home I knew mom's liver was inside. There was a half finished circle or a C on the white lid. I touched the ink and traced my index finger around it. When I was little I used to draw all over things. Mom called it a nervous tick and said she liked my sensitivity. Once when mom and I were in a department store I took a red pen from her purse and began drawing all over some man's calf. He was standing in front of us in line while we waited to pay for something. I still remember mom laughing. You're a curious little creature, she said. The man whose calf I drew on didn't mind. He said it was okay because I might grow up to be a famous artist one day. Looking back I think he was just some weird guy who liked the feel of the pen against his legs.

The cooler is at my feet and when I touch it I swear mom's liver, packed in ice, moves. She wants us to eat her liver, and honestly, I don't know if I can. I bought a bunch of breath mints on the way home from school today. My plan is to shove as many of these mints into my mouth as I can. This cooler holds a lot of memories. We used to pack sandwiches and take them to a little strip of beach about thirty minutes from our house. I have a feeling we're not going to do that anymore. Mom used to make the best sandwiches—peanut butter and pickle was my favorite.

We were on the beach when mom expressed her dying wish, that's how she put it, I'm expressing my dying wish, she said. And how do you say no to that? Mom died of melanoma three months after this conversation. "There's

something I'd like you to do," she began. The red cooler sat nestled in the sand. Its lid propped open. Mom took a sandwich from the ice filled chest and began undoing the cellophane.

"What is it?" Dad asked, and took off his sunglasses.

Mom paused. She kept opening her mouth, on the verge of talking, but didn't speak. "You okay, Elaine?"

"I'm fine," Mom replied. "I just need a few minutes."

I started to bury dad's sunglasses in the sand. He stopped me "You're going to scratch the lenses."

Mom's skin turned paler than I'd ever seen. She folded the edges of her large straw hat over her face and hid her mouth. "I can't explain why," she said. "It's just a feeling. Sometimes I just get these feelings." Mom's speech was slurred. The painkillers were talking now. The painkillers talked a lot towards the end of mom's life.

Dad sipped his beer and put the bottle back into the sand. "A sand cup holder," he said. He hated silence. He'd try to fill it no matter what. Dad was a lawyer. He talked for a living.

"You alright?" Dad placed his hand on mom's shoulder. I looked up into the sky, a seagull overhead.

Mom dug her toes into the sand. I didn't like this. Dad worries when I draw on myself. I heard him tell mom once that there might be something wrong with me. It's not normal, he said, for a sixteen-year-old to draw all over himself.

Mom pushed her feet deeper into the sand and I pressed a pen harder against my skin.

“Owen,” dad said. “You’re bleeding.”

Mom took the pen from me. Blood on her palm now. “Honey, you’ve got to stop that,” she said. “People are going to think there’s something wrong with you.”

Dad began humming some song. He said he hadn’t been able to get the song out of his head all day. “It’s the *Bonanza* theme song, I think. Isn’t it, honey?”

“Yes,” mom replied, and didn’t wipe my blood from her palm. “I think you’re right. I should know.” And she should. Since being diagnosed with cancer mom had spent most of her time watching her favorite childhood shows with dad during the day while I was at school. Dad took off work to spend time with her towards the end. That’s what mom and dad called her death: the end. But it doesn’t have to hurt for you, she’d explained to me. I’ve studied tribes in South America; tribes who eat their dead and consume their own grief. It’s a ritual that works, she said. Where did you study it? I asked. Mom was a gardener by trade. Online, she replied. I found it on the Internet last week. Mom’s eyes appeared glassy from the morphine. Her skin, thanks to the chemo, was the color of swamp water. She asked us to eat her liver later that week on the beach, right after she told us where she wanted her ashes scattered.

*I Love Lucy* was mom’s favorite show. She made me watch a couple episodes with her. Sometimes mom cried while watching her old shows. It’s

strange, she'd say, how watching certain shows makes you remember things. Mom wrapped a yellow blanket around herself. She'd become so microscopic lately. Most of these people on TV are dead now, she'd continued. My friend Nancy died too. She died the year the series finale of *I Love Lucy* came out. She overdosed and never got to see how *Lucy* ended.

On the beach, Dad slathered suntan lotion on his arms. Mom didn't wear sunscreen now. "I don't know how to say this," Mom said. She took her hat off and her blonde hair looked white against the sun.

"Just say it mom. What's the big deal?"

Mom stared past dad to a small black dot on the salt blue horizon. A boat out there, I thought, or maybe a floating body? "I want my ashes spread right here," she said. "I know we're not supposed to talk about it, but this is where I want my ashes spread. Right here off this beach."

"Don't you think that's enough?" Dad asked, and watched mom place a syringe full of morphine into a Dixie Cup.

"I'm not a baby, Richard," she replied. "I know what the doctor said."

\*\*\*

Growing up I spent hours trimming azalea bushes with a pair of dull scissors while mom used the sheers. The other boys around the neighborhood used to give me crap about this. Helping mommy garden, they'd say. And I'd run to mom, her body smelling of lavender and mud, and she'd say they're just

jealous that they don't know how to espalier like you. Espalier: to train a tree or shrub's branches to grow flat. Before the melanoma, mom loved to go outside after a heavy rain and dig up weeds. It's the best time to grab them by the roots, she'd say, and hold the roots up in her fists like knotted hair.

\*\*\*

Three weeks before she died, mom gave us the recipe to cook her liver in. She said the sauce she used to roast pork in would probably work best. I read online that people say human flesh tastes like pork. I wondered if mom had read the same article. For some reason, mom waited until the last minute to give us the recipe. Looking back I wonder if it's because she wasn't completely sure about it yet. She told my dad that the recipe used a lot of spices and so it would help dull the taste. Then she made some bad joke, saying that all the liquor she's stored up in her liver over the years would get us drunk. Dad and I didn't laugh. And I gagged at the thought of mom's liver on a grill one day; my dad hovering above her flesh, pouring a reddish- brown sauce all over her.

"You're going to want to add the sugar last," Mom said. "And don't forget you need to buy Paprika. I don't think we have any Paprika left on the spice rack." Mom coughed. I sat at the kitchen table with a pen and napkin doodling. I drew the saltshaker sitting next to me, a hair from mom's head, and a mouth: open, toothy, and screaming.

Dad sat across from mom and me at the kitchen table and wrote down mom's ingredients. She felt too weak to write. Dad's hand shook while writing, the pen crossing out words too illegible to read. He didn't want to do any of this, cook her liver, make a damn sauce, he said, but mom insisted. "So Paprika, and then what's after that again?" he asked.

"A little bit of cumin," she said, "just a pinch."

"Cumin, cumin, that's right," he replied, his voice almost a whisper. And speak up, I thought, speak up.

\*\*\*

Mom entered her azalea bushes in a contest for *Home and Gardens* right before the doctors discovered the melanoma. She said this year her flowers would win. She just knew it. Good luck is in the air. She knelt down and inhaled the scent of fresh soil. Mom wore green gardening gloves with a flower drawn in black permanent marker on the fabric of the thumb. I drew that flower last summer, the summer before she died, and I said: let's see if it grows.

Towards the end pain ran through mom's bones like Virginia creeper and so she took her medicine every three to four hours. I placed extra quilts over her thin frame and propped the pillows with the sunflower printed fabric behind her head. She mentioned us eating her liver obsessively by then. It's all she could



think about. The cure to all this, she promised. It drove dad crazy. “It’s that damn morphine talking. You’re not thinking clearly. Think clearly,” he’d beg.

“But I am thinking clearly. Turn the channel on the TV won’t you sweetie?”

“But,” I said, “The TV’s not even on, Mom.”

Often I’d stumbled in on her talking to the air or the houseplants. Yes, she’d say. I know exactly how you feel, and she’d pet the houseplants with her fingertips.

\*\*\*

The day we waited for the phone call about the lesion, a half-moon the size of a plum on mom’s skin, we were gardening. I wired the stems of tomato plants onto wooden stakes. Mom placed the soles of her bare feet into the soil that was still wet from rain the night before. There’s nothing better than this Owen, she said, the way soil feels between your toes.

The phone rang. Probably the doctor, we both thought. The doctor said the test results might be in around noon. I checked the watch on mom’s wrist, her skin hot from the sun. It was twelve-ten. Mom let the phone ring and ring. She took a spade and began digging a hole in the dirt and placing chrysanthemum seeds into the waiting space. “Aren’t you going to get the phone?” I asked, and my mouth felt numb.

“Soon,” she replied. “There’s no hurry. Can you hand me that packet of seeds next to the fertilizer?”

I handed her some more chrysanthemum seeds. The phone stopped ringing and mom wiped sweat from her forehead with her gardening glove. She did this a lot without thinking. And afterwards a trail of mud ran across her skin. Later she’d wipe the stain off. Easy, she’d say. Some things are easy to clean up.

The phone began ringing again and mom covered the seeds with fresh dirt. She packed the earth tight and told me it’s important to really get the seeds down there deep in the ground. “The phone,” I said, and almost ran to pick it up myself. “Mom, you’ve got to get the phone.”

“Alright,” she replied. “I know. I’m going.” Mom reached her hand through the open kitchen window. “Hello,” she said. I pulled at some weeds in the corner of the yard and arranged them into a design. “I see, okay, yes.” I could tell by the tone of her voice that the lesion wasn’t harmless and bit the inside of my mouth until it bled.

\*\*\*

“Laughing massages your organs,” mom told me the night before her death. “Did you know that?”

“No,” I replied. I read from a book of jokes she’d made me made me buy from the hospital gift shop. I looked down at a page of jokes but the words

became blurrier and blurrier until I couldn't see anything. I wiped my eyes and a small noise escaped my throat. The noise sounded like a noise someone makes in the movies when they're losing a loved one, one of those cries that lasts so long and hurts so bad that you can't even believe they're real.

Mom held her hand out towards me. "Crying isn't funny," she said. "Tell me a joke. Tell me something funny."

"Just give me a minute."

After this we said nothing and stared at the lines moving up and down, lines that marked the rhythms of her pulse in the heart monitor, lines that looked like a mouth talking to us. Dad walked in with the doctor and told me to go home and get some rest. Mom placed her palm face up on the white sheet of the hospital bed. "Draw something," she said. "Draw something on my palm and I'll look at it after you leave."

I took the permanent marker that I kept in my pocket and pressed it against mom's clammy palm. Her palm shook and I pretended I didn't notice. I drew a box inside a box inside a box. I kept drawing boxes on her palm until there wasn't any room left.

\*\*\*

Dad decided he wanted to take Mom on one last boat ride. The red cooler sat where mom used to sit on the boat. "I'll cook her over an open fire on the sand,"

he said through the noise of the engine. I pretended like I didn't hear him. I didn't believe he would do it anyways. But I didn't believe he would bring her liver home either and he did. It's what she wanted, he told me. We can't ignore her dying wish. But I knew he didn't want to do it. I'd heard him beg mom to change her mind. No, no, no, she'd said. But she never gave him a reason as to why. She just sounded so insistent, determined.

The funeral was small and held in our backyard. Because mom died of melanoma she wanted the funeral outside in the sun. I want you to hand out little pocket sized bottles of sunscreen instead of Bibles, she said, it'll make people laugh. And people did laugh. But the laughter touched them in strange ways; their bodies shaking in revolt at their own laughter, a laugh and then small spasms.

On the boat I placed my hand on top of the cooler to make sure it didn't accidentally fall overboard. It would be so easy for it to fall overboard, for me to push it overboard, for my dad to turn the boat too fast, and for me to look the other way while what was left of mom sunk. But I just couldn't. I placed my hand on top of the cooler and swore I felt the liver moving inside—a slow, steady pulse.

We reached the stretch of beach faster than I've ever remembered us reaching it before. Dad dropped the anchor and I watched as the metal chain chased after the heavy iron weight into the water. On the shore dad started a fire with beach kindling he found scattered around the dunes. He took a lighter from his pocket and set the kindling on fire. I held the cooler in my lap while sitting on

the sand and felt the coldness from the ice inside and the impossible movement of mom's liver against me.

\*\*\*

The thick ivy that runs up the side of my parent's house isn't supposed to be there. Mom said it's a miracle. She said ivy doesn't usually grow in this climate. But somehow we made it grow. Dad always talks about mom's green thumb. Saying, that woman could take anything and breathe life back into it. I took dad's statement literally once. I was eight years old and found my pet rabbit dead in its hut. I placed the dead rabbit, Mr. Bunny, at my mother's feet while she sat in a lawn chair. I asked her to bring Mr. Bunny back to life. Mom put down her drink, something red, and said she couldn't. Sweetie, she said, I don't know how.

## CHAPTER 8

### VLOG, CECILIA

Welcome to my video blog, or my vlog, as the teenagers call it. Can you hear me? I hope the sound isn't too muffled by the fan. I inherited this fan from my aunt when she died. It's from the 1940's. We don't throw away anything in my family. This red velvet couch I'm sitting on right here is from the Civil War. When I was a boy my Daddy said that his great-great granddaddy sat on this couch after he was shot at Gettysburg and that if you look real close you can see some little speckles of his blood, speckles like on a Robbins egg.

The AC's broken so I've got to keep this fan on but I'll try and talk loud so you can hear me over the noise. But if I don't talk loud enough though then maybe there's some way you can adjust the sound on your computer? To tell you the truth, I'm not real sure how these things work. I'm more knowledgeable when it comes to typewriters. I've got a Safari one that used to be my grandma Louise's; I used to type all my letters on that Safari before my daughter Cecilia showed me how to use email.

Grandma Louise worked as a typist before she met my granddaddy after World War Two. Both Grandma Louise and Grandpa James come from a long line of Virginian families who fought in the War. And that's how I got most of these Civil War relics, which you can probably see behind me. That sword over there against that wall is a particular favorite of mine. You see it over there? Here let me go get it. This sword here belonged to a great-great uncle of mine who died during the battle of Sharpsburg, or what's more commonly known to as the battle

of Antietam. I think we have a picture of that uncle in a drawer somewhere but I couldn't find it to save my life. I think he might've been an ugly son-of-a-bitch anyways. June hates this sword. When I tried to place it above the fireplace she told me to take it back down here to the basement. Out of sight, out of mind, June said. So I keep the sword above my bookshelf instead.

But enough about the sword, you see this coin right here? Isn't this a nice box I keep it in? My daddy gave me this box about forty years ago on my twelfth birthday. Well I found this coin in a ditch in South Carolina. It's from the War, too. My family and I were driving back from the beach one summer when I stopped by the side of the road to use my metal detector. My girls, Olive and Cecilia, and June went into a fit, stomping their feet and everything. So I asked them, why'd you get me a metal detector for Christmas if you didn't want me to use it? You can't buy a man a metal detector unless you expect him to find something. They didn't answer though. June just swore she'd divorce me if we spent another hour in that tobacco field.

You know, it's nice to have someone to show these relics to. As much as I love my girls they're not interested in the War at all. Well, Cecilia was for a little while when she was younger. I remember this one time I took her to see where Stonewall Jackson died and told her the story of how he fell asleep one night during the War with a biscuit in his mouth. She laughed and laughed. Cecilia has the most joyful laugh, and when she gets to laugh you can't help but laugh too.

My wife June sure doesn't laugh like that. Fact, I don't know if I've ever heard June laugh, I mean really laugh, laugh with her whole body. She's got

something dark inside her, something that stops her from laughing. She blames it on her childhood, says her daddy used to knock her around. Black eyes and everything, June says. June's always holding on to things she shouldn't, like that piece of gum Cecilia stuck on the kitchen table a few months back, gum that June keeps in the pockets of her clothes now.

But I tell you what. I give June some credit for holding on to that gum for all these months. Things are changing so much around here that it's hard to hold onto anything these days. I never thought when I was younger that I'd ever say the word vlog and now I'm starting one up. I got into them because my oldest daughter Olive talks a lot about these web videos. She says that right now with the way things are going that it's especially important to be seen and I agree with her. Olive vlogs about everything from human rights to the origins of certain cheese and just the other day I stumbled in on her vlogging about feta. And that's when I said to her that I liked the idea of having a place where I could talk about things. I said it sounded real nice to know someone out there was listening.

So Olive set me up this vlog. And now that I have this thing going the truth is that I don't really know how you're supposed to start them and it makes me feel a little like I did that time a buddy of mine, Don Waters, asked me to deliver the Patrick Henry speech at St. John's church. Its a few years back now and he had the flu, a real bad case of it, and on account of that forgot to give me the Patrick Henry speech. I guess he thought I already knew it because he did. You see, he delivered that speech every week and knew it by heart. But although I can recite Stonewall Jackson's last words by heart, "Let us cross over the river,



and rest under the shade of the trees.” I’ll be damned if I know enough Patrick Henry to recite a whole speech. So of course I got up there in my old timey clothes, with my wig on, and all I could remember was “give me liberty or give me death.” Give me liberty, or give me death, I just kept repeating that line until all the tourists left.

Hopefully this won’t be as bad as that. But I guess since this webcam has been on for about five minutes now and I’ve managed to talk about everything and nothing at all I’ll just continue on with what I’m doing, see where I end up (sort of like when my Daddy use to give me directions somewhere and say you start by that tree and you end up by that one over there.)

This Vlog is number one and I’ll call it something simple: The Beginning. I’ve waited until June left the house to start taping. Because like I said, June doesn’t have a sense of humor. If June discovered what I was doing on the Internet right now I’d probably be sleeping outside next to the chicken coop for a week or so. June doesn’t like technology. She thinks technology is what’s wrong with this world. She says that sometimes she wakes up in the middle of the night with a terrible feeling that one day we’re all going to be nothing more than wires inside a machine. But I wake up in the middle of the night worrying that I’ll be eaten by June like them male praying mantis you see on the Animal Planet. I don’t tell her that though. I keep most things to myself.

I don’t really know who’s watching this. Olive says she set me up on a live feed, I said it sort of sounds like I’m feeding livestock or something, but Olive didn’t laugh. She said that when I wanted to turn it off to just press that

button right over there but I don't think ya'll can see it because it's on the computer. Can you?

I think I'll just keep going for now though. It's nice to talk; nice to know someone, somewhere is listening. I know, I know, I'm eating while I talk. Guess I should've thought about that before I started this up. Here, America, want some Doritos? I bought one of those super sized bags from Costco and so there's more than enough go around. You can get some good deals there. But I'm sorry. I'll try not to talk and chew at the same time. June hates it when people talk and chew. But that woman hates most things including the way I look in my boxers these days. But we won't talk about that.

Enough about June, that poor woman sure is getting a beating from me right now. Truth is I love her. I just can't stand her sometimes. But she'd say the same thing about me. Don't you worry, if you gave her one of these live feeds, whew, that woman would go to town on me. She'd talk about all the things that drive her up the wall about me. She'd talk about my War relics, the way I chew, and the way I use my metal detector in the neighbor's backyards when they're not home. There are lots of things I do that annoy her.

But enough about June and I, here's the thing that I really want to talk about. And I hope that you can still hear me. I think the fan behind me just got even louder somehow. The thing I really want to talk about, the thing that's really driving me crazy (and I'm sure driving a lot of you crazy, too) is that teenagers, only teenagers for some reason, are disappearing. And I don't mean poof, gone. I mean their skin, their hair, and their nails, are all turning invisible because of

those damn diet pills. Those little red pills that hit the market almost two years ago, the one's the FDA claimed they "didn't know" had those certain side effects; those damn pills are destroying this country.

Have you noticed that most of these invisible teenagers don't wear clothes? I asked one of them the other day at a bus stop why not? And he said, what's the point in clothes? We're invisible. But that's just crazy talk, I said. Crazy talk. You're still naked. You're still walking around naked and the last thing I need to worry about during my day, worry about when I'm standing in line at Hardy's to get my lunch is that there's some naked, invisible teenager standing right beside me. I mean what if I accidentally move my arm the wrong way and hit something I'm not supposed to? What then?

I know this is nothing new to most of you out there, unless you're getting this live web feed from somewhere in Europe or South America or something, ya'll don't have the pills over there yet, do you? I've heard on the news that they've stopped people from coming in and out of the country until they fix all this. It's a national state of emergency the president says; even he has a daughter who's gone invisible. England had its first invisibility case two days ago.

I read an article in a medical journal that said it's possible, in very rare cases, that the invisibility is irreversible. God knows what the religious fanatics are going to do with that. Right now in America we've already got them coming out the woodworks and saying that it's not a medical crisis but a spiritual one, saying that these invisible teens have something evil inside them. But I don't care if they're sinners or not. I don't care if she's the devil herself. I just want my

daughter back. I want my Cecilia back. She's one of them, been invisible for about a year now, and ran away from a rehabilitation center in North Carolina eight months and twelve days ago.

Hold on one second. I'm sorry to interrupt the vlog like this but that's my cell phone ringing and it could be an emergency. I don't think there's a pause button on here either. Olive didn't show me that.

"Hello...Yeah, I thought you were picking up the celery...No, I can if you...Okay, see you after the store then."

That was June. I know my ring tone is ridiculous. Olive thought it would be hilarious if she put this new Lady Gaga song on it. Who the hell is Lady Gaga anyways? So now whenever my phone rings the lyrics *Stop, please, just let me go Alejandro. Just let me go* play. And this is embarrassing as hell especially when you're waiting to get your oil changed, or you're at the hardware store, or you're at one of your civil war re-enactment meetings with the guys. But I can't figure out how to change the ringer and Olive won't do it. She'd I needed to be more comfortable with my sexuality (whatever that means.) She's going through some phase right now that I imagine a lot of seventeen year olds like Olive go through and she and June argue all the time over Olive's hairy armpits. Olive refuses to shave them and it drives June nuts. But I don't see what the big deal is. I always tell June that if our biggest problem with her is hairy pits then we've got no problems.

Speaking of problems, did anyone who lives in this area see that article in the Richmond Times Dispatch last week? Scientists have found a possible link

between invisible teens and their metabolic function. They're now saying that their metabolic function might have something to do with the rate their bodies turn invisible, or disappear, or whatever you want to call it. The faster the metabolism the sooner their bodies turn invisible and the sooner they vanish the longer it takes for their bodies to reappear. That's a mouthful, ain't it? The journal also said that some teenagers never fully reappear again and that scientists don't know why. Their bodies stay in a halfway place, a limbo, between being seen and invisible forever. There was one girl on Larry King the other night talking about it, talking about how she used to be a Forget-Me-Not user (that's the street name here in America) and saying that those pills took away her smile. Literally her lips never reappeared. She talked on the TV with just her teeth and tongue showing and it looked strange. June cried and cried after watching that Larry King and kept saying Cecilia, Cecilia, Cecilia, between sobs.

But this isn't just happening to people on the news. This happened to a close family friend's daughter. Her name is Missy Eversteen. She's the daughter of a guy I went to high school with, Joe Eversteen. She's lost her legs for good now, the doctors say, and she just sort of floats around in the air when she's not wearing any pants. Her parent's make her wear pants though because they say she doesn't look as damaged when she's all covered up. And what would Stonewall Jackson think about all this? I wonder about this, a lot. You know he lost an arm eight days before he died of pneumonia? His own men, an accident, and a tragedy shot him. The Confederate pickets shot him, their own leader, at the Battle of Chancellorsville on May 2, 1863. They had to amputate.

I remember when Missy turned completely invisible. It was during a school play about three months before Cecilia started to vanish. I remember thinking how lucky we were that our girls wouldn't do a thing like that. The last parts of Missy to go were her eyes. By the time of the play she was just a floating blue dress, no face, nothing to signal that she was. It scared the children and many of the adults too. This happened early on, when all this invisible stuff was starting to take off, when people still couldn't believe it. Fact, at this point, she was the only one in the room who appeared to be clearly abusing the illegal drug.

Cecilia was in the school play. She used to love acting. It was *Les Miserable* and she played Fantine. That night she died a slow death of tuberculosis. It was interesting how they made the whole thing suitable for fourteen year olds. Certain lines were omitted. Instead of being abandoned by her lover, the director decided her husband would abandon Fantine. Instead of pulling out her two front teeth to sell she sold her mother's favorite broach instead. And of course they just left out that whole prostitution part out. Can you imagine?

But after the playthings got really dramatic. Missy's eyes disappeared right in front of Cecilia and me. She came up to congratulate Cecilia on doing such a good job, talking about how she died so well, how it was so believable when she used the ketchup as blood and all—and then somewhere in the middle of all that her eyes disappeared. It scared the holy hell out of Cecilia. She grabbed my hand and squeezed so tight. Later that evening, after her and June had managed to get all the ketchup stains out of the white dress she wore during her death scene, Cecilia came downstairs to the basement and helped me organize my

stamp collection. This was rare. She hadn't done this since she was a little girl. She used to love helping me organize stamps. I was looking at a particular favorite stamp of mine, the American Revolution Bicentennial stamp that came out in 1971, not worth much but one of my favorites. Anyways I was looking at this stamp when Cecilia told me about how the kids at school were saying that those diet pills made you feel so light, like you were flying. She opened her mouth to say something else but then didn't a when I asked her what it was she wanted to say, she said nothing, and went back upstairs. But it wasn't just nothing and looking back I know that. And after Cecilia went missing for more than six months I took all my stamps, even the Inverted Jenny, (a stamp worth more than my house) and burned them all.

Sorry to interrupt the vlog like this but I need to change my shirt real quick. This flannel isn't good to wear in hot weather like this. Close your eyes if you don't want to watch. My body isn't what it used to be. There is a thick jelly underneath my skin now in places where there used to be muscle. So I apologize in advance if you're the kind of person who has to look at things especially if someone tells you not to.

Okay, that's better. I was starting to sweat in places I didn't know a person could sweat. I bet you didn't need to know that. So where was I? I forget what I'm talking about a lot. But this is something you'll learn to live with or at least that's what June says. She says that throughout the years she's learned to live with a lot of things I do. Sounds romantic, right? June and I have our fair share of problems. But I guess that's what happens when you marry someone. June gets

headaches a lot— usually when I ask her to do something like kiss me. Kiss me, June, I'll say. And she'll just put her palm against her forehead and pat it a couple times to let me know she's got one of her migraines. There was this one time I tried to get her to dress up like Robert E Lee's wife when I got to play Robert E Lee in my Civil War re-enactment group (a big honor) and she called me from a movie (I know cause I could hear sounds in the background, movie sounds) and she said she couldn't make it cause she felt sick. I'd rented her an old fashioned dress and everything. All she would've had to do was wave me a farewell on my way to battle.

But enough about June, Cecilia was fourteen and a half when she ran away from the rehabilitation center in Wilmington, North Carolina and like I said earlier she's been missing for eight months and twelve days. When we discovered her and those pills it was during dinner. June threw iced tea in her face as soon as we noticed her hand was invisible. June's never been too good in high stress situations. But neither have I. I told Cecilia to roll up her yellow shirtsleeve and when she did and I saw that her whole arm was missing, well, I didn't know what to do. I wanted to scream like one of those blondes in the horror movies but then I looked over at June and saw her hand reaching for the bowl of mashed potatoes and so I stopped her from throwing them first. After that I can't even remember what I said I was so mad. Olive started pounding her fists against the table, telling Cecilia to stop all this before she couldn't get herself back. Cecilia promised she'd stop but didn't. By the next week her neck was gone and the week after that her



entire face vanished. And by the time we took her to the rehabilitation center in Wilmington she was nothing but freckles. Her freckles were the last things to go.

And it all pisses me off so much. Because I'm sure most of you watching this remember the way the Federal Drug Administration tried to cover their asses after putting the drug on the market, after they discovered that the drug didn't only kill people but caused crime rates within the U.S. to skyrocket. Crime's perpetrated by the invisible, pill-poppers out there became pretty standard remember? And who knows, maybe Cecilia's one of them now or worse yet, and almost unbearable to think about, maybe she's working at one of those underground invisible sex clubs and prostituting her invisible self out to customers who like-that-kind-of-thing?

Excuse me for a minute. That ding-ding-ding you just heard. That's the doorbell.

“Hello? Hello?”

It seems that there was nobody there. That's been happening a lot lately. It's strange. Or maybe there is someone there and I just can't see them? Maybe I just let some stranger into my house—a stranger who is walking, quietly, upstairs right now and trying to find June's jewelry box or the cash-for-emergencies, the cash for Cecilia if she needs it, kept underneath my mattress. Or maybe it's her? Maybe it's my little girl? Maybe I just let my Cecilia in and she's upstairs lying on her bed right now and dreaming of a time when people could see her? Maybe if I walked upstairs and looked at her perfectly made bed the purple comforter

would be wrinkled around her invisible form? But I don't want to look. I'd rather just pretend it's true. Cecilia's upstairs. She's always upstairs asleep.

I'm going to hold a picture of Cecilia up now to the webcam. Please take a good look. She's probably still invisible, but just in case she's off the pills and you can see her, here's what she looks like. I took this picture last year at Christmas. Look how happy she looked. I know, she's such a pretty girl, isn't she? Why would she want to disappear?

Hold on, that's my cell phone again. It's funny how stuff like that happens. I bet it's June. Lord knows that woman has ears all over this house. But I promise that after this I'm going to turn it off.

"Hello...No, I thought we already talked about this...Yeah... You said you were going to pick up the celery on the way home from work, didn't you? Well, should I go out and...Okay, see you in fifteen minutes."

That was June again. There's no emergency she just forgets things easily now too. I know you've heard me have the same conversation with her twice so far. I apologize. I worry sometimes that she's losing her mind. She'll call four or five times a day and ask the same questions. But grief does that to a person, I think, grief can really make a person forget things like where they put their car keys or their antique musket for battle practice. Every day it's something else she's forgetting. Just the other day she called and asked how old Cecilia was when she played Annie in the *Annie* musical at school. How could she forget? Was it fourth or fifth grade? She asked. Fourth or fifth grade?

Fourth grade, I said. She was in fourth grade.

June's going to be home soon; she said fifteen minutes but that woman speeds like crazy and she'll be mad as hell if she finds me vlogging. So I better go now. But before I go I have a confession to make. And if by some chance you happen to be watching this Cecilia, if you happen upon this vlog in the middle of the night when you can't sleep because the fact that you can't see yourself in the mirror anymore scares you sometimes than listen sweetheart, listen.

Sometimes I sit alone in the basement and tap the rocking chair with my foot Cecilia and pretend like you're sitting right there and rocking, rocking. I sit across from you on the sofa, the one speckled in a dead man's blood, and talk to you for hours. I tell you all kinds of things. I start at the beginning and say: You were six pounds seven ounces. Your umbilical cord took more than eight cuts of the scissors to break. That cord was tough, one of the toughest. And it's funny, Cecilia, because I don't think I've ever told you that before, how tough you were.

## CHAPTER 9

### TO AUSTRIA!

Our thirty-three year old Maiden lost her virginity on a sunny day at the Busch Gardens in Williamsburg, Virginia. She'd worked at the amusement park for seven years and was currently on her lunch break. In the French themed section of the park, our Maiden devoured the last morsel of a chocolate croissant, self-consciously, while a man approached her. This man's name was Wolfgang. He was a behemoth with a ponytail, a mouth that tasted like beer and pickles, a foreign accent. He'd just ridden the largest rollercoaster, and informed our Maiden of this fact in broken English, saying, *it called Grizzly*.

*The Grizzly's very popular*, our Maiden replied, blushing. She'd read about men like this in her romance novels, mysterious, sensitive men, men that will rip your blouse off with their teeth.

Unaccustomed to subtlety, Wolfgang took our Maiden's hand and sat next to her. His windbreaker made melodious sounds as he crossed and uncrossed his legs, a nervous habit. He's the one, the one, our Maiden thought. She'd grown tired of virginity. Virginity reminded her now of nothing more than an old, untouched drawer. The kind of drawer you find while rifling through your dead grandmother's house, a drawer filled with once precious possessions—marbles, glass eyes, measuring tape.

Still in France with our Maiden, Wolfgang cinched his ponytail tighter. He pointed towards another country off in the distance, past Germany and its schnitzel and sauerkraut, past the Heineken sold in Busch Garden mugs for an

extra \$5.99. *That is where I from*, Wolfgang purred, *Austria*. Our Maiden had never even left Virginia, she said. *Ve must go then. Yes! Ja! Ja! Ja!* Excited, Wolfgang kissed our Maiden. It was her first kiss and her tongue, directionless, traced the rough edges of the Austrian's teeth, unafraid, searching.

*To Austria!* Wolfgang yelled, and guided our Maiden through the cotton-candied air. Along their journey, they passed Italy and the famous ride *Escape from Pompeii*. People screamed from the ride's metal perch, but these screams did not siphon the romance from our new couple's bones, in fact, it only heightened our Maiden's resolve for *la petite mort*. In Germany, Wolfgang stopped to play darts. *It's bulls-eye, not bullz-eyez*; our Maiden corrected her Wolf, timidly.

*Das ist für ewig!* Wolfgang muttered. He grew tired of walking easily, he informed our Maiden in English.

Their journey ended in Austria behind a funnel cake stand. *I used to work this stand*, our Maiden reassured Wolfgang. *No one will bother us. The hills are alive. The hills are alive!* She sang. Wolfgang silenced her with a kiss, hands unbuttoning her Busch Garden's shirt, and cupping her breasts. She'd read about this part in her romance novels, about how a man's member usually throbs. *Is it throbbing?* She asked.

*Was bedeutet das?* Wolfgang replied. He spit a button from our maiden's shirt onto the pavement. *What is this throbbing?*

*Your member?*

*Am I member of what?*

*Never mind*, our Maiden replied, breathless.

## CHAPTER 10

### WHERE SHE'S FROM: A JOKE TOLD BY THE PREACHER

The church looks like most churches do in the South. It's white with a cross and a big sign out front. The sign is staked into the god-fearing ground with a message that changes erratically like a giant Jesus mood ring. Right now the sign says, "God is like a bar of soap." The pastor, born and raised in Savannah, Georgia now resides in what he calls, "This great state of South Carolina." He is by no means a creative man. And his sermons, a local newspaper recently said, "Taste as dull as grits" And it doesn't stop there, the review continues, saying in faded ink, with the pages stained by the preachers unusually sweaty hands, "From what I gather, the only reason the congregation returns each week is because of the free Sunday brunches." Usually this would upset a person, but not the Preacher, because he knows how dull he is. Often he looks into the fake gold-framed mirror, the one emblazoned with little cherubs, and attempts to crack a joke or two. "So, I was talking to our Lord the other day and.," the preacher pauses, he pretends there's an audience and clears his throat. He opens his mouth to continue his joke but instead says, "Well, James, you're just not a funny man. Are you?" He waits a few minutes and examines the golden flecks of amber, those tiny specks of wonder, which grace his hazel eyes. "No, James," he says. "You're as dull as a leaf blowing gently in the wind, as dull as the coo of a pigeon, as dull as your Daddy and the Devil inside the..." and he has to stop there because he's crying too hard to talk.

When he's not crying or trying to make people laugh, the Preacher thinks about his old, yellow suitcase. There are many days while planning his next sermon, and the brunch menu that will accompany it, that the Preacher toys with the idea of leaving. He closes his eyes and imagines himself somewhere else, possibly underneath a waterfall or at a rock n' roll concert. And so, he keeps the old, yellow suitcase in the corner of his bedroom as a reminder that he can go places if he wants, that he can always escape. Sometimes he even places the suitcase in the back seat of his car when he goes to buy the groceries for next week's sermon. He turns corners fast and from the rearview watches the suitcase move violently from side to side. He doesn't know why really, but it makes him feel much better.

Recently, he told God to strike him down dead if the congregation didn't laugh at his jokes. And they didn't. Mostly they just blew their noses or rubbed their feet together. And there was a perfectly bright blue sky outside until the lightning and thunder showed up during the sermon. This left the Preacher convinced that he was going to die, just a little lightning bolt to the chest, he thought. But he didn't get struck. He just finished his sermon and then listed the menu for brunch that day. "Biscuits, cured ham, and mashed potatoes," he said.

The day that Ruby arrived at the Church, it was spilling over with people. It was the third Sunday of the month, which meant it was chicken- fried steak week, and the Preacher only ever bought the finest cuts of meat for his flock. Hungry bodies pressed against hungry bodies while the folks in the pews made room for the inevitable stragglers that always showed up on Chicken-Fried Steak

Sunday. Hymnals rested against anxious knees. Feet tap, tapped against the wooden floor as the congregation licked their lips in anticipation and waited for the Preacher to finish his sermon, "Why the Devil? Don't we behave?" They even laughed a little at the Preachers attempt to make a joke because they'd do just about anything to get him off the pulpit and behind the table where he served them their food.

The people in town can't really recall how Ruby showed up-- maybe because they were all too busy closing their eyes and dreaming of Chicken-Fried Steak and mashed potatoes and. Some people say she just sort of flew in, while others say she floated an inch or two above the ground, levitating just the slightest bit, like a witch. But no matter how it happened, Ruby entered the Church and her nostrils flared with the smell of fried meat. "Mm," Ruby whispered and licked her plump, cracked lips.

When Ruby showed up, or floated in, depending on whom you talk to, it was a humid July morning and her dress was flimsy and light blue and her bare feet were caked in mud. The ends of her dress were torn, almost singed looking. And maybe, one woman in a floral printed dress said in between bites of her brunch, "Maybe she's just escaped a fire, you know, there was a big one over there near Atlanta last night." The woman paused and took a large bite of her food, "Maybe that's why she's all shook up." The woman's eyes popped open so big it looked like she was possessed and she said, a thought entering a an otherwise vacant brain, one filled with the echo of a conk shell or the subtle buzz of a bee, "Maybe she's the one who started the fire!"



And the rumors didn't stop there, they continued on and on, and years later, after Ruby is gone the town will still talk about her. "She was a sight to behold," Marjorie George, the local Tobacco farmer's wife says twenty or so years from now to her granddaughter, a girl who looks eerily like Ruby. "Her face was about a plain a face as I'd ever seen." She picks her front teeth with a toothpick, and then continues, "But I couldn't stop staring at it."

No one knows why but Ruby had a pull on people sort of like the way the moon pulls the tide along like a little child or the way gravity keeps us all from floating away. "I just wonder where she came from." A woman whispered to her husband while the Preacher tried to accomplish something funny from the pulpit with the help of a Dove and a Fedora. The woman watched Ruby. She sat in the front row; her head slumped down between her shoulder blades, on the verge of snoring.

\*\*\*

Ruby should've known when her Daddy started sitting for hours in front of the front door talking to "God" that something wasn't right. When the mine shut down and he lost his job, everything good in him just stopped working. He did nothing for days and weeks even, until one day, he slammed his fists on the kitchen table and the peas went sliding. "I've got an announcement. Your daddy's a prophet!"

Ruby's daddy was no prophet, and her Momma knew it, "What in the, what're you talking about, Gerald. You ain't a prophet. You're just a man without a job."

But he didn't listen and he made Ruby's Momma believe him. He said, "You listen to me woman, or I'm going to smack you so hard you'll see God, too." And he did. Smack. Smack. Smack. More than three times he smacked Ruby's Momma, until finally bruised and bloodied, she gave in.

She sat her children down at the old oak table, the one Ruby dented with her fork once by accident, and said with her lip busted, "Your Daddy's a prophet." And all the children believed her because if they didn't their Momma might die.

The day that Ruby's family died she woke up with a pulse in her throat because her dream almost scared the life out of her. Ruby could kick herself now, and sometimes she does in the shins a little, when she thinks about her dream and how, I'm just no good at figuring those darn things out in time, she says. You see, Ruby's dreams aren't an exact science or a sure thing, but there's always a little sliver of truth hidden in them like a piece of candy in an Easter egg. Her dream that day was about grapes on the vine, a whole lot of them. In her dream, Ruby was picking those grapes when the vine turned into snakes -- rattlesnakes. Ruby willed herself to wake up from the dream before the rattler could bite her and immediately clutched her hands together. That's when she heard her Daddy calling, "Ruby, we're all meeting down in the basement for a family talk," he said. His voice sounded different, Ruby thought, like the crazy was just cleaned right

out of him. But she should've known better, and now she does, because people just don't heal like that.

The basement smelt a little like her dream, like a wet match trying to be lit over and over again. But Ruby didn't pay any attention to this and instead, she looked at her little brother and sisters, and noticed that her Momma was smiling which was unusual for her Momma these days. "Come on over here, Ruby," her Momma said. Ruby sat down next to her Momma on the only prized possession the family had left, the one thing her Daddy swore he'd never sell, a red, velvet couch that was, as her Daddy said, "My great-great grandfathers" and then he got to the important part, "It's an heirloom from the War." And by "the War" he meant the Civil War.

So there Ruby was sitting next to her Momma and if she closes her eyes now she can still feel the warmth of her Momma's shoulder leaning up against her own. "Your Daddy's got something real important to say," Ruby's Momma whispered. "He's finally come to his senses." Ruby's Daddy heard what her Momma said and stopped mixing some juice with a Wisk and looked at her.

"That's right, Ruby," he said. "I've come to my senses."

Ruby looked at the purple drink in the clear punch bowl. It smelled good. "What's that Daddy?" She asked, tilting her head to the side, her long dirty blonde hair falling all around her as she sat in her light blue dress.

"It's a punch," her Daddy said, proud of himself. "I figured we needed to celebrate. I've been wrong all this time. I never could get it right before now. I'm sorry ya'll." Her Daddy looked around at his family and they forgave him.

"It's alright, Daddy," Ruby said. "You've had a rough couple of years." But the truth was it was a rough seven years for the lot of them, but Ruby didn't want to bring that up, not now, not when her Daddy was finally feeling better.

"You're my angel, darlin'," her Daddy replied. He continued to stir the punch. Tap, tap, tap, Ruby could swear she's heard that sound before. It sounded like a metronome you put on top of a piano while you play that helps you keep your pace. Ruby used to love playing the piano until her Daddy burned it to the ground, saying, "You're playing the devils music on that thing, girl." When really it wasn't, it was just the latest Johnny Cash song.

The next part is where things went wrong. Her Daddy poured the punch into paper cups and handed one to Ruby's Momma and her brother and sisters. Ruby was the last person to get handed a cup. And when he placed the thin paper in her hands, her palms felt all funny, like they were on fire and her heart raced so fast, and Ruby didn't know why. There was nothing to be anxious about; her Daddy had finally come to his senses. "You drink first, darlin'," he said to Ruby's Momma. Ruby's Momma looked at Ruby and said, "Your Daddy makes a good punch. He made punch for our wedding." She smiled at her daughter and then took a sip of the purple punch. "This is delicious, honey," she said to Ruby's Daddy and he smiled.

Ruby's stomach hurt, and she didn't know why, but she didn't drink the punch because of it. She watched as her little brother and sisters did. They drank it down fast like little children do, spilling some on their clothes. "That ain't going

to come out," Ruby's Momma said, wiping some of the purple punch from her son's white t-shirt.

Ruby's Daddy left the room for a minute and her little brother dropped a yellow marble he was playing with onto the floor. It fell underneath the moss green chair in the corner of the room. Ruby went to get it for him. "Don't worry, Sammy," she said. "I'll find your marbles." The six year old started to cry and so to make him laugh; Ruby crawled on her hands and knees like a wild animal toward the chair.

"Ruby, I declare. If I didn't know any better I would say you were ten not twenty," her Momma said and smiled, sipping on her punch.

When Ruby got to the moss green chair she remembered something about her dream that she'd almost forgot, she remembered that this was the chair she sat in while picking those grapes, right before the... "Oh my god," Ruby whispered, a tear sliding down her face. She took her unsteady hands and lifted the chair's dusty moss green material to see what was underneath. "Rat," she screamed. "Rat poison!" She hurried over to her Momma and her siblings and knocked whatever was left of the punch from their hands, and then, she took the punch bowl, "its half empty now," she said in a hushed tone, and threw it against the floor.

Ruby looked around at her family, hoping everyone was okay. But it was too late, their lips were already turning blue, their breath shallow, and all but her Momma was passed out. Ruby heard her Daddy's boots from upstairs. She clutched onto her Momma's hands and put her head against her chest. "Ruby," her Momma whispered. She was crying. "Run."

“But I’m not going to leave you in—”

“Run,” her Momma wheezed. And so she did. As soon as Ruby heard her Daddy’s footsteps making their way down the stairs, Ruby kissed her dead Momma on her cold forehead. She looked at her little brothers and sisters one last time and let out a scream, then left.

\*\*\*

Ruby hitchhiked across two states. She made it all the way from the Appalachian mountains of Virginia with the help of strangers and only one man got fresh with her. He slapped her across the face and when she fell, he fell, on top of her. He started ripping off her dress. Ruby closed her eyes and went to another place. She felt the man’s hot hands encircling her neck. Who knows how long it was between the start of it all and when she heard the other man’s voice, it’s hard to say. "If you don't get now," the man’s voice said. He loaded what sounded like a shotgun. "I'll pull this trigger." And he did, bang. Ruby opened her eyes and the Bad Man who said, "I'm fixing to kill you," was soaked in blood. She looked up and the other man, the man with the shotgun, was above her with his hands outstretched. "Let me help you up," he whispered.

But Ruby didn't take his hand and not because she was afraid, because she wasn't, but because she just couldn't feel her body yet. So, instead, she looked up at the man and said, "Nobody has to know." He shook his head in agreement. She

lay there in the leaves for a long time and eventually tilted her head to the side and watched as the Man pulled the Bad Man's body down the bank, towards the water.

When Ruby finally had the strength to walk again, she shook the Man's hand. He begged her to stay, eat some supper, wash up, and rest, but Ruby said, no. The Man dug into his back pocket and pulled out a wallet. Ruby watched as he fumbled around inside the wallet and she noticed a picture of a pretty young woman, who looked like a movie star, like the one she used to see on T.V., when her Daddy let her watch T.V., yeah, Ruby thought, she looked like that Genie from "I love Genie". "Who's that?" Ruby asked.

The Man looked at Ruby. He noticed her body was shaking like she was in cold water, but it was at least ninety- eight degrees outside. "That's my daughter," he said. "She lives over in Jacksonville." The Man rubbed his eyes. They turned red and he was about to cry. "Listen, you sure you won't stay and—"

"No, I really need get going."

"Where you heading?"

"My Aunt's house in Greensboro," Ruby lied. She knew she couldn't tell the Man where she was really heading. She knew she couldn't say, well, sir, just heading to somewhere I've been seeing lately in my dreams. So, she continued, "I was supposed to be there last Sunday but I got held up in Virginia, you know, family troubles."

"Well, why you in these woods then?" the Man asked.

Ruby lied again. She couldn't talk about what happened to her family. "I was on my way there. I took the train to Richmond and was robbed blind, so I started hitchhiking."

The Man didn't believe Ruby but saw that the girl was stubborn and wouldn't stay. So, he said, "Take this." He handed her two hundred dollars and Ruby took the money willingly, she wasn't stupid, she knew when she needed something.

Ruby used some of the money and bought a bus ticket. The bus wasn't for another two hours so Ruby had some time to kill. There was no one else at the bus stop. The only company Ruby had were the fireflies that flickered like little heartbeats. The fireflies made her think of her youngest sister and how when they were little, they caught them in the palm of their hands, "Gottcha!" Ruby said, and then put the fireflies into a jamming jar. "Ruby," her sister said, "that's cruel." And so Ruby would let them go but not before she pressed her forehead against the jar and felt the fireflies against the glass. It was so still, and she liked that, Ruby could sit at this bus stop forever, but her backside hurt and she really needed to find some new clothes to put on and so, she made her way towards the convenience store.

When she opened the door it made a sort of chirping noise. "Customer," she heard someone yell, the voice sounded a lot like her Momma's and for a second Ruby almost shouted, "Momma, I'm home." But then she remembered. Stupid girl, Ruby thought, your Momma's dead. Ruby started to feel like she might fall over. In the past few days, since her Daddy killed them all, Ruby picked up every stray newspaper to see if there was a story about it, about what he



did. But Ruby knew the truth, that there wouldn't be a story. Her family was poor, mountain folk and only the rich, white people from the cities or suburbs who went missing or were murdered, mattered. "I should've seen it coming," Ruby said to herself, in a matter-of-fact tone. But Ruby moved on because she had to, because there was nowhere left to go but the makeup aisle. She found some cheap foundation to cover up a budding bruise on her face; it was smack dab below her right eye. Then, because her stomach gnawed at her, she treated herself to something sweet, to a Bit-O-Honey Bar. While she took the wrapper off the candy bar she heard a song playing in the background. It was the muffled sound of a song she knew from childhood and she started singing it, softly, "Love me tender, Love me sweet, never let me go." She remembered Elvis from the Johnny Carson Show, back when she had a TV, before her Daddy made them all stay home and learn his version of the Lord. But that was in the past now, and Ruby moved onto the next aisle. She asked a nice woman, who looked a little like what she imagined her sister would've looked like in a few years, "Ya'll got any clothes?"

"We sure don't, Hon. I'm sorry." The woman, her nametag said Brenda, looked at Ruby. She noticed large gashes on the girl's arms. "Sweetie," Brenda said, she stopped slapping the gum around inside her mouth. "You need something for them cuts?"

Ruby looked down at her arms and placed her hands over the deep, bloodied rivers self-consciously. "Maybe just a bathroom where I can wash up?"

"Of course," Brenda said. She put her hand on Ruby's back and started to direct her to the bathroom, Ruby flinched. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Hon," Brenda said.

Ruby got all cut up in the woods. Of course, she didn't feel it; she won't for about another two years. "No," Ruby said. "You didn't hurt me. I'm just a little sore that's all."

Brenda examined the girl and realized something was really wrong, something Brenda didn't want to know about because she's got her own problems, because she's got mouths to feed. "Alright, sugar," she said, her voice softer than before. "If you need help finding anything you just give me a holler. I'll be shelving some misplaced items over there." Brenda pointed to aisle eleven.

"Thanks," Ruby said. "But I'll be fine. I just need to wash up a little that's all."

Ruby walked into the dimly lit bathroom. It was covered in flower wallpaper and the hand soap on the sink had a piece of hair stuck to it. Ruby didn't want to look in the mirror and so she turned her head to the side and counted the flowers on the wall instead. Her hands blindly turned the faucet and she felt around clumsily for the soap. She lathered her hands up in the hot water and ran the soap all over her arms. It stung a little so she bit her lip like it was a piece of birch. Once she was done washing up Ruby knelt down next to the toilet, she pressed her scraped knees against the cold tile, and then, she vomited.

Her Daddy would call this an exorcism. He'd say, "Ruby, let him out, you let that Devil out." He got her bit once by a rattlesnake. He brought it home and

placed the cage inside the living room and said to his family, "We're going to each take turns holding this here snake and whoever gets bit is a sinner." Ruby went first. She knew she was a good girl, she was sixteen at the time and had never even touched a boy's lips, had never even thought about it, well, not for longer than a second or two. So, Ruby went over to the rusted cage where the rattlesnake lay coiled and whispered to the snake, "You don't want to hurt me. I'm a good girl."

Ruby's Momma walked out of the kitchen, a dishrag in hand, and screamed, "Ruby, don't!" But the rattlesnake mesmerized Ruby and her hand hovered above the cage. Ruby's Daddy jumped up and held his wife's mouth shut with his hand. "Go on, Ruby," her Daddy said. Ruby's Momma kicked at her husband and tried her hardest to get to her child. She knew what a rattlesnake bite could do. Before she was locked up in her house, before all the books were burned, Ruby's Momma was a very prolific reader. "You let her touch that snake and I'll kill you with my bare hands," her Momma screamed. She kicked at her husband and then when she realized her other children were trying to help Ruby, she yelled, "Stay away, ya'll. Don't get near that rattler." Ruby didn't hear any of what her Momma said because she was too intrigued by the snake. "It sounds like a baby rattle," she said under her breath.

It didn't take long, the snake bit Ruby. It felt like shards of glass running through her veins. Her Momma screamed and ran to her daughter while her Daddy started crying. "My babies a sinner," he wailed. "My babies got the devil in her."

Ruby looked at her parents. Her Momma ran hot water and soap over the fang marks and under her breath said, "Oh my lord, oh my god." While her Daddy gathered the children together in a circle and said that they all needed to pray for their sister, pray that the Devil would leave her alive.

"What's all the fuss about?" Ruby asked her Momma. Her Momma continued to rub Ruby's skin dry with a soapy washcloth.

"You've been bit by a Rattlesnake, Ruby," her Momma said, frustrated. "What in the hell do you mean, what's all the fuss about?"

"I know, but I feel fine."

Ruby's Momma looked at her daughter, her blue eyes swimming with tears. "Sometimes these bites take a while to set in." She paused and cleared her throat. "My uncle was bit once; it took almost two hours before the poison took."

"Well, maybe it won't." Ruby tried to sound strong, but her Momma heard the shake in her voice. "What's Daddy doing?" Ruby asked.

"Forget him," Ruby's Momma said.

Her Momma looked back at her husband; he had the other children in a circle and was dancing around them, saying, "Jesus, Lord, Jesus, Lord, save my girl."

"Ruby," her Momma said. She rolled her eyes. "Your Daddy's crazy." Ruby's Momma looked over at her husband again. "I'll kill you if she dies," she screamed and then looked back down at the snakebite. "Oh, Ruby it's starting to swell. This ain't going to do it." She threw the washcloth on the floor and ran around the house, fumbling through old drawers. They lived out in the middle of

nowhere, at least ten miles from anything, and they didn't have a car. "I thought I had a book on snake bites somewhere around here," her Momma shouted from the other room. She opened a drawer and threw its contents on the floor: rubber bands, a small Bible, a box of raisins, a broken Elvis record—nothing that helped her. She ran back to her daughter. "I don't know what to do," she screamed and fell to the floor. "I'm sorry baby; I don't know what to do."

"It's okay, Momma," Ruby said.

Like her Momma suspected, the bite didn't set in right away. It took about an hour. When it did set in Ruby writhed on the floor with her nerves on fire. Her arm swelled to nearly three times its size and Ruby was certain she would die. She started hallucinating from a fever and spoke gibberish, but later her Daddy said that what she was really speaking was "in tongues." Somehow she survived but for a couple months afterwards she was weak and never did fully regain feeling in her right arm. "She's done it, she told that Devil to git'," her Daddy said. He sat by her bedside, palms pressed together in prayer, while her Momma laid in the bed with her, arms cocooned around Ruby.

And after the bite, that's when Ruby started having her dreams.

\*\*\*

The Preacher remembers the first time he saw Ruby; it was the same day the congregation did. He was up at the pulpit talking about the Lord and trying to

figure out the best way to pull a coin from his ear. "See ya'll," he said. He pulled the coin from behind his ear, hoping it looked like it was from inside. "Like the Lord, just because you can't see something doesn't mean it ain't there." He proceeded to kiss the dime. And then, out of nowhere, she arrived. At first he thought she was just someone from the town who came for the chicken-fried steak but then he realized he didn't recognize her at all. After the service he talked to her. She stood by herself, by the door, with mashed potatoes smothered in gravy covering her plate.

"This is some good food," Ruby said. The Preacher was awkward and so instead of addressing her directly he kept walking by until she talked to him.

He smiled. "Glad you like it. My sister Selma makes all the food." He pointed to his sister who was taking another helping of mashed potatoes herself.

"Well," Ruby said. "It's the best mashed potatoes I've ever—"

"Say," the Preacher interrupted. "You from around here?"

Ruby looked down at her muddy bare feet. She'd forgotten how strange she must look, her dress all torn up. Luckily, she found a cardigan in a dumpster a few miles back and the cuts on her arms were covered for now. "I'm just passing through, on my way to visit an Aunt."

The Preacher looked at her for a long time. It made Ruby feel awkward. "I don't believe you," he said. He never was good at saying things tactfully, another reason why he probably shouldn't be a preacher. "I think you're lying. You got somewhere to stay?"

Ruby's face turned red with anger. How dare he call her a liar? But then, she remembered, she was lying. She took a bite of her mashed potatoes and thought about what to say. "I do," she whispered.

The Preacher liked to help people, it was probably the only reason he should be a preacher. So, without even asking his sister, he said, "You can stay at my sister Selma's house if you want."

"I couldn—"

"You wouldn't be imposing."

Selma was a thirty something year old woman whose husband was over in Vietnam. She had two kids no older than five. She agreed to let Ruby stay with her because she felt sorry for the girl and also because her brother had already said that she could. Ruby overheard a conversation between the Preacher and his sister one day. She was sitting in the kitchen peeling carrots for the Sunday Brunch, which she helped make now, when she Preacher walked sullenly into the room and sat down in a chair. He let out a loud procession of sighs, his body slowly wilting into itself like a dying flower.

"What's wrong Preacher?" Ruby asked.

Selma looked over from the kitchen sink where she was snapping green beans. She loved the way it felt to break the ends off. "Oh, don't mind him, Ruby. He just gets into moods sometimes."

"It's just not right," the Preacher said with a whine in his voice. "They don't find me funny, Selma. I mean, what's not to find funny about me?"

"You are pretty funny," she replied. It wasn't supposed to be a compliment but the Preacher took it that way and his posture improved.

His sister, who wanted to take her mind off the fact that her husband was supposed to write to her two weeks ago from the Vietnam and still hadn't, said, "Tell us a joke."

"Two priests walk into a bar and—" he stopped there. "I need time to think up my material." His posture began to worsen again by the seconds. Selma bit her tongue. Her brother always did do things just a little off center. In high school he loved acting but was afraid to move to New York and try and make it on stage so instead he chose a church, after all, an audience is an audience, the Preacher secretly thought.

"I like that color on you, Preacher," Ruby said. She was trying to make him feel better and it was true, the Preacher looked good in all different types of blues. In fact, the Preacher wasn't an unattractive man. He was in his late twenties and looked a little like that rock star that was so big these days, Jim Morrison—except his hair was much shorter. So, since he looked so good you'd think he could get a few laughs out of the congregation, at least from some of the young women who wanted to seduce him...But he couldn't, because he really was that boring. And in fact, the only line he could deliver that was met with moderate applause was, "The line for the Sunday brunch begins to the left."

So, because the Preacher was such a good-looking man, and Ruby was fairly attractive herself, when Ruby began to stay at Selma's, all kinds of rumors



started up around town. "I bet the preacher's sweet on her," one of the many old women with white hair that stood up like deformed icicles said.

"I heard the preacher buys her presents," a younger woman said, her tone a little sad.

They were all at a beauty salon, the only one for miles, and it was a tradition, at least in the South, in the 60's, that they talk about someone. So another old woman with a frosted perm carried on this rite of passage, and said, "I bet he'll marry that girl."

Eventually the Preacher and Ruby both left town, but separately. "I bet she'll break his heart," said June. June was a newly widowed mother of two. She just got the letter last month. The one that said, "I'm sorry Mrs. Pearlman but your husband was killed in the line of duty." The note was delivered by a nice young man on his way to Vietnam; he's dead now, too.

"Well," June continued. Her blue-green eyes gazed halfheartedly at a picture of Sharon Tate on the cover of some magazine. She looked at the other women in the salon. She was the youngest but lately she felt older than the mud caking her hallway from where her children ran in with their shoes on during a thunderstorm. "I still think it's mighty strange how the girl shows up out of nowhere and the Preacher's letting her stay at his sisters."

\*\*\*

Ruby had a dream the other night and it involved the Preacher. It wasn't necessarily a premonition, or at least, she hopes not. Either way, Ruby is a good girl. I'm not the kind to do those dirty things, she says to herself, and then splashes cool water all over her flushed face.

Ruby's dream began inside a blue house that she's never seen. It wasn't anywhere she's used to. It was a big city, bigger than Richmond, which is the biggest city she's seen. The inside of the house was covered in furniture that was composed of dark oranges and light yellows. It looked the way the sun would look if you could get up real close, Ruby thought. In her dream, Ruby walked into the living room and sat in a chair the color of a tangerine and was anxious because she was waiting for someone. She closed her eyes to pass the time and then felt warm hands brush against her face, and then lips graze gently against her own. In her dream, she opened her eyes and saw the Preacher hovering above her and she pulled him towards her, his body pressed into her like something heavy falling from the sky. Three days later there was a small plane crash just outside of town—her dreams are funny like that.

\*\*\*

Ruby started to grow. At first she thought it was all the food she ate, all those chicken-fried steaks, but really it was a baby—the Bad Man from the woods. So, she ignored it. She told herself that she was just extra hungry these

days and that there was nothing wrong with her expanding waistline. All I got to do is eat less, she said one day, looking in the mirror at her rounded belly. So, Ruby cut back. But still, she grew.

Selma noticed first and she didn't know what to say. She had two children and knew when a woman was having a baby and Ruby was definitely pregnant. She sat Ruby down one night and tried to tell her. She handed her a glass of cool chocolate milk and said, "Ruby, honey, are you having a baby?"

Ruby swallowed the milk. "Why would you say that, Selma? Of course I'm not."

"Ruby," Selma said. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, Selma."

"Then why are you having yourself a baby?"

"I'm not."

Selma didn't know what else to say but she sensed something was wrong. Ruby wasn't acting like a girl who knew she had a secret, who knew she'd done something with a boy in a car somewhere while listening to a Hendrix song. Ruby was different. She was fragile and it was worse because she didn't even know it. "Alright, Ruby. But if you change your mind you let me know and we can talk about it."

Ruby laughed and it sounded panicked. "All right, Selma," she said and clutched her belly—something was moving inside of her, something, Ruby thought. But she didn't say it out loud.

The baby was born in the middle of January, on the 12th. She was on the toilet when it happened. She thought she just needed to pee and said so to Selma. They were in the living room and Ruby was walking back and forth like a madwoman clutching her stomach and wincing every once in a while. "You alright, honey?" Selma asked. And that's when she noticed the water running down Ruby's legs.

"I'm fine," Ruby said, her voice sounding like a worn rubber band about to snap. "I just need to go to the bathroom and pee is all." Ruby made her way slowly to the bathroom. Every step felt like her last. She didn't want to keep walking, she just wanted to lie down on the floor and scream in agony like a dying dog she saw once in the woods, one her Daddy, before he was a Holy Man, told her to stay away from because it was sick and could make Ruby sick, too. But Ruby kept walking and thought back to the rattlesnake bite and about how she'd get bit all over again if it meant giving up whatever pain this was that ran through her body like hot, molten lava.

Selma followed Ruby to the bathroom. She walked slowly behind her with her arms outstretched. "Ruby, I think we should take you to a hospital," Selma said. This was a delicate situation and Selma knew it. "I don't think you need to—"

"I just need to pee!" Ruby screamed. Ruby never screamed, she was an extremely quiet girl, and so this threw Selma off guard.

"Okay, Ruby," Selma said. "You go on in there and pee and—" Ruby slammed the door. She didn't hear a word after that. She was too busy in the

bathroom trying to sit on the toilet. Selma called her brother. "You need to bring a doctor over here now... No, not the hospital. She's having the baby now... on the toilet. That's right, you heard me the first time, the t-o-i-l-e-t. I can't get her out of there. What do you mean try harder?" Selma slammed the phone down. She walked over to the bathroom and tried to open the door but it was locked. She heard Ruby crying and yelling, "Jesus Christ, Jesus Fucking Christ," from inside.

"Ruby, you let me in right now!" Selma shouted. She hadn't heard herself this angry since she got the letter a couple months back about her husband. "What do you mean he's a prisoner of war?" she screamed at the officer who arrived at her door, an older man, someone who knew this was almost harder to hear than if he was dead. And he's still missing; it's been six months.

"I can't let you in, Selma. I can—" Ruby started screaming. "Oh my god, oh my lord."

And this is when the Preacher showed up. He brought a car full of people with him. He walked into the local doctor's office and screamed, "She's having a baby. She's having a baby." And a couple old women who were waiting for their appointments when the Preacher showed up insisted on tagging along. "I knew it," one of the old women whispered on the way to Selma's house. "He's the Daddy."

The Preacher walked up to his sister. Her back rested against the bathroom door and her hands were balled up into tight fists at her sides. "Selma, what's going on?"

She sighed. "Like I told you before, I can't get her out. We're going to have to break down this door."

"Ruby, listen up, if you don't unlock this door we're going to knock it down. Open this door, now," the Preacher said.

Selma looked at him with murder in her eyes. She'd never wanted to kill anyone before, least of all her brother. "What do you think I've been doing over here? Singing her lullabies?" Selma shouted. "Talking ain't going to work. We got to break down this—"

Before Selma could finish her sentence there was a sharp scream that pinched at the hearts of everyone in the room, especially the Preacher. "That sounded like a bad one," he whispered and put his hand against the door.

"There's a baby in the toilet," Ruby screamed from the bathroom. "There's a baby in the toilet," she repeated, this time a little softer.

"Pick it up fast," the Doctor said. "It's not crying. You need to make sure it's breathing."

Ruby picked up the baby and held it in her arms. She didn't know what to do with all this. "She's blue," she said, her voice shook.

"Ruby," the Doctor said, he talked to her the way a psychiatrist would talk to a suicidal patient with a bottle of pills in their mouth, about to swallow.

"You've got to let me in that bathroom so I can help that baby breathe."

Ruby looked down at the baby in her arms and realized it would only take a minute or two of keeping that door shut for her to turn so blue that she was dead. She stared at the baby and couldn't help but think of all the things she could

say, like, I tried to unlock the door in time but it just got stuck, or, I passed out on the floor. She could pretend like she was sad the baby was dead, and maybe she would be. "Ruby," Selma said, pleading with her. "Ruby, open the door so the doctor can save that baby, now." Ruby pulled the baby close to her chest and hugged her tight.

"I don't think she's going to open that door," the Preacher said. He took a hammer from the hall closet and beat it against the bathroom door. "Of all the things that are made cheaply in a house, why's the door got to be something that won't break," he said, and then continued beating the door with the hammer.

"No jokes, James," Selma replied sharply. She bit her nails.

"Stop, ya'll," Ruby said and unlocked the door. She came stumbling out with the baby clutched to her chest. The baby wasn't blue anymore.

The Doctor held out his hands and Ruby passed the baby to him. The older women looked at the Preacher and one said, "Well, aren't you going to say hello to your daughter?" The older women's mouths curled up like they tasted something rotten. The Preacher looked at the old women, all of them equally noseey, and thought about how to reply. He knew whatever he said would spread through the town like the recipe for Selma's cornbread, and that, as soon as he gave the old women an answer they'd walk faster than they had in years, almost disappearing into the night. So, he thought on this answer for a while and then told a lie, "Of course I will." He walked over to the baby and Ruby stared at him all confused. She knew this man had never touched her, even if from time to time she might've dreamed he would. Selma stood wide-eyed, mouth open, and was

utterly shocked by this revelation—she's easy to fool, the Preacher thought. The Doctor looked at the Preacher with an expressionless face and the Preacher took the babies little hand and shook it. "Nice to meet you."

\*\*\*

A dove, a big, beautiful, majestic, Dove— the preacher said he needed one. So, he stopped on over to the pet shop on Seventh and Honey street. Inside he talked to Mr. Reed. Mr. Reed had long hair bunched up in a ponytail and a little earring, a gold hoop. He was what the locals called, spitting a little when they said it with a mixture of disdain and jealousy—a hippy. The Preacher often envied men with long hair and contemplated on rainy days when he sat all alone in the church thinking on a sermon or two, about letting his short, brown locks grow like the weeds that overtook the gravestones in the local cemetery.

“What can I help you with Preacher?” Mr. Reed asks. He takes his hands and tightens his ponytail. The preacher thinks he does this on purpose, like he’s bragging.

“I’m looking for a Dove,” the Preacher says. The town will be out of Dove’s soon. The Preacher’s killing all of them by accident in his magic tricks. But he doesn’t let a little Doves blood, or a couple howling children in the pews who cry in disgust when the bird’s decapitated on the altar when the preachers trying to make the little thing disappear, stop him. Mr. Reed shouldn’t sell the preacher another Dove and he knows it and the Preacher does, too. So, the



Preacher says, his eyes wide and honest like, “I’m planning on getting things right this time.” He looks over when he hears a tapping on the window. A little boy, little Leo as he’s called around the town, places his palms hard against the glass and yells: “Don’t let the Preacher buy himself another one of them Doves. He’ll kill the thing like he did with them others.”

But Mr. Reed likes money and as much as he likes too, he likes money more. So, he tells the Preacher it’ll be a little extra this time and that if he wants a Dove he’ll have to pay double for it. The Preacher agrees and takes the bird home. On the walk back to Selma’s he names the bird, Jeremiah. “Jeremiah,” he says. “I’m gonna make you disappear.” And he probably will make him disappear, that is, disappear into the grave.

Ruby knows some bad things happened to her but she just can’t stop from singing. When the Preacher walks in with the new Dove, introducing the little dove as Jeremiah, Ruby’s singing a hymn, singing in soprano, “What Child is This” and gently rocking her newborn baby back and forth in her arms.

“Look at this dove,” the Preacher says. He holds the small cage and trusting bird up to Selma’s face. But Selma can barely see on account of all her crying. She’s been chopping onions for the Sunday brunch. She’s planning on making something special, something European from a cookbook she checked out from the library.

“Oh, lord,” she says. “Not another one. James, I’m not cleaning up the bird guts this time from the altar if things don’t go right in your disappearing act and you—”

“I’m not going to crush another one,” he said. He tapped his index finger on the birdcage and whispered, “This one will fly away.”

“Preacher,” Ruby said. Selma rolled her eyes. She didn’t know why Ruby called her brother Preacher now. Everyone knew he was the daddy of that baby. It was odd, but then it would be if you didn’t know the truth, the real truth, the one where the baby’s daddy was in a pond in the back of some man’s woods in North Carolina—nothing but fish food now. And nobody missed him, not even his Momma. “Preacher,” Ruby said, again.

The Preacher took his eyes off the dove long enough to look at Ruby. He noticed the dark circles underneath her eyes and the way she held her baby like it might bite her hands off. “Yes, Ruby?”

“What you going do with that there dove?” Worry spread across her face like thick honey, and it isn’t exactly certain but the preacher probably noticed cause the preacher notice a lot about Ruby.

He plucked at the top button of his baby blue dress shirt and it popped right off. The button flew across the room and onto the wood floor. He always did things like this. Once, he even plucked away some of his eyebrows while reading the bible and didn’t even realize what he’d gone and done until he looked in a mirror and saw a bald patch on his left brow.

“Well, Ruby,” he said. “I’m going to make this here dove disappear on Sunday.”

Selma sliced a piece of chicken into bite size pieces. “Ruby, what he means is he’s going to kill that poor little thing.”

Ruby mouth opened in an O of disgust. She’s never liked seeing things in cages ‘cause it reminds her of the rattlesnakes, of how she used to watch her Daddy shake them things around and around in their cages and hold them up towards the big sky and pray.

“I ain’t going to kill it, Selma,” the Preacher said. Selma can tell he’s frustrated.

She points a knife with carrot shrapnel on the sharp blade towards her brother. “Stop popping the buttons off your shirt, James.” The Preacher drops his chin towards his chest to take a look at the buttons, his hands still on the third button down, and pop, it’s gone, just like that, everything can go away—well, you know, just asks Ruby. Selma puts the knife down on the cutting board and places her manicured hands on her hips. “I said, stop. Cause’ you know who’s going to have to sew them buttons back on and it ain’t you.” She points to herself. “That’s right,” she says, and looks at Ruby. “Me.”

Selma was in a bad mood and when she was in a bad mood, Selma couldn’t hide it none. Her husband’s birthday was circling like a moth to a streetlight and she just didn’t know what to do about it all. She just couldn’t help thinking about him in one of them POW camps somewhere in ‘Nam and wondering are his socks dry? She laid awake at night thinking on the state of his

feet because the idea of her husband sitting in some prison cell with his wet toes stung her like one of them big horseflies you find around these parts when you least expect it, when you're having a fine day and eating some cornbread down by Old Mr. Green's pond.

But Selma knew there ain't no use dreaming on it none. "You've just got to keep moving," she whispered.

"What?" the Preacher asked. His balanced the Dove's cage in one hand and picked up a piece of cooked chicken with the other. But Selma swatted his hand away before he could grip the chicken between his index finger and his thumb.

"Stop it, James. This here's for the Sunday brunch," she said, her voice sounded worn Ruby thought, as worn as one of them old dresses her Momma used to wear cause they didn't have no money.

"Momma," Ruby said aloud and didn't mean to.

The preacher looked over at Ruby this time and asked her, "What?" He put the dove's cage up on the counter next to the cooked chicken while he dug into his pockets pulling out lint instead of the marbles he searched for. He'd bought them for the baby. Thought she'd want something to play with. "Oops," he said. "I've lost my marbles."

"You damn right," Selma said. She licked some salt from her thumb. Seasoning food was her favorite part of cooking.

“What?” the Preacher said, again. He sighed and picked his Dove’s cage off the counter. “You girls ain’t making any sense. I’m going upstairs with my Dove to practice some.”

“Go on then,” Selma said, her eyes wide with a laugh. She looked at Ruby. “He’s gonna kill that bird.”

After the Preacher left Selma continued to make the Sunday brunch. She took a jar of black olives and handed them to Ruby. “Can you pit these for me?” she asked.

Ruby looked all confused. “Pit them?”

Selma took an olive and tore out the hard center. “Like t

