

Backyard Cannibals

by

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ABSTRACT

The stories in *Backyard Cannibals* examine the thin line between connecting with another person and consuming them. They dwell in the intersections of natural and manmade worlds, exploring dislocated bodies, unexpected wildernesses, and the consequences of hunger.

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The Milk Jelly of Fallen Stars

My hunger began in the back garden, where I could crouch very still and watch the world feast on itself. Puffy white slime molds clung to branch bottoms, begging to be plucked like marshmallows and broken apart by my tongue. They moved slower than snails and tasted like wet roses, pulping as surely in the moisture from my mouth as they had in the damp Louisiana summer. I showed the neighbor boy how to find them, but he ran away when I dipped my fingers and licked them off.

I told my grandpa too. You aren't so strange, he said. Some folks in Mexico fry them like scrambled eggs—Caca de luna, they call it. But I like it fresh, I said, taking a spoon from the drawer. He tugged my ponytail. Of course you do, little alien. That's how they eat it on the moon.

The moon. I could picture Owen there. Not heaven, with winged angels and golden gates, and not hell either, though he enjoyed setting things on fire. The moon had a wide bright face and a looming dark side. Loose with gravity and full of holes, it was somewhere Owen could be happy.

We'd left California to stay with my grandpa those summer months, which my parents, both teachers, had free. I was nearly thirteen, awkward and alone; and my parents never had their friends over—a looming habit from the Owen years. Of course

there were brief phone calls, flowers in all corners of the house with dizzying perfumes, weeds pulled, lawns mowed—small gestures to keep us cushioned in sympathy. But ultimately my parents couldn't afford to sit around our old house without him, filling the extra spaces and staring into each other's eyes. They poured Owen's ashes into a glass canning jar and packed our bags for Louisiana.

My grandpa knew about aliens. He'd taught me star charts and abduction tales, mathematical predictions about the coming invasion. We were safer in numbers, he said, greeting us as we stepped from the rental car, one by one, and pulling us into his arms.

He and I resumed training where we'd left off. Grandpa gave me an envelope filled with pictures he'd cut out: bodies with thin twisted limbs and pale skin clinging to the tendons, lights in triangulated formations, and crisscrossing scars on hospital patients, who sat with their stomachs exposed and bugged-out eyes burning into the camera. There were rules, Grandpa told me. You can resist being taken if they find you. You can reject the pull of the beams and keep your heart heavy with faith, consumed by The Spirit. The aliens won't take someone else's leftovers.

That was also the summer my grandpa taught me how to hold a gun. He'd drawn on paper plates and cast them hanging from the trees. He lifted my arms to my cheekbones until I could smell the oiled barrel, and I cocked my head automatically—a natural. I shot those alien faces in their empty saucer eyes. I'll take you hunting some day, he said. It suits you. My parents jumped at the sight of me, sitting cross-legged at the end of the driveway with a .22 caliber rifle resting on my lap, and because I was still

little, and still a girl, and would always be a little girl, I was forbidden to ever hold one again.

Our movie nights were old and out of this world. For *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Grandpa placed bowls of junk food around me: ginger snaps, butterscotches, licorice, and potato chips. The aliens in globby spores rained from outer space. They looked and tried to be like us, but if you were paying attention, you could tell there was something off. My stomach clenched as I sucked a can of wan yellow soda through a straw. The women screamed perfectly: standing still, long nails delicate against their cheeks, lovely curls trembling. Shining examples of humanity in the face of monstrosity. People don't want to be like aliens, I realized. Aliens want to be like people.

The eating began one afternoon while I was lying on my back in my grandpa's garden and looking up at the bottoms of leaves. Without Owen to keep track of, I was fascinated by how much time could be spent in one spot, undetected. Little dots of frothed mold expanded and contracted above me, pulling their slow spongy bodies to the edges, nibbling in some unfathomable way on the plant's gauzy green skin. Predators or parasites. I dragged my fingertips to detach them and they clung to me, trembling masses, until I nipped them away with my teeth. As they melted into viscous plasma beneath my tongue, I swallowed and felt the mold run down throughout my body, tingling, warming me like a medicine.

My parents checked in occasionally, but with glances, seeing only stillness where I lay in the garden. To them I must have seemed calm, relatively untouched by the last couple years. New to death and unshakably innocent.

I returned to the house when I was done. My fullness was a new feeling; it didn't connect with the weight of the mold settling in my stomach, but instead felt inspired by the spores—a fullness that formed deep inside, which budded and branched throughout, expelling my hunger. Grandpa made a comment about how happy I seemed. My parents nodded, fighting back tears. In all this time, throughout their mourning, no one had dared to suggest they adopt another. I'd turned out alright, but you never know what you're going to get.

During my few years with Owen, I'd developed a stronger awareness of the natural world. Whether it was to mirror his strange vulnerability, or because I'd felt he'd needed me to be his eyes and ears—a filter towards a softened reality—I'll never know. But my sensitivity continued to grow, even after he was gone. Now I could see turtles inching through the grass no matter how fast I walked, and could smell nearby skunks that had yet to spray.

Weeks went by and the slimes became scarce, though I always had ladybugs, beetles, and crickets; they scuttled near the front door and sometimes slipped beneath it, just asking to be eaten. There's nothing in here for you, I'd say, my warm breath stunning them where they dangled from my fingers. Their exoskeletons squashed with a

nice salty crunch, but I longed for more insides. Their carcasses like pebbles in my stomach.

At night, the sounds of roosting chickens scratching and squawking just yards away kept me awake, their dull chatter stirring my adrenaline. I entered their moonlit coop, slid my hands under each plump belly until I found one, and placed it whole and warm inside my mouth to clack against the backs of my teeth. I knew it was bad, but I couldn't stomach my mother's omelets, or even the lifeless yokes leaking from her poached eggs on toast. I bit softly down and flooded my throat with egg and shell, and, though I blocked the recognition from my mind for some time, bits of unformed bird.

The neighbors built fences of chicken wire around their perimeters. They went around tapping their feet near every hole and burrow to scare up predators, while I walked in broad daylight. They'd pull fox pups from their nests but find no eggshells, and sulk home, scratching their heads over what had made them stop laying. No one knew, except the old hens hiding their eggs from me in cubbies of hay, or the foxes barking as I wandered from the coop with leftover scraps sticking between my fingers. I was the poacher. Foxes and chickens weren't enough to stop me.

Some urges couldn't be stopped. Some just came to you, and took you over. Owen had taught me this.

We'd gotten Owen easily because he was eight years old and had never been adopted. His brain was slippery and full of holes, but otherwise fine; you just had to be careful with how you treated him. In moments of frustration he liked to take a baseball

bat outside and crack it against the ground until he wore himself out. My parents were shocked that their love couldn't change him, and it scared them to think the neighbors might see: this small, downy-haired boy heaving and crying and beating dents into the driveway. My father would hover on the stoop and wave at passing drivers, talking pleasantly at Owen as though they were in conversation. Only I could see how far away Owen was in those moments. How much less the brain knew in light of the body.

I wondered what Owen would think of me if he could see me now, spitting pieces of grimy shell and wiping my chin. Even if the moment was shared then forgotten forever, it felt good to think that some part of him would know. Owen loved me, and he probably thought he always had; neither of us remembered our adoptions. I had a good excuse as I'd only been a baby. But I couldn't forget all those long years as an only child—years that didn't make sense now, being Owen's sister.

I'm the sister of someone who doesn't exist. I'm the sister of someone who went eight years before knowing me, but who loved me like I'd always been around. I filled the holes in his timeline like a stopper in a dam.

Sometimes when Owen was upset, he would come sit near and squeeze his knees, and have me tell him stories about when he was a baby. My lies did just fine. I said we'd found him inside a broken saucer, and that he'd only spoken alien tongue for years. Or that he was carried in on the tide from the Gulf of Mexico, swathed in seaweed and bearing flipper feet. I told Owen we'd both come from inside our mom, and that I'd spent the first two years of my life begging her bellybutton to grow another.

I used to wonder if he had any control over the forgetting, if he could ever choose to let go. Or if he had so much scrambling up there that he couldn't tell what his brain was taking in and what it was spitting out.

The neighbor boy, on the other hand, had a good memory. He came back weeks after I'd frightened him in the garden, now carrying a toy bow across his back and a quiver at his hip, keeping his distance. I knew the boy was watching me eat; I'd spotted him with binoculars, on his hands and knees in the brush or hanging from a tree. Grandpa's property was set far apart from the others at the end of a twisted lane, but all the backyards were open, leaking into one another through connecting water banks and footpaths. You could follow a clearing in the mess of nature straight into another person's yard. The neighbors knew better, but not the boy; he crept closer and closer each time he came to watch.

I was pulling spotted garden slugs off the curling bark of a fallen tree, when the boy peeked out from behind a boulder. He was barely yards away, so close I could see his flashing braces and nervous squint.

Hey, I called.

The boy stood. I'm Serge, he said, quietly. He led me on a path around the reservoir and to his garage, where a cat was cupping a little gray mound in its paws. Her butt arched high in the air and rattled when the thing moved, and she let it scamper free for a moment, before clamping down on its head again to hold it in place. By the high squeaking wheezes the mouse made, we knew it was in pain. Serge chewed his nails and

rocked back and forth on his heels until I could no longer stand it. I took a shovel and drove the tip down, sending the cat racing away to the shadows, and Serge made a gentle noise: a gasp, or a sigh of relief, or some combination of both. Then he ran into the house.

I found the only meaty part of the mouse's body and pulled the outer flesh away, taking a quick single bite. It was dry, somewhat tough, but warm and sweet near the bones. It was enough. I scooped the rest into the corner and placed a bag of fertilizer in front of it to cover the sight. Sitting still there and letting the animal settle inside me, I felt serene, as though I'd been flexing my muscles for too long and suddenly let them go slack. Serge soon returned, carrying a plate of light, nutritious snacks that his mom had assembled: apple slices, unbuttered popcorn, and even ants on a log: halved celery stalks stuffed with peanut butter and raisins. I've already eaten, I said. Serge looked down, scanning the ground around us.

I begged Grandpa to return my gun. Said, I've a deep feeling I was meant to shoot. The phrasing resonated with him; feelings and meanings led to omens, led to messages. Well, if my granddaughter wasn't given a gift, he mused. You get a calling, you answer; don't let anyone stop you.

I did have a calling: wild, gamey meat. My mouth was watering for it.

My parents seemed to think Grandpa and I were driving out to the Gretna Observatory in the early mornings, probably just mapping the weather and rehashing all the old conspiracies. Mom had been raised on aliens too; she didn't believe a lick of it,

but she saw learning about them as natural as religion, and nothing to be laughed at. She even offered to buy me a nice telescope for my upcoming birthday. I'd just shrugged; I couldn't remember wanting things like that anymore. It was useless junk, empty and lifeless. My gun was the only thing that brought me some satisfaction.

So, in secret, Grandpa began taking me to the deeper parts of the woods to hunt. He didn't like to shoot, just tag and follow, though we kept our rifles slung across our backs to maintain a sense of purpose. Afterwards, he'd set our empty water bottles on a log and let me have a go with my gun. I was glad for his presence, worried about what I might do if we ever trapped something living.

She isn't good with death, my parents would say of me. Maybe it was true. There was a way to grieve that made the situation easier on everyone in the room: you say kind things, dab your tears, and cover your face when you see his small body because it looks wrong without movement—slightly caved in and rubbery. An object that belongs in a box. But instead I just sat there at the funeral, staring straight ahead and slapping people's hands when they tried to touch me. When you can't trust what a human looks like, there isn't much you can trust.

Owen wasn't patient with crossing the street. Traffic was chaos to him—a game with rules he'd never learn. The day my family gathered around him to mourn, some of them meeting him for the first time because he'd joined our family as a troubled adolescent and not a newborn bundle of joy, my insides seemed to seep with toxins. I snuck outside and hid behind the smoking gazebo, breathing second-hand pollution. I

stole a pad of matches and set the trash can in the ladies room on fire. The smoke made my eyes water, and as I returned to the chapel, the alarms began to sound. The undertaker ran to the casket, slammed the lid down, and covered it with a table cloth in case the sprinklers should trigger. You'd think they'd make those things waterproof.

One Sunday morning, I stayed home from church to practice with squirrels. Propped up on my elbows, I draped the rifle along my extended left arm and tipped my head to peer through its scope, combing the line of overgrown brush for movement. I hit a frog first, I was already that good, but I gave it to the hens for retribution. Squirrels, on the other hand, moved predictably: they didn't feel safe on the ground and ran when frightened, jumping small arcs past my gun. The dead squirrels, whether on their sides or their backs, lay with noses up and eyes closed. Flattened and deflated against the earth.

Resisting my temptation to gorge, I bagged the few shot ones and brought them in to boil. The fur scraped off, the blood drained, and the boiled white meat pulled away neatly in strips. I plated it without a garnish or seasonings to try to preserve, at the very least, its natural flavor. Gnawing on the squirrel meat was like trying to eat a bowl of wax fruit—it looked like food and could be chewed like food, but it hung around in my belly refusing to break down. All that death going to waste. I stumbled outside and shot one more, knocking the squirrel down from a tree branch, splitting into its ribs with my thumbs, and eating it right off the ground.

I took a long walk that night. The moon was full and I was too; at the same time, I was hungry enough to eat anything that got in my way. Birds scattered before I approached. Mosquitoes landed and immediately relaunched, unwilling to tap their beaks in my blood. I itched all over, but only from dragging branch tips and the peak of my appetite, rising to the surface. The beginnings of a fever. I wanted to smear those fluffy white molds all over my skin like a balm, let them feast off me, clean me inside and out.

I kept an eye on the skies. Even with my gun, I wasn't safe from abduction. Aliens liked finding people in nature; they were fascinated by our instincts, how we prioritized our bodies over our minds. Luckily, there couldn't be anything scarier than what was already inside me. The stories we'd all heard growing up—about werewolves and vampires and the dangers of being bit—I wasn't above worrying. I put my hands on the ground and panted, waiting for a change I might have been fighting all along. The hunger kept stinging but the violence ebbed away; I was still me, in the end.

As I continued walking, I heard sticks breaking, closing in. If Serge was trying to hide, he was bad at it. He took the same steps, sometimes ducking into my exact footprints, shielding his face from the branches I sent snapping back behind me. I let him catch up. Serge was wearing a white nightshirt, baggy blue jean shorts, and a backpack slung over one shoulder, and he reeked of his own settled smells: sweat, oil, talcum powder, and cheap lilac lotion. I led him straight to a hole I'd covered with thatching. My animal trap.

Sitting back on his haunches, a grown raccoon peered up from the pit and screeched at us. His fat belly was framed by tough little black feet, and his neck craned

up long and wobbly. Serge crouched next to me, but not too close. I took a big rock and turned it in my hands, looking down into the pit, while Serge leaned forward on his palms. Don't, he said, but I hushed him. Serge sucked in his breath.

I wanted to hit Serge in the head and make him delirious so he could just sit and bear witness. Or hold my hand without knowing what my hands did. The way Owen knew me well enough, or perhaps knew me with such little consideration for patterns and traits to never assume, treating me like another frustrated, wild creature he could tackle and chase until he was ordered to stop. I needed to tell someone about the aliens. The milk jelly of fallen stars inching paths into our bodies.

I threw the rock down as hard as I could. But the raccoon twisted, ducking out of the way and spinning in frightened circles, scrambling to escape. I swallowed hard to keep myself from crying, my stomach biting back in quick jabs. Serge tapped my shoulder. He was holding a peanut butter and jelly sandwich out to me. The smells of the processed bread conditioners and sugary dyed citrus muck and smooth candied nut glop mingled together and slid past my nose to the back of the throat. I grabbed my kneecaps and hurled.

Serge tucked the sandwich away and, guiding me gently by the arm, led me to a clearing. He spread a woven blanket over the ground and instructed me to lie down. My mom is a doctor, he said. I was crying now, weak with exhaustion and hunger, and smearing my tears back into my face with the sides of my palms. I don't know why I obeyed. Serge knelt by my side and produced from his backpack a small black kit. Open, he instructed, and as I did, I felt him push a thermometer under my tongue and cup

his cool hand on my forehead. He lifted one of my arms and dropped it back at my side. He wrapped a stethoscope around his neck, placed the buds in his ears, and settled the chestpiece right below my collarbone. Are you in pain?

I didn't say so but I didn't have to. Where? he asked. I pointed to my stomach. Serge looked at it for a while, chewing his lip, while I pulled myself together. I'm just going to, um. But then he was silent. With clumsy fingers he found the edge of my shirt and lifted up a bit. Then a bit more. Huh, he said, wrinkling his forehead. I examined the pale fleshy underside of his arm and wondered what Serge would be like. Chewy? Sweet, like deer? He put three fingers near my bellybutton and looked into my eyes as he pressed down. Does it hurt now? I shook my head. That's good, he said, putting another hand on my stomach.

A beam of light swept through the trees, flashing over us, once, twice, and then steadying. Serge toppled backwards and squinted into it. It called for me, by name, then by the names of my parents. I spit the thermometer out.

As more voices came, I saw my mother and father run into the clearing and add their own flashlights to the scene. I pulled my shirt down and Serge jumped to his feet, grabbing his supplies before running into the trees. Grandpa's flashlight lowered away. The thermometer snapped underfoot as my parents dropped beside me and lifted me in a squeeze. Grandpa was just standing there, one hand reaching for his rifle. He gazed past me, down at the ground, then up at the sky, panic still wrenching his face.

At dinner the next day, I stuck pieces of bread roll in my mouth and swallowed with big gulps of water. It's your birthday dinner, my father said. Order whatever you want. The waiter brought him a shrimp cocktail. Curved pink bodies, deveined, deshelled, and delegged, hung along the edge of his glass, around a small sauce bowl resting in ice. He drowned each shrimp in marinara and bit them off at the tail—the only part that still looked like it was once alive.

I ordered a spinach salad, which I then picked through and played with until it looked pulverized in dressing, finished enough to be taken away. My parents stole looks with one another, worried I was protesting my punishment: no more Serge. Grandpa looked straight at me, sawing into his steak so hard the knife kept screeching against the plate. Listen. You're not starving yourself for some boy, are you?

I stood up, but the quick action made my head spin. Tripping in search of the bathroom with my center of gravity dissolving, I bumped into a waiter carrying a food tray, who watched his shallow bowl of clam chowder slosh all over its side of french fries. Ruined! he accused as I ducked past.

I wandered, delirious with hunger, until I came to a long glass fish tank, placed to section off the hostess's station from the kitchen hallway. Its lighting made the water a deep blue, and the lobsters climbing over one another were not red like you see in cartoons, but speckled orange and brown, dark and smooth like the eggs from our neighbor's coop. They curled their tails under and flailed their legs, rubbing feelers as they tried to regain balance over an ever-shifting terrain. White bands held their pincers together. Brine flavored the air.

Looking through the glass, I saw a face come close and press to it, smashed and monstrous. The close-set eyes and freckled nose were recognizable enough, but his expressions made me sure: Owen. He tapped on the tank and pointed at the lobsters. Hey Owen, I said, my stomach growling. He just kept pointing in, seemingly at a smaller lobster that was crawling against the corner of the tank, with its large claw straight up in the air, easy to pluck. I'd never tasted lobster before. I could already imagine how it would be: the smoky, oily flavor of something simmered, with the powerful sweet taste of fresh meat—still tender and new, before all the nutrients have been cooked out.

Feeling better sweetheart? My mother clamped her hands on my shoulders.

My father was there too. I hope you're not coming down with something, he said.

I spun around, surveying the restaurant for a young, wild boy, for anyone throwing crab puffs or jumping on chairs or setting napkins on fire. Owen was gone.

When we got home, my parents ran ahead while Grandpa stayed behind with me in the driveway. I took a handful of pebbles and chucked them one by one at his copper weathervane, hitting the rooster ornament nearly every time. No wind tonight, Grandpa said. Could mean an updraft, a storm coming. He leaned on the car trunk. Darlin, I think you'll have to leave the gun here at the end of the summer.

I listened to an animal call, a faraway yelping I couldn't place. Okay, I said. I threw the last few stones, but my aim was off, thwarted by cravings.

Inside, I was met with a strawberry birthday cake, stuck all over with wax candles melting to pool in the frosting. A single large box with a polka dot bow on top was displayed at my father's feet. It shimmied and whined. Open it! he urged. When I lifted the lid, a tongue swiped at me—a young cocker spaniel that left a trail of drool on everything it touched. He's all yours, they said. The dog smelled sour, pungent from recently bathing. Swirls of fur with a fat pink belly, it climbed up my shoulder and marked me with dander.

Wow, I said. It was all I could muster. My parents beamed.

At night, the dog refused to stay in its crate. It scampered up to the foot of my bed where it began nipping at my sleeping toes. Hey, I hissed, making it flop onto its side with its feet in the air, showing complete submission. Then as I'd try to fall back asleep, more bites, until I sprang up and grabbed the dog by the neck scruff, forcing its face low. The spaniel's body twitched and trembled, its wild eyes wet with discharge. It wrapped its jaws around my wrist and bounced them up and down against my skin. Tail thumping playfully.

I padded down the hallway in my slippers, with the dog bumping against my heels until we got outside. The yard was dark except for short dim walkway spikes that lit up on their own, creating a halo around the garden. The dog began work on a small hole—smelling and digging and inspecting and digging some more, robotically, like it was programmed to seek what lay only a foot beneath the surface.

Suddenly it froze, leaning forward with droopy ears, perhaps vaguely remembering some long descended instinct for hunting. It sniffed the night air, then

tucked its tail between its legs. Owen? I said. A chorus of bugs the only answer. My head was light, inflating, trying to carry me away from the cravings in my body. Now the dog was chasing its own tail and falling all over itself. I went to the garage for my gun.

The cabinet where Grandpa stored his hunting equipment was locked. Inside the house, I scanned the kitchen countertops for keys and fished my hand through my mother's purse, stubbing my fingers on something large. The jar I pulled out had a raised texture wrapping around all sides: a cornucopia of fruit and corn bouquets hanging from the stalk. Wholesome and countrified. The jar's interior was coated in cloudy gray film.

I opened the jar and took just a pinch. The dust coated my mouth like a fine, dull sand, slowly dissolving into a waxy balm, and it had a rotten sulphuric tone, too, like something that had once been ripe. I felt sick until I swallowed and renewed my saliva a few times. I rubbed my gums with my pinky, trying to clear the ash away.

There are some tastes I'll never forget, some dark areas that grow along with me, hiding me in dead spots and moonscapes. I was lucky that Owen could never see me for what was missing. He thought he'd always been there, my little brother. Now he always would be. Foreign bodies crash-landing into my world, taking me over. Owen in my gut.

Shut Eye

I came back because I missed the warmth of her bed. What Kate had done, the things I'd seen her do, were unforgivable—that mysterious black Buick, the foot and gaudy ankle bracelet bobbing out its rolled-down window, Kate's shoulders rising and sinking back down, shaking the car, and then the bright daylight too outside Kate's studio, shining over all of it and burning the image even more powerfully into my thoughts—it was enough to ruin us. But it was also, as she insisted, “a one time thing.” I didn't doubt her; Kate had this ability to make quick decisions and follow them the whole way through, to zero in on a source of disease and eradicate it. The skill served her well, both in carpentry and in relationships. You can't build a foundation from splintered wood, she'd say.

This was something I'd thought about often in the few days we were separated. Even if you can throw the bad wood away so easily, what do you do with the splinters that remain lodged deep, festering in your skin? Now, sitting parked at the end of her driveway with the engine still running, and staring at her cabin in the dark, longing to be back inside, I was prepared with an answer: I would have to throw the skin away too, prove that the old Erin could be a one time thing, a shed layer that might reveal a woman this never happened to. Someone who sees her partner misbehaving and doesn't back away, quiet, miserable and unable to cause a scene.

I turned my flashlight on and scanned the icy hill. Kate could maneuver easily out here in the darkness but my eyes never learned to adjust. And what little they picked up left too much to the imagination—there were both lumbering carnivorous things and quick beady bloodthirsty things in the woods, and the few I had actually seen couldn't compete with the ones hibernating in my mind. I left the car there. Sometimes my engine would stall if I tried to climb Kate's slick, winding driveway, as though my truck knew not to go further, and I'd start sliding backwards with my wheels spinning for traction.

It was wet, blustery, and awfully dark outside, but I knew I'd be alright once I was in her bed. My flashlight pulled me staggering from the truck up the hill to her door and into the den where she slept. I shook my blue parka over the rug and hung it on one of the bare wood knobs of her coat rack, holding the flashlight beam between my knees. The swish of my nylon coat and the accidental spotlight that caught Kate's face dragged her from sleep, and she sat up against the headboard, smoothing her black cowlicks with both hands as I began to unlace a boot. She was alone. While she studied me through the darkness, I could feel the snow melting in my hair; the fireplace still warming from the north end of her big cabin room, its flames beaten down only recently.

“What's going on,” she asked.

“Shut up,” I whispered, setting my boots to puddle near the door. I just wanted to be back in that bed. Kate lifted the covers on my side, and I pulled my pants off and crawled in to lay face-down in the open place next to her. The wind heaved against the house and we could hear the boards ache and give. I yawned happily as my legs stopped shivering. I closed my burning eyelids with relief. Then I held still, buoyed against the

mattress springs, my breasts cupped and my hips heavy. Pulling away from the sinking center of the bed where Kate lay curled caused dizziness, and the blood rushing to my head made my vision blur—an initial release into euphoric rest.

Faintly, in my last moments of awareness, I heard the springs creak under her tossing weight as she grabbed one of my balled hands and dragged it over to her side of the bed, tucking it under her chin. She mumbled a few words about starting over. Damn right, I thought. We could be better, sand away our imperfections with practice and with time. Not counting these last few days or the other woman that caused them, next month would be a year together; it was something worth building on.

When I nudged my still-cold nose behind her ear, Kate flinched but stayed, letting me draw from her warmth as I fell asleep.

The next day, I woke up to the smell of coffee and flapjacks, spurring my hunger. Blankets were twisted around my splayed limbs—no doubt I'd yanked them to my side of the bed at some point in the night—and part of me, eyeballs aching and tongue cramped, felt merged with the mattress. I turned over and squinted at the cuckoo clock on the wall. It was well after noon; I must have slept through the bird's abrasive mechanical chirping. Though out of sight, I could hear Kate bounding around in the kitchen, and the refrigerator door swinging open and closed, open and closed.

Though I kept my own apartment, Kate's house was a second home. I found myself returning to her bed every night, to the point where my own bed became extra

storage—a place to pour clean clothes, pile books, and spread sheet music so I wouldn't have to turn the page. It was good to be back, and as I gazed up to study the familiar bed posts and headboard, I let myself feel comfortable again. Yes, the frame had flaws: its midbeam sagged, and only a few of the small whittled claw-feet were worn down now, balancing the mattress at an uneven angle, but the bed's beauty was undeniable. Built from sanded oak, speckled with knots and varnished in cherry brown resin, the headboard was cut like the bow of a heart to sag toward the middle and draw you back to its center. The hand-carved bed posts sprouting from all four corners made me think of Jack's beanstalk, with twisting, bulging veins that tapered off as if into the distance, seeming to spiral all the way up to the ceiling from this angle. Kate told me she'd spent twice as long on this detailing as she had on the rest of the frame, but then she'd always liked to keep busy; she even had plans to start on a new bed, a more polished, level, and beautiful one—one that would prove what she was capable of.

But I liked this one. I arched my back and yawned. Headboard, footboard, midbeam, runners, cross support; hand-sanded, triple-varnished, curved, carved, and dipping. I recognized the shade of dusty brown oak, every notch and ripple, dark knot and bird peck. Four columns climbing up like vines, away from four little balled-up claw feet below. Sheets strewn, pillows pummeled. I'd slept heavily but surprisingly well, considering what had kept me away all those nights.

Squinting through my eyelashes, I watched Kate weave from the kitchen to the table by the fireplace, slipping out of sight and returning each time with something to add to the spread. She brought maple syrup and apple juice from the kitchen and looked at me, thinking I was still asleep. A tall stack of pancakes, some thick slices of fried potato.

She brought a kettle of coffee and a potholder in one hand, and two kiln-fired mugs she'd made in the other. She looked at me again. I pressed my eyes shut but her boots clapped louder and louder across the floor and I knew I'd been caught. I felt anxious, but not excited the way I'd been the night she first caught me. When she had taken me home and made me hers. "Erin," she said. My toes curled.

The night I met Kate, almost a year ago and already the dead of winter, I had been cold and drunk with nowhere to turn. I'd gone to a sports bar to meet an old college friend: a fellow cellist from my orchestra who had been beautiful and friendly and straight, and who I'd once been too afraid of to even tap on the shoulder. Her chair was directly in front of mine in the pit, but she would twist all the way around to whisper jokes about our lecherous conductor, loosing strands of her long blond hair, which she wore in French braids, and I would giggle, resting the smooth neck of my cello against my own, and wonder if there was something I could do to let her know I loved her—something small, subtle, and nonthreatening, but just enough to put the ball in her court. Something beyond staring at the back of her head and trying to bore my feelings into her, relishing that I still had a chance, and letting that possibility hang open. Throughout my twenties, all the women I dated could instead have been her. Her jokes, her unplucked eyebrows, her lavender hand lotion, and the quick way she once grabbed my ankle as I was kicking her chair and held my foot still for a long moment, pressing it with lavender before letting it slip away.

Years later she called me up. I arrived at the sports bar with the memory of lavender sharp in my nose, only to find she'd dragged a husband along—an amateur comedian who was nowhere near as funny as she'd always been—so I tried to remind myself that it was just college. That no one knew what they wanted in college. In any case, I wound up drinking too much, dropping a beer glass, and belligerently refusing to be escorted home. She touched my arm in kindness as they left together. Perhaps also in knowing.

I started meandering around the parking lot then, unable to find my car because I'd parked down the street. With naked hands I sculpted a lump of settled snow and lapped at it as I walked, so hopeful for hydration that I didn't notice my fingers go numb. Before long I crossed the wrong alley and saw two people tangled in a row of motorcycles, cast in neon lights from the pawn shop sign next door. Now I'm branded with the scene: A woman climbing the pegs on one of the bikes, feet thrumming against the muffler as she scrambles to get her balance and rest her hip on the seat, her arms wrapped around the waist of a taller, older woman in a faded gray jacket. The tall woman with a wide nose and a steady look about her; her movements—fingers tickling the back of a neck, palms sliding down over a tight skirt and squeezing—a coolness that stands in contrast to the young woman's excitement. Making it look so easy. Even when she catches me staring at them she doesn't startle, just carefully lets the woman go and returns my gaze. I'm embarrassed. I drop my snowball. I run.

Kate crawled over me on the bed, locking her knees around my waist and clamping my wrists down with both hands. She wore thick wool socks, stiff jeans and flannel, smelled like burnt butter and mouthwash, and she grinned at me as I opened my eyes, gruffly pretending to wake. The familiarity made it feel right, but I'd already started thinking about other women—not just the woman on the motorcycle, but all the other women that had ever swooned over her and all the other women there ever would be.

I yanked my wrists from Kate's grasp and tried to sit up, using my shoulders to force her backwards, but instead of stumbling she melted against me. Her lips fell over mine, and I returned the kiss with a prim peck, then craned my neck away.

"Whoa, hey, sorry to wake you." She smiled again, and brushed an eyelash from my face with her thumb.

"Let's eat," I said.

As I sawed my short stack into small fluffy pieces, I watched Kate get a fire going. She knew how to do stuff. It may sound simple, but rarely do you meet someone like that; even now, in my thirties, I know few people who can start a fire with only a log of fresh wood and a match. No one but Kate can fix a sink, tame a horse, darn a sock and pickle just about anything under the sun. That's the way she got me. She chased me down that night at the bar to apologize for startling me, and she offered me a ride home on her motorcycle. Kate could kiss in public, chase strangers, and ride motorcycles, and I thought I wanted someone like that in my life. It wasn't long before I, still slightly drunk and now thoroughly weakened by Kate's angular jaw line, was imagining my own arms

wrapped around her waist. I didn't think about the woman who'd been warming her motorcycle seat earlier. Kate made it easy. When we rode down the dark roads that I quickly realized weren't leading to my house, she recommended we stay at her place nearby and tackle the ice patches by daylight. If I didn't mind, of course. I was quiet, absorbed in the hum of her engine. It all sounded like poetry to me.

“You working today?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She reached up to the table for her coffee mug, then sat back down on the floor and began prodding at the logs with a poker, turning them over one another as they choked and snapped in the flames. The smell of syrup was replaced with burning ash. “Just started a set of dining room chairs for this client uptown.”

We continued to eat like this—Kate seated near my feet at the hearth, reluctantly accepting food as I passed it down to her—until the greasy potatoes were cold on our forks. She could be submissive when she wanted forgiveness, but I hated her this way. I wished I could erase her displays of weakness and restore her to the Kate I fell so hard for: confident, dependable, and deserving. Without looking at her, I took the dishes from her lap, brought them to the kitchen, and began filling a sink with soapy water. Moments later I heard her walking behind me, and as more dishes slipped into the sink, clattering loudly, I felt strangely relieved. Glad to do them all. I was good at cleaning up.

Kate poured the leftover coffee, clouding the dish water, but before I could complain she had her arms under mine, kissing my shoulders and locking her hands in front of my ribcage. My zombie arms hung over the sink, dripping with suds. I was stiff and unable to respond from this angle. I bit the side of my tongue, worried about

breakfast breath and whether I should put up more of a fight. She turned me around. When I wiped my hands on the front of her black flannel shirt she didn't seem to notice—she had her eyes closed and neck craned into me blindly like she was able to sense exactly where her mouth should go. The first time we'd kissed, just inside her doorway that night after the bar, there'd been a small stack of lumber behind her and she'd been wearing that same flannel and I remember running my hands along the collar shyly as she pulled the buttons undone. "You're like Paul Bunyan," I'd whispered, still buzzing with alcohol. She'd responded by grabbing my icy hands and twisting them down behind my back, leaving her shirt on and half-buttoned. Then she picked me up by the hips and tossed my weight against her shoulder. I guess that makes me your blue ox, I'd thought, what's-her-name. Brought in from the cold.

I tried to use this memory to stay focused, but, watching Kate as she kissed me, I wondered if she was remembering things, too, behind those closed lids. Bright lights and backseats, the moony sighs and jangling bracelet. Swallow the thoughts, Erin. Toughen up.

Kate stumbled us over to the icebox and lifted me onto it, but its frosted lid stung my bare skin. "Ow, no," I said. She stuck her hands under me and nodded her head, having solved the problem. "Kate, Jesus. Not here. The bed." I shoved her away from me, perhaps a little too hard, and left the kitchen. She followed.

I walked over to her four-poster bed and stood for a moment. Kate had once dismissed it as "student work," but by the way she'd then lowered her eyes and shrugged, I'd realized she expected me to be impressed. Women were probably always impressed. And now she was ready to toss it aside and rebuild; it represented a time in her life when

she was still starting out, still fumbling and making mistakes. I've never understood how people could be so careless with objects. She'd spent every vulnerable night in it, sweating, dreaming, loving, awakening; she'd been under it with nails in her teeth; she'd killed trees to make it; she'd spent weeks in blankets on the floor, waiting for it to finally be ready for her.

Kate said "hey" and sat down in front of me, pulling my knees close. I looked at her face but her eyes were shut again. I looked at the bedposts, at my favorite one with the bulbous oval whose knot was bigger than the others, the one that looked like an iris somehow—slightly lazy but full, affected.

When I was little, I played with the rungs that held up our staircase banister. I liked to reach out to them as I walked by, slip my fingers around the crests, and slap them until they hummed. If no one was looking I'd close my eyes, pick a rung, and pretend it was someone beautiful, swinging me around a dance floor and responding to my steady, soft fingertips. Suddenly I'd whip myself closer. I'd part my lips a little and lean in, wondering if I was doing it right. When the game was over, I would climb the stairs and stick my legs and arms between the bars and we'd just sit there, and that's where my mother would find me—in the staircase near the front door, asleep with my limbs wrenched awkwardly through the rungs and hanging over the side of the wall. "Erin, how can you fall asleep like that and complain that your own bed isn't comfortable?" She would carry me back upstairs.

I didn't like my bed upstairs; I knew my older sisters resented sharing a room with me, and, more than that, resented how our mother pawned me off on them when she didn't feel like mothering me herself. It was calming to be out of the way, tangled in the hard, quiet bars of the staircase, and perched where I could watch my family enact their days within the simple few rooms I overlooked. It was like a television show, with the drama neatly contained and out of my hands.

After Mom left us, Dad let me sleep wherever I wanted to. He probably thought I was waiting for her, even in sleep, to walk through the front door.

My gaze wandered up along the bed's twisting post to its dappled point, reaching to pierce the ceiling. But I was still thinking of my staircase when I felt Kate's fingers. Grabbing her hand, I climbed over her lap and onto the bed, where the sagging mattress cradled us together. "Put it on," I said.

She ignored me, popping my shirt buttons open one by one.

I leaned away.

"How about we—"

"Come on," I said. She had no right to argue with me about the make-up sex, and I wasn't afraid to point out why.

Kate sat up to dig through the drawer of her nightstand. Then, with the leather harness in hand, she climbed back into bed and kissed me on the neck, one hand pinning the harness next to my face, one hand fumbling to peel her blue jeans off. "Tell me what

else you want,” she said. Jeans off, socks off, shirt off, and then she leaned over the nightstand drawer, selecting a toy to fit in the ring. I couldn’t look directly at her.

“I want to be on top,” I said.

With one smooth tumble, Kate flipped us over and put her hands on my hips to help me gain balance. Then her palms slid up to my breasts and her fingers circled over the points and dips of my body, until I leaned closer and let her arms wrap around me, locking us together.

“Kiss my neck,” I ordered, and she fell into place, lips brushing circles from my ear to my collarbone. “No, harder. I hate when it tickles like that.”

“Okay.” Kate’s voice was low. She pressed harder this time, until her teeth dug in. “You,” she said, “should tell me what else.”

“What else?” What she was doing felt good. I had to brace myself with one hand on the headboard.

“Tell me what you hate about me.”

The more she touched me, the hotter my skin felt, to where it hurt to be handled. She was trying to make me put her in her place. “That’s what you want now?” I said. Kate squeezed my shoulder but I elbowed her away. She put her hands up in surrender.

“That’s what we both want,” she said, flopping back into her pillow. “Isn’t it?”

I rolled over next to her and started pulling my clothes back on. She didn’t try to touch me again.

“Erin, I can’t fix everything.” Kate stood and crossed her arms defensively. She wore black briefs and nothing else; even as I pulled my sweater over my head and

finished dressing, she made no move to follow suit. “But I’ll do whatever you want me to do,” she said, “to prove I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry.” I turned my attention from her to the bed. The pale blue of the sheets made me feel tranquil, even as Kate paced circles near the door. She was ready for me to leave again; part of her would probably even be relieved if I did and never came back. The same part of her that was already thinking about some other bed and the easiest route to it.

“I want to go back,” I said. “To feel like this could never happen.”

Kate looked exasperated as she turned to me. “It won’t. It will never happen again, but Erin, you have to work with me here.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t want to change, and I don’t want you to change me, and I don’t want you to have changed.”

The fire snapped loud and I thought maybe she’d said something, but her stiff frown remained in place. Kate got dressed, bundling up in her coat and hat, too, and kicking her heels against the bedstead to force her boots on without having to unlace them. She looked at the ceiling for a moment, then lit a cigarette in front of me and played with her lighter, switching it on and releasing it off over and over. She was smoking indoors—something she never used to do because the residual tobacco could seep into her furniture and mark it forever. Finally, she spoke: “Why did you come back if you were never going to forgive me?”

As I sat there, all I could think of was later that night. Settling for the layered mattresses on my cheap plastic-coated frame at home, the one that scrapes my knees. Or

curling up instead on my sofa with the itchy tweed cushion covers. The thought of wandering into a furniture warehouse and being followed around by some young kid in a baggy suit, trying to hook me on a full bedroom set—probably something bamboo because he can tell I have a taste for the exotic. Or worse: the thought of getting too drunk some night, meeting a mysterious stranger, and following her home to discover that she actually sleeps, every single goddamn night, on a cheap second-hand futon. So many futures opened before me, and I didn't know how I'd survive any of them.

“Sell me the bed frame,” I said.

Kate stared at me as she finished her cigarette. She walked to the fireplace and tossed the end in. Then she left.

I could remember how, as my clothes had come off that first night, I'd pulled her sheets up over our shoulders to block the draft. “This bed is really,” I twisted my neck back to admire the headboard as she bit me, “strange.” She told me she'd made it herself and I didn't believe her, but she just shrugged and pulled me closer. As I reached back and traced my fingers along the ridges and dips of its face just as she had been doing to my body, I thought I was probably in love with her, the maker of this bed. It felt then like something I'd felt before, and it was magnified a hundred times because it was suddenly mine. She made me think she was mine, that all she had, all we had, was mine.

Kate had spread my red hair over the wood. She'd made me grip the bedpost with one hand as she placed a steel ring around the wrist and another around the pole. The

cuff pinched but held me there, and as I released the tension in my body and slipped back down in the warm covers, I felt safe. It was like every one of my pores was dilated; it was like I was an Olympic diver who'd just plunged through the surface head on.

I walked to the window and looked out. The sun was getting low already as the days continued to shorten, and it cast shadows from the trees across the blue snow. Boot prints and tire marks gave neat reminders of where the driveway and paths had been, but Kate wasn't out there pacing them; she and her bike were both gone. Maybe she'd only wanted to clear her head. Well, of course she did, I thought, imagining what that meant. She made quick decisions. To leave the woman at the bar and find me. To get into that Buick. To walk out in the middle of an argument because it just got too difficult. I used to admire how Kate always knew what she wanted. Now I worried she didn't have wants, only whims.

If I left too, I would lose the most important thing to me: the sense of permanence, protection, and understanding I had found in Kate's bed. And without me, there'd be no one to protect the bed from its inevitable future. Kate would stop wanting the bed, would chop it down into ugly pieces, and toss them into the scrap heap or even burn them for fuel. I'd come back because I didn't want to back down or bow out of the way; I didn't want to be that person anymore.

Within minutes the pillows, quilts, sheets and mattress cover were all stripped off into a big pile over her ottoman. The mattress itself I hoisted from below and flipped into

the air so that it bounced over the other edge and thudded against the rail. Though the mattress was massive and difficult to lift, I was able to shuffle and lean it against the closet door, leaving the bed frame exposed for scrutiny. The wood underneath was less fortified; even so, dismantling this thing was going to be a problem. I lugged the headboard away from the wall, got behind, and threw my weight against it, then was surprised by how swiftly the bed skidded across the room, leaving a set of scuffs ingrained in the floorboard panels. As I sidled up to the exit, I could tell that the king-sized frame would be too wide to fit through feet-first. Now if I turned everything to the side, and perhaps rocked the frame out by leading with the spires on the footboard, then I could curve the rest around until half was out, and then pull that part to the exterior of the house until the rest was free.

I got as far as tilting the frame and lining its side up with the door when I realized my plan wouldn't work. Both the headboard and footboard would have to come off, or the bedposts would need to be severed and reconnected, or—I didn't know. The thought of any such attack made me sick. As I sat down and peered through the baseboard slats, I felt feverish and clouded. I would have to break the bed into pieces, tether them to my truck, and hire the second best woodworker around to mend them back together. But I would also have the moments in between, shuttling down the highway against the cold wind and hearing the boards and posts rattle gently against each other, still alive in my truck bed.

I went to the yard and returned with Kate's axe. It was lighter than I expected, and swung easily through the air. She, Kate, would have no problem doing this; she was

a maker and a destroyer and that's what made the world go round. I set the axe blade against one of the leg joints, filing it in for a fixed resting point.

Before my family moved into the house with the staircase, we'd lived in an old Victorian home that had once belonged to my mother's grandfather. The walls were sturdy redwood, painted cheery pastel colors and lined with white trim, and the house was spacious enough that we all had our own rooms—even my mother and father, who both kicked in their sleep and couldn't stand sharing a bed every night. Unfortunately, the basement of the Victorian harbored networks of old frayed wiring and curious rats that had been nibbling at them for years. One night, half the electricity went out while we were all asleep—my parents and sisters upstairs in bed, and I, downstairs on my rocking horse, where I liked to go when I had nightmares. The horse's steady moves soothed me, and sometimes I would bury my head in his yarn mane and use it as a pillow, falling asleep right there, my hands still gripping his worn leather reigns.

That night, the frayed wires sparked a fire that rose quickly from the basement and set off our alarm. I clung to the rocking horse and cried until my father finally ripped me from it. My sisters were sitting on the front lawn in their nightgowns with their stuffed toys and blankets, and my father ran between us, squeezing us and checking for burns. My mother dropped the armfuls of picture frames she'd rescued, and dashed after him, suddenly recognizing the danger we'd all been in. I sat alone in the grass. I hadn't tried to save anything.

There was no good furniture left. The police returned what they had found salvageable in bags, which I still keep neatly labeled in boxes at my apartment. A broken digital radio, a fishbowl, a collection of tin jacks and wind-up cars, a zoo animal mobile, a lunch box, a pair of roller-skates, and some paintbrushes in an aluminum case. The items were random, not chosen by me, and they all carried that same burnt chemical smell. My mother insisted we were lucky to have a new start because we could now choose what kind of life we wanted. She was always scheming, but we never took her seriously. Sitting with a cup of tea and staring at the wall, she'd suddenly say, "John! We could actually move to an island and make people come visit by boat!" Or she'd be fixing my hair and stop with the brush caught halfway: "John! Have you ever wanted to own stables?"

My mother left us a year later. She'd met a man who took her traveling, and she sent us postcards from every place they stopped. The postcards weren't much to look at; they were the cheap sort with harsh colors that you can buy for a dime anywhere, but my father bound them into hardcover books, spread among photographs of our mother and trinkets from our childhoods, and gave them to each of his daughters. After the fire, I came to value these memory-filled objects more. And I fought to keep them with me no matter the obstacle.

With the axe in hand and the bed on its side, I felt responsible, like I could take what I wanted and hold onto it forever. Kate had made a thing so awkward, detailed, and

raw that it couldn't help being beautiful. And I couldn't help the magnetic draw that pulled me back, or the feelings I'd burned into the bed when I'd let my guard down.

On the other hand, to keep the thing with me I'd have to pick it apart, and I didn't know whether I'd be able to put it back together in quite the same way. The bed would fit differently in my world than it did here. It might feel like Kate, no matter how I dressed it up. As I ran my axe blade over the midbeam, sawing small notches where I considered making the first cut, I thought about Kate and how I couldn't pin her down; she was either a hero or a fool or a traitor, depending on the jumble of symbolic moments between us and how I stacked them up. I didn't know how to love the person anymore. There was no real Kate to come back to.

As I waited, hoping to find the right striking points, ones that would split the bed without causing noticeable permanent damage, the axe grew heavier and strained my wrists. The bed was still whole at my feet, but I could already only see it for its skeletal pieces. My focus fell to one of the ringed bulbous posts, searching for that smoothly varnished oval with the knot in the center. Now, with the bed stripped bare and knocked down, I looked for that familiar eye and couldn't find it. Everything had shifted around.

I returned the axe to Kate's doorstep as I left. The bed was back in place and the linens and covers tucked in neatly. Heading down the path with my hands in my pockets, I peered at the stars just noticeable in the dusk sky—all the variations of color leading to traces of sunset.

My truck was waiting for me at the end of the driveway. I kicked the underbelly to release caked snow, cleared the areas around the tires, and scraped the windshield clean before crawling into the truck's cabin. As the heater shot dry air, my body began to warm the leather seat, and I watched the frosted glass grow foggy, then wet.

I reached into my pocket again and took out a sliver of wood. It was small, no bigger than my thumb, but sharp where it'd broken from the bottom of the bed. I passed the piece between my bare hands and rubbed them together to make the wood spin, the friction scratching and stirring my fingers. I dug the pointed end into my palm and held it against the wheel as I drove away. The wood grain stamped my flesh, the fibers nudged my pores, and the memories worked their way back in.

The Control Group

I. The Control Group.

“6:45 am on Friday the twenty-third of March.

There’s the small group, the big group, the loner and that one old white sheep over there. They’ve been pretty much like that for a week now, barely moving, and it looks like today might be one of the same.

The big group usually has nine sheep. And there are six, seven partially hidden by that big tree. Must be I can’t see some from this angle.

Looks like we’ve got two separating from this cluster over here, one pregnant by the looks of those udders. Nobody’s really feeding except this guy, the greyish one walking towards the Llamas. I don’t think anyone likes the grey one. Feel bad for it.

Now everybody’s sitting down except that one grey loner. He moved all the way across to the group but now he’s not really joining the group. He did that last time too. There was another sheep alone and he went up to it. Started eating all the good grass.”

The red light is blinking; the camera needs a new charge. This whole day needs a new charge, James thinks, needs something other than watching beasts chew for hours on end. He sees Wilkes approaching from the sunny side of the pasture carrying two Thermos mugs. Some birds overhead chirp back and forth to one another, rhythmically,

like a game of tennis. All the black, grey, brown, white sheep mingle in the field. Every once in a while, cars whizz by on their way to town, raising dust.

“Professor. Morning.”

“You must get very cold out here, James. I’d thought the stipend would be enough to afford you some blankets.” He hands a mug down, still hot, steaming with the metallic smell of badly brewed coffee, and surveys the field. James writes “bring blankets” on his notepad and looks back up to where Wilkes towers over him. The professor stands with his legs spaced apart, braced straight and open as he watches the sheep. He mutters “mmhmm” a few times with quiet approval. He’s a tall man, wearing a jean jacket over a similar shade of worn boot-cut blue jeans, both smeared with chalk dust from his last lecture. In an introductory animal cognition class James’ first year in the program, Wilkes would write so furiously that he’d swirl up clouds of chalk, and then only make matters worse by clapping it all over his hands or wiping it on his jacket. Wilkes would lean against the blackboard, smudge his own notes, and the classroom would giggle at the white streaks across his back. James didn’t find it funny, but was the only one.

“That little grey one definitely needs a change,” James says between sips. “He’s been left out from the groups all week.”

Wilkes squints as he scans the field. “Well, that’s the way it usually goes. Not every sheep can be an alpha, hm?” His beard shifts as he talks and the black-tipped curls near his mouth twist up. “Gotta have some black sheep too.”

“I can’t wait until we herd them,” James says. He’s losing patience with the slow repetition involved in establishing a reliable control group. The same sheep in the same ways day after day after day. He wants to start the experiment.

“Yes it’ll be interesting to see them up close, won’t it? Though I doubt it’ll help you tell them apart any better; seems we’re not as good at that sort of thing.”

Wilkes once specialized in baaing, but last year he changed focus to facial recognition; a Cambridge colleague of his had garnered some attention for proving that sheep have an excellent memory for faces—they can hold up to fifty at once and sometimes for many years. It seems they think about the flock often, even those who are missing, and mourn terribly for the ones they’ve been closest with.

“Sure,” James says, “But I was thinking of a change in conditions, not just in perspective. Isn’t that why we have an Experimental Group?” In one study, scientists separated some of the sheep to the point of agitation and showed them photographs; only the faces of their sheep friends, as opposed to those of unfamiliar sheep and goats and even basic triangles, could bring down their heart rates.

“It’s not ideal. The change is artificial.”

James nods. They sit for a while watching the sheep in silence. “Thanks for the coffee,” he says when the professor stands up to part.

“Well,” Wilkes says, “keep sending me your notes and I’ll draft the initial research this weekend.”

“Stay warm.”

James has a routine for his observations: he camps out every day around dawn, midday, and dusk, for two hours at a time, shooting video with his tripod and dictating his search for behavioral inconsistencies among the sheep. He sits far from the fence by the least active parts of the field to remain unnoticed by the nervous animals. It's the time of year when the ewes are ready to give birth and the rams are still weary with winter. They group together more in this weather, making it easier to spot the cliques, as well as the ones foregoing the warmth of the flock to remain on the sidelines.

In this way James has become familiar with their patterns. He begs them to break it up—to let another into the fold, switch teams, surprise him. As the days drag on, he begins to notice changes in the landscape as well, each tree that sprouts new branches and the toughness of the soil as it thaws. He busies himself with pulling weeds, separating them into piles by species—crabgrass, clover, thistle, creeping charlies, unknown—and allows them to choke out and wilt back into the earth.

Weeks ago, inexperienced, James shirked orders and approached one of the grazing young ones, barely nearing the boundary before raising suspicion in the llamas. Both stood but only one trotted to the fence, craning its neck back and bobbing it, daring James to come closer. The llamas had been installed with the sheep to ward away predators and to herd when necessary; their similarly round bodies and knobby knees, thick matted fur, friendly swagger and quiet strength made them ideal protectors of the flock. Big, calm, defensive beasts that didn't nip and bark and run in circles.

The llama's side-protruding eyes rolled around their full 270° radius, dodging and circling their subject. You don't know when one's looking at you unless it wants you to know.

“7:06 pm on Saturday, the twenty-fourth of March.

I feel like the white one over there was part of the group before the clouds shifted but is too lazy to move into more sun. Especially if that's the limping one, cause I know one of them's limping. And I know it was a big white one. He might be more mature too, who knows. I'd believe it about that one. This grey one over here, well, I think he could go over and join the group if he wanted. Come on Grey—just give it a try.

Wonder how the weather's going to affect it, when it hits the seventies in the next three weeks. Yeah, now they're going from sunspot to sunspot; I bet when it's warmer they'll be going from shade to shade.

That white itchy one, was that the one that was acting like a loner over here too? Guess I can't blame them; they only have so many options.

After his two hours are up, James struggles to remove the tape from the deck and write its label—the sides of his fingers itch and burn, especially when they brush against the camera or each other. He must have handled a poisonous weed when he was snooping in the long grass.

“Ho!”

The sound makes him jump, and is followed by the crunching of sneakers across dried yellow grass. The two women he saw last week are approaching. While recording one evening he'd noticed them where they were sitting at the other end of the field. He'd guessed they were young because they were burrowed inside two sleeping bags. At one point they played that worm game where you stand and pull the sleeping bag up over your shoulders, then slam and twist against your opponent to try to plow them down first. There didn't seem to be a clear winner. Afterwards, they'd spent most of their time writing, though occasionally they used their flashlight beams to blind him and he swore he could hear them laughing.

"You're the boy from before!" the one continues. "What are you doing with that camera?" She's out of breath as she drops her bag beside him. Dark blonde hair and wearing a pale lavender sweatshirt, she's smaller than the second woman to approach, but with a large mouth, nose, and set of eyes, all vibrantly well-defined against a canvas of freckles. The friend towing both sleeping bags catches up and extends her free hand.

"Margit." Formal and tough-sounding, but she has lovely clear white skin that hints at a faint network of blue veins running beneath. Her hair is pulled straight back and James appreciates the clean professionalism of it. Margit looks around, noticing the small surrounding piles of weeds.

He holds one of the tripod legs to protect it from them and steady it upright. "I'm watching how they interact with one another. We think their social groupings may have something to do with the way they recognize faces."

"Oh." Both women sigh. "That's interesting," they say at the same time, then laugh. He can't tell if they're laughing from embarrassment or laughing at him.

“I’m Sally,” the short one says.

“James.”

“Who is we?” Margit demands.

He thinks of saying Wilkes or Professor Wilkes or an old professor of mine who I work for now, but instead chooses, “Doctor Lionel Wilkes.”

Margit smiles at Sally. James pretends to futz with the camera while they toss aside their sleeping bags and unpack snacks (bags of carrots, cucumbers, granola). Sally rolls a joint and hands it to Margit, and James can smell the sweet dirty smoke as they hand it between one another.

“James?” Sally says. She is the friendlier one, he notices. Margit, he suspects, is the sensible one. He likes no-nonsense girls, the ones that say what they mean and don’t require a lot of subtext. Though he’d like to talk to Margit, he’s so grateful for company that he decides to accept any olive branch. James takes the joint from Sally and sits down.

The two are graduate psychology students, enrolled in a course about French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Margit says she’s already an expert and tries to explain where she disagrees with his philosophies, but Sally keeps interrupting with passionate outbursts: “The man who is born into existence deals first with language; this is a given! He is even caught in it before his birth.”

“She loves him too much,” Margit whispers.

Sally flops onto her back and smokes. “What does it matter how many lovers you have if none of them gives you the universe?”

Their assignment is to sit for two hours each night watching the sheep until the birthings start. The first night they came at five p.m., and were instructed to come back each subsequent night an hour later, and an hour later, until either the first lamb was born or until their arrival time reached five a.m. At which point the cycle reverses. Four a.m. the next night, then three, two, one, and so forth. James is stunned; who would give such ridiculous homework? Oh, she's brilliant, the women agree. The professor had devised it on a whim, as a method to dismantle their sleep-cycles and help them tap into the unconscious.

"We're breaking into language," Sally explains. They scribble in their journals. Margit kneels over hers and presses the button end of her pen against her front teeth, clicking it on and off slowly, deep in thought.

"Do you really think you can make it through to five a.m.?" he asks.

Margit scoffs. "We've already been there and back."

James waits until after dark to drive to the farm on Sunday, planning an overlap with the nine p.m. Lacan shift. He has heavy wool blankets, and thermoses of coffee and cider, and though he can't help but tug at the weeds out of habit and boredom, he buries what he pulls under his knapsack. From his settling place he can see their battery-powered lantern swaying through the trees well before Sally and Margit emerge along the path. He says "Hello" a few times under his breath to make sure his voice comes out smooth after so much silence. Most of the sheep are grazing, bleating calmly to one

another in the darkness, while only a few are fast asleep where they stand; they have to be ready in case of slinking wolves or other predators. The timbres of their calls are gentle, smooth and friendly. They chatter to assure themselves, to know they are part of the flock, to know the flock is all there. This is when their minds are most active and their memories strongest.

Sally is leading, with her hand on Margit's back, and Margit submits effortlessly. As they near he can see how she struggles to keep her eyes open. "The flu," Sally explains.

Margit curls up on her side at the edge of James' blanket, and pulls her knees to her chest. He offers her some cider but she is still, unresponsive. Sally takes the thermos from his outstretched hand and slurps from it.

"Yum," she says without relish. A hand on her hip, the other holding the cider, Sally crouches down to peer at the camera's underbelly where it connects to the tripod. "What's this button do?" Margit turns up, at attention, her fair cheeks splotchy with red.

"It's rolling already if you want to play with it; the night vision works alright. Here." He moves it away from her and unfastens the body from the stand. He hasn't made any notes yet but there's no need; it's all the same with that awkward grey floater. He wraps his quilt around his shoulders and sits back near Margit. She has closed her eyes and turned her head away, with one of her arms folded up over the front of her body like a shield. Her bare fingers reach beneath her sweater and coat to touch the top of her shoulder. James unfurls an extra blanket and spreads it over her, tugging it up to her chin.

"No!" Sally calls. "Margit, hey!"

Margit's eyes pop open. She has sand in the corners and James considers dusting it away with his pinky. She looks at him as if she can read his thoughts.

Sally unlatches the camera from its legs and sits down cross-legged next to Margit, assuming a serious attitude. "You can't sleep just yet." As Margit sit up on her elbows, she stifles a cough deep in her chest. "I know," Sally says. She hands the camera over, pointing to the controls and telling her how to operate it.

"Zoom in on the ones by the cart. No, you can zoom in more, just keep turning the lens."

Margit bucks Sally's hands away with one shoulder. "But we want to see all of them."

James lays his head in the grass and looks up at the sky. The moon is waxing, which will likely bring some of the ewes to labor. But either way, he thinks, everything changes tomorrow during the herding. No more of this incessant waiting. And whatever the result, the experiment will be worthy of conversation. He looks at Margit and Sally, who are sitting with arms thoughtlessly pressed against one another, staring at the fold-out screen where Margit holds the camera over one knee.

Margit: "Both llamas are up. They're staring at us. Planning their attack."

Sally: "That grey one right in the middle of the field is cute. I definitely feel like he's not part of the group though."

Margit: "No."

Sally: "If this was high school, I'd be in the little group over there. I wouldn't be one of the loners."

Margit: "If this was high school, I'd probably be eating. Hey, sheep don't chew their cud, do they? It's only cows, right?"

James: "Right, only cows."

Sally: “Uh, yeah, I think they’re just slowly munching grass. I mean if you only ate grass you’d have to eat a lot of grass to really... do it for ya.”

Margit: “I want to go in there with them and lie down in the grass.”

James: “You’d regret it if you did. Llamas are actually—”

Sally: “Uh oh, we’ve got some activity over here. That black one, is he standing up? I can’t see.”

Margit: “That doesn’t really seem significant, when they stand up or when they sit down.”

Sally: “I think the grey one’s getting some ideas. Run away, grey one! Are there sheep in the wild?”

Margit: “Probably. Yeah.”

James: “Definitely yes.”

Sally: “Seems like they wouldn’t survive very long.”

Margit: “They’d just live out on the hills; I mean they don’t need anything to survive.”

Sally: “Yeah, but then what if something tries to eat them? What would they do? They can’t run very fast. Well, faster than me—”

Margit: “That’s true.”

Sally: “—but not that fast.”

Margit: “There are wild goats; I’d imagine there’d be wild sheep. But then goats seem made of tougher stuff than sheep.”

James gives up, letting them take over. They obviously aren’t interested in the science of sheep. He doesn’t understand how they can spend all their time quantifying experience and emotion. As though they don’t mind unearthing more questions than answers.

Sally: “Hey look at that limping one.”

Margit: “Maybe that’s why he doesn’t fit in. Or maybe they all attacked him because they hate him.”

Sally: “Ha yeah, they broke his leg and now he’s an outcast. ‘You thought you could join our group!’”

Margit: “I’m hungry; I say we slaughter one of these sheep and eat it.”

Sally: “Yeah that’ll mess with the control group. Ha. Oh they’re all getting up again! How exciting.”

James had been instructed on the many ways sheep can die. Because sheep have a habit of getting themselves into trouble, especially during birthing season, he needed to know when to call the farmer in an emergency. Misfortune could strike at any time. Though the flock was born of East Friesian and Lacaune, both relatively hardy milking breeds, the sheep still fell prey to pneumonia, poisoning, pasturella, cancer, braxy, pulpy kidney, milk fever, twin lamb disease, hypothermia in the winter, maggots in the summer, not to mention coyotes, foxes, snakes and crows. They get their necks caught in fences, they get stuck up trees, they become depressed, they starve themselves. They tumble into ponds and streams. They stuff themselves with fallen ash leaves, roll onto their backs and blow up like balloons.

James no longer hears the girls speaking. Sally has put the camera aside but the power light still flashes, the motor still whirring in the grass. She crawls into her sleeping bag and zips it up over her face. Margit walks a long ways away to throw up behind a tree trunk, returning with tears in her eyes. She writes in her journal without looking up, and brings it with her when she finally curls up in her bag.

James picks bunches of dandelion and breaks slits into their stalks with his thumbnail. Weaving stem through stem he creates a long puffy yellow chain, and carefully lays it over Margit’s still body. Her face is pinched against the lamplight. Eventually, his hands slippery with milk from the broken stalks, James packs up his gear, turns the lamp off, and says goodnight. Margit nods.

Herdin

Wilkes tells him he arrived just in time; they're about to start. The farmer is already in the meadow holding a long brown leather switch that he taps against his palm, flicking his wrist to splay it outwards and grab the llamas' attention. The sheep are abuzz, baaing aggressively with their tongues out. But in all this chaos the farmer need only point to the pen before they are off, one llama leading the way and the other trotting around spritely like a show pony to loop the worried sheep into the parade.

"Should I get in there?" James asks.

"Lord no," Wilkes says, laughing, "he'll do all the dirty work." The gate to the holding pen swings back and forth on its creaking hinge and Wilkes leans over the fence to steady it. When the last sheep is rounded up they become like one shifting animal, packed in so tight they cannot change positions. The farmer fastens the gate, rolls his pant legs to the height of his boots and puts a pair of gloves on.

"Then why am I here?" James looks around for something to do.

The professor frowns. "You're here to help with the next important stage of research. Do you want to be a shepherd or do you want to be a scientist?"

As the farmer climbs the fence boards to plan his method of assault, Wilkes begins the selection process with a clump of rectangular boxes. The boxes are then tied around the chosen sheep's necks, facing forward under their chins. "How about this one?" The farmer slings a leg over their grey loner and lifts its chin up backward,

pointed to the sky. A groan vibrates from its throat but is muffled in the mouth wrenched shut. Up close, James sees burrs sticking along its chest, sees it find him with its frightened, blinking eye.

"No, let's leave this one."

Wilkes turns to him. "Now we ought to tag one of the outsiders too. Get a good mix."

James thinks of the old slowpoke with the bum leg and quietly agrees.

"Give him a box," Wilkes calls. The llamas stamp their hooves in place. Lash-heavy eyelids narrow.

The farmer ties the last collar tight and gets the thumbs up from Wilkes to release the gate. A llama swoops in quick and the sheep form a single-file line in tow, trotting along on short legs that make them bounce and stutter. Their bleatings rise on top of one another to form one long mournful call. They are led in a haphazard line to their corner for recovery, with the second llama bringing up the rear, and that plump white one limping in panic at the end of the ranks.

The boxes are brown rectangles with two black marble-sized spots that add an extra set of focal points under the chin. Another pair of eyes, they hope.

That night, James goes to the college bar in town. He orders a stout and spots Margit sitting in a booth alone, not busying herself with text messages or some other excuse to look important. She just sits, reading the signs on the wall and watching the bar patrons walk by, sipping a glass of wine. He makes his way over.

"Oh, hi." Margit improves her posture.

“Mind if I sit?”

She looks around the bar. “Sally’s going to meet me here, actually.”

“Okay,” he says. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh fine, fine. Much better, thank you.”

“Don’t you have sheep-watching duty?”

“Not quite yet. We’re on the late shifts again, which I don’t mind but really screws with Sally.”

And the conversation continues this way, unchanging, except that James eventually sits, taking Sally’s place. Margit begins to laugh, the wine going to her head.

James edits and rehearses the line in his head fifty times: “Margit,” he says, “If you tell Sally you’re still sick, it’ll just be between you and me.”

They have sex in his car. Contrary to her everyday demeanor, Margit is generous and open, radiating warmth. After they finish, its business as usual; Margit adjusts all her clothes and goes into the bar to call a cab.

Boxes.

One week later, Margit and Sally show up sometime after six am and sit in the clover patch without saying hello. James is surprised to see them. They are yawning, stretching their arms over their heads, twisting to warm the tufts of cold earth beneath them; Sally's hair in a frizzy tangle, Margit with dark make-up stains along her lower lids.

Sally plucks a clover and puts a few thin purple petals in her mouth, puckering, grinding her jaw and eventually swallowing. She notices his stare and shrugs. "You should try them; these ones are quite nice."

James reaches for the clover patch, but Margit winces, making a sound of disgust. "Do we have any more pot?"

"They're sweet, but bitter and earthy," Sally explains. "Spicy almost. The green three-leaf clovers are nice too, just more tart."

"Sal. The weed."

"No, sorry."

"Rough night?" James asks.

Sally grunts and pulls the hood of her coat over her head. "Woke up late. She should've let me be."

"Oh boo hoo." Margit has her pen and notebook out, writing rapidly and with stern focus. "If we didn't come out at all it would screw everything up."

"What could we screw up? Those goddamned sheep are never going to give birth! It's probably not even the season."

"No, it is," James says.

They turn to face him in unison. Margit gingerly clips her pen to her notebook. "James. How is your research going?"

The sheep wearing boxes are alone now, avoiding even each other as they graze. Last week they'd tried again and again to fit in, chasing away old friends and pushing the two cliques close together in unity against the outsiders. Their baaing was low and choppy, mournful and upset. The little grey one had nearly stopped eating.

“It’s been interesting,” he replies, shuffling his notes. “I didn’t think it would create such a strong reaction.”

“So it *was* you!” Sally snaps. “Don’t you think it’s cruel what you’re doing?”

“No, I—” he can see they are both livid. Margit is staring into the field and shaking her head slowly. “It’s not hurting them. It’s just research.”

“Sick,” Sally says. A high-pitched cry emerges from one of the sheep near the fence. It rings out continually, getting caught in the sheep’s sore throat, escalating in desperation, cramping James’ stomach. “You’re sick,” she says again.

“Margit,” he says, turning to her hopefully. “How are you feeling?”

Margit heads after the cry without taking care to soften her footsteps in the grass. James follows, telling her to come back, but she goes right up to the fence where the sheep bows on its knees. It is the little grey one, its brown box partially obscured by a knotted fold of wool. It slopes its ears out to the sides and bleats at them, low.

Both Llamas close in to create a barricade near the boundary. Margit smiles at one and reaches out to its wet brown nostrils but the llama shakes away aggressively, ears at attention, twisting forward and sideways to listen for danger.

“Look at what you’ve done,” she says, crouching down to get a better look.

“Alright, that’s enough.” He kneels and peers between the llama legs to where the sheep has turned over onto its side, still crying. “We didn’t do anything wrong.”

Sally comes running up behind them yelling, “It’s happening! She’s going to give birth!”

James sighs. “It’s not pregnant.”

“James,” Margit mutters. “Pregnant sheep under this kind of stress.”

“What’s the problem?” He puts his hands in his pockets, and digs his nails into his legs. “We didn’t use pregnant ones.”

The rest of the sheep are watching and baaing in response; every time the grey one moans, a chorus of voices calls back. As the llamas dart their faces around to survey past the fence on all sides, James wonders if they are searching for the farmer. He surveys too, hopeful. The grey sheep lifts and drops its head to wave away mosquitoes, but eventually just gives in to them, closing its eyes.

Sally hugs herself, digs her boot heel into the ground. “Aren’t you going to do anything?” she asks. Margit is still angry but she turns to him. Her face has lost its danger; her eyes are lined with crimson, the stress and sleeplessness showing through, close to giving in. They look at him as though he knows how to handle this.

James struggles with the fence as he climbs, and is just able to straddle it before a llama gallops and leaps toward him, chest out, knocking him backwards.

“James!” Margit calls. Her voice is a squeak, and she takes a few steps near him.

“He’s okay,” Sally says. “But I’m not so sure about that little sheep.”

James steadies himself by grabbing the underside of the fence boards. The Llama’s narrow face swings close, grunting, but James grips the planks with his knees and manages to stay upright. A wad of spit hits the side of his face. There is something mealy to it, he notices, as he wipes the spit with his sleeve and brings his second leg over. Little Grey is quiet now, but breathing quickly. Kneeling close, he realizes she’s a ewe.

The llama begins circling, quickening its trot towards him. He grabs Little Grey by the legs and swings her up into his arms, as he’d seen the farmer do, and steps back onto the fence. A sudden blow to the shoulder, a scream, the two hooves of the other

llama reared in the air, and he topples back over to the other side. When his back hits the ground, the air inside his lungs is expelled in one gust.

Margit's cold hands clap against his cheeks. "Oh you're wet," she marvels, wiping off on her jeans and then bringing her thumb back to drag beneath his right eye, smearing llama spit. Little Grey has run a few yards away, and is kneeling down, looking at the pen. James tries to speak but it starts him coughing.

Sally leans over and pats his knuckles. Only a gesture. "Well, what should we do now?" she asks.

He gasps, lifting his neck to clear the passage. "I'm not a sheep expert."

Margit hands him her scarf to wipe his face. "No, I think she means should we call a doctor?"

"Call the farmer. No, call Wilkes." He hands over his cell phone.

Sally is the first to get up, but Margit follows. A severe headache develops as he turns, watching them walk away together. They are recounting the attack in savory disbelief and mimicking the violent llamas. It's a funny thing to see, he supposes. The rest of the farm has quieted, but the guards are still trotting in circles with their chests puffed out. The ewe in a heap of exhaustion, breathing deep, her head in the grass. James watches the brown box rise and fall with each breath, its two glossy black dots the only eyes left on him.

The Candyman

I met a man who sold chocolate and I knew it was clichéd to like him. Women and chocolate. Sweets for the sweet. So when he held out his heart-shaped box, an abundance of flavors and fillings and elegant swirled coatings, I told him I lacked a sweet tooth. Good, he said, smiling. He liked a hard sell. On our first date he took me to an orchard on the outskirts and we picked so many apples that we had to make applesauce, apple fritters, apple stir fry, apple cider. We wound up apple-sick and couldn't go all the way, so we lay with our hands in each other's hair and our knees grazing. We sighed over the sounds of our stomachs churning. He would meet too many women in his trade, I thought. I'd never keep a man like that.

I was pursued by a man who placed chocolate-coated espresso beans in my mouth to wake me. He left dirty notes on my refrigerator, and lured me out on cold days through miles of snow just to get my heart moving. Chocolate, he once told me, isn't simply melted down and poured into molds. Oh no. It has to be prepped in special kettles, mashed and heated, drained through cooling tunnels, heated again and then cooled again, over and over, sometimes for days. It must be tempered to get that beautiful sheen, he said. That nice clean break, like glass. The man was a connoisseur of flavor, dusting his lips over day-old skin and putting my fingers against the sides of his tongue. What do the good know, except what the bad teach them by their excesses? His requests made me

feel kind, his hunger made me ripe. He would eat me alive, I knew it. He would burn me up.

I broke up with other boyfriends because I met a man, a chocolatier, who was good at what he did. At our family Christmas party, he gave my parents Delafée Swiss chocolate pralines speckled with flakes of 24-karat gold, and mixed cocoa bean martinis for my friends. Quiet and sharp, he studied us from the sidelines, always offering some treat to charm and disarm. While they wouldn't remember a word he'd say, they'd remember him in their stomachs and request him by name: Candyman. At night he would kiss the dark tips of my breasts, run his nose up my sternum, hold my hands above my head, and tell me I might as well give in. Everyone wanted chocolate. Crumbling, I told myself urban legends about the guys you don't suspect, the ones who are all smiles, the ones who tug at the frayed, unraveling bits of you instead of just ripping you down the middle, to prepare myself for the end.

I fell in love with a man who just happened to sell chocolate. He could have sold poisoned apples, or razorblades in lollipops; I'd still have felt full. In our best clothes we walked everywhere, arms linked, gait slow, following stray cats as they slinked from cover to cover. Old men spit tobacco in our wake, children laughed and whispered about us on street corners. We talked about all the people we'd ever been jealous of, and we felt very old and comfortable for not being the jealous types anymore. It's a blessed state, believe me. Even in moments alone I was haunted by his milky voice. I would hear it in the shower, my pores open to the thought of him, while I lathered my hair with

cocoa butter because I wanted to smell just slightly familiar, like him; I wanted him to recognize me. Sometimes, missing him, I imagined him dead. It was morbid, but also good practice for widowhood. Because that's surely how it would end: I would live because he lived, and when he finally stopped living I'd dissolve, share leftover dinners with the stray cats on his grave, and swear off dessert forever.

I moved in with a sweet man because that's what people do. He carried my bike up four flights of stairs, gave me half a closet, a toothbrush, and a six pack of beer, and then fell asleep with his arms and legs locked over me. The apartment was dark and unimaginable but it was ours, and I liked stubbing my toes on its edges. Over time, bags of semi-sweet chocolate chips began piling up, spilling from our cabinets and congealing in the hot pantry, squeezed into drawers that snapped at my fingers when I'd force them shut. Dinners were a challenge; the ingredients we really wanted to use were dwarfed by mountains of chocolate, demanding our attention. I couldn't shake my starving artist mentality, thinking it would be a waste to neglect all that free food, so good for the heart. The thoughts overwhelmed me. How much money would I save by replacing half my diet with the sweet stuff? Could I actually hone my circulation through regular nightcaps of red wine and bon bons? I experienced highs and lows like I'd never known: my body pulsing with elation and arrogance and lust, and then crashing into sluggishness. At least once a day I broke down and realized how much I hated the man. At least once a day I convinced myself that I'd only ever be happy if I left him. Then I would make chicken with mole negro sauce, or chili-cocoa mashed acorn squash, or monkfish in chocolate mushroom drizzle, and try to forget.

I became familiar to a man because, like chocolate, it's an addiction. I'd wait all day to be touched by him, imagining his hands twisting through vats of molten chocolate, refining it, and he would come home to me bleary-eyed, his sweat tasting like dirty coffee grounds. I liked how it left my mouth bitter after so much sweetness. Then I'd sit on the toilet and talk to him while he showered. I wanted the man to really know me, to know about all the men who had moved me, to know all the things I had ever wanted to be and the reasons I gave up and instead amounted to who I am today. I thought this was the only way to love a person. Years later, men would have to dig for these details because I'd know how completely unknowable people are. All you need to know, I'd tell them, is that I don't have a sweet tooth.

I had nightmares about a man who loved women more than chocolate. In tangled sheets I imagined him with someone else, someone richer, darker, and more complex, with no discernible melting point. A woman who wasn't a shell to be moulded, but a center—the mysterious, hidden part the Candyman valued most. He hand-dipped and coated her in layers of sheltering chocolate. He enrobed her completely. I woke up scorned and unable to unwind, hiding my clenched hands beneath my pillow while he warmed his between my thighs. I knew I'd have to give up chocolate. The next day, as I hauled chocolate-filled trash bags to the dumpsters, stray cats rubbed against my ankles and howled for a treat, but I hissed them away. Don't you know it's poison? I said, worried that a starving cat might eat damn near anything. I sprayed every inch of the bags with bleach. That would keep them away. But the Candyman kept bringing his work home,

and I kept turning it out to the streets. He filled my pockets with red Criollo beans from the rarest Venezuelan Theobroma trees, and stirred warm bourbon ganache into my coffee while my back was turned. To cope, I sucked lemons coated in salt and burned my mouth on whole jalapenos. I hovered over steaming bowls of vinegar water to clear my senses. The cycle didn't end until he didn't come home at all. I tried to be sad, or sorry, or something less than relieved, but it felt good to wake up alone. Chocolate breath is bad in the morning. I didn't have the stomach.

There once was a man who gave me sore teeth and sugar-plum visions and who I couldn't help but love. He once loved a woman who, like chocolate, had to be tempered just right, heated and pressed enough to get that proper snap.

Chemosynthetic Ecosystems of the Southern Ocean

(The beginning of a longer work, still very much in progress)

The Malfunction

With grit jamming her cameras and cutting her feed, ISIS hangs suspended beside the ship, half in the ocean, half out. Zoya climbs the machine's grated sides and prods gently, lapped at by sharp waves sloshing between the hull of the research boat and ISIS's massive steel body. Each time the ocean hits them, marking ISIS's carriage with white salt lines, Zoya feels a sharp burning from her knees to her chest. The thick layers of neoprene keep her body temperature up but they don't stop her shaking. She's too aware of where she is: all eyes on her, the only person in the Southern Ocean for miles, the pressure of the dense water and arctic ice shelves nearby, the pressure of being the most technically trained camera operator on the expedition, and, more importantly, the expert on ISIS. As Zoya wipes her fingertips along the machine's exposed sockets, debris clings to her rubbery diving gloves, threatening to resettle. She feels her wet suit suck close to her curves, and is eager to trade it for a parka.

Ian calls out from the crane, shifting the ROV's three tons down and up with the push of a button. "That where you want her, love?" Zoya gives a thumbs up and slaps one of ISIS's swivel mounts with the edge of her palm.

Leigh watches from the Captain's deck, his mouth burrowed in the fur collar of his coat where moisture from his coffee breath collects and sweeps back against his face.

He knows Zoya is tough, but he also knows that if she were struggling, she wouldn't show it. Heading five other expeditions has taught him to worry about the strong silent types above all others.

“Bring her up,” Leigh calls to Ian. “We’ll cancel today’s dive.”

“Almost!” Zoya calls. There’s something still sticking, making ISIS whirl and shudder as if struggling against the glitch—a practiced movement that cannot complete. Zoya’s gums ache with cold and she grinds her teeth to work through it. Delays have now set them back through December, mostly due to unexpected power failures and ISIS’s camera feed cutting out mid-dive, but their University grant won’t cover costly repairs or allow for another delay at this point. The Austral summer will soon be over.

A few more jostles to exercise the gears, and Zoya thinks she hears a revving deep inside. There are cheers and whistles from the deck. Zoya looks to Leigh but is struck by the glare in his sunglasses, unable to tell whether he’s looking back. She clings to ISIS’s frame as they are lowered down to bob in the water, and feels proud—not of herself but of the machine. ISIS’s boxy design may look primitive but she houses a complex and priceless interior. No matter the glitch, with thirteen distinct marine ecosystems under her belt and nearly twenty years of fine-tuned calibrations, ISIS never fails to recover.

Katrina puts a wool cap on Zoya’s head and pulls it down over her ears, the band squeezing water from Zoya’s short blond hair to dampen her collar. “Wonder woman,” Katrina says. “Every time that piece of junk breaks I think it’ll be the last.”

Leigh and Ian sit on supply bins, and the four of them eat biscuits with jam and sip warm coffee, the muddy remains of the morning’s pot. Terry, the mess cook, has

gone back to the kitchen to prepare lunch. The ambitious doctoral candidates, Rick and Miguel, must be sleeping in, having stayed up into the night typing the team's notes and sending communications back to Rothera, the research station on Adelaide Island.

Additionally, Ian operates a small crew to keep the boat running—three older men who call each other by their last names: Darrow, Meeks, and Jenesson (Jess, for short)—but they stay out of the way, not caring for the company of scientists.

“She really has been a bitch lately,” Ian says, with a laugh in Zoya's direction.

“Least she's a bitch on a leash.”

“Ay now,” Leigh warns.

“What makes you sure it's a she?” Zoya says, though she agrees. You name the objects you love, and with a name like ISIS, of course it would be female.

“Not up for argument, Zoy. It's tradition. Cars are she. Boats are she. Remote Operated Vehicles are she.” Ian waves his hand to dismiss the suggestion.

“I disagree,” Katrina says. She waits for their attention, pulling her elbow up over her head as she leans to stretch against the empty aquarium, her skin luminous against a background of dead skin cells and dirty microorganisms. Her body is long and willowy but she carries herself low, always slinking and slouching as though she is sleepy. The men like Katrina because she is faithfully married but doesn't feel the need to hide her femininity; in fact she flaunts it, having been raised by a colony of nudists, radicals, and free love fanatics who preached the evils of shame and ownership. “Well, I agree she's definitely female, but there are reasons,” Katrina says, thoughtfully. “She does the deep, dirty work and never crumbles under pressure. She's quiet, but powerful, probing, the

way most women are.” Ian stifles his laughter but Katrina smiles—calm, cool, and good-natured. “Sometimes, you can just tell these things.”

The Camera

ISIS is a Remote Operated Vehicle. She has no feelings, no desire to explore the floor of the immense ocean. She cannot even see. What her eyes record are for her scientists, and when she does her job properly she is loved. When she malfunctions she is still loved, but it makes her scientists feel like parasites, floundering and praying their host will not die.

When ISIS goes deep, the water pressure doesn't push into her ears or crush her eyes or cut off the electrical charges to her brain. She was made for this, to be the perfect replacement body for someone like Zoya. Zoya doesn't know this is why she loves ISIS, but she's grateful that her knowledge of the machine has made her indispensable, to the team and to Leigh.

Zoya instructs ISIS on how to move and how to avoid impact with disintegrating beds of coral, pushing her joysticks in slow half-circles and monitoring the camera's scope. It's a dangerous maze through frail skeletal forests. As the ocean soaks up carbon dioxide from the sun, dragging its PH balance lower toward acidity, the sea life suffers. Weakened corals are prevented from forming their delicate shells, and brittlestar larvae die, unable to calcify. Suddenly clownfish can't smell the difference between predator and prey. Porpoises lose their echolocation in a sea of cluttered sounds.

Every year the sun gets hotter, the ocean becomes more radioactive. The scientists love ISIS because she feeds their imaginations with the world's uncovered possibilities, even as those possibilities shrink with terrible speed. No one likes to think about how these paths will one day meet, or what they will have found, and lost, by the time there is nothing left to find.

Zoya feels at ease steering ISIS along the dark ocean ridges. Although the team calls the machine a "hunk of junk," it has never caught on with Zoya; in the end, whatever the course, ISIS does what she's meant to do. When Zoya's not operating the ROV she's not sure what she's meant to do. She even has out-of-body moments, watching herself shower or play cards or lift weights. It will be something perfectly normal—the bones in her small shoulders, or her slim fingers against her soft skin—that will make Zoya feel like she's doing it wrong, that will send her retreating into her head, pulling herself away so completely that her awkward body seems hollow, like a diving suit. By looking at herself, especially when she removes her clothes in the evening, Zoya even feels she might be making a permanent record, one that could be studied by the other scientists on board and be proven or disproven. She squeezes her eyes shut and plunges her mind into the dark ocean depths. Drinking helps, and she's developed a stomach for the cheap Bundaberg rum Ian sweetens his coffee with in the mornings. But there are times when the only way to get back into herself is through ISIS.

The Men's Room

Zoya walks past Leigh in the bathroom. It's technically not a men's room, but Katrina, the only other woman on board, avoids it, instead heading all the way up past the

control room to a private bathroom she's claimed for herself. So it's become a space for men: cheap alkaline soaps in little foam puddles on the counter, towels folded over bathroom stalls to dry, and a slight smell of scum and urine hanging in the air. Leigh looks up from the sink and says a slow, careful "hello," running a razor under his beard as he speaks. Zoya meets his eye again as she begins brushing her teeth, and he smiles from the side of his mouth, but only slightly; in fact he could be grimacing. He wasn't known for expressing his emotions.

Zoya had been watching the beard grow thick after weeks unattended, but she thought it fit him, made him more seaworthy. It was nice how the beard obscured features that one might take for granted: the bowed outline of his top lip, the crease lines of a forty-year-old smile, the dark freckle near the cleft in his chin; and how it brought others to light: a scarred patch on his jaw line that no longer grew hair, the shadows and hollows around the bulge in his throat. Things you notice about a person who lives only yards away.

Now he shaves it so carelessly because it's taken only a matter of days and absolutely no effort to grow. Zoya spits, and as she is leaving the bathroom she pats Leigh on the shoulder. He pauses, steadying his shaving hand. She doesn't know why she has done this. An awkward interruption to a perfectly normal moment between the two.

Zoya returns later, once Leigh has left. A showerhead is dripping and the air is still damp. Zoya picks up Leigh's razor, bringing it close to her nose. Barbasol and something else. She can see herself doing this. Quickly, she rolls her jeans up, props her

foot on the toilet seat, and shaves the hair from her calves, one after the other. Then she taps the razor over the trash can to hide her evidence. Her dry skin stings.

She's always done this sort of thing—using other people's toothpastes and shampoos, or trying on their clothes and drying off with their towels—but she doesn't like to dwell on it. It seemed at first to be a child's curiosity, then a teenager's rebellion, then a desire for control in her confusing adult life. Now? Now she has given in to the urge and the small acts that calm it. Now she wonders when it will ever be satisfied.

The Moon Landing

Her arms stick out like weapons, and bright yellow and red strips of steel draw attention to her clunky, geometric body, but ISIS is not treated like an intruder. In shallower waters, the fish brush up against and graze off her body, swirling in circles past her cameras. In deeper waters they float, teeth bared and wide empty eyes staring through her, unalarmed. Perhaps they cannot see her at all, the way Native Americans might not have seen the Spanish ships.

She takes most of the day to sink 6.5 kilometers deep. Two Pegasus standard resolution low light colour cameras provide the scientists with general coverage video. Their best camera, an Atlas 3-chip 850 line, pulses in and out with interrupted feed, but it is only gone for moments at a time. They will be able to line up footage from the various cameras and create a rough map of the scenery.

Zoya uses the manipulator arm to push in a 50cm sediment corer. The image goes black. Coarse gravel cannot be collected by the corer and is swooped up in a bag,

creating a full sample from near their site. Black. An iceberg dropstone is brought in. A pale pink spider crab is caught and placed into the biobox. Black. The arm carefully removes an umbellula polyp from the seabed. Black. Animals too soft-bodied to be grabbed are sucked into collection chambers by the Slurp Gun. Other low-grade cameras monitor the tether and the rear of the vehicle. Black.

Just as the moon is covered with dust, the sea floor bottom is coated with delicate flakes of the dead: plankton, feces, and other organic particles from above. On a recent expedition, a German team found 400 new species of life in a single scoop. But the ISIS team is here for black smokers—deep sea hydrothermal vent systems that look like hot, billowing volcanoes. There is more life per square foot in vent ecosystems than anywhere in the world, dating back almost 500 million years ago, and they hope to be the first to discover these chemosynthetic chimneys in the mysterious Antarctic seas. There have been signs, patterns in the variety of animal life near this stretch of sea off Adelaide Island's northern coast. The breadth of life in a scoop of this ocean sediment is almost unimaginable. They feel they are getting closer.

Skinless

Terry washes potatoes in the sink and peels their skins to collect in the drain. He mashes them skinless now, after learning Zoya's preference, and has also stopped biting his fingernails because she'd caught him once in the act. To curb the habit, Terry wears latex gloves most of the time, even between meals, and especially during cigarette breaks because the nicotine makes him fidgety. When he sees Katrina walk by, tapping her pack

of smokes on her forearms and laughing, probably at some joke he didn't hear, he knows to drop the potatoes and join the crew on deck. He wasn't always much of a smoker but it feels so good on a cold morning. On cold mornings, Zoya taps her feet in loose patterns that make Terry think she must have been a dancer in her youth. She rocks back to front and kicks her heels to the side and waves her cigarette in small circles at her hips, and Terry thinks he must be the only one who notices. He wonders what tune she has in mind.

Katrina, in only a hooded sweatshirt and a pair of cargo pants, winces in the sun as she lights up, then claps her hands together and enjoys the sting of the dry morning air. If the summer sun is bright she can stand the temperature, refusing to add layers that aren't absolutely necessary. Katrina, Zoya, and Terry join Rick and Miguel in a huddle, though they are all aware of Leigh standing alone at the other end of the dock, puffing away on his old-fashioned pipe. Zoya nods to say hello. He bows, either to be formal or to be funny—no one can tell. Zoya leans back against the railing and folds her arms, occasionally bringing them up to drag on her cigarette without uncrossing. She watches him with quick glances but never turns her head. Katrina stares at the ice floes drifting by and thinks of her husband back in England, naked and bundled up under layered comforters without her. Leigh takes a few slow steps closer to the group to seem polite. Zoya scratches the back of her neck, casually combing the ends of her very short hair to curl out the way she likes. Terry knows Zoya is older, but he likes how serious she is, so unlike all the girls he knows back home. His gloves smell like smoke, dirt, and the earthy starch of potato skins. He begins humming, his eyes on Zoya's feet.

Cold Seeps

Since the age of eight, Zoya's favorite animal has been the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, which translates literally as “vampire squid from hell.” Though often mistaken for an octopus or a squid, it is neither; instead it belongs to its own taxonomical order: *Vampyromorpha*. With eight long arms, eight smaller wispy arms, a sensory tentacle, and giant electric blue eyes. Its eyes are proportionally the largest of any species, and though they seem cloudy with blindness, they are sharply attuned to their dark environments. When threatened, the vampire squid either turns inside out or cloaks itself in a bioluminescent haze—an unusual defense.

Early in her career, Zoya was able to capture many vampire squid from the murky sea floors, but though she housed them in a series of elaborate aquaria, not one survived longer than a month. She doesn't tell anyone how many tries it took her to accept this result. Studying them so dutifully and patiently, she failed to understand their needs, their inability to adapt—she didn't want to believe they would be as out of place in her world as she was in theirs. Following this devastation, Zoya switched her focus to studying the transparent, shrimplike *Phronima* after the new species was discovered in the North Atlantic, but she lost her funding when she couldn't publish faster than her colleagues. Then she dedicated herself to studying schools of infant jellyfish, monitoring their behavior as they pulsed in place, creating a beautifully rhythmic upside-down blanket over the tank floor, but she did not monitor the tank's bacteria levels closely enough and they began to die, drifting lightly upward one by one when they'd given in. Now Zoya prefers monitoring from a distance, and keeping her hands to herself.

Her photographic specialty is capturing landscapes beyond the light—much of the 95 % of the world left unexplored. She still receives newsletters from the Census of Marine Life that remind her how much more world there is, and how rapidly it is all slipping away. Their recruitment tactics were as blatant as the army's, but Zoya responded, finally joining the Chemosynthetic Ecosystems of the Southern Ocean (ChEsSo) mission with a spade in her pocket: she had experience with ROVs and ISIS needed an operator and cameraman. She culled the internet for pictures of Antarctica, and wasn't surprised to find almost all the teams were male. Tough stomachs, gritty faces, sexless clothing, and quiet work. It seemed like paradise.

Movie Night

The team reclines in front of the television in the dining hall to watch *The Thing From Another World*; Ian brings the VHS tape with him to every mission. Some drink powdered cocoa, while others still drink coffee at every chance they get, no longer affected by the caffeine. The closeness to the poles does strange things to their bodies, weakening their defenses and tipping their balance just slightly. They huddle under quilts, still half-dressed in snowpants with suspenders and thick rubber boots that take too much effort to unlace, and half-watch the movie, thinking about New Year's resolutions. Katrina's is to spend no longer than a month at a time in her new husband's company—the longing will be good for them both, especially in these early years, and she must start managing his expectations about her independence. Ian's is to vacation in Thailand—he's never seen a real elephant. Leigh doesn't believe in New Year's resolutions. He

believes one ought to be the person one wants to be every day of one's life. Terry is fast asleep. He doesn't usually make resolutions until it's too late and the ball has already dropped.

Zoya's resolution is to stop sneaking around. Later that night she returns three pairs of thermal socks to Terry's sock drawer, a hotel-sized bottle of lotion to the kitchen bathroom, and a pair of goggles that Leigh had been searching for to the lab. She wipes the slate clean.

Zoya and Katrina share a cabin at the end of the hall. They are the only women on board this week, as the rest of the Southampton crew stayed behind at Rothera Station, on Adelaide Island, to compile research or touch base with the University. Or rest. On the boat at night Zoya can hear the men snoring. Their cabins aren't far away, though they've been instructed to steer clear of the "ladies' quarters." Zoya only sleeps in short bursts and has learned to recognize the sounds of each man. Alex, the boat's captain, has a choppy guttural snore like an old chainsaw starting. Ian's is high, with occasional nasal whistles—a surprising, endearing sound from someone so large. Terry snores in quick panting succession, like the sound of a dreaming dog closing in on a rabbit. She hasn't heard anything she can peg Leigh by, which leaves her imagination open to many possibilities.

The most likely one, the one Zoya always returns to, is the idea of him lying on his back with his limbs splayed and tangled in the sheets, jutting out from his twin-sized cot. He is shirtless, and the hair on his chest and on his lip catch faint traces of

moonlight. In this idea of him there's always impossible moonlight, as though he is allowed, as Captain, a different experience of night. She lies awake in the dark but can feel the eternal summer sun. It won't set until April, four months from now.

In a few days, they will make the discovery they've been working towards. Six-foot tube worms and bloated white yeti crabs, bacteria resembling the first traces of life on earth, almost perfectly preserved. Hundreds of new species, born of the primordial black smoker vents. Gelatinous luminescence.

They will celebrate their importance and fall more deeply in love with ISIS, and even a little with each other. Katrina will return home to begin categorizing the samples, but will spend the weekends in bed at her husband's flat and work through her lingering elation with him until she is finally spent, at which point she will have accidentally stayed for five weeks. Terry, realizing he'll never register on Zoya's radar, will take off his gloves and give in to the biting. He'll try to forget his childish resolution to woo her. Only Ian's will last. He'll fly to Chang Mai and ride an elephant through the jungle and to a river, where they will both wade in and relish the water's sweet coolness.

With glasses of whisky in their hands, standing in for Champagne, they stare at their synchronized watches until the hands meet midnight. Katrina grabs hold of Zoya's collar and pulls her in for a kiss, mashing her glossy lips against Zoya's and bumping her

teeth. The men howl and whistle until Katrina tumbles backwards and steps on Ian's foot. Everyone laughs. Women have always felt safe kissing Zoya.

Their glasses clink with bits of iceberg they've cut to dilute their drinks, and everyone cheers. Terry has made bacon sandwiches and apple pie. Even Leigh is laughing, his eyes watering slightly with joy and intoxication—he feels they are close to a big discovery but he doesn't want to get anyone's hopes up.

Zoya pushes past everyone and fumbles down the hallway towards her bedroom, satisfied with putting in her time at the party, and getting out before anything embarrassing happens. She is sleepy for the first time in months, and somewhat nauseous, but mostly embarrassed that she can't hold her whiskey better among the men. As the door swings open her eyes take too long to adjust. It is not her room, but a bed is there and she falls onto it, inhaling the musk of unmade sheets. The room spins but when she opens her eyes she can see his books in piles on the desk and chair, the maps of the Highlands tucked into the mirror, and an open suitcase filled with rumped fair isle sweaters, thick denim jeans, and long johns. She sips from a cup of water at his bedside and rubs some over the skin on her lips. There is no moonlight, of course, but otherwise it is just as she expected.

(Again, these are parts of a longer work I'm still sorting out—I plan to flesh out a story for each primary character, and then restructure the whole thing to layer everyone's experiences within these close quarters.)

The Place Beyond Our Trees, Our Homes, Our Neighborhoods

We lived in the woods between our houses. We didn't know what to call it besides woods, though what it really was, when you stepped just outside of it, was a small massing of trees that didn't even flesh out with leaves in the summer. The woods had been pared down as the neighborhood grew, but you could still enter it and be inside it, and if you blurred your vision as you scanned the trees, you wouldn't know they didn't go further. Robbie lived in the back room, a clearing he'd framed with stacked rocks and bricks from his mother's garden. Lupita made a kitchen and said she didn't need a room, coming back and forth from home with lemonade and biscuits to keep us fed. I took the room that had a tree growing sideways, its branches cowering over to create a sloped nook just big enough for me to lie under while I read, and I carved "Winnie" on the trunk to make it mine. And there was one other room: a round clearing with a stone to sit on. The stone was a pretty bluish white with shimmery quartz-like patches. I kept the room bare otherwise, and occasionally raked the ground of leaves and twigs because it had belonged to my older sister Hannah before she died. Sometimes when a person's life is taken too soon their spirit sticks around. I thought that if my sister ever chose to visit, she might like to come back to her favorite place and see it sparkling.

Today, I decided, could be the day. It was nearly a year since Hannah had died, and on top of that it was Halloween—the one day the dead were actually invited to walk the earth. When school let out the snow was falling lightly and I raced Robbie to the woods with our hats off, happy to feel our ears chap and burn against the wind. The cold

was early for Wisconsin. Last year the first snow had come in November, in the night after Hannah was buried in the county cemetery. I remember waking up to a white field and wondering how far down the melting snow could seep, whether six feet of dirt would provide insulation. It gets so dark this time of year, sometimes you keep the days straight by the thickness of the snow.

I chewed the tips of my wool mittens as I crouched in the woods and watched the snow collect in dirty patches across the field outside. Robbie took soft handfuls every few minutes, testing the snow for stickability before trying to pack it into the stones around his room. His wall had grown from a small pile to a low blockade, now running past the length of his room and beginning to wrap around the perimeter of our woods, separating us from the outside world. In the summer it had been a calm shaded area to lie behind, kept cool and out of sight. With winter approaching, the fortress felt more important. The woods would seem smaller then, and its bare trees and muted landscape would make us stand out even more.

“There are holes in the wall,” Robbie said, his voice squeaking from the sore throat he’d get when the weather changed. “But if I fill them with snow, the wall will ice solid overnight.” Robbie sounded different this year, and he looked it too—he still had the smooth cheeks, small round nose, and wild cowlicked hair of a little boy, but he’d hit an awkward growth spurt. His tee shirts always rode up over his stomach when he raised his arms, and he hadn’t yet learned to shave; patchy black hairs were crowding his top lip, and beginning to spread from his sideburns down his jaw line.

Lupita walked coolly past him, taking her gloves off and smoothing her eyelashes with her pinkies to keep her mascara from running. Her fingernails were painted orange,

yellow, and white, like candy corn. Lupita only showed up every once in a while now, having just started high school at a private academy on the other side of town, but Robbie and I were still in 7th grade and he wouldn't be leaving me for another year. Until then, we'd made a deal to watch each other's backs no matter what. We both needed someone like that. All Lupita talked about were the older, richer kids and the way they dressed and how a junior boy had asked her to homecoming and how her mother wouldn't let her go. She'd started wearing a high ponytail and hairspraying her bangs into one big curl, big enough for me to gaze through like a telescope when she wasn't paying attention. Robbie even nicknamed her Loopty Loop, which of course she hated.

I sat with Lupita while she talked about her new friend Chelsea, the one who lived on a big estate with horses in the yard because her dad was a judge. "I've seen it," I said. Smiling, Lupita rubbed her gloves together to warm up. "Chelsea's been sneaking out every night to meet her boyfriend and do you know where they do it?" She paused. "He takes her to the sugar shack."

I didn't know what a sugar shack was and Lupita knew I didn't know; she watched my face for a response, and giggled hysterically like she'd been sucking helium. "A sugar shack is where they make maple syrup," she explained. "It gets all hot and gooey in the shack to heat up the sap, and they sneak inside at night while the farmer is asleep and do it. Chelsea said that sometimes she comes home and her clothes are practically glued to her body."

I imagined two people kissing against a sticky wooden wall. "That's disgusting," I said, taking my rake and tapping it on Hannah's quartz to shake off the snow. "I used to like maple syrup."

While I raked in neat rows across the room, I considered telling Lupita that Hannah would sneak around too. She used to go out past curfew sometimes to meet up with friends—but not all her friends, not Lupita, just a certain crowd. I'd always kept it to myself because I thought it might hurt Lupita to know that Hannah, who was only a year older, had already outgrown her.

I neared the edge of our woods and began combing the slush into the ground and back out towards the field. It wasn't the right consistency, wasn't accumulating into an even white blanket like it sometimes did. Even Robbie's snow was crumbling and melting from the crevices in his rock wall while he tried to pack more in, pressing to make ice. I watched as a man and a woman approached along the path nearby. They were holding hands, smoking cigarettes, and talking in loud, teasing voices, but they hushed themselves when they spotted me. I looked down and kept working.

"Knock it off," Lupita said, watching my rake.

I didn't like her ordering me around, so I kept on, scraping harder at the ground to make my point. You're nothing like her, I thought.

I'm not even like her. Except sometimes, like when I wear her favorite turquoise sweater, as I am now, and you can see how it looks just right against our pale skin. Or when Dad pauses before saying my name, forgetting for just a moment. Or that time I went and stood at the edge of the sloping quarry, because it'd been six months and I felt ready, when I'd looked down and felt part of myself tumble down too. I'd had to sit right there and dig my palms in the gravel to keep from falling—that's how much I felt like her just then.

I cried out suddenly, feeling my neck seize and skin burn. A lump of snow was melting between my shoulder blades, soaking into my sweater, and Robbie laughed hoarsely as if it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. Lupita closed her eyes and shook her head. I felt betrayed, thinking that she was the one who should've gotten snowed, who needed the cooling off. I rubbed my neck as I went to sit under the tree in my room. He was supposed to be on my side.

"Oh come on, it's nothing to get upset about," Robbie called.

I sat under my tree to sulk, but Robbie followed. He stood over me, stripping the bark off a dead branch and tossing the pieces aside until the stick was clean. Then he pulled back and swatted my knees with it. "If you want disgusting," he said. "I've got a story."

"We don't," Lupita said.

"It's for Halloween," Robbie said. He retreated to his room and sat behind the stone pile. "But you have to come closer if you want to hear it." Lupita ignored him, smoothing stray wisps of her hair back with the dew on her gloves, and watching me with an intensity that was meant to keep me in line. "Come on, you too Loopty Loop," Robbie hollered. "You'll like this story. It has a shack in it."

As I stood up, Lupita groaned. "What," I asked. "Go hang with your gross friends if we're boring you." Robbie laughed. Lupita shrugged, but I knew she was upset because she made such a huff of tying her scarf around her neck three times and fitting her earmuffs exactly right before leaving.

I bunched my hood behind my head and lay in the dirt near Robbie's boots. Any snow that made it past the trees melted within moments of hitting the ground. The earth was wet, but cold and mud-free. "Close your eyes and clear your head," he said.

When I did, and there was only the sound of twigs tapping lightly overhead, he began.

"This is a true story, so pay attention. Once there was a man from up north only a little ways, who lived out in the middle of nowhere with his mom and brother, and didn't have any friends. One day, he burned down a cornfield in his backyard, which you have to do sometimes to prepare for new corn to grow. Well, after the fire stopped, the police arrived, and the man told them he couldn't find his brother, but then he led them straight to the body. His brother was lying dead in the corn. With lots of bruises but no serious burns. And then the police just let the man go, because let's face it: Wisconsin cops are idiots." Robbie's gym pants swished as he settled closer into the dirt beside me. "Then, years later, some women went missing."

I didn't like these kinds of stories but it was all Robbie talked about lately, even if I asked him to stop. He didn't know what it was like for me, after what happened.

"So the cops went to the man's farm, and, you guessed it, to the man's shed. Know what they found in there?"

My nose went runny and I had to swallow. "The women," I said.

"Yeah, but their bodies." Robbie elbowed me lightly. "They were hung up all over the place, like decorations. In plain sight. Like he wanted them to be found."

I looked over at him, at his dark, gloomy eyelids and the flecks of dandruff around his collar. He stared at the treetops with his mouth slightly open, seeming

distracted by something. I didn't know what to make of Robbie's new obsession with horror. Sometimes it felt like he was trying to top Hannah's story with something more gruesome. Sometimes he seemed to forget her story, her existence, entirely.

"I'll be late for dinner," I said.

He turned to face me, wincing. "But I'm just getting to the good part."

I breathed in slow. The damp ends of my clothing felt itchy, but I tucked my hands between my legs to make myself still. "Ok, shoot."

"The best part is that at night he'd go into a daze, totally unaware of his actions, and dig up bodies from the graveyard."

I thought of all those displaced people, the families searching for their loved ones. I thought of the night I'd shot awake to find my mom kneeling on Hannah's bed, flipping through the empty mess of blankets and calling for my dad. How when I stood up she finally noticed me, and raised her shaky voice: "Where is she? Did she tell you?" She hadn't. Dad asked if I'd ever seen Hannah sneak off. I'd said no again, but of course I saw—we shared a room, and my body was tuned to wake at the sound of the window creak. I'd toss a little, and she'd say "Winnie," and I'd say "hmm?" and she'd say "I'll be back soon." I was still figuring that one day she'd ask me to come along. Dad said there'd been no moon that night, and that she must've gone the wrong way in the dark. Knowing these neighborhoods better than most, I wouldn't have let that happen. I would have brought her home.

I climbed to my feet, and Robbie started laughing again. "No no no wait," he said, and as I tried to step past, he scissored his legs around mine and sent me tumbling to the ground. I landed hard on my hip and brought my knees to my chest, a sharpness

shooting down my thigh, while Robbie scrambled to prop his boots on top of me. “I have you,” he said, beaming. “You can’t leave until I say you can.”

There was dirt on my lips and I spit, pushing away from Robbie to rise to my knees. “Hey,” he grunted. He lunged at me, and socked me in the shoulder as he tackled me down. His hands leapt to pin my elbows at my side, and my breath was forced out by the knee he dug into my gut, making me cough and wheeze. “I said you can’t leave,” he repeated slowly, as if talking to a child. I sucked in a few quick breaths. Where his flushed face loomed over me, I could see his eyes darting around and then settling into mine. Like his sister, he had long, black, curling eyelashes, but now he was squinting through them—tense and angry as he studied me.

I turned away from Robbie and looked out through the trees. At one point in our fighting I’d had an instinct to call for Hannah, forgetting I was on my own. I’d have to get used to it. If I didn’t have Hannah and I didn’t have Robbie, then there was no arguing it—I was alone.

After a moment, I felt Robbie release my arms. “Okay,” he said. He stood up and backed away, wiping his hands on his jeans. “I was just testing you. Now go on home.”

As I walked in the door, I removed my knit cap, mittens and Starter jacket, and draped them over the radiator. Old newspapers were spread underneath to collect the drops. Mom sat in the den, watching the Five O’Clock Report with Ward’s big muzzle in

her lap. His Doberman ears perked forward as I entered, but she grabbed them and continued to massage, keeping his head in place.

“Don’t you think you should come home right after school?” She turned down the volume but kept watching the report; a truck had flipped over in a ditch, causing a two lane pile-up.

“I don’t know. Sorry.”

She glanced at me. Her forehead was tense, wrinkled, but her eyes remained blue and tranquil. I shrugged. “Were you with Lupita?” she asked.

“And Robbie,” I added, wringing my hair into a knot to squeeze out the frost.

She nodded. “That’s okay, I guess. You don’t have homework?”

“They don’t assign any on holidays.”

“Smart girl,” she said, seeming to relax a little. “I just missed you is all.” And with that she went back to her program and I was dismissed.

She would wait up for my dad to return from work, and after he warmed his leftovers and they kissed me goodnight, they’d go to bed. When not at work they were inseparable, and mom even started trading her waitressing shifts to match his at the pet hospital. They’d go to sleep early, leaving me to read for as long as I wanted, and in the morning I’d have to wake them up because Dad still liked to make breakfast but never set an alarm. I couldn’t remember if it was ever like that last year, before Hannah died. Most of my memories were about Hannah now, with my parents just orbiting her like satellites, monitoring and recording. Once, when I was very young and not likely to remember, Dad told me that I was secretly his favorite daughter. But the way I thought

about Hannah placed her at the center of our world, my love for her eclipsing their love for me.

I ate some macaroni and cheese my mom had left on the stove, then went up to my room and read until my parents stopped in to say goodnight. It was barely seven o'clock. Dad leaned over the bed to hug me, while Mom stood a few steps back and waited for him to return to her. He pushed my bangs away to kiss the scar that dipped into my hairline, a scar I'd gotten two years ago in a sledding accident when Robbie's Flexi Flyer had careened into mine and hit its skate on my face. Five stitches only; it could've been worse. Goodnight Mom and Dad.

When we were nine and eleven, before the sledding accident, Hannah had been experimenting with applying makeup when she caught me watching her. She was sitting in front of the floor-length mirror in the room we shared, and her soft brown hair was claw-clipped above her neck, swooping loosely over her earlobes and back to create this particularly nice framing effect. Now, when I try to remember the way her makeup looked, it seems sort of clownish—purple across the hollows over a smear of bright white just above her lash line, lip gloss with tiny flecks of pink glitter—but back then it had made her seem sweet, in the way cupcakes gleam with a bit of frosting. “Let me do yours,” she said. She gave me a vampish look with crimson lipstick and midnight blue eyeliner that stemmed out at the corners, like little daggers, and then she brushed my stubborn hair down with water and smiled at me in the mirror. “You're actually very pretty,” she said. I felt awkward with the attention and grinned big, but when I saw my braces flashing I brought my lips back together. “Yep,” she confirmed, “pretty enough to be a model.” I mumbled that she was wrong, but inside I'd never felt so close to her—

not close in terms of our emotional connection, though that felt good too, but close in terms of our places in life. Like I was being pretty out of sheer loyalty to her. Then she'd added, "Well, not with that scar of course."

I dog-eared my book and walked to the mirror, removing Hannah's sweater and my overalls along the way. Now, when I squinted, it didn't look so bad, and I felt okay about the potential of my incoming breasts and the normality of my feet—not too big or small or rough or boney. I slid into a pair of kitten heels that had been handed down from Hannah; we kept boxes of her clothing stored away for me to one day grow into. My fingers played with the band of my underwear and I dropped those too, shaking them off over my heels. My looks weren't as shocking as I'd feared, but neither were they very interesting.

Hannah's bed, in the mirror behind me, was still made as though she'd need it, with a faded white comforter folded down to reveal petal pink sheets. I climbed between the sheets and inhaled. Of course it'd been washed since she left, so the hint of something more I could draw from the blend of detergent and mold was probably just the smell of my own sweat.

Even though I felt too old for Trick-or-Treating that year, I wanted to keep with tradition and at least get dressed up. I dug under the bed for Hannah's boxes of clothes, but found only her school outfits—nothing I could make a costume from. So I crept through the half-open door of my parents' room, and past where they lay curled on the bed together in flannel pajamas and tee shirts. Mom was burrowed against Dad, snoring lightly, and Dad lay with his arm over her waist, his big shoulders shielding her from the lamp on the bedside table. Dad's blue scrubs from the pet hospital were laid out on the

ironing board. I put them on over my clothes, adding rubber gloves and a surgical mask to complete the look.

In the kitchen, I combed through our cabinets for anything sweet, and wound up with a bowl of pinwheel peppermints, some licorice strips, a couple of bite-sized Hershey bars, and a fortune cookie. My parents clearly weren't planning to hand out candy this year, but some kids look forward to Halloween all year long—I thought we should have something ready in case we got visitors.

With the bowl of candy in my lap, I stationed myself on our den sofa and massaged Ward's belly with my feet. Twilight Zone reruns played back to back. Costumed kids weren't stopping by very often, and I started eating the peppermints by the handful, taking off my gloves first so I wouldn't get slowed down on the wrappers.

When the doorbell rang once more, I opened it to a boy standing in camo hunting gear, a black hole painted into his forehead and blood splattered all over his face. It only took me a moment to recognize Robbie. He laughed at my get-up and said "Nice mad scientist."

"Doctor. I'm clearly a doctor."

He frowned. "Like a mad doctor? Who murders his patients?"

"Okay, that."

He pointed his plastic rifle at me and gestured me off the stoop. "A bunch of us are playing night games around the neighborhood. Better git," he said, slowing his voice to a southern drawl and keeping me in his sights. We used to do this all the time; we'd go from door to door collecting each other until we had a group large enough, then we'd do whatever we felt like under the secrecy of night.

As we left, Robbie poured my candy into his plastic pumpkin and held it out to me, offering the joint spoils. We shuffled along together, not quite filling out our costumes, and hiked past the chicken farm that defined the line between the neighborhood we lived in and the more rural developments to the west. I asked him where we were going, because even though I lived on the edge between the two places, I didn't want that line to come between us. I'd actually been out this way often, especially after Hannah died and my parents stopped paying close attention, and I'd noticed the similarities between where I lived and some of the abandoned houses west of town. But as far as Robbie was concerned, I was still his neighbor. He didn't even see himself as a rich kid yet.

Robbie and I climbed over the pasture fence that had fallen years ago, during a storm, and had never been repaired. We went past the farm and the screeching of cooped-up chicks settling into a sleep routine, and past the train tracks that went all the way out to the edge of Lake Michigan, so I'd been told.

"Don't worry," he said, handing me his flashlight, even though we didn't need it. The sky was clear and moon high, making the slushy paths glimmer around us. "It's not much farther."

I was relieved, because another mile or so in this direction and we'd reach the quarry.

When we got along to the big willow tree with the tire swing, there were ten other kids hanging around—some I recognized from school and some I didn't. Lupita, wearing a simple knit dress with black stockings, was leaning against the tree trunk, swooning at

an older kid in a skeleton t-shirt while he made grotesque faces with his flashlight beam. She ignored us.

They'd picked this spot because no one would have a home field advantage and there'd be plenty of space to tear around. The skeleton boy called the shots: We'd start with Bloody Murder, and we couldn't hide anywhere past the cornfield. When it came to choosing a person to be "it," Lupita pointed at the skeleton boy and said "Come on Eric, be a man and go first." The rest of us agreed.

We circled the knotted tree trunk and buried our arms and heads together. I was wedged between Bill Clinton and a half-naked pirate, two older kids who kept whispering about how they might ditch the game and try to score some booze. The rest of us counted aloud: "One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock rock," and so on until "ten o'clock, eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock, Midnight!"

We ran at the run-down country houses, drawn to the same locations—the circle of pines, the fence behind the chopping stump, the chained-up tractor, the low branches of the crabapple trees—but then ricocheting in all directions to cover more distance. Anytime we saw a light go on we ran to the next yard, keeping away from the homes themselves. I hated this part of the game. I wanted to be clever enough to find the murderer, but at the same time I always prayed it would be someone else. I wanted to race home knowing I was already safe, knowing that the murderer only chases the one who finds his hiding place.

I had just finished checking all the climbable trees and was bending down to roll my scrubs at the ankle, when I heard the scream. "Bloody Murder!" Sneakers stormed through the wet grasses and I scrambled to follow. By the time I reached the field, the

skeleton was closing in on a tall bumblebee girl. I raised my knees higher and slammed them down harder, my heartbeat battling inside me with just as much force, until finally I reached the tree and slapped it with my palm. Slowing to a break beside the rest of the “safe” players, I heard them all cheer and I turned to look.

Robbie was crumpled in defeat a few yards back while Eric danced over him, the white bones on his shirt gleaming.

We started again: “One o’clock, two o’clock, three o’clock rock. Four o’clock, five o’clock, six o’clock rock. Seven o’clock, eight o’clock, nine o’clock rock. Ten o’clock, eleven o’clock, twelve o’clock, Midnight!”

This time, I let everyone run ahead. I knew Robbie wouldn’t hide in the places we’d narrowed in on last time, so I walked in another direction, following a tall red fence as far as it went into a new backyard. As I passed a naked maple tree, with all its leaves and propeller seed pods scattered beneath, stuck frozen together and crispy under my feet, I heard another crunching sound, close. I looked behind me. The dead leaves were shifting in the breeze, but there was nothing, no one there. The crunching had suddenly ceased.

The next yard presented a dug out ditch filled with burnt refuse, an empty dog house, and a small gray shed with a dirty window. I couldn’t see anything through the glass, but I found a door as I circled around. The hinges were crooked, which allowed the door to relax open a few inches and groan against its weight.

Using my foot to wedge it open further, I squinted past the entrance to what little I could make out, half-expecting the place to be caked in crystallized maple sap. Canvas stretched over the tops of a lawnmower, a snow blower, and a coiled up garden hose. A

bench jutted from one wall, with various tools splayed haphazardly across—I recognized a table saw, a wrench, a sandpaper roll, and some cable. I pulled my shoulders back to stretch them, realizing I'd had them hunched up to my ears. I was close enough now. I could move on.

Or I could keep going. My foot balanced on the rotting door frame where it met the dirt path. Something was drawing me in to take another look, to know what was inside just beyond the door. A cold wind bit my ears and I moved forward instinctually, tumbling with one easy step into the middle of the shed. I groped along the canvas to the workbench, and pulled the chain above me to turn on the only light—a small, dim bulb hanging from the ceiling, which buzzed while warming up. I brushed some loose screws from the seams in the wood and they hit the floor with little pings. A sledgehammer leaned handle-up against the corner. I adjusted it to stand straight, taken over by a desire to put everything in its place. I angled the saw downward and lined it up between the wooden planks. The blade was dull on my fingertips.

A rustling sound made me pull my hand back and turn. The face emerging from the shadow behind the door didn't look red anymore, but I recognized the camo, the bullet hole. He was so close that when he rolled his neck I swear I could hear the muscles pop. Robbie didn't say anything or come any closer. Now that I'd seen him, I'd have to call bloody murder before either of us could move.

I judged the open door and bent my knees to get ready, just as a throbbing sugar rush headache set in. Robbie mirrored my shifting movements with the sway of his body, his eyes flickering as they scanned me up and down, making my courage drop to the pit of my stomach. I laughed once but he stayed serious, with his hands braced palm-

outward in readiness. It was just a game, I knew, but the thought of being tagged made me dizzy: would he go easy on me or would he attack, and where, and how would it be after? I wanted to tell him to stop—to give me enough of a head start to get us out of the shed—but instead I just looked at him, trying to find a way back.

There would be his hand, fingers grinding their dirty sweat against my lips as the rest of him knocks me into the machinery, but with too much force; I land on the side of an upturned hoe, bruising my ribs and raking the top of my skin. More scars. I could look up at Robbie, in all his victory, and see him in a new way: his sympathy succumbing to delight or his beaming pride over having made me stronger somehow. Above us, the hanging light bulb sways from all the commotion, casting Robbie's face in a series of monstrous shadows, and, occasionally, a glowing.

Or I break away and race back to the woods with my loose paper scrubs fluttering. Our woods are peaceful, the ground there covered in a deepening layer of clean snow and the gusts of breeze transient, slipping away into stillness. The air is warmer and lighter as I walk further in, and seems to thin as though I'm scaling a mountain. The blue quartz has been moved to the center of the clearing in Hannah's room. I find Hannah in glimpses, a flash racing through the trees and calling to me, so I follow, maybe even catch up to her, herding her back to her well-tended room. I will make her stay all night with me, grounded to the ground as I am and missing the old times.

Robbie's eyes narrowed and he gestured to the door with a polite bow. Leaves stirred beyond the shed, but quietly—not enough to be a shuffling of feet over husks and shriveled leaves approaching.

“Say it,” he said. “We can't move until you do.”

And far away on the other side of town, the church bell chimed twelve times to mark the witching hour.

