

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE HUNTING GROUND AND OTHER STORIES
Heather De Bel, Master of Fine Arts, 2018

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The Hunting Ground and Other Stories is a collection exploring themes of addiction, love and class within the landscape of New Jersey, the wilderness of Alaska, or the Adirondack Mountains. All characters had their formative years in the suburbs of New Jersey and this manifests itself in unexpected ways. The characters in these stories are second or third generation Dutch immigrants who struggle with their conservative and religious culture both inwardly and in their daily interactions with those around them. Whether the stories are about two estranged sisters who must interact with each other after a tragedy, a recovering alcoholic who babysits the child of the married man she loves, or two young sisters who are navigating childhood in the Adirondacks while taking care of their alcoholic Aunt, each story explores the difficulties of addiction amidst a conservative and religious culture that doesn't have the words to start a conversation.

THE HUNTING GROUND AND OTHER STORIES

by

Heather De Bel

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Good Intentions

I.

All week, the family was talking about meeting Grace's boyfriend. Mike was, quite frankly, getting sick of it. The words "good Dutch Reformed boy" were repeated, along with "wedding" and "babies" and the phrase, "there's still hope for one of our kids." He didn't hate his family, how they didn't know how to contain their excitement, or how they sat near Grace at the dinner table as though he didn't exist. What he hated, he would tell himself years later, was that this new boyfriend was too good to be true. They were all too dumb to see it.

Benjamin arrived on Thanksgiving with a small bottle of red wine and a plaid scarf wrapped firmly around his neck. Leave it to his younger sister, the goody-two shoes, the tattler, the princess and golden child, to bring home a man who looked like he walked out of a magazine hanging up at a ShopRite register. Benjamin had blue eyes, thick combed hair the color of sawdust and a baby face that needed shaving only once a week. He was as tall as any other Dutch boy. He reached out to shake Mike's hand. The shake was girly and limp. Mike looked at his father. His father never did respect a man with soft hands.

But Benjamin leaned in for the hug. His mother got a kiss on the cheek. In their confusion at such an overly friendly greeting, his parents giggled like children and turned red.

Mike went for the appetizers while small talk ensued.

Benjamin was a boy from church whose family had recently moved to the area. He was one of nine. His siblings were blonde and wore matching flannels. His mother was a big woman, who looked to Mike like a brooding crow guarding her chicks. They were homeschooled. They

took notes in church. His sister couldn't stop staring at the new family sitting seven rows in front of them. Mike teased her. Who would she pick from the Brady Bunch? But, Grace had never shown interest in boys, had always turned boys down since she could mumble the word "no."

Mike, on the other hand, had many girlfriends. None were the kind who came over for dinner. None were the kind to wake up early on a Sunday morning for church.

Benjamin continued to make small talk with his parents. *Yes, the weather has been quite warm in New Jersey, considering. Yes, I remember when it snowed on Halloween! How times are changing....*

Mike kept eating, kept pouring himself a glass of wine.

His mother laughed in a way he knew was not sincere—something between a chuckle and an exaggerated *ha-ha*. His father seemed much more pleasant than the father he knew, the one who sat at the kitchen table and barked orders at his family. And Grace was silent. Mike did not like the way his family was acting. They got like this sometimes when certain people came over: the elders for house visitation, bible studies in their living room, even when some of the women came over from church. They talked more loudly, agreed with everything and laughed at the right times. His parents might think this was polite, but Mike saw it as something else—a fear that someone might discover that this family was not perfect.

"So Mike," Benjamin said, turning his attention to him now, "Grace tells me you like to deer hunt."

"I've shot a few animals in my day."

"My family has a cabin in the Adirondacks. Got about a hundred acres, pretty close to a lake. You should come with us next time."

"So long as your family doesn't skin me alive."

“Michael!” his mother said.

“My brother watches too many horror movies. And he’s an ass.”

“Language, young lady,” his father added.

“Sounds cool man,” Mike offered, satisfied that he had caused a ripple.

“I don’t like anybody shooting animals,” Grace said.

“Look Grace,” Mike said, “how do you feel about us eating this poor turkey? Probably had a wife, kids, hopes and dreams.” He put a large piece in his mouth and chewed obnoxiously.

“I’m going to start eating meat again soon, come New Years,” Grace said. She looked at Mike, daring him to argue. Benjamin reached over and pinched her cheek, “I told her that not eating a normal diet is unhealthy and too drastic. No need to draw attention to herself.” When his fingers left her cheek, two dark red spots were left.

“I agree,” their father said, “I’ve always told Grace to be realistic, practical. Too much of anything is a bad thing.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been telling her.”

“I figured three years as a vegetarian is long enough,” Grace said. “I might go back, but for now I just want to take a break from it all. I want to go to restaurants and eat what I want,” Grace chuckled. Mike looked at her perplexed. This was not the same girl who sat at Bruno’s three months ago, refusing to eat even the free bread in protest because Bruno’s cooked their sauce in meat fat.

Grace pushed her potatoes around her plate, refusing to look back at him.

“And because you know it’s not healthy. I doubt you’ll go back to depriving yourself,” Benjamin added. Grace rolled her eyes and pinched Benjamin’s shoulder.

“Looks like you have quite the effect on my sister,” Mike said, eyeing Benjamin so that he would know that this time he was being serious.

Benjamin looked back. Mike was convinced he saw something evil there, just a flash, something in the sharp wrinkle of his eyebrow, the purse of his lips. But it disappeared as Benjamin reached over, shook Grace’s hair.

“I certainly hope so. A guy like me couldn’t be so lucky,” and when Benjamin winked at her she smiled back, so big she looked like she might laugh.

After dinner, Benjamin helped their mother clean up. Mike had taken after his father. It was an unspoken rule in the house that the women cleaned and cooked, the men let them. Not knowing what to do, he went outside to the yard, where he had a tire nailed to a tree stump. There was a pile of wood that needed chopping before the winter came and the family heated the house with the fireplace. One by one with torn gloves he lifted parts of the trunk onto the stump and began chopping. No scarf, he thought. The wind burned his face which grew a deeper and darker red as the winter progressed. He felt the calluses on his hands with each swing. Man’s hands, he thought. He felt strong—in the shoulders, in the core, even in his legs. He felt capable of something, even if his family thought otherwise, even if everyone at church thought him useless for smoking and drinking too much. He looked inside, into the home where his family moved around effortlessly, bumping into each other and laughing. Benjamin already looked like he belonged there, but Mike had always been made to feel otherwise.

Four years ago when he was sixteen, Mike broke his nose. Drunk, he and his friend Theo boxed each other while another friend held up a stereo playing Rocky’s “Eye of the Tiger.” Mike remembered feeling elated. Then he was lying on his stomach in his bed in the basement. His

sister was playing the piano upstairs. When he went to sit up, he realized his face was crusted to the pillow. Slowly, he peeled the pillow away from his face like a scab. He felt his face, felt the warm blood and panicked. Had he burned himself? Had he gotten into an accident? He stumbled to the stairs and crawled up, afraid to look in the mirror.

He went to the living room, where his sister was sitting perfectly, her fingers moving as though they were their own beings.

“Grace,” he said.

She turned around and when the music stopped and he saw her face, he thought that it might have been a bad idea to show her.

“Is it bad?”

She stared at him. Went to make a sound, said nothing.

“Grace? Is it bad?”

He lay on the couch, afraid he might pass out. Everything from the neck up throbbed.

Grace went into the kitchen and returned with a bowl of soapy water and a rag. She began wiping his face. He could feel her sharp fingernail through the rag, scrapping at the crusted blood on his cheek. It might have been that his inebriation was making him sappy, or that the broken bones in his face were affecting his eyes, but tears poured out. His sister kept wiping them.

When his mother came downstairs and saw him on the couch, smelled the liquor, she looked him in the eye and said, “I wish I could say I expect more from you. But I don’t.” She walked away to get the keys.

He had this same feeling when he was a little boy, about six or seven, sitting in the front pew of church. The pastor was new, large and had a booming voice, like thunder. He preached about Sodom and Gomorrah—said that naked bodies were walking around h city without shame.

Mike let out a laugh, like a bubble he held in his cheeks that burst from between his teeth. “What is so funny young man?” The pastor roared from the pulpit, in front of the whole church. Mike was so embarrassed, so afraid, that he peed himself. He sat there for the next thirty minutes, feeling the shame flow down his legs, soak into the seat. When he stood up and his mother had seen what happened, she gave him a look, a look that said, *I am ashamed of you*. “Why didn’t you go to the bathroom?” she asked him, “you’re too old for this.”

He had felt this a dozen times since, like a child caught sitting in his own piss.

Later, he would laugh at himself for being so pathetic. But even so, sometimes when he is drunk he thinks of his sister wiping his face. He thinks of how bad he was at being a disciplined child. He wonders why some people are born good and some are born to ruin everything.

On New Year’s Eve, Mike sat on a leather couch at Theo’s house, talking to a girl who had a soft voice and red hair. She had on a tight gold dress, a plunging neckline. Her laugh made Mike feel light. He could feel the alcohol behind his eyes, the lack of feeling in his body. Could this be someone, he wondered, he could take home to his mother? Would she pawn over her the way she did over Benjamin?

The house was a mansion. Rumors in high school said that Theo’s father was in the mob. It was the year *The Sopranos* came out and every rich Italian kid in New Jersey was suspected of being a mobster. It felt good to be surrounded by the Italians and Irish of New Jersey, the ones who didn’t go to his church and didn’t know his family and knew nothing about the Netherlands. They knew how to throw a party, to drink, to let loose. The Dutch were always so cautious, always afraid of being chastised or shamed.

Grace called at 11:05. She begged him to come pick her up, take her home. Her voice was shaking. She was nervous or crying. Mike couldn't tell.

He left the party, left Maddie, the girl with the red hair and gold dress sitting on the leather couch, and drove to Emily's house—a girl he didn't particularly like because she had once called him “a mongrel.”

The neighborhood was like his own. Each house was the same house, but with different color shutters and roofs. There were no lights on the residential streets and he couldn't remember which house was Emily's, so he drove down the road slowly with his high beams on.

His headlights fell onto his sister, who was sitting outside on the curb, her knees pulled into her chest. When he pulled up she looked at him; her eyes red in the shape of her knee caps.

Mike reached over to his passenger side door, pulled open the handle. She stood up and almost fell over. Mike was shocked to see his eighteen year old sister finally drunk.

Inside the car, she cried—long sobs that reminded him of Grace as a baby. She was a thin-skinned kid who would cry if you looked at her wrong.

“What did he do?” Mike asked.

Grace couldn't spit it out.

“I'll fucking kill him.”

“Benjamin said my friends are sluts.”

“What?”

“He said they were sluts, every one of them.”

“That's it?”

She looked up at him, teary eyed. Said that Benjamin had fought with her in front of all of her friends, said things he could never take back. It started when Emily was making out with

her boyfriend on the couch. Benjamin made a comment to her—that this was rude and he was glad Grace wasn't like that. She shook it off, wasn't a big deal. She kind of liked the compliment. But she had a bit too much to drink and tried kissing him at the party but he kept pushing her off, saying she wasn't acting like herself. She was too wild, too loose. He was just joking around, Grace said, he was laughing and having a good time. But then Benjamin got into a really bad mood when Emily and her boyfriend went upstairs by themselves, giggling and making a big show of it. Her friends were whistling and hooting and Grace chimed in too. She didn't think it was that big of a deal but then Christian was mad at her all night, she could just tell. She went to kiss him, you know, to make things better and he pushed her off. Started yelling at her in front of her friends, said they were Godless, hopeless, lost women. "Sometimes he gets mean, real mean," she said.

There was once a girl Mike dated who had looked at him with big eyes and told him, "You're just mean." He had brushed it off. He had been called worse. But many months later he couldn't stop thinking about it. He was hyperaware of every mean thought he had and the idea tormented him—maybe there was nothing more to him than cruelty, spitefulness.

Mike let his mind wander to the girl on the leather couch. He wondered if she was still there, waiting for him. A little part of him broke. How could she be?

"You are too good for that fucking loser."

"He's not all bad though, you know? Mom and dad love him. He takes me out to expensive places. He makes me feel needed and good and whole. I'm afraid I'll never find anyone like him again."

"I hope you fucking don't."

"I love him so much, Mike."

“You don’t know what that means.”

“I know better than you.”

“I’m beginning to think you don’t.”

She continued to sob. Mike felt anxiety rising in his chest. He had to comfort her, had to say something.

“Your friends are the most prudish girls I’ve ever met.”

Her sobs grew louder. “It’s not that Mike. When he was yelling at me, I felt really angry. I hated him, just hated him. But now that he is gone, I see he is right. ‘Bad company corrupts good character,’ right? I mean look at me, I’m drunk, I’m crying, I just lost a good man. I was so angry, I could have just killed him. How could I have been so angry?”

“You should have just killed him.”

She sobbed louder.

He put his arm around her. It felt awkward so he patted her back instead and quickly quit that too. He tried talking to her. He asked her if she remembered when he was building the wood burning stove and a pipe had broken, slit open his arm from elbow to wrist. Grace had passed out, went down like a pile of bricks. She looked at him, her smeared mascara making her look ugly and old. “And then you woke up,” Mike said, “and drove me to the hospital.” Grace said that she remembered, of course, but her stare still asked, so what?

“I just mean to say that sometimes you’re weak, but sometimes you’re really tough.”

Still she looked blankly at him.

“I don’t like that he makes you sad. You deserve to be happy.”

“You’ll get through this,” he added, and when she didn’t answer he said, “when one door closes another one opens. God will grant you the serenity to accept the things you can’t change. The grass is always greener.”

“Are you just spewing hackneyed proverbs?”

“Yes. Is it working?”

“I think, ‘love will find a way’ would have been more appropriate.”

“How about, don’t cry over spilled milk?”

Grace chuckled, but looked out the window. “You’re bad at this.”

He turned up the radio. The ball had already dropped. Maddie in the gold dress was probably kissing someone else. He drove his sister home and thought about nothing in particular. He kept his eye on the white dashes, decided that his New Year’s resolution should be to stop drinking and driving—and learn the way to comfort someone who is hurting.

II.

They were engaged within six months, married in six months after that. It was a small ceremony with no bridal party, no groomsmen, no guest book with a waiting line out the door. Grace wore her mother’s wedding dress, the shoulders flattened, the crinoline cut out. The veil was crinkled and tinted yellow. Mike thought his sister looked ghostly. Not like his young, sensitive sister but like an old woman who had seen enough of life. The piano player was a young girl from church. She played beautiful music. He thought about Grace as a young girl again, playing her own tunes, the pile of church hymnals closed on the piano.

The pastor had gone on and on, the submission of the wife, the servitude of the husband, a cord of three strings is not easily broken. Mike felt his eyes grow heavy. The family pitied him, especially now on his younger sister's wedding day. But Mike only pitied one person. She was standing at the altar, making promises to a man no one really understood.

Afterwards they went to dinner at an expensive Italian restaurant. Benjamin's eight siblings and his mother and all of Benjamin's cousins and aunts and uncles were invited. From Grace's side though, only her parents and Mike and two cousins were invited. Grace had said she didn't want most of her family there, only who was important. When Mike said, "I suppose Benjamin has a more important family," he was told to hush up.

The pasta was handmade. Mike imagined a man twirling each individual piece of pasta into a bow tie. Alcohol was not allowed at the "reception," and so Mike took a flask with him. He was not allowed to have a plus one. When he was sober he didn't care much, but the liquor made him vindictive. Had he been allowed to take someone, he would have taken Maddie, the girl from the New Years Eve party who, in fact, did wait for him and was surly disappointed when he didn't come back. She was a secretary at a hospital many miles west. They were sleeping together, but she had refused to be his girlfriend unless he quit drinking.

He wanted to get this wedding over with so he could hold her, forget this creeping feeling he had about Benjamin.

At the restaurant, Benjamin kept his arm around Grace the whole time and she leaned into him, cuddling into his chest. Emily was not there and neither were Grace's other best friends, who she stopped seeing after New Years. Mike looked at one of the waiters who was dressed in a suit and was rushing but trying to look calm. He imagined what they must look like to him—a happy family he imagined, one that had their little arguments but was happy

nonetheless. And weren't they happy, he thought? Grace was smiling and always looking at her new husband with big eyes. But, where were her friends? Where were her cousins who had come over every summer to paint their nails neon colors and swim until the night grew cold? Mike didn't know why he felt sad. Perhaps it was because he did not recognize the bride at the end of the table. Maybe it was because his parents were beginning to act apprehensive—he had never seen his father and mother so unsure.

Or maybe it was because *he* was the failure of the family. He was the one who didn't know how to be happy, the one who never took anything seriously, the one who was *just mean*.

Grace only left Benjamin's side once, and that was to go to the bathroom. As she left, he stared at the hunk of chicken on her plate, uneaten. He waited a minute and left to go to the bathroom himself. He waited by the door for her to come out.

As she did, he grabbed her arm.

She looked at him, her face confused and hurt.

"You are now happily married."

"You're drunk."

"You're not yourself. Am I allowed to be worried about my sister?"

"You have no reason to be worried. And what do you know about who I am?"

"You've never even kissed the guy."

"That's how it should be. Benjamin doesn't go around expecting girls to put out like you do. This is what a relationship is supposed to look like."

"You're lying to yourself Grace and you know it." He did not realize how hard he was squeezing her arm until she yanked it free. His hand was throbbing from the grip. She was holding back tears, the way she always did when she had been hurt.

“God says it’s a sin to hate your brother. But sometimes you make it way too hard not to hate you,” she turned to walk away.

“You don’t believe that bullshit,” he said. It was too late. She was walking to the table, back to Benjamin, who watched Mike walk from the bathroom, watched him take his seat and watched him eat his dinner. Benjamin stroked her arm, like a fragile bird.

When he came stumbling into her apartment the night of the reception, Maddie had almost kicked him out. Except, his body weight was too heavy and he was too blitzed to walk. He didn’t remember much, only that he went into a rage when she tried to kick him out. I love you, he screamed. How can you not see? How can my sister marry a man like that, and yet you won’t even speak to me. He turned, his fist met the wall—once? Twice? Perhaps more? And then he fell to the ground, cried on the floor. Her rug was shaggy and smelled always of lavender. Mike kept his face smothered in that rug all night, all morning, until Maddie came home from work. Dry spackle particles stilled floated around the room in the sun. His hand ached, and he had the same feeling like when he woke up with a broken nose. Only when she looked at him with disgust and said, “We need to talk,” did he know that he had fucked up.

The newlyweds moved to Pennsylvania. They wanted to go to a church where women sat on the left side and men on the right, where all the women wore hats and old men lead the hymn sing. They lived near the hospital where Maddie worked. It was a small comfort to Mike, who could use the two women as an excuse to be near the other.

Their house was a log cabin with a chimney out front and a porch. The house was surrounded by big, towering trees. On the inside, Mike helped nail up signs that read, “God

Protect This House,” and “Worry Looks Around, Faith Looks Up,” and “She is clothed in strength and dignity, and laughs without fear of the future.” He paused to look at each sign, wondered how much Grace believed these. How much comfort did they give her? After they helped the couple move in, Mike and his parents drove away, never to be invited back.

Grace could only be reached by phone once a week, Friday nights at 8:00. She had hour long chats with their mother, not one minute more. Mike could hear the soft conversations from upstairs, whispers mostly—sometimes he could hear subtle pleading. Christian didn’t approve of her spending so much time on the phone, being so connected to her *past* life, her life without him.

His mother now looked to Mike like an aging woman. She had lines that were not there before. She had cropped her hair short, curled it some days, let it hang limp most other days. His father spoke differently—his voice trailed off as though he forgot what he was saying by the time he reached the end of a sentence.

When the first baby came, there were many months of happy tears over the phone. When the second baby came, it was only one phone call late at night. His father answered, offered a half-hearted congratulations. The third baby was only rumored through a distant cousin who might have seen Grace pregnant again at a gas station. Mike imagined her in maternity clothes, her belly round, swollen. The dress swaying from the breeze in the woods. He could not see her smiling. He could not see her crying. He could not imagine anything but the swaying dress, the cold breeze.

There was no piano in the cabin and Grace did not work. There was no television either. Mike wondered what she did in the woods, when the sun was up and the days were lonely.

Mike spent his time working at UPS. On Saturday nights he would get drunk at the local bar and call Maddie, leave her long and sad voicemails that were lists of proverbs—I love you, I know I'm calling so many times but if at first you don't succeed, try and try again, I only want the best for you. Sometimes there just weren't enough ways to say something.

She texted back once: “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

He answered: “what's that supposed to mean?”

The want in him made him weak. He missed his sister. Most days his worry was a deep and subtle pang in his stomach, like a bug crawling around in his insides. But on some days, when he had woken up feeling like he knew how his day would unfold, he would suddenly feel his memories and guilt crashing around him like a flash flood, the current pulling him down and down into a dark pit. These days weren't much different than the subtler days, but only had small moments that set the waters flowing—when he caught his mother in the kitchen wiping her eyes on her sleeve, when Grace's favorite songs came on over the radio, when he saw a license plate from a different state, and he had the sudden urge to lean over and punch her in the arm, “Virginia!” But the worst was when he came across a package at UPS with a gift note: “To my sister” it said, and that was it. What did he ever do for Grace? What did he ever give up for her?

He had seen her every day for eighteen years and now she was more difficult to reach than the pope. His young sister who couldn't eat spaghetti without spilling on herself had children now, and he couldn't pick them up, couldn't tell them stories of their mother who was spoiled and a tattler and had the biggest heart he knew.

While he was hunting one day, trudging through the woods, he saw a deer about fifty feet away. He lifted his rifle and took aim. For the first time since his first deer, he hesitated. He thought of Grace, how she used to grab his legs with two arms, kicking and screaming when he

and his uncles were getting ready to hunt. He pulled the trigger, hit the deer in the side of the chest. The deer took off, running through an open field to its left. Mike watched as the deer collapsed not too far from where he was standing. It was a good shot, something to be proud of. But he did not feel different. It had been four years since he last saw Grace and though she was only miles away, he felt as though she was gone.

Maddie called him one night. Her voice was trembling and hesitant.

“Can I see you?” he asked, “I miss you. I need to see you.”

“I’m only calling because I have to tell you something. It’s about your sister. She was here at Chilton last week with a serious miscarriage and I thought you should know. Doc says she shouldn’t have any more kids. It’ll put her life at risk.”

When Mike was silent, Maddie added, “Don’t tell anyone. I could lose my job.”

Her voice trembled, and Mike wanted to reach through the phone, tell her it was ok. But words would not come.

“That Ben guy. He scares me. I don’t trust him,” she said. “Do you hear me, Mike? I could lose my job.”

But he was already starting his car—the words he needed still stuck in his throat.

It was past nine when he pulled through the brick entryway into the driveway. Mike got out of his car and approached the house. He twisted the door knob as though it would be open.

“Grace?” he whispered. There was light coming from the dining room window on the side. It was sharp and invading, hard to look at from outside, “Grace, are you there?”

“Grace!” he knocked hard on the door and pulled at the knob, hoping it might pop off.

“Grace, I know you are in there. You trust me, right? I’m you’re big brother, and that man is no good for you. You must believe me, right?”

Giving up, Mike walked around the house and through the manicured shrubs. The landscaping tugged and scraped at his jeans. His sneakers sunk into some mud from the spring rain. The humidity of the woods clung like fog to his clothes and his face broke into a hot sweat. He ran his hand along the cabin to sturdy himself. There were no windows except for the one out front. He came across an axe, an old and rusted one. He picked it up, just to have something heavy to hold onto. Grace’s backyard was not as nicely kept. It rolled into trees and more trees, a desolate landscape. It seemed like Mike and the shuffling bears and deer were the only living creatures on earth.

Mike remembered a place in their neighborhood where, when it snowed, the tree branches would get so heavy they would lean and touch the ground. Mike and Grace would dig a hole in the snow beneath the branches and crawl into their own igloo. There was enough room for them to sit and that’s about it. Still Grace loved to be in a place so confined and protected, *hidden* she had said. Until one day, when Mike was outside of the igloo watching the stream flow under a sheet of ice, he had heard the snow cave in. Grace screamed once and was silenced.

He ran to the snow pile and dug frantically. There was more white and more white and no Grace. He felt the panic rising into his face, until her arm burst through. She rose out of the snow like some unearthly creature. They had a hard time getting her out, especially the legs. For days she would complain about how hard it was to breathe. Snow was the heaviest thing on earth. Mike thought of this moment and wondered if this was what Grace felt like in this cabin. He wondered if he would be able to save her again.

Mike walked around to the front of the house and stopped in front of the door. He braced his legs and ground his feet into the hard wood of the porch, lifted the axe and thwacked it into the door. The door split and held onto the wood. Mike put his foot up on the frame and pulled the axe out. He hefted it above his head, and swung again, missing the first crack. Again the door gave a little more, and light from the inside poured out through the holes. He jerked the axe loose, and took another swing.

He felt strong and capable.

He heard noises coming from within. He kneeled down and put his ear toward the door. He heard the muffled cries from children, and then Benjamin—“He better stop. He’s mad...this house will collapse.”

He strained to hear the voice of his sister, but nothing came. Shame began to wash over him. He saw with clarity what this situation would look like to someone who didn’t understand. He pushed the shame into a place where it wouldn’t bother him.

“Benjamin, I will cut down this door and the rest of this fucking house if you kill my sister,” he shouted into the slits he had made in the door. It was quiet for a long time. There were crickets and shuffling in the brush and all the night noises. But for a long moment, everything was still.

He heard Benjamin whisper on the other side of the door, “Fear not them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul.”

Mike felt the heat of anger rise into his face. “I can hear you!” he screamed as he lifted the axe and swung again.

When they were ten and on vacation, Grace had asked Mike to bury her up to her neck in sand. So, he dug the biggest hole he could and Grace stood in it while he dumped the sand back

in. For a minute Grace stood buried with only her head showing, laughing and laughing as Mike patted the sand to make it more compacted. But then something came over her. Her eyes welled up and in a panicked voice she said, “I want to get out, get me out right now.” Mike thought again of snow and began digging. By the time her arms were free, Grace was hyperventilating.

He wielded the axe above his head and swung. Something told him that he had to get her out, right now. He was looking for her hand, an arm, something he could tug on and feel the weight of her body, breathing and alive. He couldn't find anything. He could not find her.

He was wild and fighting. Time was slipping through his fingers, sweat poured down the back of his neck, down his sides. “Grace!” he yelled with every swing.

Then he was glowing from the headlights which he knew would come for him. He put the axe down and in one last fight, he wedged his fingers between the cracks of the door and shook it. He screamed at nothing and at everything. The beams flew across the door and grew brighter, shedding light on the mess of wooden shards scattered around the porch. There were sirens and swirling blue and red lights. Boots were scuffling around in the gravel and men shouted “show us your hands!” Mike felt hands gripping his arms, gripping his waist as he twisted and shook and kicked.

Something in him gave up the fight. And he let these men drag him back down to earth, down to their car, where he was shoved like a heavy sack into the back seat.

As he looked out the window he finally saw Grace open the door. She had swollen eyes and her fingers trembled as she talked to the police officer. Through the crack in the window, Mike looked up and thought that he caught a smell—tears and cheap perfume, cooked potatoes and spring, soapy rags and snow. Years later, Mike would tell himself that it was his sister's smell, the last time he saw her, when he realized that he could not be the hero he needed to be for

his own sake. Children surrounded her legs like little crying angels. They were his nieces, he thought, as he put his hand up to the glass, willing the car to break so that he might comfort them.

As they drove away, he watched Grace grow smaller and smaller in the lighted doorway, watched her face that he had loved so much disappear in the night and though he tried to slip and cut the cuffs off his wrists until warm blood ran into his fingers, there was no going back to that house, no saving his sister, or himself, from what was about to happen.

Euphoria

We go shopping for our mother's birthday present and I drive because Abby has been drinking. We're at New Jersey's Willowbrook Mall where we've been shopping since we were born. It's a week or so after New Years and the place still smells of pine and log cabin candles. Paper stars and green and red streamers hang from the ceiling. The store windows are littered with what's left of winter clothes and bright yellow signs: *Clearance!*

Abby has recently dyed her hair a color blonde that is one shade darker than white. It is paler than her skin. I've tried to convince her I like it, and she pretends like she is convinced.

My mother insisted that we go do something together, to *cultivate a loving sister relationship*. Our father died before I was two and so we're all she has. Abby has been down since her boyfriend Dean passed away in a car accident a few months ago. Ma thinks it's my job to pick her back up.

Abby and I don't talk about the important things. Just like our mother never talks about the important things. Just like our whole Dutch community has a long, long list of things we do not talk about. Abby and I never had any serious fights, though if we did, I am convinced we would be past this situation.

I was envious of the Dykstra sisters who went to our high school. Emily once stormed into our English class and yelled at Rebecca for stealing her shirt. When Rebecca said she'd return it tomorrow, Emily ran to her and began pulling it off. They were still screaming at each other when two teachers pulled them apart. I wanted that.

We go to Macy's first. I can see the long flowered dresses from the main aisle. My mother, an old Dutch Reformed woman, loves long flowered dresses.

Mirrors on every wall make Macy's look twice as big with twice as many people. The lights are hazy green. Everyone in the store look pasty and sick. The clothes are dark blue, dark red, black and patterned. I look forward to the summer season, bathing suits, the smell of sunscreen when you pass an old lady.

It smells now like linoleum floors. I dread department stores.

Abby touches every dress as though it is the most beautiful dress she's ever seen. This is one thing I can't stand about her drinking. The exaggeration.

"Ma would look beautiful in this, don't you think?" She takes a dress off the rack and holds it up to her body, hooks the hanger behind her neck, swings it around. She has to take a few side steps to hold her balance. The dress is short and red, bright red. The neck scoops low, a playful tease.

"It's not really her style."

Abby and my mother are different. Ma blushes at the word *sex*. When unmarried people kiss on T.V. she yells *EEK* and changes the channel. "This is why we shouldn't have a T.V." she'll say. "This is why no good reformed family has a T.V!" When I started stealing her pads, she bought me a box and hid it under my pillow. Abby and I were on our own when it came to tampons.

When Abby was ten, she cut all her hair off because Ma refused to let her stay up past 9:00 p.m. "Nobody loves me!" she shrieked as we listened to the dramatic snips coming from behind the door. "I think someone gave me the wrong baby at the hospital," my mother said. It was the meanest thing I've ever heard her say.

"Well maybe it should be her style," Abby says, pouting her lips. "Think of all the men she would pick up."

I laugh. My mother is the most virginal woman I know.

“Not sure ma wants to pick up men.”

Abby hangs the red dress back up and it takes her two tries to get the hanger on the rail. She runs her fingers through the dresses on the rack. I imagine her numb hands don't register the feel of the fabrics.

“She's still pretty. She could have any man she wants.”

Abby believes these things and I am jealous. When we were young and on vacation, Abby and I would stay up late and draw the freakish animals in Revelation. A leopard with bear's feet, an animal with seven heads and horns and crowns, lions with wings like eagles. Abby used colored pencils and traced each animal with pinks, purples and yellows. Those passages frightened me. Not Abby. She had convinced me that she saw these animals in her dreams. They were kind, she told me. They were misunderstood. They came to her when the moon was full or when the nights were longest. She'd take me out to the beach and point to the horizon and say “that is where I saw him, the fish with a long neck like a snake and feet like a seagull.” And I believed her. These creatures existed in worlds that I didn't have access to.

We decide to go upstairs, but have to pass the perfume station first. The bright lights glare off all the glass. The area is like an 80's version of heaven. Pretty women with shoulder pads spray us with perfume as we walk by.

Abby stops and tells them how wonderful that smells. When she talks to strangers, her voice trembles. I get worried that they might smell the liquor on her, might notice how her left eye lid swells and droops.

“What is that?” she asks, “Roses?”

“Euphoria,” they tell her in one voice. The blonde one takes hold of Abby’s wrist and pulls her over to the counter. She shows her the bottle, purple, like a Genie lamp with liquid inside. She holds it out to Abby as though she is presenting a baby.

“Exotic!” she squeaks from excitement.

“No,” the woman says, “*Euphoria*.”

Abby doesn’t know how to act around people. She stiffens and stutters and when she is drunk, she is loud and laughs too much. Dean could calm her. Now that he’s gone, I’m afraid she’ll never feel calm again. He would reach for her and she could breathe.

He had that affect on both of us.

What everyone likes to talk about while I’m not in the room is that I was in the car when the accident happened. They know the facts. They know that Dean’s mustang didn’t have airbags. They know, from the significant bruising down the left side of my body, I was lying in his lap. They know I can’t remember much, and that’s just as well, because who would believe me now anyway?

I shake my body. I read somewhere that doing the literal action will help the mind accomplish the intangible action. *Hello guilt, I’m shaking you off.*

I see another woman walk up behind us from the make-up section. She has lipsticks in hand, waiting for the perfume lady to release my sister from *Euphoria*. She will try to sell us lipsticks with names like *Forbidden*, *Coral Crush* and *Kiss of Fire*. Her life will depend on it. Paying commission is the cruelest thing you can do to a person.

“Usually, the perfume goes for about 116\$, but we’re selling it today for 80\$”

I’d like to see Abby get out of this one. She can never say no.

“Oh wow, that seems reasonable,” she says, two octaves too high. She bites her fingers, tosses her almost white hair. Her clothes are from Plato’s Closet, a consignment shop. She has black baggy pants and a tight, purple button down. Her big square earrings are perpetually swaying. Her style is strange enough to seem expensive.

I get nervous for her. She might buy this perfume. One time she stayed on the phone for three hours answering questions for a survey. She was getting so frustrated that she had tears in her eyes. And yet, she couldn’t hang up the phone. After watching her for so long, I pushed the hook on the base myself. She said, “How could you do that? The man must think I’m a rude bitch!” But her eyes said thank you, thank you lord.

I walk up to them and put my hand on Abby’s shoulder. “Do you have any perfumes that aren’t so cheap?”

The woman’s eyes light up, “Well what were you looking to spend?”

In high school we went to a store one time and said I was getting married just to try on the expensive wedding dresses. We put on a English accent just to sound older and rich.

Abby chuckles under my hand and this makes me feel good. So, I keep going.

“We don’t have a budget really, just looking for that extra special something for our mother.”

“Yea, we have no budget,” Abby peeps.

“We have this Coco Chanel for \$150.” She tilts the bottle back and forth in the light, to make sure we see the remarkable reflection of the glass. She sprays a piece of paper and lets us smell it. Abby and I look at each other, we act lightly grossed out.

“Smells cheap,” I say. Though, it is the most amazing thing I have ever smelled.

She takes out more bottles, lets us smell each perfume. Abby and I pretend to be more and more dissatisfied. For a moment, I think Abby might start speaking in an English accent.

We've never been allowed have these kinds of pleasures. When Ma's oven door broke she asked Opa if it was time to get a new oven. "Bent je gek?" I could hear him scream through the phone. He came over within five minutes and nailed a block of wood to the wall to hold up the oven door. There was another piece of wood that slid between the wood nailed to the wall and the oven, so that my mother could open and close the door. Not only was our oven so old it was probably a fire hazard, but now we had a chunk of wood nailed to our beige wallpaper. They were proud of it. My grandfather pointed to the oven with his hammer and said something to me in Dutch that I didn't understand, so I nodded hoping he wouldn't start yelling at me for not understanding.

When her friends came over, my mother couldn't stop talking about such ingenuity. The Dutch are proud of the money they don't spend, and ashamed of the money they do.

The sole of my black boot came off recently. I reattached it with a roll of electrical tape. I walk around like this and feel the same kind of pride. It scares me to be like my mother. She is not as happy as she pretends to be. Ma has been talking with me a lot about helping *the family*. What she means is *get your sister sober*. She thinks it's my fault. She doesn't say this, but it's probably true.

At family parties and at church I hear them all whispering in Dutch. I can't fully understand, but I hear enough words to know they're talking about us and that it's not good.

The blonde goes behind the shiny glass and the next perfume she brings out is locked in a safe under the cabinet. Abby looks at me and mouths, "locked in a safe!"

She holds out a black square bottle with a gold lid and gold lettering.

“Rose de Arabie Eau de Parfum, Giorgio Armani,” she says as she lifts the lid and puts the bottle under Abby’s nose, careful not to let it go. Abby leans in and smells. I can hear the exaggerated flow of air into her nostrils, and then a sigh as she breathes out. I lean in and smell without making a noise as if to say to the woman, *not all of us are drunk, not all of us have lost our minds*. “A beguiling lament of the desert, like an undulating melody,” the blonde says. It smells like a rotting shrub.

“How much is that one?” Abby asks.

“500\$”

Abby catches a sound in her mouth. A laugh bubbles in my throat.

“That one smells very beautiful. What else do you have like it?”

Abby snorts. When we tell Ma and Opa about this they will laugh too, shake their heads. Some people are so spoiled. Some people have soft hands that have never seen a hard day’s work.

She doesn’t answer. Abby is still giggling.

The way the blonde’s eyes stare blankly makes me want to leave.

“Thank you for your time,” I tell her. “We’ll come back after we’ve thought about it”

“I look forward to seeing you two again!” She smiles so big I might actually believe her.

Abby and I leave the store. I am dragging her by the arm.

“What are you doing?” she asks. “Poor woman thinks we’re rude. We could have kept going!”

“No we could’ve.”

“It must be fun to be rich.”

The way the blonde looked at us reminds me of the way Ma looked at us when we embarrassed her in church. Or, when we stumbled home drunk one night from a party. Or when Ma saw me and Dean sitting at a restaurant together, touching knees. “You better tell your sister,” she said to me. But of course, I didn’t. Doesn’t matter in retrospect, she found out eventually. My body all of a sudden feels heavy. Abby looks back and forth across the aisles, unaware of the change. She is almost skipping and I have to hold her arm to keep her still. We walk towards Bloomingdales, Abby trying to escape my grasp like a child.

We pass the Disney store and Abby suggests we go inside.

“Wouldn’t that be fun? We can relive old memories.”

I don’t respond. I pull her forward and she doesn’t notice my mood, or at least doesn’t mention it. Like I said, we don’t talk about the important things.

I think of Dean’s hands around my back and around my knees.

Our Aunt Susie had died a year into Abby and Dean’s relationship. She was drunk and fell off the deck at a party. The family shook with sadness—that’s how I saw the funeral, through a shaky lens.

The next day I sat alone on my kitchen floor and cried. My whole body was gripped with sadness. I lay on the floor. The tile felt good on my cheek.

That’s when Dean walked in, looking for Abby.

I didn’t move. I only lay there, hoping I might become invisible. He put his hand on my shoulder. Instead of asking me what the hell I was doing, he scooped me up like a child and brought me to the couch. I wrapped my legs around him and gripped onto his shirt and cried. His hand was on my hair.

I can't help but think of these things—his hands around my knees, around my shoulders, his hand on my hair.

Some things stick in you, like when you walk past blackberry vines and get thorns lodged into your skin. You don't notice until you move a certain way or you are touched in a certain place and then you can think about nothing else. You try to shake them out of you but it's no use. You have to wait until you forget, hope you don't dream of all the things beneath your skin that shouldn't be there.

When we walk into Bloomingdales, Abby has the same reaction she did when we were in Macy's. "Aren't these dresses to die for!"

I want her to be angry because I was in love with her boyfriend.

"They are certainly better than Macy's," I say.

The floors in Bloomingdale's are black and white checkers. When Abby walks she keeps her feet in the black squares. White Christmas trees are still up, gold mannequins posing for us. The oversized bulbs around the mirrors remind me of a carnival.

"Lidia, look." She grabs a floor length dress. She holds it up to her neck and for a second, I confuse her for our mother. The dress is a light shade of purple, so light it looks gray. There are small black and pale yellow flowers in a dense and old fashioned pattern. The sleeves are long, the neck line is conservative and yet the looseness of the bottom is youthful, pretty.

I smile at her. "Try it on, you're about Ma's size."

We walk through the aisles until we find the glowing sign: Dressing Room. It's empty. Clothes lie on the floor beneath the rack. There is no one to give us number tags and so we walk into the handicapped room. The lights are extra bright in here.

I sit on the big couch while Abby undresses, stumbling over her shoelace. I'm not sure where to look because there are six mirrors in the room. I look at my feet, at the ceiling. Both are uncomfortable. I see the pale pink of my sister's skin, the dark spots where her tattoos are out of the corner of my eye. She shimmies on the dress, straightens it out. When I look at her, she looks ten years older and so very beautiful. Her hair looks gray in this light. I see her as an old lady, like she has outlived us all.

"Ma would love this."

My sister is enamored with herself too. She looks at herself in every angle, memorizing.

"Abby," I say. "Do you think about Dean a lot?"

She looks at me. She looks back into the mirror and tilts her head. Something has confused her, or she is trying to figure something out. Perhaps she is thinking there something wrong with her reflection. She tosses her hair, perhaps that is it.

"Sure. I mean, one day at a time. Don't know what you want me to say."

"You've been drinking a lot."

"Here and there," she chuckles.

She spins, letting the ends of the dress rise up and fall. "I feel so fucking classy!" she says. When she stops, the dress keeps going, and then falls around her ankles.

"We've never *really* talked."

"Nothing to talk about anymore, sis."

She kicks her socks off. Perhaps she likes her reflection better now. She turns her body full towards me, but looks back at herself in the mirror, the next mirror, the next, then back around. She pulls a corner of her dress up, lets it fall. She smiles, just slightly.

I say, "I shouldn't have done what I did."

And she says, “Well, it was fucked up.”

She is done looking at herself and she grabs her pants off the rack. She slips them on under the dress, her hair covering her face.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Ma put you up to this?”

My silence says yes, yes she did.

“Ok, fine,” she says. Abby makes a show of sitting next to me with her pants on and the dress bunched around her waist. She raises one eyebrow, as though she were waiting for me to entertain her. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Damn it Abby, I don’t know.”

“You can’t remember?”

“No.”

Now, it was my turn to look away, into the mirrors.

“You were in his lap.”

“Yes, and I’m sorry. We were just—”

“You were in his lap,” she says, as if I didn’t hear her the first time.

Like I said, they know facts. But they don’t know how I remember the kissing, kissing, kissing as he drove down Rt. 23 to our favorite bar with the strung up lights. And they don’t know how happy I felt while the sun sank and the buzz kicked in. They don’t know I loved him. They don’t know that I remember one moment after the truck had hit us: I saw him in the dark, blood poured like oil from wounds I couldn’t see.

She looks at me, squints as though she’s trying to see me better.

“You have nothing else to say?”

The sharpness catches me off guard.

When I don't answer, she turns away from me and slips her arms out of the dress and into the shirt. She is determined not to be naked in front of me again. When she makes the quick slip, taking her head out of the dress and into the shirt with one swift motion, something goes wrong. There is so much dress that it gets caught around her head and extra fabric is coming out of her shirt. She begins to pull the dress out of the shirt but it is stuck.

Her head is swallowed up by the dress and I chuckle. I begin to wonder if my sister has always been so strange or if it's from drinking.

I grab the dress and pull too. It's coming slowly, but at least it is coming. Abby pulls backwards, as hard as she can.

The dress finally pulls through the shirt, accompanied by a sharp ripping sound. Abby falls backward flailing her arms. She lands on her ass. She sits a moment. When Abby puts her hair back, she is not laughing. Big tears roll down her cheeks.

"Shit, Abby." I reach for her arm.

Her tears turn into sobs.

I think that I should hug her, but I am afraid that she won't let me.

A Bloomingdales woman walks in with her name tag swinging at the end of her breast. She swirls around the number tags on her finger.

"So sorry I wasn't here ladies! How many?"

We look up at her. She is wearing a black skirt and rolled up sleeves, name tag still swinging.

"Oh sweetie," she says, "Are you okay? Do you need a bigger size?"

“No,” Abby says. The Bloomingdales lady looks at the dress on the floor, the tear up the middle of the skirt. “You have to pay for that, you know.”

“Right-o,” Abby says with exaggerated cheer.

“Thank you for shopping!” the Bloomingdales lady yells after us as we walk to the counter to buy the dress. Abby looks down and keeps her feet in the black tiles. I keep mine in the white tiles. We have to bump into each other to walk straight. Abby smiles. If it weren’t for her swollen eyes, I might think she was happy.

When I was young, I went out into the ocean once and was dragged under by waves. I was tossed around and dragged through the sand before the ocean spat me back out. I coughed up water, my nose felt both hollow and full. My throat burned with salt water.

This is what I felt like when Dean died, that my throat burned with salt water.

I don’t know who to tell this to.

I look at Abby as we drive home. She is still chipping her black nail polish off, flakes falling into my car.

She had been tossed by the ocean once too, so badly that her stomach was bleeding from being rubbed against the sand. Ma rushed to her but Abby shook her away. While hacking up water and laughing she said, “I’m fine, I’m fine.” She touched her bleeding stomach with her hand and wiped it on my arm. “Blood sisters,” she said as she winked at me. It was gross, but I was too afraid to go back in the water to wash it off.

Snow begins to fall as we drive. I imagine snow falling on the ocean too, melting before it is absorbed by the water. “Lidia?” Abby says. “Can you drop me off at The Shep? I’m meeting some friends.”

I don't want her to go there. I don't know who to tell this to, either.

"Sure."

When she gets out of my car, she mumbles something I don't quite catch and she slams the door. The snow is falling heavy. She puts her hands out, looks to the sky and spins. I watch her walk in. She is all white and black.

When I walk into my house, ma is sitting on her sewing machine with her glasses on. She looks at me over the rims. "How was it?" she asks, eagerly.

"Abby and I had a good time, Ma." She stares at me, waiting for more. I have nothing else.

"What do you have there?"

"Nothing," I say, teasingly, trying to lighten the mood. But she does not smile. She looks back down at her sewing machine and picks at an old dress.

I can't help but think that those of us left behind don't know what to do with ourselves.

I go to my room and pull out my sewing kit. I hold my mother's new dress for a long time, rub the black and yellow petals and patterns between my fingers. I fold it and put it in a box, knowing that I cannot give my mother what she really wants.

Junkyard in Passaic County, 1995

After my mother left, my sister took to setting things on fire. It started with my mother's quilts in late December. They were, besides us, the only thing my mom ever made. Bentley dragged the biggest one to the yard like a dead body. It was the Christmas quilt, the one my parents slept under during the holidays. It was a pattern of ivy green and red, rich and dark. Bentley dug a hole in the snow. She covered the quilt with gasoline, as if thread and cotton didn't burn fast enough.

Dad didn't stop her. He went to the shop and put his head under a car.

My father, Bentley, my younger brother Axel, and I lived in a building that was half house and half auto shop. My father liked to tell people he was part mechanic, part junk salesman, and 100% Dutch. We had three white garages that, when opened, sounded like a rolling train. Inside were cars, an office desk and computer, tool boxes, gas cans, car stacks and all kinds of other rusted junk. On the side of this garage was our small, white shingled house which shook every time the garage doors opened.

We were in the suburbs of Northern New Jersey, where Dutch immigrants made their living years ago as milkmen, tile distributors and auto mechanics. We were surrounded by cars in a parking lot where overgrown grass crept up between the cracks and along the edges. Mom used to say that one day we'd have a real house that didn't smell of gasoline and burnt rubber. Mom and Bentley were always complaining about how their food tasted like DW-40 or how their hair smelled like transmission fluid. They got real creative with it, even if it did hurt dad's feelings.

As a child, Bentley threw a lot of tantrums, the kind that were so dramatic her face would turn purple and her fists would burn red from punching the ground. The kind my parents didn't know how to handle, except to look at each other in shock or blame.

She never cared much for staying in the house or in the shop. She couldn't sit down and read, couldn't do the dishes very long, couldn't wash clothes without sighing every two minutes. She'd rather be running in the soccer field behind us, hanging out in places in the junkyard where we weren't allowed to be, riding her bike down the street to heavens knows where.

My sister has blonde hair and blue eyes. She has freckled skin like my father. When she was young, she was skinny as a rail and ate like a horse. I can remember food always dribbling from her mouth. *Chew with your mouth closed, sit with your legs together, don't run while near church, stop slouching like a caveman*—my father uttered commands to Bentley in his sleep.

I was always the good daughter of the family, while Bentley was a whirlwind. At least that's how I saw it then, and still see it sometimes now when I'm feeling sour. While Bentley complained, I sat quietly. While Bentley went about skipping and dreaming, I helped mom with dishes. While Bentley threw her tantrums, I stood by my parents, trying to imitate the same look of confusion, concern, even blame. I had red hair, like my mother, with pale pink skin that always looked rubbed raw. My nails were bitten to the quick, always worried about getting in trouble, always so worried of upsetting my father.

My father is a tall man whose face and hands are thick as calluses. He had grown up in Salvage Yards: Mechanic, Scrap and Junk Cars just as we did but with no T.V. and with nothing to do but take care of his drunk pa and his severely asthmatic mom. She couldn't speak English.

When he was a child he translated labels for his mother when she went food shopping. After she died he never spoke one more word of Dutch, though I often begged him to.

He always wore two alternating flannels with holes, both deep blue. In the summer, he wore white tee's with holes. He couldn't grow a beard and only shaved once a week before church. He had a full head of white hair. He had a raspy voice from weak lungs and smoking. We took our love from him in the time he spent talking to us, in the hours he worked to put food on the table, in the moments when he patted one of our shoulders or gave us a dollar for ice cream. But it was always my secret sadness that he favored Bentley.

That Bentley could make him laugh or make him angry with one sentence filled me with jealousy.

She didn't have that effect on my mother, who seemed angry no matter what Bentley did. My mother would often sit by herself with the lights off. Her down time was never spent with us.

Then one day she woke up *impassioned*, unsatisfied with all of God's blessings. This is what our elder said when he came for house visitation. Passions were things belonging to the devil. I asked him if talking about people when they weren't there also belonged to the Devil. And he said, yes, yes it does, because he just didn't get it.

My father grounded me for a week after that.

My mother hugged each of us and kissed my father on the cheek. She promised us she would be back soon and left with a suitcase. Bentley was sixteen and I was fourteen, old enough to know when we were being lied to. Our mother trudged through the snow. She tripped on her way to the car. None of us moved to help her. Bentley was the first to turn inside, mumbling profanities as she stomped around the house.

We had quiche that night, quiche that my mother had made for us. Something about eating the eggs, cheese and broccoli that she had chopped and baked without any intention of eating felt sadder than watching her trip over her untied boots as she walked away.

No one liked her at church because she wasn't Dutch Reformed, wasn't even Dutch. What kind of a good Dutchie names their children Bentley Anne, Emily Russell and Axel James? Rumors in church said she might have been a Catholic. No one knew what she was. British, Scottish, German, maybe Italian. I decided on Irish because she and I were the only ones in our very blonde family with red hair. Her parents were "liberal" people (my father would say this as he made air quotes) who didn't believe in God or governments. When my father told us this he would roll his eyes, shake his head.

My mother met my father when she transferred to the private school of the Dutch Reformers. She started dressing conservatively as a middle finger to her parents. She put away her dreams of becoming a fashion designer and used her skills at the sewing machine to make traditional quilts. "Don't you become a housewife," her mother threatened. And that's exactly what she became.

Until, of course, she left us. And my sister, night after night, dragged my mother's heavy quilts out into the yard and watched them burn. She told me that ma left because she couldn't stand to be so suffocated by dad, who did nothing but work all day, sleep all night, and enjoy extra cigarettes on the weekend. Dad ruins everything, Bentley would say. Or, Dad just can't get anything right.

I think my mother got tired of him, the way we often tire of people.

When my younger brother Axel cried for her I walked him around the house until he grew tired. Sometimes I'd take him downstairs into the shop and name the cars, the parts, the

machines. Or we would stand by the window, look out at the junk. From one motion light in the backyard, I could see the stacks of cars and the gleam of metal shards, the piles of parts and all the unwanted pieces. Nights were the only time when the junkyard was quiet. During the day, my father towed cars around, his workers used loud machinery in the shop, someone shouted over the sound of heavy equipment. But at night, if you closed your eyes, you could almost hear a cricket.

My feet felt heavy. Walking on concrete for so long will hurt your knees, hurt your back. I prayed one day I might live in the mountains, where the dirt was cool and soft and everywhere, where you can step outside your house and hear running water and not the *beep beep beep* of machines. I prayed for the life I might have in the future, a life I have tried to build for myself over the years with some measure of success. But mostly, I prayed my father might put his hand on my shoulder one day, say, good job Rusty, I couldn't have survived without you. You've been a good daughter, something along those lines. He's never done this, not like how I imagined. But sometimes I get a look from him and it says all the things I've needed to hear.

By spring time, my sister dreaded her long blonde hair and dyed it orange. She had glued rhinestones above her eyebrows. She had walked into the house like this one Saturday while my father and I were having lunch, and my father nearly choked on tuna sandwich. She leaned on the doorframe of the kitchen and smiled at us. She was wearing baggy black clothes and she looked taller than ever.

“What in the world did you do?” he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders, as though she didn't know either. My father continued coughing, trying to hack up the tuna in his throat. I started patting him hard on the back, as my

sister turned around and went to her room. I was so nervous and shocked that laughs were bubbling up and out from my stomach. My father rubbed the place between his eyes and looked at me. “If you die your hair, I’ll disown you.”

My father didn’t believe in therapy and he didn’t believe in mental health. He believed in prayer. What he prayed for, I don’t know. These days I imagine him kneeling awkwardly besides his bed like a child, trying to remember how the pastor prays in church:

Please, Lord God, I would be really grateful if you make my daughter dye her hair back to a normal color and please, God, I beg you, heal all her earring holes so that she can’t put in all those earrings anymore. And please, God, please make her stop burning things.

Matches. Cigarettes. Homework. A lot of chopped wood. Some kid’s rocking chair in wood shop. When I took wood shop a year later, I could still see the big, black burn mark on the floor. No pyromaniacs allowed in wood shop, Mr. Atkins said, peering at me as though I was a reincarnation of Bentley. I’m not my sister sir, I told him.

The counselors at school talked to my dad and me privately after the burning chair incident. A woman with big shoulder pads asked me how my home life was, if anyone ever beat me, if I was happy. Great. No. Yes. I didn’t understand what was happening then, didn’t understand the weight of my answers. I liked the free Reece’s. I liked the woman’s hair-sprayed bangs. I liked how she looked at me and held my hand. People didn’t pay me much attention and so this was a nice change.

Then they talked to my dad and me together. My father was still wearing a flannel with grease stains. Luckily, he had washed his face for the event. If I had been older, I would have told him to put on a button down, even if he thought those were for church and for church only.

The therapist, the nurse and the vice principal seemed as uncomfortable to talk to us as we were to talk to them.

The school therapist looked at my father and suggested he talk with his daughter, see if he could get her to “open up.” He slowed down with those words, as if he already knew my father didn’t speak that kind of language. My father’s eyes furrowed.

“You know, get her to talk to you about things, about what she’s feeling.”

My father looked at me for help. I gave him a light smile.

“We can talk to her. We talk to her all the time,” I offered.

“Right,” my dad affirmed.

The lady with the big shoulder pads said, “You’re daughter needs you. Talk—to—her.”

She pushed a pamphlet towards him. “The Rewards of Attachment Parenting.”

Underneath was a picture of smiling parents and a smiling daughter. There was a light blue haze around them all.

My dad nodded and then broke into a sweat.

That night, my dad tried to talk to her after I had cooked us spaghetti.

“Bentley,” he said, and I thought, shit here we go. “Whatever you do, don’t burn the school down. I mean it, I can’t afford it.”

“Ok, dad.”

“I mean, how could you be so stupid?”

“I don’t know, dad.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

We sat there for a long time staring at our spaghetti. Her reply never came. His face flushed a deep red, as though his thought simply embarrassed him before they left his mouth. I looked at Axel whose face was heavy. I gave him a wink to cheer him up. It didn't work.

"I miss mom," I said. Bentley and my father looked at me as though I hadn't been sitting there the whole time, as though they were shocked to discover someone had been listening in on their conversation. "I bet she's doing awful without us. Probably eating quiche and crying about how much she misses Bentley's tantrums."

Still they stared at me, quite blankly. I scooped spaghetti in my mouth.

"That's cute, Rusty. Mom doesn't miss us."

"I'd miss us."

"That's enough," my father said.

Then I scooped more spaghetti in, trying to think of something deep and meaningful to say, something that would sum up that sick feeling we all had but couldn't put into words. The clock ticked on the wall, the beige one that my mother had bought from the Amish a couple of years back. Tick, tick, tick, mom reminded us—look at how weak you all are without me.

"If mom loved me so much, why would she leave me here alone?"

Then it was my turn to stare at her blankly.

"Well, what the fuck are *we* Bentley, chopped liver?"

Then my father turned his eyes to me. "Watch your language. Go to your room."

I looked at Axel who had tears running down his cheeks, but he didn't make a sound. Already he knew how to keep his sadness quiet.

I stood up and made a scene of throwing my food away, which I knew would piss off my dad. We don't throw food away. For a moment, I felt like Bentley, wondered if she had this same

feeling of triumph every time she messed something up. Lying in bed, I was steaming. Her and her stupid orange hair and stupid rhinestones. She had turned my father against me. I swore I would never forgive her for being selfish and indulgent. I had always been what I was supposed to be, why couldn't she?

I would forgive her, like I always have. Though, it always takes me too long.

After school, my father let me sit in the shop for one hour, which is something I could only do once I was old enough to know how not to hurt myself. I swirled around on his "office" chair in the shop, which was torn and had yellow foam coming out from the edges. I can remember when Bentley was old enough to sit in his office chair in the shop and I wasn't. I would listen to them talk and laugh from behind the door. I was jealous then and still am.

His body was under a '67 Thunderbird. He was building it for Bentley, who would be driving in October. It was going to be her birthday present, since our father never bought us much for our birthday except ice cream. His legs and feet hung out from the bottom as though he had been squished by the car.

"Why do you like Bentley better than me?"

He laughed. "What do you mean?"

I told him I didn't know, but I did know. He slid out from under the car and wiped his face with his dirty cloth, which didn't help.

"Do you know why your mother decided to call you Rusty?"

"I thought it had something to do with what happens to old cars that are stuck outside too long."

“No, because when you came out, your hair was as fiery red as it is now. We knew we had a special child.”

“Why not call me Rose or Ruby?”

“That’s beside the point.”

“Mom told me once it was because I was born in the junkyard and she was worried a rusty piece of metal was going to give her tetanus so she started screaming RUSTY!”

“You know your mother was just kidding-”

“She also told me that now that she had two kids, her body was a rusty piece of junk.”

“Just hold on...”

“She also told me it was because when she found out she was pregnant again, God cursed us with rusty water for a full nine months.”

“Rusty, my point is that I always knew you were the special one, and as the special child you have to promise me never to smoke, do drugs, drink alcohol or talk to boys.”

“I promise, dad.” But again we were talking about Bentley.

Axel creaked open the door and peeked in.

“You know why you’re called Axel, Axel?”

He opened the door and smiled, careful not to break my dad’s rule of never going into the shop.

“Yep,” he said, “Bentley told me it’s because I spin like a wheel.” He tilted his head and looked up and spun quickly on his heel before falling over laughing.

“You know why I think you’re called Axel?” I said as I picked him up off the floor, “because you’re strong and you keep me rolling.” I gave him a kiss on the cheek and he giggled.

I turned and asked my father, “Will you build me a car when I’m old enough to drive?”

Already under the car again, his voice was muffled when he shouted, “Huh? Yea, sure. Whatever you want.”

Bentley walked in then, her hair now almost reaching her hips with her new extensions.

“Dad, can I go out with the girls tonight?”

“You still got those funky colored rat tails on your head?”

“Yes.”

“Then no, you can’t.”

“We’ll be at the movies. Be home around 1:00.” Then she scooted out to her room.

My father slid out from under the car to look at her. When he didn’t see her, he looked at me. “Did she mean 1:00 *a.m.*?” I shrugged. “I don’t know what goes through that girl’s head,” I said, hoping he might laugh with me. Before I finished, he had already chased her to her room. They yelled at each other between the door.

You’re not going out that late tonight young lady do you understand dad I am sixteen I am a grown woman you don’t know what it means to be grown I’m an adult if you’re an adult you can get a job and start paying for some bills you’re ungrateful dad how dare you do this to me after everything you did to mom I need girls in my life you don’t need girls in your life at one in the morning I’m tired of all this bullshit...

I thought this war couldn’t last long, but I was wrong. It has lasted for decades with only a few scattered years of peace. It will be over soon though, and I feel some kind of relief.

That summer felt different than other summers. For one, our mother wasn’t there. That meant no more fresh lemonade and no more pancakes on Sunday morning, as Bentley so eagerly reminded us. For two, the heat was record setting. It was a dry heat, the kind that shriveled up

your throat and exhausted your whole body to move from one room to another. Our father wouldn't let us turn on the air conditioning until mid-August. Each one of us was redder than the next, sitting at the dinner table like boiled lobsters. Bentley had her dreads tied up on her head. My father called it a bee's nest.

He still worked on the Thunderbird though when the days were slow, wiping his face every few seconds until his rag was brown and soaked.

Every night my sister would come home smelling of smoke. My father would warn her, you know what happens when you play with fire. Yes, yes, she'd say. People are flammable too, he's say. Yes, yes. I know, I know.

Church people had stopped coming by and bringing us pre-cooked dinners. They did this for a while as though my mother was dead, which felt like an apt description. The only reason dad could get Bentley to go to church in the first place was because of the air conditioning. As soon as we stepped foot into that place, our sweat became cold as ice. People couldn't stop talking about the weather, which left less room to talk about the girl with the orange dreadlocks.

My father went on doing work in the shop. I could hear him clanking around and cutting things with a saw. His voice only ever perked up when a customer walked in, usually one of the men from church. These men were also all physical workers and liked to talk to my dad for a long time about cars, and problems and that new thunderbird he was building. My dad hired a few of the high school boys from church to do work for him too, boys who were tall and lanky and didn't pay me any mind. I would spend those days with Axel at the soccer field, which was usually empty because who would play soccer in 95 degree weather? Being a mother to Axel helped me pass the time. I wasn't quite sure what else I should have been doing. If I wasn't

taking care of some problem, I was mostly idle and like dad always said, idle hands are the Devil's workshop.

Bentley was out getting herself into trouble. I knew it because she didn't cause as much ruckus around the house, so I knew she was causing ruckus elsewhere. We didn't have much of a relationship because to her I was goody two shoes and she didn't understand how I could do nothing all day and call that a life. But she didn't know much about life either and she still doesn't. We'd get into tiffs about it, but Bentley would go off anyway as though I were a waste of her time.

At night, though the temperatures never dipped below 65, Bentley sat outside and had her own bonfires. Dad taught her how to build a small log cabin with sticks and some newspaper to start the fire, so that she would stop using his gasoline. I remember watching them from my window. My first thought was, how could one come from the other? How was it that the three of us were a family? All they ever did was fight and all I ever did was wait for them to stop fighting. I didn't know then what a childhood was supposed to look like, but I know now it wasn't supposed to be filled with so much waiting, so much watching. I spent those years like a damn bird in a tree, wondering what it would be like to use wings.

My second thought was that this was some kind of a joke, a joke that I was being kept out of. They had built a fire together and they had burned logs that my father had spent all spring chopping. They had stood by the warmth and felt the heat and heard the crackling and watched the wood fall apart, together. I like to think now that it was that feeling of exclusion that pushed me to leave Salvage Yards before Bentley did. It was them two by the fire that said, your father is too preoccupied with fixing things. That's all he knows how to do. What was the use of a daughter who didn't need fixing? For a long time, I blamed my father for those few lost years of

wandering around, trying to figure out who I was outside of a junkyard that needed tending too. Then I blamed Bentley for soaking up all the love and attention that was one third mine. Now, I'm too old to blame anyone. You realize life just works that way.

Once during autumn when the heat had finally broke, my dad banged on Bentley's door to get her up for church. She replied with angry moans.

I was up early with my Easter dress on. It was Sunday and I knew better.

Bentley had stumbled into the house late in the night, as she had been doing for awhile. I thought I was a good sister by not telling my dad. He knew already.

It was a few weeks after Easter, but I hadn't been shopping for a new dress for awhile. I dressed Axel in his suit and tie. His sleeves didn't reach his wrists, his pant leg didn't reach his ankles. I'd wait until my dad was in a good mood so I could ask for money for new clothes.

I could hear my father getting ready. Sunday's were hard for him because he didn't have my mother to lay out his suit and tie.

Before we left, my father stopped by Bentley's door.

"I will see you at church," he said in his I'm-not-fucking-around voice.

And we did see her at church.

It was a few minutes into the sermon. We had already sung the songs, "Nearer, Still Nearer," "What Wondrous Love Is This," "Majesty," and heard the pastoral prayer. We had given our gifts and written our names in the friendship pads. Our pastor was the one with the heavy Dutch accent. He was hard to understand. So, I thought on other things. What I would do in the afternoon while dad napped. What I would have for lunch. I thought of a boy, John Van Dyke, who I liked in school. He was one of the only Dutch boys with dark hair.

Then she slid in the pew next to me. She was wearing pants instead of a dress. Her rhinestones were still above her eyes, one missing, two of them hanging and about to fall. She smelled like liquor. Even people in front of us were trying to see her from their peripherals.

“Hey, Rust,” she whispered to me.

“I’m going to get drunk just sitting next to you all service.”

My father leaned forward and stared at me from the other end of the pew. He was red with embarrassment. It was a curse called Dutch skin. He furrowed his brow and nodded at Bentley. I mouthed “she’s fine” at him and he sat back, unsatisfied. I whispered to Axel, “Tell dad Bentley is fine, just a little sick.” And Axel whispered to our cousin Joseph who whispered to our cousin Benjamin who whispered to our cousin Abe who whispered to dad that Bentley was fine, just a little sick.

I thought the sermon might never end. Bentley’s eyes grew heavy and she rested her head on my shoulder. I stiffened. This kind of action was too lax for our church. Within seconds she was breathing shallow, drooling on my shoulder. I hoped no one might notice, then remembered Bentley’s orange dread locks in a sea of blonde and white hair. Another boy who I liked, Adam, was sitting two rows behind us. I thought I would die from embarrassment.

The pastor droned on about Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot’s wife turning into a pillar of salt. Why salt? The fire, the destruction that awaits us all after death. Sin, the fire that consumes us, the fragility of our souls without Jesus. We need a Savior. I shifted my body so that my father might not see his daughter sleeping in church. I wasn’t sure which one of them I was protecting.

When the sermon was over, I shook Bentley. She groaned, forgetting where she was. The people in front of us, the Woodenburgs, turned their heads, all seven of them. I didn’t have to

look to know my father was leaning forward too. My face flushed red and Bentley wiped her eyes.

“Bentley,” I whispered.

She glanced down the aisle and snapped her head forward. From the look on her face I could tell that she had been given the death stare from my father. She reached for the Psalter Hymnal and said nothing.

After we sang the doxology and the Pastor left the sanctuary, Bentley turned into the aisle and began weaving her way through all the old Dutch ladies with the long dresses and Q-tip styled hair. I could see my dad in the other aisle saying “excuse me, excuse me” as he also rushed to catch up to her. I picked up Axel and was caught in the flow of the congregation, moving as slowly as it took to say “hello” to every person before taking another step.

By the time I got outside, I could see them arguing—whisper arguing so that they wouldn’t draw attention to themselves. Though, from where I stood on the grass, I could see the church goers staring. I saw the Dysktras, the Westras, the Boonstras, the Veenstras and the Hoekstras. They were surrounding the pastor, waiting to shake his hand. They took quick glances at my sister and father. I stayed with Axel on the grass. He kneeled in it, rolled in it and I wished we had our own lawn to play in at home. I wanted to roll with him, up and down the hill. But I was aware that I was fourteen and much too old for that.

Then I heard a shout, and I looked up.

“You can’t drive, Bentley. If you get in that car, I’m calling the police,” my father said, in his I’m-not-fucking-around-voice. Second time of the day.

She tossed her locks, took out a cigarette and began smoking. Seeing my father dressed in a suit and my sister in torn jeans and big orange hair down to her waist, I couldn’t imagine how I

belonged to these two. I felt like I might be a stray cat, picked up and fed by strangers. I could see my father try to take the cigarette from her but she pulled back. Bentley would tell me later that she tried smoking because she thought it would sober her up. I'd also learn later that she had forgot to put the gas cap back on after using my father's gasoline to fill up her tank, and so there was gasoline on her wheels and on the side of her car.

He reached for it again and the cigarette went flying in slow motion from her hand.

If the Dysktras, Westras, Boonstras, Veenstras and Hoekstras were only politely side-glancing the fight between my father and sister, then they had no shame in snapping their heads towards them when the Thunderbird went up in flames. It spread over the car like a water spill. The fire sounded like a roaring engine and the flames quickly turned to smoke billowing up over the trees and down the road. My father pulled Bentley away. She sat on the ground and stared in horror.

It took a few seconds for the back of the car to melt as though it were made of ice. There were loud *pops* and sparks spewing from the inside. The cars next to it melted too, and my father would lament for the rest of his life about the money he lost paying those people back. We were all up against the brick wall of the church. When the fire department arrived and sprayed the fire, the whole parking lot and the inside of the church filled with smoke and mist. My hair smelled of burnt tires for days.

Bentley was arrested for arson, disorderly conduct, and public intoxication. It was the first time I would see my sister arrested.

I knew that this was bad. But I also knew that my father would make it right.

We didn't go to the night service, one of the only times my dad missed the night service. And yes, the church still had the service even though the sanctuary smelled of scorched tar. Instead, my father picked up Bentley at the police station and drove her home.

In my eyes then, I believed that my father had saved Bentley from punishment. He had gone to the wilderness and had brought her home. I hoped that when I grew up, my dad might save me too. Then, he'd forget all about Bentley. When you're fourteen, you're selfish. You don't understand that the things you love might one day be taken from you. Losing my mother hadn't even taught me that yet.

I waited up for them to come home.

When she walked in the room, I whispered, "Bentley, are you ok?"

And she said, "yea little sis, go to sleep," and she stroked my hair the way mom used to do. That night I had dreams of Bentley pulling wood from the yard and piling them up in a car that had already been burned and was waiting to be scrapped. She lit them on fire. Flames crackled up from the windows. I watched as she spun around the car with the fire inside. The metal frames of the cars around her flickered in sharp light. The wind blew hard and it was getting cold. The fire whipped around too. She spun and spun and danced and drank. She wiped her eyes. She was crying. And then the flames swallowed her up.

For weeks they moved around the house like ghosts. I tried to talk to my father about better things but he wouldn't answer. I couldn't imagine there were any words for the kind of shame both my father and Bentley felt. Our shame was the talk of the community. At two in the morning my father would wake up and have his cigarette in the chair where he always smoked, under the yellow stain in the ceiling. He had black coffee and bowl of Cheerios which he left on the table for me to clean up. He worked in the shop until dinnertime. After we ate, my father

would go to the far corner of the backyard where he kept his wood and he would chop, never paying much attention to the family who waited for him inside.

When my father dies, which I am guessing will be soon, the cause of death should be: work and my sister. The doctors say high cholesterol and emphysema, but I know the truth.

My sister put down her matches after that Sunday and picked up the bottle and never put it down. She ran away like my mother did, and unlike my mother she came back. She came back for comfort, for help, but mostly for money. My dad never actually knew how to save Bentley.

I was less of a disappointment, though it never felt that way. Couldn't find myself a permanent husband. Couldn't settle down and have kids. I went to college and got myself a new church where not everyone was Dutch.

Bentley lives now in a small apartment above a bagel shop. She suffered from pancreatitis last month and the doctors said that this time, she wouldn't make it. She did and I am sure she will survive the next problem. That woman is like a damn cockroach, is what my father always said.

When I go and see him in the Holland Home he sits in his rocking chair, the one he's had since before I was born. He is seventy, but looks to be about one hundred and four. There are mostly women in the home because all the husbands have worked themselves to death, another thing my father always says. I bought him new furniture for his place, though he insists on sitting in this one old chair, every moment of every day until he has to shuffle himself over to the bed, the same bed he's had for forty years.

"Hey, dad," I say when I walk in. I have to shout. Still he says, "Ehh? Ehh?"

"How are you doing today, dad?"

“Ehhh?”

He doesn't talk but makes grunting sounds. When he talks in his sleep he will make words that sound like “Bentley,” or they will be something else, words I don't recognize. I think he is speaking Dutch again.

I sit next to him and hold his hand. “How are you?” I shout, leaning into his ear.

He nods.

His room is a bed, a small bathroom, a table to sit one person, a television and a rocking chair. In all my life, I had never seen my father watch television. It's an unnecessary luxury, I can hear him saying. It makes people lazy. Everything on it is foolishness. Even now, on his death bed, all he wants to watch is the news and the Yankees.

It is Sunday and there is a church service downstairs for all the old Dutch Reformers. When he wasn't so sick, I walked him down there every Sunday where he would sit quietly for an hour and a half, even when we were supposed to sing and pray out loud. Two of the windows used to be stained glass with a diamond pattern. I liked to stare at these windows during the service and watch shadows move outside. They had to take them down because the old ladies complained that the windows were too *Catholic*.

But now he's too sick, too old. It's a hassle to move his oxygen tank so I just sit with him and watch the game, though I hate sports. Being here is more for me than it is for him. My younger brother Axel is too busy with his wife, kids and new baby. Bentley is too ashamed to come even though I tell her he doesn't really know what's going on around him anyway. I'm disappointed but then I have to remind myself that I was always the one who took care of him anyway. She's supposedly coming today. She's been saying this every Sunday for the last ten

Sundays, and yet the church bells ring and she is not here. I don't mind. Though I have been the best daughter, I haven't been the favorite.

It smells like lavender in the Home and I can't stand it. It does not smell like my dad. Engines and cars and grease pouring out on concrete, that's what smells like my dad. When we sit and watch the game I cry, because I have already lost him.

I like to imagine now that I am not a middle age woman, but that I am a young teenager who has just lost her mother. I like to imagine that my father's way of comforting me is to sit on the couch next to me and watch baseball. We don't have to say anything, because we know each other's hurt and there is no shame, just understanding. We cheer when the Yankees get a homerun, we talk about their chances of making in to the playoffs. I care about baseball because I would care about anything if it meant time with my father. I like to imagine that instead of yelling at Bentley, he sits with me. That he builds *me* a car instead and I'd take care of it because I know how to be careful with someone else's heart. Sometimes I like to imagine my mother took my sister when she left and then I would have my father all to myself. These aren't things I say out loud, because they sound bitter, and I am not.

Outside it is snowing already in November. I don't want to think this, but I imagine the gravediggers ice picking their way to the ground and then using the sharp edged shovels to dig the rest. Bentley will leave her yellow apartment to come out and watch. Axel will come too, but his wife and kids will stay at home. His wife refuses to be within 500 feet of Bentley, who stole money from them a while back.

Will still be snowing then, or will the sun come out to give us a hint of comfort? Will each of us wait until we are away from the crowd to mourn, because we are still not used to

seeing each other's sadness? Or, will we break down over the grave and hold each other while they all watch, almost forget that we have to pretend to feel so little?

After we leave, we will not visit the grave again because the Dutch Reformed don't believe in visiting graves. The person we love is not in the ground. They are someplace where we can't reach them.

Listening to Birds

Because I am not Dave's wife, I hold my ear to his daughter's chest every day, when the other children are quiet, sleeping. I think of her as his second heart beat.

I watch my friends' children while they work. I am sober now, have been for three years.

Dave's daughter's name is Avery. Her skin is paper thin. Her cheeks are red like God's been rubbing them. Her eyes are the color of brown sugar and honey, like Dave's. I have dreams that she is drowning at sea and I cannot reach her.

I live in my grandmother's home, a one story farmhouse with an unkempt backyard. She is 85 and works at a nursing home where she takes care of women younger and sicker than she is. She is an anarchist, a pacifist, and the last family member who still talks to me. I've turned her home into a playroom, where friends and neighbors can drop off their kids whenever they want. I am cheaper than the daycare across town. My grandmother doesn't mind. She whispers that we will turn their babies into revolutionists yet. We have cigars together some nights and talk about the past and how time doesn't really mean anything.

This morning, I had a cup of coffee and sat outside, listened to birds. When I was living on the streets, I prayed I might live long enough to have a normal life. People all over the world wake up and have coffee, listen to birds. They don't hear them the way I do.

I rarely leave the house, just to have my morning coffee on the deck. None of the babies talk, so all day I hear moaning, crying, giggling. I don't mind. Most of the words I've heard throughout my life have been harsh. I can do without.

Dave has called me today to tell me he will be picking up Avery at 3:00. He knows he doesn't have to do this. I know he picks her up the third Friday of every month when his wife, Julia, runs youth group.

Julia is a beautiful woman with dark hair and green eyes. I feel like a child around her. When she picks up Avery, she and I have nice chats about baby things. Sometimes she tries to talk about her work in New York, but I just can't understand what she does. She knows this, but tries to include me anyway.

We live in New Jersey. We have lived here since childhood. Dave is a police officer. Our friends from high school are accountants, lawyers, teachers. Julia is a paralegal, but she grew up in all different states. She is an outsider who still fits in. I know she's heard about my drinking and lets me watch her child anyway, something Dave has asked her to do.

I change diapers and feed the babies, put them down for naps and call parents if they are sick. There are books, I've learned, about child care. There are rules and regulations and a whole school dedicated to different strategies for raising children. All I know how to do is love something. I love these children and this is enough.

Sometimes they escape while I'm changing them and they run around the room. Their faces beam with the happiness of using their legs, their bodies. I envy them, their freedom.

When he comes over on the third Fridays, he tells me what the outside world looks like. It looks like traffic jams and people driving on suspended licenses, old people dying to the sound of a stranger beating on their breastbone. Then, while the kids nap, we make love. It is the one thing I look forward to as the days pass.

When I tell my grandmother about Dave she laughs at me. Men never did her any good. All they want is a whole lot of love and they never give it back. One piece here and a piece there,

just to keep you hanging on. That's cruel, I tell her. And she says Samantha, you better learn, men are the cruelest creatures alive. She's got a smooth voice. Her words go down like the fourth glass of whiskey.

Dave calls some days to ask how Avery is. He knows she is always fine. She is growing. She will talk soon. Will walk soon. I tell him to come over, give me a reason to keep on living. Three more days, he will say, or ten more days, or seven. It's not much. But at least I know he's counting.

I keep trying to remember who I was before I was an alcoholic.

After dropping out of high school I worked at a slow diner.

I worked behind the counter serving coffee in the morning and mixed drinks at night. After we closed down the diner I stayed later with the cooks, Alberto and Nazario, drinking beers on upside down buckets. We talked about our families and the customers and the kinds of vacations we wanted to take but couldn't afford.

When Dave first walked in one night, he came to the counter and ordered a coffee. When I saw him the heat rose in my cheeks.

Usually people who have to work nights stopped in the diner before their shift to get coffee. There were a lot of cops and nurses and doctors, most of them wore scrubs or uniforms. Some were partially ready for work, a phone in their ear, blood shot eyes. But Dave looked like a day time customer, drinking coffee at 9:00 at night.

"Do you have work soon?" I asked. He looked confused. The heat rose to my ears.

"No."

"A little late for coffee?"

“Oh. Caffeine doesn’t affect me. I can drink a whole cup of this stuff and still fall sleep.”

I could smell liquor when he talked. I figured he was not yet 21 and slipping whiskey into his coffee. If I wasn’t desperate for the money, I would have sat next to him and shared.

Each table I served, I would look back at the counter to make sure he was still there.

“You’re welcome to stay while we clean up. And after.”

He smiled at me and said, “I have nowhere else to go.”

As I washed the tables my heart raced. I kept my hand on it to say, “Shh.”

We went out back with a couple of beers and drank them under the light on the delivery ramp. It was cold, leaves falling. Sometimes I would hear Alberto laughing and peaking out the window. They kid with me for days after.

He talked for a long time about his family. He didn’t get along with his dad and he wanted to get out of the house. We had gone to the same high school, had some mutual friends. He paced. He played with a rubber band, wrapping it around one finger, then the next. I’ve never fidgeted much, but I was the one whose insides were falling apart, never had control of anything.

A few nights later he walked me home from the closing shift. It was after a blizzard. We had left the diner and stumbled into a mess of bamboo stalks. The stalks were heavy with snow and we were full of coffee and bourbon. The moon was bright. He shook the stalks and snow fell, reflecting light. I unzipped his jacket and put my ear to his chest. I heard his heart. I knew I loved him.

We had the end of autumn, one winter, and a small part of summer before Dave left for training.

Before leaving, Dave picked me up in his father's truck. He took me downtown. Lights hung from the bars and live music floated down the streets. Everything about him filled me with hunger.

I wore a loose dress. I wanted to be the kind of girl that wore dresses. "Do you want to eat?" he asked. "Do you want to drink? Do you want to dance?" I could feel the happiness in my fingertips. We passed a restaurant with the TV on, showing clips from the war. 'Insider Attack' the headline read, '3 US soldiers shot in Afghanistan.' We walked on, Dave's voice slow and steady, as though he were holding back.

The next bar we passed, a woman was crying and leaning against the glass. I had an overwhelming feeling that this woman was me. I wanted to lean against cold glass and cry. Dave would see the world, lose something at war, find a woman who felt comfortable in dresses. Who was I to grab his hand and say, *wait for me because I love you?*

He told me his sister was a musician. She studied music in Maine and played in an orchestra. I thought that was one of the most beautiful things to do with a life. We talked about our friends from high school. I talked about applying to colleges one day, how I wanted to study art and history and literature. He said he had no plans after the army, that he hoped to get through the next four years alive. He said it with a smile.

I said "don't go," because it felt like the right time to say it and because I meant it.

He said, "I won't be able to look at myself if I don't."

Perhaps another kind of girl could have made him stay.

I asked him if I made him nervous because he never looked at me, or perhaps he thought I was ugly. He held my hands and looked at me the way he did in the bamboo stalks. "You really are something," he said.

When he left I didn't know what to write in letters. I couldn't think straight because my drinking had gotten bad. Those days felt like change pouring through my pockets.

I had felt like my insides were burning. Some nights I would stand in the rain to cool them.

I don't have much to do here except think on the past, and to think on the good past. Watching children is a lot of work, but it's mindless. Unless I am caring for Avery. I want her to need me the way she needs her mother. Once in a shelter a woman told me to think only on good things and it will heal your insides. I was hearing a lot of the same stuff from the counselors and books. It sounded so much better coming from her. Some of us need these things to be true.

There is a thought in the back of my mind. Avery grows up. She is a teenager and hates her parents. She drops out. Dave calls me and begs for help. I bring Avery to the places I slept when I was homeless. I show her my mistakes and she understands. I hold her hands in mine, look into her almond eyes, say, "you don't know how much your father loves you." By the way I say this she knows I love her father. She holds my hands at this secret knowledge.

In another thought, she rips her hands from mine. She doesn't understand what it is to love someone who is not yours. She thinks I want to steal her father completely. She thinks I haven't changed. "I don't steal anymore," I want to explain. But I'm not even sure what I mean.

Think only on good things, I remind myself.

I hold Avery, practice being in the moment. My hand is in the little soft folds of her armpit, her legs are getting strong. They grip my hips. She rests her head on my shoulder. Her hair is by my nose. Holding her is like holding a good memory.

After Dave left there was a hole in my chest.

Images from the war in Afghanistan played out like a movie in my head, the lens bouncing around as though the cameramen were fighting too. I knew nothing about war except the glimpses I saw from news channels.

There were alcoholics down the shore about an hour from my parents' house who drank by the docks. They were quiet drunks. The kind that didn't want any trouble, just wanted to keep on living, keep on drinking. Kenny, Larry, Jax and Bob—they mostly drank vodka, and red wine, always had onions in their pockets to hide the smell. They would eat them in the morning and if cops were around, bite into them like apples. After my parents had kicked me out and I lost my job at the diner I stayed there with them and slept under the docks during summer. I took a bath every morning in the ocean. This is where I met Mason. He had black hair and gray eyes. On the beach the first night we met, waves crashing, looking into his eyes and his skin coated with sand, it felt like making love with the earth.

I want to reach back to that moment and grab my arm, say *Don't, leave this man alone.*

Because Dave was the one for me. But Dave was at war. What did he care for a drunk girl in New Jersey who slept in the sand?

And Mason was here, with a bottle of liquor and eyes that said, *come, stay a while.*

Every night we sat by the docks and watched the fishermen at sunset. The fish go wild with excitement when the sun seeps into the water. I heard them make songs like sirens.

Then they are reeled up on a line. They just hang there, afraid and dying.

The other drunks were usually with us too, when the tide was low and the rocks were covered in seaweed and starfish. We would stay up all night talking about life, laughing until our stomachs hurt. Bob usually had us buckled over with tears. He had been drinking for thirty years

and had a story or two. Then we would sleep away the day, trying not to get sunburn, sleeping mostly in Mason's van or under an umbrella or taking naps on the bar down the street. It was usually so early in the morning the cooks didn't mind. They'd laugh at us and call us borrachos. We'd wash some dishes for them in the morning too for some free food.

I never went to college. I never studied art and history and literature. I started working at a jewelry store, the kind of place that sold shark teeth and rope necklaces. My friends from home believed I was living like a bohemian and I thought I was too. Customers didn't notice much if you were drunk because all you really did was take their few dollars and put them in the cash register. Some days, during my third summer, my hands would shake so bad that even this was hard to do. Mason sanded decks and repainted them. Then at night we climbed rocks again to watch the sunset without anyone bothering us.

Mason put his arm around me every night that first summer and said you are mine. But, Dave was always heavy on my mind.

Madeleine came in around noon for her daughter and she sat on my steps and watched me as though I were a show. I went to high school with her and I was smarter than her in math and English. She was looking for something wrong with me, something she could go home and tell her husband, *see I knew she was still a drunk*. I don't like being watched.

Madeleine made small talk about her day. She is having trouble at the office with another woman who has been through three divorces. Something having to do with sucking up to the boss, higher pay, flirts with the men who work there. "That woman is crazy," she says.

She made a comment about Avery, that she was one of the most beautiful children she had ever seen. Then she asked, as though the question had just popped into her head, “when will Dave be by to pick her up?”

Everyone is in love with Dave.

“Not until 5:00,” I lied.

Her husband does some kind of job I can’t understand. He is handsome and solemn and quiet; the kind a man I imagine spends much of his days thinking on things—the smell of rain, morning blues, making love, fireflies on a summer night. This is the kind of man I like.

When I first met her husband, dressed in a light blue button-down who laughed, so sweetly, at one of my jokes, I thought of Mason. How when winter came and there wasn’t much work for us, we fought every day. Mason became an angry drunk, one day when the beach was empty and cold. These days blend and I can only ever remember how the weather felt on my skin. We had fought about something that doesn’t matter anymore. He threw sand in my eyes and wrapped his hands around my neck. He shook me and shook me and I kicked him back. He squeezed until everything went dark.

When I woke up he was crying in my lap and begging for forgiveness. “Of course I forgive you,” I said, “of course.” I was afraid I might be left, again.

Madeleine is the kind of woman that doesn’t appreciate a solemn man, a man who knows how to love a woman without violence, a man who thinks hard on beautiful things.

I read in the papers a few weeks ago that Mason had robbed nine convenience stores down in New Mexico. He was going to do time in his home state of Pennsylvania. New Mexico, PA, New Jersey, he always said he was wanted to travel. After I had read it I started thinking about him a lot again, how I almost didn’t escape.

I have been afraid ever since I stopped drinking. Panic has been creeping up on me. I hold it back. In my mind I see a wall I am building. Each brick is a good thought—moments of happiness, moments of peace. Most of them are Dave. He touches me sometimes and my hair rises. This is one brick. I place it on the others. I take my time with the concrete. The time we kissed at the back of the house during the Christmas party. He backed away and said “shit.” Another brick. I stack it on the others. The first time he saw me after five years. I was in the hospital. He was not angry. There was elation in his face. “Aren’t you a sight for weary eyes,” he said. This is another brick. I think on it long and hard, take my time with the cement. Stack it on the others.

I don’t think about when my pancreas gave up. I had broken it off with Mason. I meant it this time. I was so afraid that I went on a bender, blacked out for hours. I woke one afternoon in the bar with such pains in my stomach I thought an alien was ripping through my body. I don’t think about the hospital, the sterile smell. The way the nurses looked at me. The hallucinations—a circus outside my window, my dead grandparents rocking in chairs next to me, rocking, rocking, the water filling my room. They asked who they should call and I said Dave’s name.

By the time he came the fog had cleared and I could see life again. We made small talk. My throat was so dry I thought I could never drink enough water. I don’t think about how he told me he was married, how he talked about his wife, how much I would like her. Yes, I said, I would like her very much. She sounds wonderful. Yes, I said, I would like to meet her some day. Yes, yes.

I do think about him reaching for my hand.

“Aren’t you a sight for weary eyes,” he said.

The last time Dave came to pick up Avery, his face was heavy.

He leaned against the playroom doorway and didn't say anything. Sometimes he gets sad about the things he does with me. Sometimes he is sad when he sees dead teenagers at work. Sometimes he is sad about the things that happened in Afghanistan. These aren't things he tells me. These are things I've guessed.

I want to bring him to the past, to the docks. Spend my good years drinking him in with the sunset instead.

I put Avery in her crib and put on Dora the Explorer. I never put on the TV during the day so that when it is on, she will sit quietly and watch.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my head on his chest. He held me like he had to tell me something important, but he didn't. When we were in my room, he kissed me and undressed me without undressing himself. I felt put on display. When I reach for his shirt he held my hands down. I've thought about this move since then. I squeeze my own wrists and imagine he is with me. My sponsor, Katie tells me to be careful of these moments—these highs will hit with dangerous lows. I can't help myself.

When we finished we lay next to each other and stared at the ceiling, one part of us touching at all times—our hands, our legs, fingertips.

I told him that detox was the second scariest thing in the world, that losing him was the first. I told him I saw my room fill with water up to the edge of my bed. I prayed that the water might swallow me. Sometimes I saw trees in my room too, and shooting and explosions. I thought he was coming to save me. I told him these things and he just listened. He never had much to say, but I know he likes it when I tell him what he means to me.

When he left me that time, I thought of Julia. She dances around in the kitchen preparing dinner while Dave holds Avery. He comes up behind her and kisses her cheek, tells her he loves her.

She will never know what she has taken, what I have given up.

My grandmother drove me to my first meeting and she came in with me. I stood up and told them I was an alcoholic, had been sober for three days. They clapped and clapped and clapped for me. At my grandmother's house that I now call home, I wrote *sober* in each of the days I had been sober. It was only when the month of September was filled with the word that I believed I might actually pull this off.

When the thought of Dave's marriage hit me weeks later, I laid in bed for days. Katie came to visit me and said, don't you move an inch. Better to be bed ridden than drunk.

I felt like I was learning to walk again. I picked flowers and felt like I had never picked flowers before. Driving was like the first time when I was sixteen. You are one month old, they would tell me. And when I was one year sober, happy birthday, you are one year old.

I hold Avery and smile. We are practically the same age.

I will tell Dave this when he comes. I am happy I have something new to say.

But Dave does not come, Julia comes. I can't help it, but I know disappointment is all over my face.

"Hey Samantha," she says. There is a laugh in her eyes. She looks at me holding Avery. Words get caught in my throat. *Only a few more days*, I can hear Dave saying. But he has forgotten.

“What is the matter?” She says.

“Isn’t it Dave’s turn today?”

I try to look happy to see her. I feel as though I have been caught drinking. I used to try to act sober around my parents. It was almost impossible, trying to act like everyone else.

“Dave probably won’t be picking up Avery for a bit. Youth group is done and I’m not going to be doing it next year. That’s for sure. All ungrateful young ones, can’t keep their hands to themselves. You know?”

“Oh, sure,” I say and I smile.

She is wearing a dress and she looks beautiful. I feel ashamed.

I get Avery ready. I put her shoes on and am slow with the knots. She smiles and I have the same thought I always do: she is so perfect she could break my heart.

“Actually,” Julia says, “I was wondering if you could watch Avery tonight, and I will pick her up in the morning. I want to have some alone time with Dave. It’s been so long.”

“Yes, of course.” She sits down next to me, crosses her legs like a young girl. “I want to surprise him, he gets so busy with work and with being a father. I think sometimes he forgets me.” She smiles and has a light laugh, as though what she was saying wasn’t that big of a deal.

“I doubt he ever forgets you.”

“I know,” she looks down and picks her nails. I have never seen her so unsure. “I always knew he wasn’t one to talk much, and I love that about him, you know? I just, like, can’t ever tell if something is bothering him.”

“He seems like a hard man to love.”

“You’ve been friends with him for so long. What do you think I should do?”

I reach for Avery’s tiny hand and her fingers wrap around mine.

“I think your plans for tonight sound lovely.”

She smiles at me and stands up. She reaches into her purse. I don't want her to leave. I want to talk with her for hours about Dave. She hands me money, more than necessary. “You've been such a life saver to us.”

“Yes,” I say, “yes, I'm always here.”

When she leaves, I pick up the phone, call Dave. It rings once and he hangs up.

Avery is hungry and she eats quickly. Instead of having a cigar with my grandmother, I sit on the rocker outside and rock Avery on my chest. She is calm. I hear crickets and imagine that all the birds I heard this morning have turned into bugs. I feel Avery drool on my chest, her arms dangle and her breathing is shallow. She is all that I have. One day she will talk, and when she leaves with her mother she will turn to me and say *bye Sammie* as she leaves.

She will never know how much I love her father. I will not be able to save her the way I want to. She will not know how much I want her to be mine. She will not give much thought to her old nanny.

But at that moment when she turns around to goodbye, she will be smiling because she will miss me. These moments I steal away and hide for myself. I save them for a day filled with waiting.

Small Rodents and Other Unwanted Things

At night, we hear mice scratching in the walls, soft like they are sharing a secret. Within our room we can feel the mice moving around us, hear their nails scuff across the rafters. The house is alive—little vibrations, fingers on a waxed car, door hinges. Liz thinks they are playing with her, some game of hide-and-seek, lost-and-found. “We should get a cage for them,” she says, “so we can see them and take care of them.” I like the idea. I never had a pet before. One peeks its nose out from a hole around the outlet. “That one we’ll call Nosey,” she says. I tell my sister not to touch them. They might bite. She reaches her finger towards the hole in the outlet and says, “here Nosey, Nosey, Nosey.” I reach out too and touch the tip of its nose. It feels like a tiny bead.

Our Aunt Maggie has tried to get rid of them with mouse traps. They litter the cabin. Liz and I have to watch our step so we don’t lose a toe. We bring enough fresh cheese up to our rooms for the mice to munch on so that none of them want the moldy cheese on the traps. Aunt Maggie doesn’t have the energy to notice all the missing cheese. Most days she sits in her chair on the porch and drinks her Majorska. If a mouse scampers by her feet she screeches, “God damn you little bastard!” We were shocked the first time we heard her use God’s name in vain. Aunt Maggie is a religious woman who wears high necked dresses, long enough to sweep the floor. When she’s not too hungover, she goes to church on Sunday. She says, “God only helps those who help themselves,” and “Some people need to take the plank out of their own goddamn eye.” Aunt Maggie used to work at a greenhouse taking care of flowers when a shelf fell over and broke her back. She collects unemployment and walks with a slight limp.

We should be with our mother right now, but a few months ago she robbed three Starbucks—one in Paterson, one in Wayne, one in Verona. “The State of New Jersey” picked us up from school. She told us as we got into her black SUV that our mother was going to the big house. I told her I wanted to go to the big house with my mother and she said that maybe one day I will, but not now. She told us we’d be living in upstate New York with our Aunt Maggie. The DYFS lady in the passenger’s seat promised us she was sober now.

We were picked up at the Social Services office by a man in church my mother had always secretly referred to as Wrangler Jim, because he was the one man in church who wore jeans and a cowboy hat. We called him Wrangler Jim all the way up here. Wrangler Jim, turn up the air. Wrangler Jim, turn up the music!

I wish he would show up now and take us back.

Ronnie comes over after school so that we can hang out by the lake. It is spring and the Adirondacks are just starting to warm up.

Ronnie has a birthmark that spreads like a web across his face. Everywhere else his skin is pasty like dry glue, but the web on his face is so dark, in the light it looks purple. Ronnie doesn’t look at me the way most people do. Kids upstate always look at me like there is a joke hidden somewhere in my face, within my clothes, or my hair, or whatever else might become a punch line. Adults look at me like I might give them an infection.

Ronnie likes to talk to me because I don’t make fun of his birthmark.

We throw stones into the water. Ronnie puts his arm around me and strokes my arm while we sit watching speed boats go by. I ask him where he learned to do that. He says his dad does it with his mom when they aren’t fighting. He is the luckiest boy I’ve ever met. I ask him if he has any pets. He thinks a minute and says his father always brings home dead deer and hangs

them up in the garage. His mom says their house is haunted by deer because she can hear their hooves clicking around the house. I think of my own mother and tears well up in my eyes.

Aunt Maggie comes out with her dress twisted to the side and her hair out of the braid. She is swinging an empty bottle around her head. She comes next to us and puts her face by my cheek, “did you do anything to my car?”

“No, Aunt Maggie. What’s wrong?”

“You know what’s wrong.”

I look at Ronnie and Liz. Both of them are frozen.

“Were you playing with it? Crawling under it? Did you touch it?”

I swear to her I didn’t. She stands up and stomps over to the car. She kicks the wheels. She gets into the car and tries to turn it on, but it makes a *click, click, click*, sound. “Damn it!” she screams from the car. “Son of a bitch!” She holds the key in the ignition, *click, click, click*.

She calls my name to get over here and so I do, embarrassed that Ronnie is watching. She says she needs me and my friend to ride down to the liquor store to pick up more Majorska. She is nervous and angry. I can see hints of my mother in her, the pointed nose, the eye wrinkles, the feigned enthusiasm. Like a shell of my mother without the love. I want to get us and Ronnie as far away from her as possible. We get on our bikes and ride to Ronnie’s house. He steals his brother’s big quad and we hop on. While the sun is still high, we ride towards the liquor store.

I am beginning to like these woods, the tall pines, the subtle rumble of running water. It beats the apartment we lived in with our mother, where every time it rained, mud washed up our front step.

The man has to lean over the counter to look at us. “It’s for my aunt,” I tell him. “Old Mags?” he asks and we nod. He shakes his head like he disapproves, but he has eyes that say he understands.

At night, Old Mags is so satisfied we got her more Majorska that she doesn’t notice when Ronnie sleeps over. We curl under the quilts and turn off the lights except for the flashlight. We wait for mice to come looking for food. We stay up late. We name the mice we see—Tippy, Shadow, Rex, Pinky, Monster, Curly, Baby, Runt, Lady—mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers. We make up stories for them. We talk about putting them in cages so that they can’t scamper away. We talk until our eyes get heavy. We listen to the mice squeak until we sleep.

In the morning, we hear Old Mags throwing up in the bathroom. Liz and I stare at the ceiling from our bed and pretend like we don’t hear anything. I pray Ronnie stays asleep for this.

When the house goes quiet we go downstairs to make breakfast. There is a note on the table and a twenty—*get some more on your way back from school.*

We walk a half a mile down the dirt road to the main road where the bus lady picks us up. The bus lady has red hair and is missing her left eye—from a fall when she was young, she tells us. We make up other stories: stab wound, a gunshot wound, some sort of pledge to Satan. She smokes with the windows up in the heat. We hate her for it. There is a stop sign about half of the way to the school and the bus lady stops there for five minutes and tells us a story. I suppose she is lonely.

At the stop sign, Liz and I see an old antique shop. It is small and brown and has big windows. Liz talks about all the things she would buy in that store. She says there are probably magic things in there. I notice a bird cage hanging in the front window. It is gold and the top of it is shaped like an Arabian palace. I imagine it is a beautiful place to keep the mice and we could

finally make them our pets. I point it out to Liz and she smiles. After we drive off, we can't stop talking about it. How the mice would love it. How wonderful it must be to live in a place like that.

After school, the three of us have to run to the liquor store. I find the red bottle cap and the red and gold curtains. We drop the twenty in a hurry and bolt out of there to make it to the bus in time. I shove the bottle in my backpack and hear it swish next to my homework. The bus lady with her sunglasses glares at us as we walk on. Ronnie and Liz giggle behind me.

Old Mags is waiting at home for us with four glasses of orange juice. When I give her the vodka, she pours it in her cup and asks me where the change is. When I look confused her face turns angry. She asks me if I'm trying to steal from her, and I say no. I promise I'll get it tomorrow. This seems to calm her, so the three of us chug our orange juice and run out to the lake.

Almost every day we have to make a run to the store for Old Mags and after the first few times it's not as fun. I am sure to remember the change. Old Mags waits for us at home with glasses of orange juice, tapping her fingernails against the wood to an old church hymn. Liz and I still don't talk about our mother because we know that any day now she will drive up that dirt road and pick us up and never let us go.

By the end of summer, Old Mags is drinking every day and the heat will not quit. The humidity sticks in our hair, soaks our skin. Ronnie leads us to a trail that takes us around the lake and into the woods. I am beginning to think Ronnie is someone who will stick around for a while. He is someone I might marry. As we walk, I imagine what kind of life we might live in a

place like this. We would take care of our shutters, dust our house, wash the floors, have real pets.

We reach Ronnie's secret lake, which isn't really secret, just a lake smaller and more hidden than Lake Sacandaga. We take our shoes off and dig our feet into the sand. I realize that none of us have bathing suits because Liz and I didn't know where we were going. Ronnie turns to us and says, "this is a nude beach," which I know is a lie. He takes off all his clothes and a part of me is a bit surprised that his birthmark is only on his face. The rest of his body is smooth and dull. He runs off the five foot dock, does a cannonball into the water. Liz and I look at each other. When I start undressing she does too. I cannon ball into the lake. Liz follows.

We tread water for a bit, not knowing what to do. Ronnie suggests we play Marco Polo. We giggle a whole lot every time our hands reach out and touch a bare body. We are acting wild and shouting too much. Liz and I hadn't ever known a place this beautiful existed. How could we? When all we had ever known was white walls and mud outside our doorstep. Ronnie is giddy just to have friends. This is the world we create for ourselves without adults.

It is my turn to be Marco. I hear Liz breathing next to me. I keep reaching for her. *Marco! Polo! Marco!* I keep reaching and reaching until I run into the dock and hit my head. Liz is laughing at me and I laugh too. I rub my head.

I feel a hand around my wrist. In one motion, I am yanked out of the water.

I see Liz too, hanging next to me. Old Mags is holding us, her face and eyes glowing red and sweating.

"Hannah and Elizabeth! What do you think you're doing? Swimming naked with a boy? What is wrong with you? I've been calling your names! Where have you been?"

I smell stale liquor. I look at Liz who is flailing in the air, her feet kicking nothing.

“I was calling your name! Why didn’t you answer me?”

I yank my wrist from Old Mags, but she clamps down like a pit bull. Still I pull my arm back and she pulls me forward, my feet dragging on the ground. I look back at Ronnie who is still in the water, horrified. Immediately, I am aware of my nakedness. My eyes burn with tears. I pull my arm as hard as I can, but Old Mags isn’t moved. I try covering myself with my free arm, as my feet kept tripping over themselves. As we pass our clothes, I lean down and pick up my shirt and am able to hold it over me as she drags us all the way back to the cabin.

When we are in the house, she still does not let go of us. I hear Liz’s screams bouncing off the walls. They are loud and angry. She kicks every wall that is in reach, banging into door frames with her feet, kicking the floor if nothing else.

As Old Mags walks, a mouse skitters across her path. With one motion, Old Mags’ shoe crashes down on it. There is a crunch, like she had stepped on a bag of potatoes. I hear the long, drawn out, demon-like scream from my sister, “Nosey!”

There is no way to know if it is Nosey, but to Liz, there is no way it could be any other mouse.

Old Mags throws us both into our room and closes the door. Liz bangs on the door with everything she has, like she wants to knock down the walls.

At night, my face burns with embarrassment. I cry still, thinking about Ronnie’s horrified face, the crushed mouse. This is not the kind of life I want. The mice shuffling inside the walls keep us awake. “We have to protect them from her,” Liz whispers. “I’ll be damned if she ever hurts another one of them again.” Liz turned to me in the middle of the night and whispers, “I hate her. I fucking hate her.” The sound of the word *fuck* rolling out of my sister’s mouth shocks me and feels right. “I fucking hate her, too,” I whisper back.

Winter comes fast. There is no autumn. It snows once and never melts. My legs beneath my knees freeze on the walk to the bus, on the walk to liquor store, on the walk back home.

Thawing my legs is the best part of the day.

Ronnie sleeps over most nights. We make forts in our room and sleep in them. It is warm there. We hear the mice. They are warm too.

A snowstorm blows in sometime in December. The snow is so high it reaches our windows. The three of us eat whatever we find in the house. We play whatever we want. We get tired and bored, lay around, sleep, fight, laugh.

After three days the snow melts enough for us to open the front door.

Old Mags bangs on my door early in the morning. She tells me I have to make a trip to the store. She holds out a twenty. She looks in bad shape, sweaty, her eyes bulging. I am tired, in every sense of the word.

“Later, Aunt Maggie.”

“No,” she says, “now.”

School is still not open. The buses are not running. Ronnie’s quad will not run in so much snow. The store is miles away.

Aunt Maggie’s eyes are red rimmed and desperate.

Ronnie, Liz and I dress, putting our clothes on slowly. We soak up the warmth as long as we can. Then, we begin walking.

The sun is rising. The snow is hard and dirty. It slushes around our feet.

“Hey Ronnie, if you could live anywhere, where would you live?”

“Under the Eiffel tower.”

Liz says, “that’s silly. I would live in the ocean.”

I only think of my mother. I say nothing.

After too many steps my stomach growls. My head aches for food and rest. I think of a warm grilled cheese, a hot barbeque on a summer day.

We reach the antique shop by the stop sign. It is a square cabin with a pointed roof. The sign painted out front is wood and reads: “Tree-Eater Antiques.” We go in. There is no way we are making it to the liquor store like this.

Inside the shop is better than I imagined. It is all clutter—strange paintings, newspapers, taxidermies, old lamps and lanterns, old furniture and radios. We can’t move, don’t know where to go. Dust swirls around in the hot air being blown out of the space heater.

An older woman shouts from another room that she is closed. We don’t leave. The warmth has just started to seep into our clothes.

She emerges from the doorway. She wears a skirt with bright flowers and a dirt brown shirt. She has massive earrings and a bandana tied in her hair. Her glasses magnify her eyes. Kind of like Ms. Fizzle. None of us know what to say. When she sees it’s just a bunch of kids, Fizzle lightens up.

“Are y’all hungry?” she asks. Our faces must give away our hunger because she laughs and says, “Come in! Come in!”

She disappears and hobbles around. “Did you know ‘Adirondack’ means tree-eater!” she shouts from behind the wall. “It was meant as an insult between two groups of Native Americans! Tree eaters they called each other! What a riot!”

I like her voice. Unlike most adults, her ‘happy’ voice is sincere.

Each of us shuffle around the store as Fizzle continues to shout stories at us from behind the wall. Ronnie and Liz are reaching out to touch old radios, swiping the dust from dials.

I sneak around one of the shelves. I see the bird cage, long and thin, painted a dull gold. Ivy vines are engraved along the bottom and up some of the bars. It is small with a hook on top. Inside, I can see little swings. There is a small lock on the front of the door.

How nice it would be to live in this place.

What a sweet home for the little rodents in our walls.

“...meaning ‘porcupine’ which in fact is just an animal that eats bark, but the Mohawks had no written language so we can’t be sure.” Fizzle holds microwaved pizza. We hardly wait until she puts it down. I eat quickly, trying to get more than Liz or Ronnie. I can feel the pit in my stomach filling, the hunger headache subsiding.

“I noticed you were looking at that bird cage?” She says, as she points to it with a heavily ringed finger. I look up and still keep eating. I nod.

“That one is as old as they come. Made in the 1880’s and owned by a man who used to live up here before it was even a town. Paint is probably not safe for a bird, but it still is pretty to look at. Rumor has it, the owner held onto it until he died. Literally, he died holding it.”

I look at the bird cage. I want it. The want goes deep. It’s as heavy as the bread and cheese sitting in my stomach. I have never really owned anything.

“It’s about 100\$,” she says, eyeing me closely.

I look down at my pizza, trying to figure out how I can make the 20\$ in my pocket turn into 100\$. I reached in my pocket and pulled it out.

“What do you have?” she asks and I tell her.

“You can have it,” she says. “I like you.”

I feel Liz and Ronnie looking at me. I don't care. I want the birdcage.

It still doesn't hit me, what I have done, when we leave the antique shop. We walk in silence, Ronnie and Liz on either side of me. I hold my birdcage to my chest.

Liz whispers, "Old Mags is going to kill you."

We stop walking and I turn to look at them. "She can't kill us if we don't go home."

We walk to Ronnie's house, where his father sits on the couch and watches TV. "Hey," he mumbles to us as we slip in. We have peanut butter sandwiches and we spend the night there, talking about how we might lure the mice into the cage. No one says anything more about the money or Old Mags.

When we finally go to school, I bring the cage with me and I carry it around all day to my classes. I am still scared to go home.

What I've done begins to weigh on me and I can't sit still in my chair. The clock ticks, and every moment I forget about Old Mags is a blessing. But then, I remember again and my heart sinks.

Mrs. Silbernagel asks me to talk to her after school. I go to her office when the bell rings. My heart is throbbing in my ears.

And who is there but good old Wrangler Jim, Mrs. Silbernagel and the school counselor. All three of them looking more concerned than the next. They look at the cage. They look at me, and then the school counselor says she wants to ask me a few questions. It is all going to be okay, she says.

Whatever these adults are planning, I want none of it.

I turn and I walk toward the door of the classroom. Slowly, at first. I shuffle my feet. I keep walking. When I get to the door, I run. I hear my name—Hannah? Hannah!—but I just keep running until I am out the door, the bird cage clonking like a ball and chain behind me.

I run to the nearest bus. I don't care what bus it is.

I get off as soon as I recognize where I am. I have to walk another two miles to get home. I hug the birdcage.

When I get home, Ronnie and Liz are sitting in the snow, asking what had happened to me. Nothing, I tell them. The door is locked they say, and they can't get in. I knock. No one answers. I break the side window. I'm already in trouble for the cage and for not bringing Aunt Maggie the liquor.

When I walk in, Aunt Maggie is laying on the couch under blankets. There is a putrid smell. I walk over to her. She is white. She does not look like Aunt Maggie. Her teeth are bared in a stiff snicker. I touch her arm and know.

It is terribly quiet in the room when I turn and look at Ronnie. I see him take a step forward, like he might reach out and touch my arm.

"She's dead," I tell them.

Liz takes a step forward and looks herself. She tilts her head like she is trying to figure something out. "Why?" she asks. I know it has something to do with the twenty dollars and a birdcage.

Ronnie takes another step, and I wait for the weight of his hand on my body.

"Good," Liz says, "I'm glad she's dead."

Ronnie turns and runs out of the room. My heart breaks. I am angry at Ronnie. I am angry at Old Mags. I am angry at my mother. I can't think of anything I can do, so I throw the

cage after him. It hits the door frame. I hear it crack. Pieces of the broken cage lay on the floor, but I can't look at it.

Liz and I aren't upset that Aunt Maggie is all empty-eyed on the couch. We have a different worry. We will lose the mice. Liz and I run into our room and bang on the walls with our fists. The walls are so fragile the sheet rock crumbles in our hands. We keep at it, tearing the walls down and feeling the excitement and the sweat. If only our wild mother could see us now. We pick up a whole handful of baby mice and load up our pillow cases. Some mice bite at us and we don't care. We are screaming like mad and chasing the mice and putting what we can into pillow cases. Wrangler Jim and Mrs. Silbernagel and the police show up on our doorstep.

They look a bit horrified when they see Liz and me standing there with pillow cases full of mice, our faces covered in wall dust.

We don't get to keep the mice. The police put us into the back of their car while other policemen pull the bags from us and throw them into dumpsters. We sit in the car and push our wet and pouting faces against the glass.

Cops are too busy with Aunt Maggie to notice the first mouse crawl out of the dumpster. One after another they tuck and dive into the snow, their furry backs flowing like gray ripples as they run over the white ground, squeaking something that sounds to me and Liz like freedom.

The Hunting Ground

Annie was eighteen when her father brought her to Alaska. As their plane lowered into Anchorage, the low sun turned the snowy mountains yellow. The air felt different. The sky felt different. Her parents were different. This was not her home.

They were from New Jersey. Cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents, they all lived in the same town. Annie's friends there were like her—Dutch, pale, church goers, had never left New Jersey.

Her father was a proud man and a construction worker. He built houses. He liked to point to a house and say, *see Annie, I built that one.*

Her father had broken his leg by falling off the roof of a new colonial one Saturday morning. He couldn't work, couldn't afford his medical bills. He would walk with a limp for the rest of his life. Not working was not okay. A man worked. A man supported his family. It got to her father, his purpose taken away like that. He decided they should move to the least densely populated state in America—2,000 miles away from the home they knew, the people they loved.

Her new home was tucked far down a road that was overgrown with thick bushes. Fog was hanging heavy over the Chugach Mountains. When they pulled up to the ranch-style house with the porch and a decrepit rocking chair outside, Annie felt empty.

Whittier was built on the base of a mountain which also happens to be on the waterfront. Two hundred people lived in the town and they all mostly lived in one building. The only way to get in and out of Whittier was a one way tunnel with train tracks. For a half hour, cars are allowed out. For the next half hour, cars are allowed in. Water used to drip from the ceiling and down the sides of the rock tunnel. It was the mountain leaking on cars driving through.

Alaska was a wild place. Alaska was a place where her father could feel like a man again.

Her father got a job on a cruise ship that went in and out of the Prince William Sound.

Her mother took to collecting furniture from antique shops, garage sales, Native American stores. Her mother bought art with strange animals, black and red, like totem poles. She bought copper bracelets and earrings carved by men wearing headdresses. Their house felt like a museum for hunters. Her parents had a deer hide sprawled out on their bedroom floor. Her father spent his weekends hunting in the mountains, bringing home deer the size of horses. They had quickly become a part of the landscape. But Annie could not let go of New Jersey.

She picked up a job at Wild Catch Café on the water, a cabin built on stilts. It was small and brown with watermarks along the bottom. No one came in except for the regulars—Bob at eleven, Jill at one. Around two the hungry tourists would come in after their cruise. No one tried to talk to her. Who knows what a lonely girl might say?

Annie wrote the menu on the black board every day, making sure to write the specials in big pink letters. She washed the dishes and then washed them again. She scrubbed down the tables, just because she was bored. She sat behind the counter and stared at the wood panels mostly, or looked out the window at the boats floating in, the boats floating out.

It was a hot day in July when the cafe television reported that a body had been found near Eklutna Lake. The newscaster with thick black hair told the empty Cafe that the skeleton found near the power lines was an unidentified woman, wearing a knitted sleeveless shirt, a leather coat and knee high boots. She was wearing a pendant heart, a ring carved from shell, a medal bracelet with three turquoise stones. A sketch of her was on the right side of the screen. The artist had drawn her with a smile so big you could see it in her eyes.

Eklutna Annie, they called her. Annie had never known anyone with her name.

She walked home from her shift that night with one eye over her shoulder. She had always been wary of Alaska, but now she had something real to be afraid of.

She wanted to curse her father for bringing her to a place where women are found buried under power lines.

When she dreamt that night, she was in New Jersey. She was in *her* church—not the church in Alaska, with women wearing sweatshirts and the piano player banging tunes on a keyboard, the one in Jersey, with gold letters on the hymnals and thick wooden rafters on the ceiling and her parents on her right. She had a terrible feeling like she was forgetting something, but what was that thing? She looked to her left and saw Eklutna Annie, just like the sketch, like she was drawn in pencil. She was crying, big tears dripping onto her Bible. Annie looked around, wanted to know if anyone else saw this woman. Should she comfort her? Wrap her arm around her? She better not, lest the murderer sees and comes after her too.

When she woke up, she had that sinking feeling of guilt. Why couldn't she do what was right? Why was she always afraid?

After her shift ended the next day, Annie started walking home when she saw teenagers gathered around by the docks. They were wearing basketball shirts, loose t-shirts, a few of them wore baseball caps. They reminded her of her friends back home.

She lingered behind them a moment, hoping they might not see her.

One of the boys was talking about shooting a moose, a creature Annie still could not get used to seeing roaming in her backyard. *Right in the ribs*, he said, whipping his beer around so that it splashed on them, *barely walked 30 feet without falling over. Can't believe how much that thing bled everywhere.*

She felt sickened by the violence.

She followed them into the boat.

They were engrossed in what he was saying. *Shut up Mitch, like you know anything about using a bow. You nearly shot yourself in the foot last time...*

Annie slipped to the side, found a seat in the back and wrapped her coat tightly around her. The cruise ship went out to the glaciers. The boys kept on talking. They paid no attention to the glaciers that rose like glass mountains out of the sea. Or to the pieces of ice floating in the water, which looked to Annie like white lily pads floating in a pond. The sun was low and it would stay low for a few more hours, skimming the top edges of trees. She looked out over the water. Was the move worth it for her father? Had he found what he was looking for?

She watched the one who was speaking down by the docks. He had a dark beard and was talking to the person next to him, Mitch she assumed. His hand rolled in the air, trying to imitate something for his friend. She wondered what kind of life he lived. She wondered what kind of stories he told.

The conversation with his friend had stopped and he looked at Annie, a side glance first and then a smile. The second time he did not look away.

When he sat next to her on the bench, she smelled old apples and the burnt filter of a cigar. *Hey*, he said, *I'm Christo*.

Annie.

You look lonely Annie.

She looked around her, pretended to be surprised.

I suppose I am.

He smiled at her and she thought, *he must be trouble*.

Are you from around here?

No. I'm from New Jersey.

I am so sorry.

She laughed at herself. *Who are you to apologize? You're from Alaska.*

She winced at her own bitterness.

But he only looked around him, put his hand up as if to say, are you looking at this? Do you see what is around you? The mountains, the glaciers, the ocean. Alaska was nothing if it wasn't beautiful. She wanted to clarify, say what she really meant. She didn't know what she really meant.

I've seen you in church, he said. Then, she liked the thought of him watching her.

How could I not have seen you?

You're always looking down.

She had missed her home so much, she had not wanted to look at anything. She was looking at his hands now—dirty and cracked. She wanted to reach out, lace her own fingers through them. She had been so lonely.

He talked to her about being a truck driver for Northern Industrial. It wasn't a bad job. He wouldn't do it anywhere else. But this is Alaska. The scenery is not so bad. He looked at her sideways, *for some of us*. He talked about his truck like it was his baby—Sherry was her name, an eight speed International Eagle born in Texas and brought all the way to the best American state there is.

She thought about her cousins in New Jersey who also drove trucks, who gathered around after the church service and could talk about nothing else. She thought maybe this place wasn't as different as she thought. It was a world where men's jobs were the absolute, and women

pretended to be interested. Though in New Jersey, truck drivers winded through farms, suburbs and flood zones. Here, she imagined Christo driving on the edge of the earth, a mountain to his right, oblivion to his left.

I'm not interested in trucks, she said. Though she missed her younger days, when her father would drive with her in his construction truck—the seat bouncing, the sound of the engine shifting gears.

What are you interested in, then?

She hated those questions. She could not think of one thing she was interested in.

Did you see on the news they found a body near Eklutna Lake?

The boat was turning. The guide mentioned something about the seals on a piece of ice, sunbathing their rubbery skin.

Yea. They say she had high leather boots, probably was a prostitute. Probably got into something she shouldn't have.

Seems like no one has missed her.

He shrugged his shoulders. *Some people aren't worth missing.*

Would she be worth missing?

The ship docked for a moment by a waterfall. Birds swarmed the water. So many it was hard to hear. She pushed her knee against his, thought maybe she'd offer a comment more friendly. *So, I thought I'd at least get to see Northern Lights, or something.*

No, no. This is the time of the Midnight Sun. Can't see the lights if it doesn't get dark enough.

She looked into his eyes. They were green and brown, like a pile of firs.

He slapped her hand. She jumped from the sound of the smack. Looking down, she saw that he had crushed a bug, a ladybug, against her knuckles. He smeared it off with his hand and held it up to her. She saw the red and the brown guts covering most of his palm. *Bugs up here are mutant*, she said.

There are worst things, he said, and winked.

When the boat docked, they wanted to take a ride. He opened the door of his truck for her and she jumped in, her eyes scanning the crushed water bottles and tobacco in the cup holder. She sunk into the torn up seats as his friends whistled at them.

They drove through the Chugach State Park. They drove past the Matanuska River. They drove further still, along the Susitna River. Christo talked most of the time and held her hand. She closed her eyes in the comfort of it. The distance between her and home did not feel so vast. They drove all the way up and into Denali. They pulled over in a place where the land stretched on for miles, where the snow peaked mountains faded into clouds. They drank more beer in the bed of his truck and smoked weed and cigarettes. Her loneliness burned away. The air was heavy with long, embracing dusk. Christo pointed to the horizon and said, *See that ghost of a mountain over there? That's McKinley, taller than Everest.*

That mountain is a graveyard I hear.

Well, 'ghost' because it is white and hard to see.

But she was thinking about the lost mountain climbers, their bodies frozen against the rocks, their bodies becoming Everest.

He looked like he was thinking hard and she liked that look on a man. They watched the sun go down behind one mountain to the left, then rise again three hours later above a mountain to their right.

That morning, sleeping shogun in Christo's car as they drove back, she dreamt about Eklutna Annie again. She looked over and Eklutna Annie was driving. She had the feeling like they were running from something, escaping. There was a feeling pricking her mind, like a warning, but she ignored it. Eklutna Annie held her hand in her lap, so soft. When her eyes opened from the dream she saw Christo's hand holding her wrist and stroking it with his thumb. She wanted to crawl inside those hands.

For weeks, she thought only of him. She counted down every hour at the café, so that she might meet Christo near the docks and take a drive to a new place. Once, when she came home, her mother was sitting at their dining room table, which looked to Annie like a hunk of wood carved from a massive tree (her mother had told her it was made by a Yupik man who used only a carving knife). *Where have you been?*

I was with friends.

You don't have friends.

Annie let the comment hang there. If her mother thought she was being mean, she might soften up. *That makes two of us*, she wanted to say, but bit her tongue.

Annie looked at the paper sitting on their island table. Another woman had been found, Josephine Messina, in a gravel pit near Seward. Annie's eyes lingered on the picture of the woman with big, brown bangs, eye liner above her eyes. She was twenty four. Her body was badly decomposed. Annie could not look away. She caught the end of what her mother was saying to her.

I heard a rumor about that boy you were with Annie, Christo? I heard that boy lives out in the wilderness with wolves.

He lives in Begich just like everyone else, Ma. And you're not a damn Native American. You don't have to be so cryptic.

Be nice to your mother, her father said from the living room, as he banged his walking stick against yet another hand carved piece of furniture. She had never been rude to her parents, never felt the need to be. But she felt different now. They had dragged her to this place and there was no room here for pleasantries.

Her father was still wearing his sailing hat and he was reading a hunting magazine. Since coming to Alaska, her father had hobbled out to the woods with a rifle and a deer stand every weekend he was home. He came back with dead birds, dead rabbits, a dead squirrel which looked like a rabbit. She had never known her father had such a desire to kill things. But, he defined hunting as, "being one with nature." And her mother, well she was just along for the ride. She said things like "we need to keep every part of the animal!" while plucking out the pheasant's feathers and throwing them into the trash bin.

Besides, he added, *haven't you heard about your boy's heart attack? You should get yourself a man more physically stable.*

Again, she bit her tongue.

He looked up from his magazine and right at her, daring her to make a comment.

Instead she went to her room, a small place with a bed and a writing desk and not much else. She needed more sleep. The weed and the alcohol were wearing off. She rested her head and stared out the window at the sun which refused to go higher than the trees. She hoped she might dream about something better than dead girls.

Autumn in Alaska was red, orange and cold. It's the warning season. It tells the inhabitants to get the hell out of there before the snow comes. Annie would stare out her window and watch the moose rub their velvet antlers on the trees, a sign that the male is ready to mate, a sign that the female's summer is long gone. Christo took Annie to a shooting range near Chugach State Park. He brought most of his guns. They were standing under a wooden structure, taking turns shooting at the human shaped targets in the middle of dried, crumpling bushes.

He gave Annie his Glock and said, *my father once shot this at me.*

She said, *Lucky, at least your father was around you enough to hate you.*

Now that the summer had ended, her father picked up more shifts on the cruise ships, cruise ships that were on the water for days, even weeks. Her mother continued to collect Native American antiques. Her neck was straining under the weight of traditional necklaces. Their dinners together were quiet and lonely. This, Annie thought, was not how a man takes care of his family.

Christo laughed at her and said he would prefer a father who was never fucking home. He loaded up one of his guns and fired shots into the stomach of the outlined man.

Christo's father didn't shoot him exactly, only a metal pan hanging on the wall behind his ear. Christo's father had come home angry and was even angrier because his mother was off with her boyfriend again. Christo hadn't made dinner and his father had been drinking at the bar and was hungry. *Make your own goddamn food,* Christo said. Usually they wrestled and fought, but this time his father must have needed to do something more powerful than throwing a punch.

As he loaded the gun again, Christo told her that's when he had his first heart attack. Christo had an unknown pre-existing heart condition and the stress was too much for his heart. As Christo gripped at his chest, his father told him to stop being a pussy and walked into another

room. Christo called his own ambulance. The doctor told him to stop drinking and to stop smoking and that he had to take medication every day.

But I only follow one of those rules, he said to Annie. She marveled at him, his broken body.

He shot the shotgun rounds into the closer target, until the target crumpled in half and fell into the dirt. The shots echoed through the trees. Other guns down the shooting line shot at their own targets. She shifted her protective muffs so that she could hear the dull hum of pads pressed against her ear instead.

So, Christo had been shot at and lived. He has suffered a heart attack, and lived. Annie could not tell if he was being vulnerable, or if he was proud. It was that way with men. They did not know how to be sad. They have not learned how to be defeated.

Too lazy to pick it up, they took turns shooting the target on the ground. It flipped into the air with every accurate shot. Vulnerable, Annie decided. That's what he trying to be for her—vulnerable.

By the time winter arrived authorities had clues to a suspect. Another woman had been found near the Knik River, a dancer shot in the back. They were looking for a man with a personal plane, someone who was bullied by girls in high school, someone with acne, someone with a stutter. Annie paused at this sentence. How would they know he stutters?

Annie sat on her stool in the café during the slow hours, 10:30 am. She wondered if her dad was out there on the Alaskan waters reading this same newspaper and worrying about her. Would she be the next woman? Would this man with acne and a stutter come to Wild Catch Café and take her next?

It had been six months since she last saw her home. She remembered a girl whose name was Lidia who sat in front of her in calculus. *I cannot wait to get out of this god forsaken town*, she said. Annie had let that phrase sit in her mind—*god forsaken*. The use of God's name in vain made her conservative ears pinch. Had her mother ever heard Annie say this, she would have been smacked. But there was something else about those words that stuck with her. In New Jersey there were people everywhere. There were sounds. If she walked outside she could hear music playing at a poolside. She could hear church bells through her window on Sunday morning. She heard dogs barking at each other in their secret language.

What did it mean if a town was forsaken by God? She did not know, but she knew New Jersey had been forsaken.

This place though was something else. There was nothing bigger than Alaska. The animals here were massive. Eagles had wingspans like ship sails. Deer had antlers like oak trees. And the moose, the damn moose. They walked through yards by stomping on fences. They had knobby knees like knots in a trunk, shoulders that were wider than buses. And the land opened up for all of these creatures. One could see for miles. Looking out over the fields was like looking back in time at a place untouched, undisturbed. And then there were mountains which rolled on and on. It made Annie scared to think of the land beyond those mountains. Who could survive there? What creature would want to? Every bird here seemed undiscovered. Wolves howling will break your heart. The Alaskan wilderness was nothing to take lightly.

Something else ruled here, something that was unlike the God she was used to. Something here drove her mad with love. Something here had pushed her father out into the sea. Something here had changed her mother from a woman who sang in the church choir to a woman who sang Native American songs at night.

Something here kept putting women in the ground.

Annie worked until closing time. Each hour passed and she felt more and more like she was sinking.

Christo came by while she was closing. He sat on the stool and watched her work in the kitchen.

Where going out drinking tonight, he said. You're coming with?

She scrubbed at the dishes. She did not want to go out drinking with his friends. She turned and looked at him. She could not say no. She did not want to say no.

They walked around the edge of town, where Eagle River meets the woods. The scattered street lamps gave them pale orange lights to follow. Looking hard enough, Annie could see the end of the road, the town being flat and open, but there she also saw mountains—shapes relentlessly unchanging despite the constant fall and melt of snow. It felt like at the end of every road stood the same mountain, impossible to cross unless she booked a ticket out of there. This night, it was the end of winter and still dark. Annie felt cold in her bones. They wandered the streets without any place in mind. Mitch started singing and the rest of them shouted down the street. Annie felt bold. The sinking feeling had dissipated. She slipped her finger in the loophole of Christo's jeans. He squeezed her hand. They walked on like that.

They came to the new liquor store that hadn't had its opening day yet. The glowing neon sign—Brown Jug Liquor—didn't match the rest of the Alaskan landscape. They lingered around the front door, skittering around like ants. Christo bent down to pick up a rock. He leaned into Annie's ear, asked her if she felt excited. *Yes*, she said. And he backed up, smiled at her. *You don't know what excitement is*, he said. He threw the rock through the front window. It broke into tiny shards and collapsed like a waterfall. A little alarm went off as Christo stepped into the

store, glass crunching under his boot as he moved around. The others waited outside of the store nervously, keeping their eyes looking down the street.

Annie followed him in.

It was obvious now. She would follow Christo anywhere. She watched him slip small bottles into his sweatshirt, into his pockets. Annie looked around at the empty, dark store, quiet except for the beat of an alarm. It seemed like a place a forgotten girl might go. She thought again of Eklutna Annie. When she disappeared, did anyone miss her? She watched Christo scuffling around the liquor store. Annie loved him and yet she wasn't sure if he loved her back. If she was taken right now, swept off by a murderer, would Christo miss her? Maybe, she thought. But not the gut-wrenching longing she felt for him when he was away.

What if she was piled up with all the other women—stuck in the Alaskan wilderness forever, with no one to know her name?

Christo looked around at the new wooden shelves and clean glass doors, smiling because he was under a roof where he wasn't welcome.

The police sirens came and they ran out the window and down the street. They had made it to the woods as the police cars pulled into the parking lot of the liquor store. Mitch's house was close enough to run to.

They ran hard and fast. Annie's lungs burned. She couldn't see Christo so she followed the sound of his boots snapping branches. She couldn't keep up. If he runs on without me, she thought, I will surely be taken.

He stopped and grabbed her wrist. She shuttered and caught a scream in her throat. He leaned down and kissed her, held the back of her head so she couldn't breathe. *How do you feel?* He asked. The first word that came to her mind was, *afraid*.

Excited, she said.

He smiled at her, *now I believe you*.

Winter was relentless. Annie had never seen snowfall like this. The temperatures dropped below zero. The ground was frozen. Still those moose glided through her yard like visions. Her father was out on some long trip and had been gone for weeks. Her mother was stuck inside the house, burying herself under all those collectables. She wanted to tell her mother that their father was gone, had been long gone from the moment he stepped foot in Alaska. But the words were always getting caught in her throat.

She spent nights at Christo's house while his father was gone keeping the family business going—a brew house. It was the only thing keeping him sober right now, he told Annie.

They curled under a quilt near his wood burning stove, so close they were practically sitting on the bricks. The television was on low, blue lights flickered around the apartment. The snow was heavy but the wind was light. The drunks in Anchorage were filing into one of the three good bars in town. Every year a couple of people died getting so drunk they passed out in the snow, lost under fresh flakes. Bodies weren't found until snow melted.

When Annie heard this she was not surprised. This place seemed to be collecting bodies.

Christo talked about hunting. Getting the animal was only part of the fun. The other was walking through the woods, the navigation, the time it takes for the sun to come up and change everything. Animals, he said, were always awake for this while humans slept away the best parts of the day.

Annie scanned the deer heads hanging from the walls, the hides hanging like trophies. She did not understand this pursuit of death. She did not understand man's need to kill things. In

New Jersey, her father built homes to keep families happy, keep families safe. He made beautiful buildings with his hands. In Alaska, unable to walk on roofs, he turned to shooting animals, gutting them inside their garage, saving their flesh inside the freezer.

She hated the moose in her yard because they reminded her of where she was. But she could never aim a gun at them, never feel any joy from pulling the trigger.

That killer they're looking for, they think he is a hunter, she said.

This is Alaska, Annie. Everyone hunts.

I don't hunt.

You will, if you stay here long enough.

Christo had one hand rubbing the inside of her thigh, the other around her shoulders.

You did a good job capturing me, he whispered in her ear.

She shivered, only a moment. She watched the fire crackle. She felt the emptiness of Alaska, the uninhabitable places that rolled on for miles. How lonely it all was.

Come back to New Jersey with me, she said. She wanted to explain to him that there, there were too many people to feel lonely. There, the churches have pianos and organs and song books with gold letters. There, she knew everyone and everyone knew her. There, murderers are caught and locked up. There, a person can breathe easy.

He laughed at her, patted her head. *Don't be ridiculous.*

He kissed her like he always did, with his hands around her neck and his body leaning heavy against her. His hands and face were rough like sandpaper, and Annie thought he'd wear her down until she was nothing but sawdust. She thought he'd wear her down right to her soul. Having sex with him felt frantic, like she was doing the most important thing in the world.

That night she dreamt of Eklutna Annie again. She watched Eklutna Annie and Christo by the fireplace. They were talking and laughing. She wanted to talk to them. She couldn't. She could only watch. Eklutna Annie pushed her leg up against Christo. He grabbed her waist and started to kiss her. Then he was on top of her. He was aggressive. Annie watched as he turned into someone she didn't recognize. Then she could see, he was the murderer. A scream was in her stomach but she could not let it out. She could not make a sound.

In the morning, Christo was sleeping on the bear skin on the floor. *You were tossing too much last night*, he told Annie.

I have a feeling about this place, she said.

I don't recognize my family. I don't recognize me, she said.

Christo told her that these were things to get used to. There's no use picking your battles with the land you're living on. You'll lose every time. What did you think, Annie? That a place like this would take care of you? We stick our dead bodies in it and it turns into something sour. It gives us grass and we curse on it. It gives us flowers and trees and we spit on it, fuck on it, throw our shit on it. Walk anywhere long enough, it'll fuck you up. Best not to think on it too much. You'll lose your mind trying to understand a place.

Do you still love me? She asked him.

You're terribly needy, he said as he kissed her forehead.

In April, they caught the murderer.

Annie was at home with her mother. Her mother was wearing a traditional shawl with pale pink and blue fabric, brown triangles. It was large and heavy and made her mother look washed out. The television was on and Annie and her mother sat at the table drinking coffee

before Annie had to go to work. She had no idea what to say to her mother to lift her spirits—*it's not you Ma, it's them. It's all of them.* But like her mother, she didn't have the energy to say any of it.

On the television, she saw Eklutna Annie. She turned up the volume. Eklutna Annie's picture faded and a picture of a man replaced it. He had a face scarred from acne and thick, black rimmed glasses—*Robert Hansen*, the newscaster said.

This was him, Annie thought. This was the man she had feared in the dark for months. He was a baker, a man loved and respected by his community. He was married, had two children, and looked terribly average. Authorities had found a map in his bedroom with X's scattered across the landscape—a treasure map of bodies. After abducting a woman, he would set her loose in the woods and hunt them down like prey. A hunter through and through. He had won awards at local competitions. Another photo showed him in his basement, surrounded by taxidermies, holding up the head of a dall sheep.

Annie had not realized that she was sitting so close to the television.

Who would do such a thing? Her mother asked.

Annie thought about what Christo had said, that it was the land that fucked you up. And how could we stop it?

Those poor women, her mother said.

And what else could be said? Annie thought. And what else could be done? You can get the fuck out of here, she thought. But she could not leave Christo behind.

As they showed Robert Hansen's photo again, she wondered about Eklunta Annie. Still, they did not know her name. None of the newscasters seemed to care.

She was in a daze all the way to work. Wild Catch Café, the name of it, made her shutter. How fitting to describe her, Christo once pointed out, such a wild catch.

The news was on all day and they could not get enough of Hansen.

She served the coffee absentmindedly. She could not shake that feeling like something bad had happened. She could not put into words what she was feeling. Sad? Worried? But worried about what? She couldn't tell someone. They would laugh at her. *Don't be so ridiculous.*

On her break, she went out to the dock and put her feet in the water. Hansen had confessed—he had killed that woman by Eklutna Lake, stabbed her in the back when she tried to escape. He did not remember her name, but he remembered where she was from. Kodiak, a town just like Whittier on the waterfront surrounded by mountains. That water front was a 250 mile swim from Whittier, next door in a place like Alaska, on a map, a thumbnail away. Annie kicked her feet. The ripples rolled out into the sea. This water would eventually flow to Kodiak in the Alaskan current and then flow back to Annie.

It bothered her, that Hansen could not remember Eklutna Annie's name. He had hated her enough to kill her, but he did not know her enough to remember her name.

When Christo came to visit her during her closing shift, she had been swimming in these thoughts all day. He was full of energy, like always, and she could not understand his mood.

The guys and I are drinking tonight. You want to come?

No, she said, scrubbing the dishes.

Why the long face?

She felt anger rising in her and she did not know why. She had felt scared and vulnerable, and for what? She felt tears bubbling up and she swallowed them.

Annie? What's up?

She turned and looked at him and said, calmly, *did you hear they caught the murderer?*

The one who's been killing all those girls?

Yea, creepy stuff.

It's got me shaken up, that's all.

Why? You didn't know them?

No. I suppose not.

He said that he was surprised she wasn't relieved that the murderer was caught. Did you see he hunted the women? Christo asked. Did you see he had a map of all the bodies? He was almost laughing, shaking his head at the ridiculousness of it. How could a baker get away with something like this for so long? A *baker*, Christo made sure to emphasize. And he had a wife, what an idiot. Who could be dumb enough to love a man like that? She kept scrubbing the dishes, her hands burning from the cracks in her fingernails. Thirty women, Christo said again. Most of them strippers.

That's why you don't strip, he added.

He smiled at her, another joke.

What are you saying?

That I don't want my girlfriend to strip?

That's not what you meant.

She didn't want to be rude. But it was pouring out now, and she couldn't help herself. Christo pushed his fingers into his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. She was getting used to this gesture. It meant, Annie, you are making me so tired.

Don't blame me because you're in a bad mood.

She bit her lip and turned to finish the dishes. She scrubbed harder and harder. She heard him stand and pause. He walked over to her, stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. His hand reached for the bottom of her shirt. She felt captured. She shook him off.

He stepped back, stomped almost, to show her his anger.

You're more heartbroken about dead strippers than you ever would be about me, he said as he left the café. An absurd statement, meant only to hurt her. She heard the door slam, his way of having the last word.

She concentrated on the dishes and thought about what else she had to do: wash the tables, put the chairs up, clean out the coffee machine. She began to cry. She regretted it already. What was wrong with her? He was the only thing that kept her going in this god forsaken town. God forsaken, she thought. Yes, yes, something like that.

Annie went to the Moose's Tooth for a few beers with Christo and his friends the next night. Annie noticed a woman at the bar by herself, looking over at her. She had thick hair, dyed silver and black like a snowy owl and layers of gold jewelry around her neck and arms. She could not stop looking at her. She had a kind of confidence that Annie had never had. She looked like the kind of woman who told men exactly what she thought and didn't care.

Annie held Christo's knee under the table, looking for his hands. He wouldn't let her find them.

When the woman finally walked over to the table, she sat down on the other side of Christo. Her name was Kayla, she told them. She was an army wife whose husband was stationed at JBER. She wanted to buy everyone at the table a round, *on the American government*, she said. Her husband had left for Afghanistan. She was lonely. Her husband had cheated on her

with a girl who had eight fingers and twice as many teeth. She was getting a divorce. Some of the guys were shifting in their seats.

Christo? She asked. *Why not Chris, or Christopher?*

I like Christo. Christo is different.

Are you different though?

Annie could see, just in the way Christo leaned into this woman with the owl hair, that he was falling for her.

He asked her to dance. He looked at Annie and said, *that's ok right?* The excitement in his face made Annie's heart drop into her stomach. Kayla touched her arm so gently and said, *I'll bring him back soon, I promise.*

Annie danced with Mitch, made the best of it. The band played some fast country songs with a lot of steps. Annie could hear Kayla laugh as Christo spun her around and dipped her so close to the ground, she gasped. She sounded so in love with life.

The bar had Christmas lights strung from the rafters from last year and they still hadn't replaced the wooden chandelier that someone broke a few weekends ago. The floor boards were coming up, the paint was chipped and the place seemed on the verge of collapse. Once Annie thought it gave the bar character. Now, the place looked pathetic.

When Annie woke up the next morning from a dreamless sleep, hazy and still drunk, there was no Christo next to her, no Christo on the floor. The sun burned her eyes, burned from every angle, from each piece of glass in her room. She had no energy to close the shades.

Summer had passed and rolled into autumn, the warning season. This time around, she would heed the signs. Christo had fallen in love with someone else, a woman who had come

crashing into their life like a storm one night at Moose's Tooth. She nudged her way into the friend group, reached for Christo's legs under tables and bars when they thought no one was looking. Annie knew. She remembered that look, that feeling. Losing him felt slow, suffocating, like breathing underwater through a straw. But it had happened so fast—Christo and Kayla were whirlwinds, and Annie could not compete with that.

All summer she had spent with her mother going down by the docks, looking out to sea. When she was not working she would stand at the edge of town with her mother, both of them staring out over the water, hoping to see a ship coming in, her father at the front of it, waving. How he had missed them, he would say.

When September came and the leaves just began to turn, she held her mother's hand and told her she was going back to New Jersey. *It's been long enough, Ma. Dad has what he was looking for. It's time to take care of yourself.* But her mother looked her in the eye, confused, and said, *I am.* Annie took a step back and could see now that her mother hadn't lost herself, but had found her own peace in the mountains.

It was a few nights after Christo and his family's beer had won best brew in Alaska. It was months since he and Annie had talked, but she called him to congratulate him anyway. Annie told him she was leaving Alaska soon and asked if they could meet.

Christo and Annie took their shoes off at Eklutna Lake and walked through mud. Leaves were crimson. Soon enough the gray mountains would be white for another ten months.

She had never been to Eklutna Lake because she was too afraid. But the killer had been caught now. She had lost Christo. What was there to be afraid of anymore?

He was smiling when he got out of his truck. Since marrying Kayla, he'd let his friends with needles do the other tattoos. His arms were a mess of lines by then. When he walked through a room everyone was aware of him, and not because he walked loudly, which he did. He was still like a finger dragged through water affecting everything around him in ripples.

Hey Annie, I brought your favorite. You still smoke 27s?

Always.

They tried to walk on the dry cracked mud. Water ran into the lake from the surrounding woods. Christo told Annie about his family's new beer and how they made it. She didn't understand what he was saying, but it had been so long since they were alone together, Annie didn't mind so much. He told Annie that he wasn't surprised that she wanted to meet at this lake, given that for the duration of their relationship, Annie couldn't stop talking about that serial killer. *Eklutna Annie*, she thought, she couldn't stop talking about *Eklutna Annie*. What she didn't tell him was that she was hoping she would see her. She was hoping Eklutna Annie would walk right up to her and scare her shitless. She hoped she'd leave this place with the impression of death and not one more thought of Christo.

When he was silent, she asked, *So, everything ok with your dad?*

Yea, We're okay.

Everything ok with your heart?

He looked at her and smiled. *Heart's fine. You're quite the worrier.*

Warrior?

No. Worrier. But you know, you're a little of both. You're a little of everything.

You're flirting with me, she said pleasantly. He would not answer.

They sat down on a dry patch near the lake. She rested her head on his shoulder and felt him stiffen like a stranger. She wrapped her arms around his and couldn't feel the warmth of his body anymore. Would it have been better if the leaves were falling? Would he love her if Alaska was colored white instead? She reached for his hands, purple and swollen, but still rough like she remembered. They talked about her mother, how Annie did not recognize her anymore and how eager Annie was to bring her back to New Jersey. They talked about her plans to move back home. They talked about Christo's job—the views haven't changed much. They talked about his new house and he was careful not to mention Kayla.

She wanted to beg him not to leave. She wanted to ask him to stay in this place where they might see moose, wolves, ghosts. If not those things then stay for her. Stay because she needed something solid to hold on to. Stay because she wasn't sure if she was losing her mind. She wanted him to spend the night down at the lake before winter froze the mud and the rest of the goddamned earth. But she was silent.

I have to get back to Kayla.

She pulled away, and felt him relax.

At least let me make sure you get home okay.

I'm okay to drive.

Please?

She followed him down the road which swerved and dipped through the darkness. She turned off the radio. He drove fast and erratically, which she knew wasn't from the beer. He was riled up. Perhaps she had done that.

It was quiet and the moon was heavy and low. The roads winded through the woods with nothing on either side besides trees and a worn ice cream shop that sat oddly in the brush.

Christo was slowing down. They were coming up on his new house.

Annie smiled when she saw Mitch's truck out front. He had been enamored with Kayla too.

Christo got out and slammed the door and the truck sounded like it was going to fall over. He walked to the back of his truck and unlocked his tool box. Annie jumped out of her car and ran to him.

Christo, calm down, seriously. There's an explanation, I'm sure. What are you doing?

Stay out of it, Annie.

Annie's hands were on his arm and he flung them off with such force she fell over. He took his revolver from the tool box and walked towards his house, Taurus Judge in one hand, his other hand balled up. Her heart beat into her ears. All the lights were on. Everything looked warm inside. He kicked his wooden door and the hinges cracked off like plastic.

KAYLA! he yelled into the house as he walked.

Annie heard her scream. Following him from behind, Annie noticed his shirt was soaked through with sweat and the back of his neck glistened.

Get the fuck out here!

Kayla opened the bedroom door and walked up to him in a sheer bathrobe, her owl hair a mess.

What the fuck Christo? Where have you been? Are you fucking her?

Shut up Kayla. Where is he?

You want to shoot someone, coward. Shoot yourself!

He pushed past her too. She fell onto the floor and grabbed at his legs. Her face was wet and between sobs, she cried out, *I hate you. You hate me. Just kill me. You're crazy.* He walked with a limp down the hall toward his bedroom with his wife hanging on his leg. Annie crept along the hallway wall. She couldn't see much, but when Christo raised the gun and clicked off the safety, Annie could see Mitch half clothed behind the bed.

Stand up, Mitch. STAND UP.

There was one lamp in the bedroom of their tiny house. It was an oil lamp with no shade and it lit the room with striking light and defined shadows. Kayla's sobs rang in the quiet—ear piercing and panicked, like the sound of a child being dragged away from home. Annie was standing close enough to Christo that she could grab something near her and knock him over. Eklutna Annie stood in the corner near the light. She could only see half of her, the other half blended into the darkness.

Let him do it, Annie, she said. Let him kill both of them.

In the light, Mitch shook. He looked at her, pleading. He stood and put his hands up, trembling. *Chill man, it's no big deal. We're cool.*

But Kayla would not calm down. *Stop him!* she screamed. *Somebody stop him!*

He will be yours, Annie said, he will be yours.

Christo was motionless, sweat poured off his forehead in massive drops. He shot the revolver and the wall behind Mitch's head blew open. They cringed away from the explosion. The room was ringing. The sound bounced in Annie's head like razors. Letting go of the gun, Christo's hands grabbed at his chest.

Christo? Chris! Kayla yelled. Christo leaned against the wall and panted like a drowning animal.

Mitch stood up without his shirt and walked over to us. *Fucking asshole*, he said, as he punched Christo across the cheekbone, landing him face first on the floor. *Always was a piece of shit.*

Cold seeped in through the hole. Dust from the wall and smoke from the gun filled the room. Kayla went screaming after Mitch. Her voice was cracking, fading down the hallway.

Christo grabbed Annie's arm and told her to call 9-1-1. She did and she gave the operator the address, told the operator her friend was having a heart attack. She sat next to him. *My friend*, she told the operator. She looked around the room. They were alone.

When Annie first saw him look at Kayla that night at the bar, She thought that's it. She lost him. Then when she heard about his wedding she realized she was wrong. This was truly it. She had lost him. That night, Annie figured she'd never really had him, never would. Maybe death or some kind of space might make a piece of him hers.

It was those cigarettes. He whispered to her.

I always said those things would kill you.

I thought you might do that.

How could she be stupid enough to love a man like that?

Annie helped him find his aspirin bottle at the bottom of his pocket. She had never seen Christo so scared. She told him everything would be fine. She leaned down and whispered in his ear, *Will you remember me? Will you forget who I am?* But Christo looked confused, *what are you talking about?* She looked for Eklutna Annie and saw nothing. *I don't want to disappear*, she thought, but she could not remember if she said this out loud.

Annie went with him to the hospital where the doctor said she should go home. Home was Alaska now, with wilderness that no one should take lightly.

The days leading up to her departure were long. Mostly, she went down to Eklutna Lake, looking for Eklutna Annie. Annie's dreams never returned. Her sleep was deep and dark.

Annie lives in New Jersey, ten miles away from the house she used to live in, though it no longer feels like the home she missed all those months she was in Alaska. She thinks about the sky down here, because most days it's nothing but a sun stuck in an upside down blue funnel. But Alaska is all sky. The sun spins around your head like a halo during the summer and swims below the surface of the mountains in the winter. When Annie tells people this, she's not really telling them about the sky or the sun. She's really telling them about Christo.

There was no word from him. Silence was one of Christo's crueler tricks. She spent the days drinking coffee in the bookstore down the street. She went hiking and read books by waterfalls. She wrote for the newspaper and made some extra money as a ghost writer. She knows Christo is alive. She knows he is with Kayla. She knows the way a mother knows her kid is doing something bad. Annie goes to church, traces her finger over the gold letters. People look at her like she is ghost. She has to reintroduce herself. *My name is Annie. I grew up here. This is my home.*

Some nights Annie gets drunk and wanders around the neighborhood. Some nights she has one glass of wine with the girls down the street. Some days Annie does normal things. Some days she screams like wild into the backyard. Some days when she is shopping or at the book store or walking in the snow, she thinks she sees Eklutna Annie, a shadow who is there and who is not there. Well, Annie thinks, it looks like both of us have been forgotten.

A piece of her still hangs above those trees by the lake. Annie was in love with a man who tried to kill his wife's lover. He was stopped only by his broken body. Annie would not save his wife. She would not save Mitch. She would save only one, but he had forgotten her name. Annie doesn't tell anyone this. Something about the land, you don't know until you've been there.