

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: WHICHEVER OF MY PARENTS' GODS WILL TAKE ME

 Ali Goldstein, Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing: Fiction,
 2015

Thesis Directed By: Professor Howard Norman, Master of Fine Arts Program in
 Creative Writing

This novella titled *Whichever of My Parents' Gods will Take Me* is about a young woman named Ruth growing up in a bicultural home in post-World War II Detroit, Michigan as she trains for her first marathon. Told from a first-person lyrical point-of-view, the story seeks to capture Ruth's development as a runner and young woman through her voice and sensory perception. This novella takes the form of a triptych with three discreet sections in Ruth's life – adolescence, young motherhood, and old age – that cohere the life of a woman while putting Ruth's myriad voices in dialogue with one another. This is a story about a young woman obsessed with running at a time where it was both strange and dangerous for a young woman to run alone at dawn – but also about bravery, freedom, and what she saw as she ran through a changing and healing city.

WHICHEVER OF MY PARENTS' GODS WILL TAKE ME

by

Ali Goldstein

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
2015

Advisory Committee:

Professor Howard Norman, Chair
Professor Emily Mitchell
Professor Maud Casey

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part One.....	1
Part Two.....	59
Part Three.....	84

Part One

Daddy brought home the running shoes in a brown paper grocery sack. He stood in the dim doorway, a shadow of grease and gasoline. Mother had relinquished her roost and it was just daddy and I in the quiet kitchen. Mother was upstairs with a jazz program on the radio. There, in the kitchen, it still smelled of dinner's roast chicken and mother's perfume. After mother had dried the last dinner dish and headed upstairs, daddy went out to the car in the drive to bring something in. "Wait," he'd whispered to me. So, I waited. The door closed behind him. He turned on the hall lamp. The paper bag crinkled at his hand. He placed it before me on the kitchen counter.

"For me?" I asked, and he nodded. I peeled open the bag and peeked inside. I looked up to search the topography of daddy's face: he had olive skin and lips that pinched in on themselves when he was thinking, as he was then, waiting for me to open the grocery sack. He coughed into the silence. I was still searching his face when he turned and assumed mother's station at the sink. His back faced me. I could see just the golden haze of his reflection in the kitchen window above the sink. On the dark street beyond, a lamp hummed on. My hand reached inside the bag. "Daddy," I said. I pulled out one trainer, the left, and then the other, the right. They rested side by side on the counter: thick rubber soles, canvas tops, pristine white laces. They smelled ripe of new rubber. I held on tightly to each canvas tongue.

“So?” daddy asked. He turned to face me. He placed his hand on my shoulder and I blushed in his gaze. I felt uncomfortable letting him see that deep inside of me. “My friend at the rubber factory had them made special for you.”

I could not find the right words. My heart stammered at my throat. All I could do was shake my head, *no*. “They’re starting to get into trainers,” daddy said to fill the silence. He let his hand fall from my shoulder.

I did not know he knew about my running habit. Every morning before dawn, I put daddy’s coffee on the boil, laced up my Converse, and then I was off. I liked the city best when it was quiet and stirring awake, before even the great factories started their daily churning. I ran to the top of a hill overlooking Detroit, purple dawn breaking at my shoulders like it was the power of my stride bringing light to the sky. At the top of the hill, I liked to pretend that the city was my own, that it belonged to me. Those pale shapes below were my kingdom.

“Are they good?” daddy asked.

“Mother won’t like this,” I said.

He smiled wide, one tooth from each half of his grin missing, a hockey player’s patchwork smile. It was then he switched to French. Daddy’s French, smooth stones roughened to Canadian boulders. It was the only way I knew French was spoken then. “Entre nous,” he said. *Just between us*. “D’accord?”

“D’accord.” I nodded. I watched the knot of his shoulder instead of his face. He turned to the living room and the red chair awaiting him. His footsteps rattled the whole house. The light of the lamp, the sigh of the chair. The sudden static of the radio turning on was a shock that took my breath away. I looked to the shoes on the white counter. I

had not realized how I still gripped one in each hand. When I looked up, my face was a pale moon in the kitchen window, and our neighborhood beyond it, one lit-up square of a window after another.

That night I slept with the running shoes beside my bed, toes pointed towards me and laces in a neat bow, soles parallel.

...

I stared at them when I woke. I sat on my twin bed with its iron headboard trellised in flowers, a relic from grandmother. I stared with lust. The sky pressed against the small bedroom window, cold and black. It was still just early fall, but in Michigan there was always a spark of winter in the air, especially that early in the morning. I crooked my bare feet beneath my legs. The shoes were big, white monstrosities. I imagined how heavy they would feel at my feet and dreamed of just putting on my faded and reliable Converse instead. I knew, of course, that if dad chanced to see me still wearing my old shoes it would break his heart. I laced them up slowly. When I stood up from the bed and stepped, they bounced back. They were surprisingly light. I bounced back and forth, from my left foot to my right, smiling at the fog of my reflection in the black of the bedroom window.

Downstairs in the dark, I spooned coffee into the metal basin of father's Italian coffee maker, and then placed it on the stove. I turned on the gas and listened for the sound of the water boiling. Then, I shut the front door quietly behind me. Outside, it was just me and the quiet streets, just the way I liked it. I pushed to the end of the street, a row of weathered bungalows just like the one we lived in, and then turned right, towards

Greek Town, to the hill I chased up every morning. I laughed at how easy my familiar stride felt in these new shoes. I was flying.

It was 1949. The War had just ended and the sky swelled with the factory smells of productivity. We had a patch of sun-burned grass and a yellow bungalow we had enough hubris to call our own. Mother had even decided she liked the Americans for how they saved the Jews. Daddy worked at the car plant placing tires in their hinge, making them spin. Mother spent each day dueling with her reflection in the kitchen window. She muttered in Yiddish to herself, hands slimy with dough, waiting for the men to come home. She would be barefoot for the cool of the tile, her brown hair in a long braid all the way down to her hips.

I knew that I would never see another girl like me out running in the streets, but it was also too early for the neighbor's to take notice. To pry through their own blinds with watchful eyes, to revel at this eccentricity. Even I knew that my running was strange. But I would not have done it if I did not need to. To the neighbors still snoozing in their beds, I was a respectable girl, a young woman. I was quiet, gangly Ruthie.

My heart banged against my chest as I climbed up the hill. I leaned into it. On the horizon, the sky brightened to a pale grey. My lungs burned and expanded. Finally, I reached the crest of the hill. I was free up there, and there it was: my city, Detroit.

Below, the men were starting to leave for work. They poured into the streets in their grey coveralls heading to the factories. We lived in a Polish neighborhood, much to everyone's chagrin. The men were tall, blonde, and slight, which was how I recognized daddy – broad and dark-haired, the neighborhood's lone French-Canadian.

If daddy was on his way to work, it meant I needed to get home. I started back down the hill. I needed to be back before mother woke, lest she see the white shoes at my feet and look all the way up into my eyes. The wind pushed me, carried me, me and my flying feet.

“My little skinny,” she called me. As in, “my little skinny come help with dinner.” As in, “no boy is going to marry you skinny like that.” When mother looked at the jut of my hips through my navy school dress, she clasped her hand over her heart.

And it was mother, unlikely mother, who made me first want to run. Six months earlier; I was just barely seventeen. It was after a night of one of her moods. All night, I could not sleep listening to her cry. I flitted to patches of sleep wound with mother’s tears. When I woke early before dawn, I was exhausted, but also restless. My heart clanged. Downstairs, I noticed the worn patch of wood beside the front door where daddy kept his work boots; it was bare. Turning, I took in the coffee pot, too: it was already cooling, half-empty and steaming in the sink. He’d left for work hours before he normally did. I slid on my Converse and stood outside just for the air. I gulped at its cold. I tasted its quiet. Then, something came over me, and I started to run. I ran, and I ran. I ran until all I could hear was my own heart. I ran until my muscles ached and my mind went numb.

She could get low, and then lower. Every little thing she lost made her cry. An errant red button for a sweater; a tortoiseshell comb for her hair; the missing pair to a sock. She tallied the lost.

This morning, however, six months later, as the front door stuttered closed behind me, I looked at my new, white running shoes. Already they had streaks of the road along

their soles. Upstairs, the swoon of mother's favorite morning jazz station. I caught my breath. She would be performing her morning beauty rituals. She would apply cold cream and toner to her face with a patient hand. To her driest parts, her elbows and knees, and even between her fingers, she would massage a rose-scented lotion. I listened to her hum alongside the music and it made me hopeful that today she would be ok.

...

The city just barely light excited me. I left the house after the street sweepers emptied the sidewalks of their litter. There were no jangling cans, no bags clinging to street signs. Even the bums with the city in their breath slept in their own sacred nooks. I ran in that moment where night became day, and I could see it happen as my legs filled with blood like their own dizzy happiness. Night leeches from the sky in stripes. I pumped my arms. My breath, and then the left foot, and then the right. The one, two of my steps. Over and over. Through our neighborhood I ran, past the perfect squares of lawn and trees drooping with trees, to Greektown, where the houses were red brick with gold roofs and the air steamed with coffee sold by the cup at neighborhood markets. To the wealthy part of town where the Tudors with shuttered windows and walls of grey stone sat back from the road, watching. These were people who wore silver watches and drank their coffee in the window while reading the paper and who did not seem to know how to hurry. Then, up, up. To the hill, to where I could see the part of the city that was steel and fire. A place where the rubber burned so hot a man could ply it into any shape he wanted with just his two gloved hands. There it was. I caught my breath. The city wheezed with me.

When my legs throbbed later beneath my jumper at school, their ache felt nearly delicious, like a secret, like joy.

...

The next morning, I spotted a boy as I sped down the hill towards home. The sky was crisp and clear. His back faced me. I saw the pale nape of his long neck, the curtain of his straw-colored hair, the colony of bright brown freckles on his hands and forearms. I pictured his eyes even before he turned and squinted at me against the bright morning light: they would be a pale, liquid blue. I slowed my pace, trying to decipher if I recognized him from school. He wore a navy newsboy's pouch slung over his shoulder. Each time he threw a paper into a yard, he refined his pitch. Sometimes, the paper flew in a neat, patient arc before settling in the green square of grass. Sometimes, the paper twirled and spiraled. At each shot, his arm extended, I heard him whistle, long and low, as he watched the paper bundle sail towards land.

I crossed to the other side of the street, but still he jumped at the sound of my steps. He froze with his arm in mid-air, a paper enrobed in plastic clutched in his fist. "Sorry," I whispered. Then, I found my breath. "Sorry." I kept running.

"What are those?" he shouted at my back. I turned and he nodded towards my new running shoes. When he smiled, there was a tiny gap between his two front teeth. I shrugged, but with a quick blink of a smile. I did not recognize his face, but still there was something familiar in how he moved, like I knew his stuttered grace, or trusted it. I felt him staring at my back as I ran away. "I like your short hair," he called at my shadow.

...

On Sunday, we pressed into coats and packed into the Ford. Behind mother and daddy was a small bench where I sat. It was quiet all the way to the ice rink. I watched for the boy with the freckled hands through my corner of mother's window. There was a rush of light through the front window that hit me square between the eyes and made me blink. Mother placed her hands one inside the other and watched the neighborhood. I followed her gaze. It was Sunday, the day the men were home. Blonde fathers with long white necks mowed the lawn, or scooted beneath cars in the driveway, rusted tools spilling out of a box beside them. Blonde mothers watched from the front stoop, babies on the knee. They enjoyed the presence of their men, even if the men were still too quiet and preoccupied, and the women still too anxious, about where to stand and how to hold their painted faces, about the roast in the oven. It scared me, these scenes passing for calm. How much effort and precision went into choreographing a Sunday morning. I watched it all with mother. I even felt her indulge in the sun through the front window and watched in the side mirror as she closed her eyes and smiled at its warmth on her forehead. Behind us, a baby cried, a door slammed. Mother did not skate, but still I thought she at least enjoyed the Sunday feeling of leaving it all behind. Of opening her eyes and watching the neighborhood dwindle to a point of light. Every boy helping his father in the driveway looked for one long second like the boy I'd met, until I saw them gesture, or reach for a tool, and I saw their bare, pale hands.

The rink was at the edge of town surrounded by old factories. Inside, skaters wrapped in bright-colored scarves and hats filled the ice. Mother wrinkled her nose at the rink's musty smell but then daddy turned and saw, and shook his head. Mother rolled her eyes and swatted the air. We walked by a man in a newsboy cap selling hot chocolates

from a cart just inside the rink's entrance. Mother stopped and reached into her pocket. Coins jangled at her fingers. "I'll catch up to you," she said. Daddy watched her closely. "Here," he said, offering up a shiny quarter.

I stuffed newspaper into my pawnshop skates to keep my feet warm as daddy laced up his own. We sat in the front row abutting the rink, and I watched the faces of the passing skaters as I waited for daddy. Their faces were luminous and pink, frost in their lashes. A man let go of his wife's hand on the ice, and she screamed with a peal of laughter as she spun, released across the ice. I waited for her to stand still.

"Here," daddy said, stooping before my skates. He tugged at the grey laces. "They have to be good and tight. Like a glove." He clucked as he wound the laces. The leather skates squeezed against my feet, and even though the feeling was familiar, I winced. I heard mother hum down the stairs and towards our seat as we pushed onto the ice. On Sunday, mother watched. Daddy flew ahead of me on the rink. He wound his hands into a knot at the small of his back. He was so sure on the ice. I held onto the wooden rim of the rink, toeing my way forward. I was awkward on skates, "his skating giraffe," daddy called me, but still I joined him on the ice so he would not have to be alone. As a teenager freshly landed from Quebec, he'd dreamed of the pros. He'd only given up hockey when mother told him he was a husband now, and then a father, and that he needed to be practical. We all knew his grief. We tasted it in the air of the Ford on the ride home from the rink.

I turned, still holding onto the edge of the rink. Skaters passed me in a blur. In the bleachers, mother took off her lilac cashmere gloves, a gift from when daddy got promoted to shift manager, and her one luxury. She clasped the gloves one on top of the

other in her lap. With her long fingers, she clotted up spilled hot chocolate from the bench. Sure that no one was watching, she licked the hot chocolate from her fingers, and then smiled at herself.

Daddy skated like he was the only one on the rink. He wore a red beanie pulled low over his thick eyebrows, snowflakes on his sweater. Mother watched him with her pink lips pursed, liked she had to cork her longing.

At the edge of the rink, I was still, and cold. I throbbed with their longings.

...

I woke earlier to make sure I saw him. The boy with the freckled hands. I smiled despite myself when we passed in the street. A big, dizzy smile too – all teeth, like an animal. Though I did not know what to say to the boy, I liked the way he whistled at my back. Especially in the dark morning when the sound of air escaping between the gap in his front teeth, and that of my steps on the pavement felt like the only sounds for miles. If daddy's coffee burned from sitting on the stove for too long, he did not complain.

That was all for a week, or maybe even two, our call and response across the neighborhood street. At school when geometry bored me, I would think of his back, of the points of his shoulders covered in the flannel of his shirt, of his outline ribbed in morning's shadow.

One morning, he was on our street as I was coming home. My legs shook with the electricity and exhaustion of my run. "Hi," he said first. I slowed to a stop. I shook my legs to keep the blood flowing. "I don't bite," he continued, waving me over to his side of the street. It was just the beginning of October, but already the lawns at dawn smelled of frost. Morning was slowly filling the street with light. It was not quite so dark. I could see

his face. The long line of his nose and how he held his jaw, waiting to speak again until he heard my voice. I noticed his right hand shake a little. “Hi,” I said.

“What’s your name?” he asked. His breath smelled of coffee.

“Ruth,” I said. “Ruthie.”

“You look familiar. You go to Seacrest?”

“Who are you?” I asked. The news boy’s pouch at his stomach was nearly emptied of papers.

He watched me. Finally, he said, “I didn’t know girls could run.” I shook my head and started as though to keep running when I saw the widening light of his smile. Then, as if I’d confessed something, and out of politesse he was obliged to confess something too, he said, “I’m saving for a car. A truck!” He whistled and stretched his arms wide. His eyes were the pale, liquid blue I’d imagined, even in that grey light. “The biggest on the block!” He laughed. There was a slice of pink through the gap between his teeth the color of an exposed muscle.

“Your house doesn’t get the paper,” he said. This startled my breath and words into a knot. Daddy left for work before the paper arrived and mother had trouble reading English, but I did not like this sudden compulsion to explain myself. I did not want to explain. I shook my head no. The light was revealing our shapes. I nodded at him, and then I kept running.

“My name is Walt,” he shouted at my back. “I go to Catholic.”

When I walked out the front door for school later that morning, there was a paper in our yard. I picked it up and thought of the freckled hand that threw it. Of the boy with the eager smile saving for the block’s biggest truck.

I did not get a chance to tear the paper open and read it at school, and when I got home mother called for my help from the kitchen. She sat at the island, her hair loose from its braid, her face wilting above a mug of tea before her. I could smell its warm ginger and chamomile. Her feet hung off the stool, bare and not quite reaching the floor. Standing beside her, awaiting her words, I looked through the window above the sink, at the neighborhood of teal and rust and growing blonde boys, as mother saw it, as though it were my whole world. That single fogged frame. Tears stung at the corner of my eyes. I rested my hand across mother's shoulder. I felt her knots. When I looked to mother's face, there was a ring of melted mascara below her eyes. At my touch and my stare, she shook her face away from me. "Ruthie, my skinny," she began. "I need you to chop the onions for me for dinner. For some reason they are making me cry." There was not a single onion on the counter, or even a wooden cutting board, but I silently obliged. I found the onions in their sack. I found mother's favorite chopping knife, with dimpled edges. She watched me as I chopped, her hands hugging the warmth of her mug of tea. I pushed the onion's copper skins into a pile and swept them into the trash. "I lost my pencil," she continued. "My favorite. Now I cannot write to home."

I went to her, my fingers ripe with onions. I felt like a giant standing beside her sitting frame. I placed my hand against her moist cheek. "We'll get you new pencils," I said. She let me hold onto her for a second before she wriggled free, and stood. She went to the sink. "*Je suis, tu es, il est,*" she whispered, conjugating daddy's verbs as she watched her reflection in the darkening window. I am; you are; he is. The French sounded awkward at her mouth. She sighed into the shapes of the verbs. She turned to me. "We light the Sabbath candles this Friday," she said. She nodded.

When daddy came home from work, she was already in the bedroom with the door closed. She did not come down for dinner. We ate cold sandwiches, daddy and I, and then, even though I knew it was cheap, I threw the chopped onions into the trash, where she would see the waste.

The next morning, I ran for over an hour, longer than I'd ever run before. When I reached the hill, I leaned in, and sprinted up. I wanted the hill and its demands on my stride to empty me of all that I was feeling. I could not even stop at the crest of the hill to admire the waking city. I kept going. My legs hummed.

I did not smile, or slow, to enjoy the music of Walt's whistle at my back. He was there on a wide, flat sweep of road, and I ignored him. I tried not to imagine the confused look on his face, but I knew that I'd hurt him. That at the very least I took his breath away. That the next paper he threw into a yard would fall flat and hard instead of soaring.

The house was silent when I arrived home covered in cold sweat. Mother was still asleep. At the kitchen counter, I collapsed into my arms. My sweat smelled of salt, but also onion and garlic, like something mother might throw into the soup.

Quiet then on the steps, I went to my bedroom. I stooped on my knees to feel under the bed. The bed skirt gathered at my shoulders. There was a grey mound of lint, a stray sock, the copper glint of a penny. There was also the newspaper I'd hidden there. I grabbed it and reeled up; I listened for mother. She slept, still.

I spread the newspaper across the white island. There was a story about the country's prosperity, a story about reconstruction in Germany, a picture of a village block on the coast of France that was still rubble. As I turned the page, my eye caught on a black and white picture of a man running. He was skinny, all arms and legs, in a

sleeveless shirt and tiny shorts. Before him was the word, “Finish” painted in white across the pavement. A city stretched behind him. “Boston Prepares For Annual Marathon,” the headline read. And then, in smaller print just below, Post-War Race Asserts Patriotism, National Unity.” The man in the photograph wore running shoes just like my own, with bright white laces. “The 26.2 mile course will stretch through all the city’s neighborhoods,” I read a few paragraphs down. “Serious runners from across the country will compete...” Jazz music sounded upstairs. I rubbed my thumb over the man’s shoes. As I folded up the paper, I noticed my thumb bore the fog of newsprint. Quickly, I shimmied off my running shoes and headed upstairs to get ready for school.

I knew that, “the country’s most serious runners,” meant, “men,” and besides, Boston was a world away. I knew it was on the East Coast against the Ocean, the one that smelled of salt. I knew all this, and yet, as I fell asleep that night, finally emptied, I pictured myself in my fancy sneakers before the line on the pavement that read, “Finish.” I heard the city’s applause. I did not know how long 26.2 miles was, not exactly, nor how many laps around my own city it would require. Still, the challenge stayed with me. I knew somehow that I had to see for myself if I could run a marathon. There, at the back of my eyes, on the brink of sleep: my skinny legs crossing the finish line, and a boy with freckled hands and a wide smile waiting, watching.

...

When a voice called my name just beyond the school fence, I blinked at the window of an old red truck. The sound of his voice – light, but insistent. His face peered from behind the window. He cranked down the window and reached his hand over its lip. I grabbed his open hand. “You did it,” I said. We were city kids and few of us owned our

own cars. My classmates tried not to stare as they pushed past onto the sidewalk. At the boy in the faded red truck with the golden cowlick and long, freckled fingers. At how he was talking to me, Ruthie, quiet, serious Ruthie with the short brown hair and the skinny legs. I blushed at their quiet approval. They walked away buzzing, and I was proud. I'd never quite fit in. Walt noticed it too. He lowered the window down further and pressed his chin against the glass. He beamed at me. "So I won't be seeing you in the mornings then?" I asked. I let go of Waltie's hand and he rolled up the window. I pressed my nose and then my lips against the glass. I felt his heat from the other side of the window as he did the same. He puckered his lips into a cartoon kiss, and I kissed back. I kissed the fog he left on the glass. I peeled back and placed my hand in the circle of the window marbled by our breath.

"How else will I pay for gas?" he asked, rolling down the window.

I sat in the passenger seat beside him. The car's fabric still smelled of an older man's habits, of cigarettes and spilled moonshine. There was, however, the quiet presence of the laundry detergent his mother used to wash his plaid shirts, the ones he rolled up neatly to his elbows, unself-conscious of his freckles. He did not speak as he drove. There was something intimate and quietly electric about being in his car, about seeing this tiny piece of his world. I searched his car for clues as to who he was, but the interior was perfectly clean. There were not even crumbs in the cup holder. The familiar neighborhood streets with the hopeful names looked different from my seat high up in the truck. The streets through the window caught the fall light like they were posing for its luster. The trees held onto their leaves. The neighborhood that afternoon, however, felt charged with how the season was about to end, to become another. Like we were waiting

for the leaves to shake loose. To tumble through our thick, blue air. So that we might be there, feet in the grass, staring.

“This is it,” Walt said. I startled back to the moment. Walt pulled on the shift and sidled beside the curb of a house nearly identical to my own. His was a mint green whereas mine was yellow.

“Are you sure I can come in?” I asked. I felt his arm close to mine and I did not want him to move.

Waltie propped open my door and he gave me his hand to help me down. I jumped down instead. He shook his head at me. Their lawn was unseasonably green and lush. “My mom’s name is Mary,” he said. He took my cold hand.

She too was in the kitchen. She wore socks with ribboned ankles and her hair to her shoulders. The dress she wore was peach with a white collar and a single, striped button at its nape. When she turned from the oven to take my hand and look me in the eye, the skirt of her dress flitting out from the waist nearly spun. “You must be Waltie’s runner girl,” she said. Her teeth were imperfect like Waltie’s. The way her face held onto her twisted smile, however, made her somehow beautiful and not just pretty. As though pretty wasn’t wide enough, or complicated enough, to capture the way emotions showed up in her face.

“Ruthie,” I said. Her skin at my hand was rough. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mary. Though I thought Waltie knew to keep that a secret. The running that is.”

She stared at me. She stood in a puddle of golden afternoon. “Because I don’t know what everyone will think,” I continued nervously. “It’s a bit strange, no?” I tried to

smile. In that moment, I hated my dark hair and my thick brows and the dull luster of my eyes. I did not want to be the first to look away.

“I think if you look closely,” she began. “We might all be a little a strange.”

Waltie grabbed onto my elbow crooked up from my waist with both hands.

“How about a snack?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you, ma’am. Mary.”

We watched as she pulled four slices of white bread from the bag and placed two on each plate. Then, she topped the bread with a hunk of cheddar, a sliver of butter, and a piece of tomato. She scanned her pinkie along the log of butter and brought it greased to her lips. Her smile gleamed like meat.

“Thank you, ma’am Mary,” Waltie laughed on their front porch, sandwich in his mouth and his plate balanced across his knees. He unwound the crust from his sandwich.

“You’re such a child,” I said. I reeled up my shoulders like a proper young woman. The cheddar mixed with the butter tasted rich and sharp.

“This is good,” I said. I tried to eat slowly.

“It’s like you never had a cheese sandwich before,” he said.

...

Mother wore a fresh coat of lipstick and the kitchen smelled of baking roast when I got home from Waltie’s. Through her window above the sink, trees heavy of leaves. Fall would not leave us. The kitchen radio was on like a static tether to the world. “Your lips feel like winter,” mother said as I leaned in to kiss her cheek. She was digging her hands into dough in a metal bowl to nurture a new loaf of bread. Mother would never just pull bread from a bag, already sliced by a machine. Watching her reflection in the

darkening window, I realized how the kitchen, even the entire house, smelled of her. Of meat so fresh it was still marbled with blood, of perfume, of sweat salty with yeast. I wondered what Waltie would think of how our house smelled, so unlike the neat, nearly empty smell of his house, like a house just finished and painted. Mother's perfume smelled of a field of wild flowers that existed nowhere in our Detroit, which was how I knew she longed, too. "Will you have an afternoon coffee with me?" mother asked. She patted my arm and brushed the bangs from my eyes. "Yes," I said with a nod.

We sat with our elbows on the Formica, coffee in blue mugs before us. I felt elegant beside her, even though I knew my hands cupping my mug were wild and chapped like a man's. Then, I leaned over the sink and pried open the window, just to smell the cold in the leaves.

...

My training plan was this: each day I ran a little bit longer. I knew there had to be a science to training for a marathon, but I ran in my own way, each morning bursting from the front door, shoulders hunched, head dipped into the sky. I pushed beyond what I knew of my city. Beyond my hill, beyond the ball park, beyond the factories steaming with rubber and steel. I ran to a point where if I squinted I could see the fields of the country. Where there was a sky so flat and blue just the feat of the sun rising made me feel small. I turned around when I was scared to go any further, scared that I might not make it home. Waltie would whistle at my back, but some mornings my blood ran so loud I did not even hear him.

At the rink on Sunday, mother watched through the cold glass. Monday morning, her lilac cashmere gloves, washed by hand the night before in the same tub of soapy

water as daddy's coveralls, would be drying in the sill above the sink. In that moment before I turned on the kitchen light, I'd think they were hands.

...

We did not talk of school, or our families, of his paper route, or my running. In the car, we just listened to the wind at the windows. I did not know what I would find if I pushed at his quiet, if I cracked it open. For now, I allowed him his quiet. I waited for him to help me out of his truck. Instead, he stood waiting in his front yard as I sat in the passenger seat with the door open. "You don't say hi to me when you run by in the mornings," he said. "Heck, you don't even notice me." I smiled at that word, *heck*. "You're so much more serious about it all of a sudden."

I looked to the front window of his house and thought I saw the golden flint of his mom pretending not to watch. When I blinked, there was only warped afternoon light in slants across the window. "So you feel jealous?" I began.

He shook his head. "If you're tired of me, it's ok. Just let me know. I don't want you to pretend to like me."

"Waltie, that's not fair. I'm training."

He laughed, and I resented the sound of it. I looked to my knees and my hands. "What are you training for?" he asked. "Running away?"

I looked him hard in the eye. He did not blink. His hands sparked at his sides. "A marathon."

"Right," he said.

I jumped out of the car and pushed past him. “It’s 26.2 miles,” I said, walking to the house. Again, a frantic wash of light in the dark square of the window that could have been Mary.

“Where are you going to go?” he asked, following me. I listened to his steps in the grass, how they slipped into the patches muddy with fall’s melting and freezing, melting and freezing. “Is Detroit even that big?” He grabbed my shoulder just as I was about to push open the front door. “Ok fine,” he said. “I take it all seriously. You seriously.”

In the foyer, I smiled big for Mary.

Waltie had brothers, a whole gaggle of them, all blonde and gangly and awe-struck just like him, like I could have fallen in love with any of them. And yet, Mary always had bread in the bag. I liked watching the imprecise, but patient way she carved cheddar from the block and smeared the lumps of butter on each sandwich. She made me feel like we were the only ones she cared about. Like she just waited for us to burst through the front door after school.

Waltie gave me the second half of his sandwich, seeing the ferocious way I ate. He laughed at how I tried to eat slowly, but then squished the corners of the white bread with my urgency. Waltie kept his slice of tomato before giving me his second half. He’d stare at the red slice in his open palm before eating it whole in one sloppy bite. “How come you never have me over?” he asked. There was tomato pulp on his lips. I laughed. A big, mean laugh. He watched me with his freckled hands in his lap. “I’m serious,” he said. I shook my head and swallowed the last of my cheddar. I considered the street before us fading to dusk.

“We’re too foreign,” I said.

“So?” he asked. His face was puzzled in such an earnest way; I leaned in to kiss his eyelashes. He leaned back. “Ruthie. No. I don’t understand.”

I stood, wiping crumbs from my lap. My legs ached as I pushed up from my seat. “We don’t eat cheese sandwiches,” I said. I walked down the street emptied of its children. It would soon be dark. He did not call for me.

...

Mother had her Sabbath. Her face looked pretty lit up by the candles. The kitchen window hung open to let out the smoke and the steam. We could hear mothers outside call their children home. Tiny feet clattered down the sidewalk. Doors slammed. I listened to the noises beyond the window with a sort of longing. Mother was focused on the light. She gestured in circles with her cream hands and eyes closed, culling the light and heat towards her. Father read the prayer from a page in a book that spelled out the sounds in English letters. He was cautious of his movements, lest his big frame dampen the flickering candles. I tried to listen to mother sing. To let the sound of her voice fill me. That was the challenge after all, letting this be enough. To be still. Outside, the leaves started to fall.

We had just finished the prayers and set out the soup bowls when there was a knock at the door. The sound grew louder. Daddy went to answer it. I stayed at the table with mother as her eyes flitted back and forth from the candles to the soup growing cold in the bowls. I heard Waltie’s voice and could not breathe. I wanted to blow out the Sabbath candles and hide in the darkness. “I’m here to ask permission to take your daughter Ruth on a date.” He had practiced these lines. He had carried them with him all

the way down the long block. Daddy's loud stillness. Mother pulled herself from the table and rested her napkin in a tangle on her chair.

"It is the Sabbath," she said at the door. There was silence. I doubted Waltie knew what the Sabbath was.

"You must be Ruth's mother," Waltie said. He must have offered up his hand: there was space in the conversation for her to consider taking it. How badly I wanted to nudge her forward, to scream, *take it! Just shake his hand!* I waited at the table, clammy knees bent and bouncing, twisting toward the sounds. We were going to lose the fire of the candles. The Sabbath would be ruined and the soup cold, and mother would cry.

"I can see she gets her beauty from you."

I burned, bowing into my hands.

"The Sabbath only lasts one day," mother said. Her accent was thick. I whispered the words into my hands in my own perfect American accent. I wondered at the miracle of her face permitting him. Her dark clothes and bare feet, Waltie searching through the shadowed triangle of the open front door for my appearance somewhere inside. She would hold up a single finger for *one day*.

"Thank you," Waltie said. His golden cowlick in the falling light through mother's eyes as she watched him walk away.

Mother eyed me through the dancing light of the Sabbath candles between us. Soup spoons clinked. Daddy was silent.

Daddy waited for me after dinner. Mother wiped clean the kitchen sink, singing a standard soft and low. She almost had a man's singing voice. I made to head up to my room when Daddy cleared his throat, which I knew meant, *stay*. He winked at me across

the darkening kitchen. “Thanks, mon chou,” he said to mother. He was at her back to kiss the top of her head. She set down her sponge.

As she walked upstairs, he poured the cold dregs of the coffee into a mug and sipped at it. “Ruthie,” he said. I just wanted to be in my own quiet corner of the house. But when I turned to face him, he pulled out a newspaper. Its date printed in the upper right-hand corner came into focus. It was from two weeks earlier; it was Waltie’s paper.

“I saw this sticking out of the trash, and I was curious,” daddy said. “Because we don’t get the paper.” Mother’s radio filled the silence as he watched me. Across the counter, he spread open the paper. “When I turned the page, I saw this picture. Like someone had soaked up all its ink.” He gestured like he was sponging up the photograph with his bare hand. “I was not surprised to see the story was about running. A race called a marathon?”

“Daddy,” I said. “It’s just a silly thing. I was just curious. I’d never seen running talked about before.” In the kitchen window, our reflections glowed.

He shook his head. “But you are not a silly person.”

The kitchen smelled of fire from the dwindling Sabbath candles. I looked to my hands, at the patterns the flames made across my skin. “What is a marathon?” he asked.

“I thought you supported my running. That’s why the shoes?”

“What makes you think I don’t? It’s a long race, no?”

I nodded. I could not get a read on his face. Upstairs, to mother’s skin, cold cream and toner, a dollop of lotion flecked with dead roses.

“Ruthie,” he said. “I just want to help. To be your coach.”

“But I already,” I began. “I’ve been training. Already. I’m ok. Thank you.” I did not want to give up the heady freedom of my morning run. A solitude so deep I felt it in the proud ache of my muscles. When I re-examined his face, I was surprised by how much hurt I saw there.

“Yes please,” I stammered. “I need a coach!”

“Bien,” he said. He clapped his big hands together and then kissed my head. “Très très bien.”

The light was on in the kitchen when I came downstairs in the morning. Daddy gulped at coffee from a red Thermos. He wore a shiny whistle around his neck. “Good morning!” he said. “Bonjour!” I was bleary-eyed, sore, and nervous. “We’ll stretch outside,” he continued.

We made triangles in the cold driveway and spun our hands to our toes. I leaned against the house to stretch one calf and then the other.

“Have you been doing hills?” daddy asked. I thought of my favorite hill; I did not want to share that with him. I shrugged.

“You need to do hills,” he said. “They are good for your strength.”

“Can we go?” I asked. “It’s cold.”

Not my hill then, but a nearer one: he stood at its crest with a whistle as I ran up and down it. I had twenty seconds of recovery in between each set. “Good!” he shouted. I tuned him out. I thought of Waltie. This workout would last too long for me to see him. He’d wait in the cold street for the sound of my stride. Then, he’d go inside, wash his face, put grease in his hair. He’d smoke a cigarette in the seat of his car with the window

down, feeling like a man. All along, he'd think of me. "Good!" daddy kept shouting. Already, I hated that whistle bouncing at his neck.

...

Waltie drove the old Ford, his hand at the stick, the road dark. Overhead, a frenzy of stars. I did not know what to do with my hands. "I can't believe mother said yes to this," I said. His eyes were straight on the road, face all angles in a shard of moon. I swallowed. It had been only school and training for months, but there on the horizon was the city. Lit up so bright in a sky of black it looked on fire – a city in flames.

I sweated through my mother's perfume. We spent his paper route money on bowls of spaghetti we slurped up wild and hungry, like country folk. We danced feet on feet, necks twisted, and holding on to each other tight. Waltie kept looking at me with his mouth paused open – something dangerous like hope hovering at his lips. I was scared of going home. Of the long dark road and the moment Waltie would have to let go. Of waking up in the morning without enough sleep and having to answer to daddy. Of mother lining up her socks across the bed, making sure each had a pair. All I could feel was scared. My muscles ached.

The city hissed and steamed. The women wore well-tailored dresses and ladylike heels, hair coiffed and loneliness tucked away. The city scared me now. This city: it was different than the one I ran through in the morning. The way the men looked at me, the way the sky hid its stars. I closed my eyes and tried to smile. I leaned in closer, and it was enough for Waltie, for now. Waltie ordered two scotches at the bar and the Italian behind the bar raised one eyebrow.

“And what does the lady want?” I grabbed the scotch and gave the bartender a big smile. My stomach felt empty, a cavern you could drop a penny into and not hear it clink at the bottom.

“This.”

Two men spoke French across the bar, throaty with Canada, and it was all I could hear.

I knew I would wake up in the morning and lace up the white shoes from the brown paper sack.

Outside, we stood with our backs against the cold truck. Waltie wore his arms crossed. I still tasted the liquor like a flame at the back of my throat. Before us, the dark city, lit up. Men pouring from the bar shouted in Italian and Polish, occasionally French. The women followed, walking on their toes so their heels wouldn't sink into the mud. Waltie watched me. He smelled of the pomade he'd rubbed in his hair to make his cowlick lie flat. I tracked the shadows across the bones of his face.

“This was fun,” I said. I nodded at the rectangles of light before us, the city's many jointed fingers, at the sky freed of its steam and its steal. “The city is beautiful right now.” Waltie unwound his arms and took a step closer. At his movement, the faint smell of his mother's laundry detergent. He rested his forehead against my own, and I held my breath.

“Do you have to go home right now?” he asked. I thought of mother asleep and daddy beside her.

I shook my head.

“And we don't have school tomorrow, right?”

I smiled nervously, all tongue and teeth. My nose leaned into his.

“I want to show you something,” he said. He took my hand and squeezed.

Mon Dieu!, a woman in a sparkled silver dress shouted, tripping out of the bar. Mud kicked up across her tights at her step. *Claudette*, a man said, following her, two coats perched spilling across his arms. He blushed as he passed us. The woman winked at me, before the man caught her around the waist.

“Waltie,” I said. I pushed away from him with laughter in my breath. Lit up in the bar’s circles of light, his ears burned like a school boy’s. His arms found themselves again at his chest.

“What did I do wrong?” he asked.

“Like I’m just going to follow you to some strange place in the middle of the night? You really thought that was going to work?”

His hand reached to smooth his cowlick, but his hair already lay flat. “It’s just the family farmhouse. It’s swell.”

I did not know what to say and so I waited. I was not yet ready to go home. To take off my shoes alone in the shadows, to unclip my earrings and massage the redness from my ears, to miss his breath at my neck when he leaned in close to say, *look*. I was also not the kind of girl who stayed out all night with a boy. I did not want to be that kind of girl.

“My Great Aunt just died and left it to us,” he continued. Again, he grabbed my hand.

“So it’s haunted?”

“I have a flashlight.” He smiled wider.

I looked to my feet, sore in borrowed heels. “I have to run early in the morning.”

When I looked up, there he was. I pressed my hand against his heart to feel it beat. “Ok,” I said. I copied his earnest smile. I tried on his happiness. I laughed there in the cold parking lot just to hear myself do it, just to tell myself I was free.

The city disappeared behind us. Dead corn shoulder high swept both sides of the road. Out here, the darkness was so resolute, I blinked just to hold onto some stammered sensation of sight. The road before us existed only in quickly disappearing slices of light. This was everything I’d been told not to do. My knees stung, pressed together in the pink confines of my dress. I smiled to convince myself of my own charade: that I was in control.

“You didn’t say it would be so far?” I said. I looked to the window, where the wind whined at the seams.

“It’s a farmhouse, Ruthie. And we live in the city.”

I looked at him. This boy with the unself-conscious smile and its fractures of light, a smile that made its own nervous music out of gulps of wind. A boy with a red truck bought with saved quarters and thumbs raw with newsprint. This boy with patient, freckled hands. This boy in clean laundry. I felt safe beside him despite the darkness and the voices in my head.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Here.” He leaned over the steering as he turned down a dirt driveway. “It used to be an apple orchard.”

He turned off the car and everything went black. He kissed the side of my face, my ear. I touched his cold face as he kissed me. When the normal thoughts came,

thoughts telling me what I was doing was wrong, thoughts of my run in the morning and daddy with the whistle around his neck, I closed my eyes. I pushed Waltie's face closer to mine. "Shall we go in and explore?" he said, and quickly, right on top of his words, I said, "yes."

The air outside was sweet with the spoiled apples that littered the overgrown grass. The smell made me feel dizzy and a little bit loose. Bruised skins roiled beneath our feet. When my heels kept getting stuck in the dirt, I took them off and left them outside the truck. Waltie walked behind me. He pushed his hands through the space between my waist and bent arms, leading the way with his lone lantern. When he stooped before a large rock in the driveway, the lantern caught on a rusty key in the dirtied cup of his palm. I giggled. Waltie smiled staring at me at the sound of my laughter. His eyes pored over my face.

...

Inside, Waltie lit match after match from a box he found beneath the sink. They'd turned off the electric service after his aunt died, he explained. Our lantern too was dimming.

I was ok with the darkness, but he desperately wanted to light a candle. At his shaking hands, each match quickly lost its flame. He set the dead matches in a pile at his knee. We sat on the living room floor in a pile of blankets and pillows we'd ransacked from other rooms. Smoke filled the space between us. I wanted to reach out and touch his knee. I wanted to pry at the buttons of his shirt. I wanted to feel the shadowy down of his beard growing in this late darkness. His face lit up in a fire of orange for one

mesmerizing second before he again fell into darkness. His eyes held onto each spark with a look more of hunger than of hope.

I nudged my body closer to his so that he might touch first. In my head, I pictured a more confident me swiping the matchbox from his fist and kissing him. I watched this version of me I wanted to be run my hand through his slicked-back hair and along his chest, and then how a single finger of mine traced all the way down the leg of his pants.

I sat on my hands. I watched him, waiting. “Damn’t,” he said. He threw the matchbox against the window where the wind pleaded, smelling of cider. *So the boy does swear*, I thought but did not say. I wondered at what would force him to say, *God Damn’t*. At what might make him profane. I was grateful for this decision of darkness. Certainly, it softened my angles and hid how my sweat pooled at my armpits, how my heart stammered against my pink dress. The wind sounded louder, and I was grateful for that too, for I could not listen for what scurried and hid. I felt him watching me. “Walt,” I said finally. When he touched my face, his fingers smelled of smoke.

“Ruthie, you’re so cold!” he said. He pulled a blanket around my shoulders. He kissed me. His tongue found how my lips parted. It searched my mouth in greedy swirls. I closed my eyes and shrugged off the blanket. I pulled up my hair at my neck, exposing the zipper of my dress. I was the one who did this.

I watched naked as quickly he shimmied off his clothes. I’d wanted to find the zipper of his pants and the waist of his boxers, to feel him come bare, but I let his own hands do the hurried work. We shivered then beneath the blankets in anticipation, side by side on our backs. Neither of us said a word. I felt his heat as he tried not to shake. I heard the wind. I smelled our errant smoke.

I turned and kissed his shoulder, his neck, where his ear met his hair. I was so scared of what I wanted and unsure of how to get it. “Come here,” I said.

Walt rolled on top of me and I sighed at his sudden weight. He was long and angular and we jugged against each other. I wanted to savor how his body felt pressed above mine. Out of nowhere though, I giggled. “Ruthie,” Waltie said. “Come on, now.”

I held my hand over my mouth as I gasped away the laughter. I felt him hard just over my thigh and I reached – I reached and grabbed him with my cold hand. He shivered. “Ruthie,” he said again, and I did not recognize myself, this woman he was calling for.

The hardest part about training for a marathon was holding myself back. It was not starting out too fast.

Walt fumbled, and when he pushed, the pain pierced all the way through me. I could not breathe. Back and forth he moved above me. I bit my lip and tried not to scream.

Finally, I went numb and it felt like nothing at all. I leaned my head back over my pillow and arched my back. My fingers found his greased hair. This was and was not what I’d wanted. When he pulled himself out of me with his eyes closed, I gasped. He crawled into my arms. His freckled hand toyed with my breast as he caught his breath. I felt horribly exposed even though he too was naked, and besides, we could not see each other in the dark. “Ruthie,” Walt said. “Ruth, who are you?”

In the absolute darkness of the bathroom, I sat on the cold toilet and pressed one hand over each eye to press back the tears. I was too strong to cry like this. But what I

wanted was deeper than crying; what I wanted was to weep. To surrender to the eddy of sadness Walt shook loose inside of me. I knew in that part of me, I bled.

I thought of the popular girls at school with their early curves and soft hair and their easy confidence when they laughed at something a boy said in the hallway. Did they all hurt like this, in this way? I wondered if that was part of their untouchability – this secret hurt no one talked about. The men we all teased with our smiling lips and touching hands, the men we let fumble into discovery, the men we let hurt, blindly, who never even knew they were hurting.

“Ruthie,” Waltie called from the hallway. *Just go away*, I thought. *Please leave me alone*. I wanted to whisper it against the door where Waltie waited on the other side. I flushed the toilet so he would not worry. I did not know how someone I loved could also hurt me so deeply.

As I found the doorknob and wandered through the hallway of the black house, I heard the groans of my steps on the hardwood and felt alone.

I thought the wind howling with such frantic sadness across the fields might just lift us up, and carry us away.

I did it. It was done.

...

I woke to light through the living room windows and turned to see fields of corn and wheat. Waltie slept plastered to my side. I had no idea what time it was, but I knew from the brightness of the light that it was later than I’d slept in a long while. I pulled a quilt tightly around my naked frame. Bare, I felt my angles more acutely – the scooped hollow of my stomach and the tilt of my hips, how my legs flung open and away from

each other. I pulled myself out of bed without waking Waltie. I found the single bloodied sheet where I had been, and I grabbed it up, and knotted it into a big ball. Quietly, I opened the back door and threw the soiled sheet into the empty garage.

Then, I walked barefoot though the silent house. The morning light made the kitchen beautiful despite its age. I imagined new paint on the walls – a cheery, lemon yellow. I pictured myself placing the coffee carafe on the stove as Waltie dressed for work. At my feet, sun-warmed floorboards. I could be happy here.

The stairs groaned. Waltie slept. At the master bedroom, I paused. We'd unrobed the bed of its quilt but the wooden frame was magnificent still, nearly regal. As I turned, I caught sight of myself in the mirror above the dresser. I was wrapped in a white feather quilt, my hair in waves, smeared mascara making my eyes wide and bright. I did not really recognize the grown-up face with the confident smile reflected back to me. *Gamine*, Waltie called me, *like those actresses in the French silent films*. It hit me: I had not run this morning. I felt the panic as vertigo, and I swooned.

“Ruth?” Waltie called from below. His throat warbled with sleep. I closed my eyes and held onto the dresser. What surprised me was how much I did not want to run. I let my limbs feel their exhaustion. The dots of white dizziness in my eyes ebbed. “Coming!” I shouted. *Je suis, tu es, il est*, I said to my reflection, pleading with myself to just be here.

Down the steps to our makeshift bed of white, Waltie's freckled arms long across the pillows.

...

Waltie idled his Ford two yards down from my house. I worried about mother's face in the front pane of the window. In the rearview mirror, I thumbed the mascara clean from beneath my eyes. "Ok," I said. Waltie kissed me on the cheek. I did not look back after I stumbled out the passenger door. I was garishly out of place on the sidewalk in my muddied heels.

I knew mother would be right there when I opened the door. There would be dark circles under her eyes from the waiting up. I was nearly surprised she had not called Walt's family, or even the police, when I had not come home last night. How bruised her hands must be from one set of fingers worrying the other.

I pressed my dress flat, trying to smooth its wrinkles. I smelled my own morning breath slimy on my teeth. The house beckoned, silent. *Just one whiskey, officer. I swear.* There was grey in the sky and a rasping cold that made my bare arms break out in goose pimples. Waltie's tires down the block driving away. I smelled his exhaust. I opened the front door.

"Mother," I called. "Father?" The door slipped shut. Breakfast dishes were still in the sink. Clumps of raspberry jam dotted the formica. Daddy's coffee pot was still hot to the touch on the stove, but empty. "Mother?"

I slid off my heels in the doorway and ran up the stairs. The bed in their room was unmade, the room thick with mother's perfume. I breathed in her smell. I returned downstairs. I retraced my steps. Through the living room, to the kitchen, back up the stairs, and again to their messy bedroom with the door wide open. I nearly tasted the scream coiled at the bottom of my throat. I thought of putting on my running shoes, but I did not have the energy. Instead, I sat on the steps with my hands tight beneath each knee.

I could not bring myself to take off the pink dress. Through the window, a dad with golden hair stood with leaves up to his ankles on the lawn across the street. I admired him. It was only when I saw his wife's face flicker in the front door, and then the door opening and closing as she stepped outside, did I comprehend that it was Sunday. The men were home. It was skating day.

Through the house, I ran. I blinked into the cold garage. The Ford, of course, was gone. Mother and daddy were at the rink. They were at the rink when I needed them here. I felt the silence of the house as deep as a shout, like they were shouting at me.

I'd never been alone in the house. And daddy, too: he'd be alone on the rink. But wasn't he always? Wasn't he always alone?

Upstairs again, I lay down in their bed and pulled the comforter over my head. The sheets smelled of roses and gasoline, and I inhaled deeply. It did not soothe. I started to cry. It was a cry like I was stunned -- the feeling of being punched in the stomach, and left reeling, forced to find again my breath. Placing my hands over my eyes, I was angry at myself. This person I no longer recognized. At how wildly I shook with no one there to notice, and then to look away.

Everywhere I went in the house it seemed there was a mirror reflecting me back to me.

I busied my hands. I made their bed and smoothed the pillows. In the kitchen, I wiped clean the jam from the counter and washed and dried the dishes. My hands in the warm water and the smell of the soap bubbles made me nearly forget what I was supposed to be nervous about. I kicked off my Converse and placed them at the door besides daddy's work boots. On hands and knees, I lavished lemon soap across the

hardwood floor. I scrubbed harder. It needed to be perfectly clean by the time they got home.

“Ruthie?” Mother’s voice came from the shadows of the doorway behind me. My hands were in puddles of water and lemon soap on the floor, and my knees suddenly ached. Daddy followed mother into the house smelling of cold sweat. They stood over me, watching. Mother had kissed off all her lipstick. “Ruthie, there you are,” mother said. She unwound her scarf. She took off her lilac gloves one at a time. Daddy sighed into a chair to unlace his shoes. He would not look me in the eye, but mother would not stop staring. “Make sure and get the patch of wood next to the sink,” mother said. She rested her gloves in the laundry tub, for later.

I sat at the kitchen table until dusk. It was cold chicken and silence for dinner. I kept looking to daddy but he was a boulder at the end of the table. “I’m going to take a short walk,” I said after dinner. “Just to get some air.” Mother nodded as she dried the plates. In their coolness, a distance I felt lost in.

It was already night as I laced up my running shoes in the driveway. My legs shook. I’d been too keen to leave, so I had not bundled properly. My ears immediately burned with cold, and I placed my hands over them. Still, I’d made up my mind. I needed to do this. I started to run.

My limbs were tight and heavy in the cold. I chased the cloud of my breath. I slunk into the darkness. I ran quickly, like I could not keep up with myself. It was Sunday evening and I hoped families were preoccupied inside, around the dinner table or the radio, that a dad stepping out into the driveway for silence and a cigarette would not see

me. Through each lighted window, blonde heads sitting down to dinner. The smells of roasts and laundry hung in the street.

I ran faster. I pushed beyond our neighborhood, towards downtown. The city flickered around me. The streets that were empty at dawn clattered with men I did not trust. Men with moonshine in their coverall pockets and mean words to burn on their tongues, hobos with their lives perched on their backs and dirt on their hands. I shivered, still trying to warm up.

I ran towards my hill, even though in this kind of darkness its isolation scared me. The city like a bell ringing at my back. Husbands and wives shouted at each other behind leaky windows. My head swam. There was Waltie, rolled onto his side, smiling at me, in our bed of white. How beside him, leaning into his heat as outside wind rattled across the countryside, a peace like one I'd never known filled me up. But then, I thought about the silence of the house and daddy's big hands steady at the kitchen counter, and how mother kept looking at me, like she couldn't see me clearly, like the light would not hold still. Through mother's eyes and daddy's silence, my doubt and shame came sharp. Waltie was in his own house with his own family steeping his freckled hands as they thanked God for the food on their plates. For this season of plenty.

From the top of the hill, I could not see a thing. Only the stars, too electric. I hurried home. "What's the rush, pretty girl?" men called with a whistle from their front stoops. I had craved this fear, but just a dangerous taste, like blood from a cracked lip.

By the time I got back home, I could barely breathe. I dried myself off in the bathroom, and then I hid my shoes.

...

Father's face in the dark crack of my bedroom door woke me up the next morning. "Ruthie," he said. As I sat up in bed, I had no idea where I was. "Ruthie," my father continued. I recognized his voice and his face. *Dad*, I thought. I realized, *home*. "You overslept. It's time to run." My eyes searched for the pale lumps of my running shoes on the floor, before I remembered that I hid them downstairs the night before. I pulled my comforter over my head. "Let's go, Ruthie," my father said.

"Can't I just take the day off? I'm so tired." When I pulled the comforter back down, his face was still in the gap of the door. He held onto the doorknob.

"Come on, Ruthie," my father said. "You want this." I shook my head no at his back. I pulled myself out of bed. When I came downstairs, he'd already found my shoes. They waited unlaced for me in front of the door.

What father said to me in the pale dawn: *extra miles today to make up for yesterday*. Like he knew everything or nothing at all.

Through our neighborhood of neat, pretty bungalows, through Greek Town with its golden roofs and coffee in the wind, through the monied part of town with its tiny castles and heirloomed lawns, up one hill and then another, the part of the city where daddy worked always on the horizon, like if I just reached far enough, hard enough, I could touch it. "Pick it up," my father shouted. There was no time to think of Waltie.

Each day I went a little bit further.

Behind closed doors, I wept.

...

There was nothing worse than this waiting. Waltie had to help his father after school on Monday, and so I had to wait until Tuesday to see him. Time was unbearable.

The seconds so slow I could feel them move. I put on makeup just to stare at my face in the mirror, and then to take it all off again.

Tuesday afternoon, my hands shook to the side of his face in the school yard. Same lips. Same eyes. Same nose. He fell first into my shoulder, and I latched my arms around his back. “I can’t stand how you make me feel,” I said. “Like I’m falling apart when I’m alone. Not with you.” He pulled back and smiled, hands at my shoulders. “Ruthie,” he said. “Hey, it’s ok.”

What I needed to say, I didn’t. I hated being alone now, and that scared me. The sweet-scented lotion pressed to my skin and the pink lipstick applied to my smile and the stomach sucked up and away – all without realizing that what I was prettying up to sell was myself.

He kissed my forehead. It was wet and cold. “Do you feel that?” he asked. I nodded. He shook loose my fist and kissed my open hand. “Do you feel that?” Again, I nodded. I was starting to smile. He bent forward and kissed my bare knee. “How about that?” This time, I laughed. Brazenly, he ran his hand up my leg and then pulled it back down. “Is this the feeling you cannot bear?” he asked, and again, I nodded, cupping his smiling face in my hands.

The next morning, I was up before daddy. I spooned the coffee into the silver maker. The sound of it beginning to boil warmed me as I looked at the blackness at the window, and the cold it promised. I did not know what I would do when winter came. His steps on the stairs shook the house. “Ruthie?” he called. My hands were busy at my laces. “I thought I smelled the coffee.” When I looked up from my shoes, his face was more tired than I’d ever seen it. There were dark circles beneath his eyes almost like bruises,

like they'd hurt if I pressed my fingers against them. Coffee spilled alongside his mug as he poured. "Daddy," I said to his back. He wiped up the coffee with his fingers. "Daddy, I think I might like to run alone this morning."

He turned, hands cradling the warmth of his mug. His face opened just a little bit in his exhaustion as he puzzled at me, and what I expected to see was hurt. What I saw instead was relief. He took a long sip of coffee. The pot simmered on the still hot stove, and I reached to turn it off. "It's your long slow day anyways," he said. "Just keep your pace consistent."

He was silent as the door closed behind me. I wore his red beanie and an old pair of gloves. My legs itched in the cold. Savoring the familiar feeling of my muscles at work, I was surprised as I realized how much I'd wanted a fight. I had not expected him to look so sad. Exhausted beyond what he could sleep away. The hardest part about my long slow day was making sure I did not start off too fast; it was holding myself back. I had just wanted to be alone. That was all I really wanted.

My thoughts were loud and I did not try to quiet them. The miles leaned one into the next. I collapsed into the feeling of my legs and my arms, the yoke of my heart. When it started to rain, I twisted up my palms to catch it. Cold, perfect rain, tiny orbs of winter.

"Ten miles," I whispered to daddy after dinner.

"Bien," he said. He slipped away to kiss mother on the top of her head. "Mon chou," he said. Mother closed her eyes. Her restless hand kept flitting across the kitchen counter with a sponge in its grasp, but the rest of her held still.

I soaked in a bath of Epsom salts, the air thick with steam. The hot water on my blistered feet made me gasp. My muscles surrendered to the soothing heat. I made myself

hold still, even though the pleasure was nearly unbearable. I closed my eyes. I counted my breaths. I sat up and cupped my feet in both hands. My thumbs found the ripe pockets on the bottom of my soles, and pressed. Breath stumbled out of me.

From the hall, mother's and daddy's voices. He was being soft with her. His voice was barely more than a murmur. When she laughed, I held still, like if I moved I might scare it off.

When I pulled up the drain, there was a ring of blood around the edge of the white tub from my feet. And so I stayed in the bathroom, heady from the heat, until the bath drained, and I could bleach away my stain before mother saw.

...

Morning, it was darker, and then darker still. Fall ceding into winter required a steelier faith that morning's light would come. I did not know what I would do when winter came. Daddy's coffee, the gas, the shoes laced tight at me feet. They were no longer the pristine white they'd been when I first pulled them from the grocery sack and daddy stared at my frozen joy. There was mud, grass and grit stuck in their soles. The laces were browned at the edges, like I'd dipped them into the wet earth. I shook out the baking soda I placed in each shoe to soak up the smell.

Upstairs, the Master door opened. Daddy. I put on his red beanie, a fleece scarf, and mittens. My legs were bare. He nodded at me in the kitchen. I nodded back. He stood over the steam of the coffee pot like mother over the light of the Sabbath candles.

There was frost in the grass and no light in the sky. It could have been a dream save for how vibrantly my muscles pulsed, somewhere between pleasure and pain. I started. My muscles were stiff. My blood stammered, stirring warmth into my legs. Four

minutes to the end of the block; six minutes to Waltie's mint green. Now that he had a truck, he drove his paper route and woke up later. I told myself I would be warm once I passed Waltie's. That my muscles might not protest so much. I heard the sound of mother's laughter. Each sock nested safely with its pair. Each comb stacked in the drawer. The perfume bottle next to the sink with its copper cap on. Daddy's steps on the stairs. Voices fizzing alive from the radio. Just before the hill, I turned thinking I heard daddy's whistle. It was just the wind.

I spotted him from the top of the hill in coveralls and a work shirt, a lunch pail in his hand. It wasn't his height or his darkness that cast him apart, but his loneliness, like he was the loneliest man in the world. Just before he reached the factory, he opened his lunch pail and threw out the lunch mother made him. Cold roast beef and horseradish on rye, or soup with green onions and chicken, lukewarm in a red thermos. He was barely a smudge at the bottom of the hill, but I saw him do it. The food tumbled into the trash. My hand reached out from the top of the hill, the sky now grey, with a sliver of peach on the horizon, like I could stop it. I added up the dollar he must spend every day on a sandwich from the lunch cart. But why? To fit in? To stop the smell of onion from seeping out of his skin? To spend a dollar on his American sandwich, still two slices of bread around a filling, and a second cup of coffee. I watched his back like I did not know him at all. I'd memorized his quiet, and the loudness of his face, the shades of his eyes, and yet he was a stranger. And mother who spread extra horseradish across the meat, just the way he liked it. And mother, who cleaned the rings from his coffee mug off the Formica.

All the way home, I ran without catching my breath. I let it unspool wildly, no longer so afraid I might never catch it. I only ran eight miles that morning. Still, at school

exhaustion hit me. I winced sitting down at my desk and had to hold onto its edges as I grasped to stand back up. On the outside I was Ruthie in a navy dress, hips through the fabric, hair tucked behind her ears, smiling at the window.

At the farmhouse on Saturday afternoons, when the world is too busy to notice, we disappear. Out there, the air is sweet and the sky golden. Waltie watches me from our nest of pillows on the hardwood floor as I stand barefoot at the sink, mesmerized by the light. The sky is so ripe with apples it ferments. The clouds above are big, and sloppy, and drunk. I place two mugs on the kitchen counter. "Waltie, dear, let's drink our coffee before I have to take you to the train for work."

"Ruthie?" he says, smiling, spread wide like a snow angel in the sheets. I can hear the gap between his teeth in the scratch of his smile. "What are you talking about? What train? What work?"

...

My legs were heavy and my arms exhausted as I ran the familiar route. Bungalows and lawns to the red-brick row houses and the coffee-steeped air, to the iron houses with the stained-glass peeping holes, to the hill. I dragged. My white shoes gathered dirt. So did the ivory swell of my calf, from my lazy stride. To the top of the hill overlooking the boiling pot of industry that burped up smells of daddy. Climb. Climb. Climb it –

At its crest, I was empty. Hands of air. What I felt in my stomach was a punch certainly, was exhaustion definitely, was definitely not a kick.

I watched for daddy's neck on the street below.

I fell to my knees. I knotted my hands. The sun rose. I did not know how I would make it home.

Up there where no one was watching, I clasped my hands against my heart. My breath was kaddywampus.

...

Everything was unbearable. The wind against the parts of me exposed to the cold. My sweat pooling beneath my long underwear. The way my heart raced. The air thick with the smell of factories, even this early in the morning, when the city was supposed to be my sanctuary. The dead plants. It hurt to breathe. My throat burned. In my stomach, a feeling of absolute emptiness, like I'd been hollowed out. When my hand found the knob of the front door, sweet relief.

Just mother was in the house when I returned from my run. She was awake. I could hear her hum in the kitchen as I slunk into the bathroom, closed the door and turned on the faucet. I kneeled over the toilet. We kept the bathroom window open a crack for air even in winter and the tile was so cold against my knees. Fire at my throat. I clutched the toilet bowl with both hands. The tire factory churned the morning air with the hot smell of rubber through the window. I breathed deeply, pulling myself into a cross-legged position. I told myself it was just all the training adding up. Girls like me weren't supposed to run like me. I told myself this and yet, I prayed. I closed my eyes as I heaved. Heat where it wasn't supposed to be. Jewish or Catholic: I just wanted forgiveness. In French, and then in Yiddish. I prayed to whichever of my parents' Gods would take me.

When I came out of the bathroom, I found a dried cube of ginger next to a steaming mug of black tea on the kitchen counter. I placed the cube in my palm and turned it over, calculating just how much mother knew. On my tongue, it melted slowly, deliciously. I watched mother's back at the sink as I sat sucking at the ginger, her strong shoulders and single black braid draping all the way to her hips. She wore red lipstick even though she was barefoot in the kitchen with a sudsy plate in her hand. I watched her as though I might catch her smiling at her own reflection in the window. I watched her, because she'd misplaced me, and she hadn't noticed.

She cleared her throat and my spine tightened. "Ruthie, my little skinny." All I wanted to do was rest my head in my hands, but I looked up at mother. She was a blur coming into focus. "Just don't lose your wildness," she said. I shook my head. She whispered to the window, but the words were for me. Her hands in the sink were still.

"You are a girl who wakes up early to go running in the streets. That is who you are," mother said. "This," she continued, gesturing with her cream hands, her dress following like wings, "This is not enough for you."

"But," I began. I blinked. Mother leaned to crank open the kitchen window. The steam from the tea followed. "How do you know?" I shivered in the cold.

"I am your mother, Ruthie, my skinny," she said. "I watch." She turned to me. She mimed opening the blinds, then making space for her face. She widened her eyes in her acted out roost. As though she was tracing the white of my legs on the dark street. As though she was permitting me to go, and praying for me to come home. I closed my eyes. Blood whirled between my ears. Her accent was so foreign I barely recognized her as my

mother. I wanted to reach into her mouth and stretch her lips around the American sounds.

“That is who you are,” mother said. From a bag high up in the cupboard, mother fumbled for another cube of ginger and handed it to me. Greedily, I sucked at it. There were crumbs of sugar from the ginger glittering in her open palm. “That is who I am.”

Thick wool tights over my trembling legs, a navy dress over the parts of me I would give up, that would belong to another, saddle shoes over my bloodied feet. Lastly, mother gave me one of her tortoiseshell combs for my bangs. Her hands twisted it through my hair. She did not warn me not to lose it.

...

The smell of the cold rink on Sunday riled my stomach, but I did not tell father. I stood at the edge of rink wobbly in skates. I kept looking to mother in the third row of the bleachers. There'd been no hot chocolate cart that day, and so she stared at the change in her palm. A child's peal of laughter filled the rink. I turned to watch. She wore an orange hat too big for her, so that it nearly covered her eyes. She squinted at the ice, at her daddy's hand. I was heavy in a sweater and a big, brown coat, long underwear tucked beneath my pants. Sweat flooded my elbows and my knees, and lined my collarbone. Still, my hands were cold. I was burning on the inside and freezing on the outside. Finally, mother nodded at me. A small smile of encouragement. I watched her face as a fixing point. When I let go of the side of the rink, daddy was suddenly there. He took my hand. I followed, legs copying the quick, practiced arcs of his skates against the ice. We were going too fast. “You have to stop fretting about falling,” he shouted. “You'll never be able to skate that way.”

Halfway across the rink, he let go. I flew. The edge of the rink spiraled red and white. My breath disappeared. A child's laughter rang in my ears. I did not know how to stop. I was going to hit the edge of the rink. I closed my eyes. Before me, my arms stretched long.

Daddy. He was there. He stopped me. He grabbed my hands from their frieze in the air. My knees were weak. Daddy let go again. He mimed closing his eyes and waving his hands wildly in the air. "Why this?" he said. "What will that do? You hit the rink like that your arms are too weak. They will snap." He did not make the sound of the snap, but I heard it. Bone like a tree limb heavy with frost, snapping apart outside my window in the middle of the night. I shook my head, *Yes*. I understood. I was the perfect student.

When I turned, mother was standing in the bleachers. Her arms were long, reaching towards the ice. Quickly, at our gaze, she wrested them into a knot. Like she'd been trying to catch me.

Monday morning. I ran thirteen miles in the cold and the dark. It was longer than I'd ever run before. I ran, ignoring the protest in my stomach and the heaviness in my legs. I could not give this up. I ran like I could fix it. Blood in my urine. A toenail clinging to the sweaty insides of a sock. Fire in my belly. I brushed my hair. I went to school.

...

Daddy stretched out the map between his two sturdy hands. He had the kind of hands you want building your car. The map was hand-drawn, just black ink through a blank Detroit. "This is your course," daddy said. There was a halo of gasoline about him. Both of us stared at the map he'd drawn. "26.2 miles," he said. "I measured it after work

in the Ford.” He smiled and I felt deep inside of me that I was the source of his pride. He might have given up hockey for mother and the life she’d instructed him to construct, but now, his daughter, me: she was going to run a marathon. I could not get a breath deep enough in that kitchen of gasoline and bouillon. It was in the walls; it was in the floorboards. In the trash beside the sink were the grey bones of a chicken’s thighs. “That’s what we are training for, yes?”

He placed the map in my hand. “Here,” he said, patting the map into my palm so the paper crinkled. “But I’m only at thirteen miles,” I said. Then, “But what if I don’t finish?”

“You’re my daughter,” he said. Daddy smiled, still. His hands were empty without something to stretch between them. “When am I supposed to train?” I asked. “There’s not enough time before school.” I looked again at the map. He’d drawn it in ups and downs like a scientist’s graph of the vibrations of the earth’s plates. His course was not around the city, but through it. Detroit seemed small sketched like that in daddy’s crude hand – like what I needed was something so much bigger.

I carried the map upstairs to my bedroom. Quietly, I apologized for what I’d revealed to him, for what I’d allowed him to expect. My stupid, heedless dreaming. Now this: shapes on a page I was expected to fill.

“How far?” Waltie had asked, squinting at my face.

The white running shoes slept still beside my bed. Tying up their laces into neat bows was the last thing I did before falling asleep. Their grocery sack was folded in a triptych in my dresser drawer. I held them in my lap. I untied the laces. Mother’s hum, syrupy and desperate. Daddy telling her a story she was not paying attention to. I could

not look at the running shoes anymore. I pushed them further beneath my bed. I let their laces tangle.

Yet, when morning came, and the alarm sounded, I stretched one long arm beneath my bed. The one, and then the other. Daddy nodded at me in the kitchen, and I nodded back. He stood over the coffee pot, breathing in its steam. I held my breath so the smell would not shake me.

“You can come this morning if you like?” I said. The coffee pot hissed. A car outside turned on its lights as it drove by our house.

“Hills?” He asked. I shook my head yes. In the sigh of the branches against the wind, winter. “They are well-loved, no?” he said to my feet, to the once white running shoes. When he saw me studying his face, he closed his lips. Opened them again. “You go,” he said.

The cold slap of the night at the door. I lied and told myself it was morning.

I ran up and down my hill. One hand fluttered to my stomach as though I could protect it. My heart heaved open. Pale light, strips of clouds, frost in the grass. I could slip and fall on a shard of ice and tamper the fire inside of me. Dark and empty again, just like that. I could go back to being the Ruthie I knew and trusted. Standing at the top of the hill, however, already I swelled with the life inside of me. I held my breath, everything still, except for that quiet tremble. I had to stop fretting about falling. Daddy’s words.

When I was almost home, I heard a car slow beside me. It was Waltie. “I like your shoes,” he shouted. He rolled down his window, propped his face up on its lip of glass. Warmth poured from his car, and I just wanted to crawl inside.

I shook my head. "I'm running right now." I jogged in place. "I'm not supposed to be taking a break."

He waved me on. His face clenched around his confusion and hurt was fragile, like porcelain. I had to look away. I heard the papers crash into the lawn behind me, one after the next. I winced each time one thudded against the earth.

...

The city smelled of rust. Like daddy's hands at the end of the day. Like mother's hair when she cooked with the window open. Steam billowed from squat factories, our mountains. It was three in the afternoon, school out, and only us teenagers filled the streets. Teenagers hovered in circles smoking a single cigarette stained with a girl's lipstick. Teenagers screamed at the top of their lungs. Skinny teenage boys in shorts and Converse stretched for sports and teenage girls in mother's makeup giggled, watching. I had never been one of them. Not a teenager, not really. I was too shy and nervous. I liked the neatness of the pleats in my navy dress, smoothing them always with my hands. The only recklessness I'd tasted was my running. Knowing that all I could count on to get me home were my own two legs. The milky darkness of morning that might've scared other girls, I savored. To Waltie, I gave that delicious recklessness. I gave it all to him.

Cold in my lungs, I ran to Waltie's. My dress flew behind me and my saddle shoes clopped down the sidewalk. Other boys, not Waltie, whistled.

"Ruthie? Hi," Mary said, pink in the front door. I gasped at my breath. Their house was warm and I let myself in before being welcomed. "Waltie's not home yet," she said to my back, closing the door behind me. She looked closely at me in the foyer. I felt what she took in with her blue eyes: my bare arms, marbled with pink from the cold, the

wild wisps of my hair escaping from my ponytail. I knew that I probably smelled of sweat and onions. “Oh dear,” she said. “Let me fix you something warm.”

I tried to walk like her down the hallway to the kitchen. My shoulders pushed back and my feet splayed like a ballerina’s, my chin tilted just so to the light. When she turned to make sure I followed, I folded back in on myself. “He’ll be home soon, anyway,” she said.

To a slice of white bread, cheddar cheese and butter, no tomato. As I reached to grab the plate, she turned to the stove. She placed the sandwich on a pan, turned on the gas, and then flattened the bread with a spatula. I could not hold still as the sandwich simmered in the pan. A clock chimed the hour, four. “I should make you two,” Mary said. “You look too skinny, my dear.” The smell of the warming cheese and butter gave me unexpected pause, but I swallowed it down.

She slivered the sandwich in two on a small, blue plate. Mary watched me. She would not frown, but there was a tautness to her face like she was holding something back. She stood across from me at the table, her hips pitted toward the sink, like she knew she should let me be.

“Ruthie, my dear. Are you ok?” She sat beside me and rested her hand across my forehead. “You’re ice cold, but at least you aren’t warm.”

I wiped a string of cheese from my chin. There was one of Mary’s golden hairs glistening inside the sandwich, and still I took another bite. The front door opened and closed. Boots kicked off in the doorway. A man’s cough, squelched in the crook of his arm.

“Waltie,” Mary said. “I am surprised you didn’t give Ruth a ride home.” Waltie was in socks and slacks. He pushed the surprise from his face. His mouth paused open. With the back of my hand, I wiped butter from my lips. “Look at this poor girl,” Mary said. “She’s freezing.”

In his room, Waltie found a book from his shelf and sat down on his bed Indian-style as he propped it open. I hovered. He turned the page.

His room was simple and small, and shared with one of his older brothers. There were metal bunk beds with pale blue sheets, a shared wooden desk, and nothing on the wall. From their window, a patch of the backyard. Waltie’s bed was the lower bunk.

“Waltie,” I said. We were instructed to leave the bedroom door opened, and so I whispered. He moistened his finger, face stern as a librarian’s, as he turned the page. I stood at the window. I played with the picture frame on his desk: it was of the family at Lake Michigan, a brood of blonde heads tousled by the wind.

Finally, I went to him and knocked the book from his hands. He looked up at me. I fought his hand into my own until he squeezed back. Then, I plied it against my dress.

“Do you feel anything?” I asked.

“I feel your dress, love,” he said.

I pressed his hand against my dress harder. I bit my lip until it bled.

“Ruthie, you’re scaring me.”

“I said,” I began, “do you feel anything?”

He took his hand away from my stomach. I watched it fall from my grasp. I touched his face and he reared away. “Your hands are cold,” he whined.

He looked to me. He considered my face. “Am I supposed to feel something? What’s this all about?” His greyish blue eyes were like the clouds right before it rains. “Ruthie?”

I nodded. He leaned into his hands. I thought I heard someone breathing on the other side of the door. Winter in the sky at the window. “Ruthie?” he asked, and again, I nodded.

“But you’re training for a marathon,” he continued. The words surprised me. I did not know what to say back. He took my hand. He rubbed it like tinder for the fire. I could not look at his face. To the backyard instead: grass finally brown, welts of frost, forgotten leaves curled up on themselves, like flecks of rust. I was not mother, a mother.

Waltie went to the window, opened it, and stuck his head through its frame.

...

I woke to ice on my forehead and her face over mine. Mother’s eyes were startlingly clear. “Thank God,” she said.

She took her hand off my neck where she’d been feeling for a pulse and then she kissed my forehead. She pushed the pool of ice cubes into her open, waiting hand. “You fell,” mother said. I leaned up on my elbows. I was in running shoes, long underwear beneath my shorts. Cold sweat covered my skin. “I heard you open the door, and then kaboom.” I felt nauseous and leaned back down onto the floor.

“I came running,” mother said. I watched her stand to pour the ice cubes down the drain of the sink. She came back, kneeled beside me, tilted my head into the pillow of her hands. “You can’t do this anymore.” I breathed in, and then out. There was not a speck of

dirt on the hardwood floor. “You have to give up the running.” I turned over onto my side, away from mother’s hands, knees pulled into my chest.

When she said, “it’s time to tell your father,” I was already nodding.

That day, she let me stay home. She let me sleep in the nice bed in their bedroom, beneath a warm pile of quilts. I thought of thirteen miles: the furthest I’d gone. A neat, perfect, half.

She came and sat beside me in the bed. With her hand, she patted the quilt flat. She said, “When you were born, my heart cracked open.” Her fist stretched into a hand. I stared at her fingers. “Suddenly, light,” she said. “More light than I could stand.”

...

The kitchen filled with smoke as mother fried onions in the pan. Even with the window cracked open, tears stung the corners of my eyes. Home from work, daddy sat in his chair by the door untying the laces from his boots. “Smells good, mon chou,” daddy said, even though the kitchen smelled like it was burning. He headed barefoot to mother. He placed his empty lunch pail in the sink.

“Don’t hold me all dirty like that,” mother said. “You’re going to get grease on my sweater.” She wriggled free, but still she smiled, daddy’s big fingers in her hair. To each place at the kitchen table, I sat a silver spoon, knife, and fork atop a folded white napkin. The kitchen radio competed with daddy’s murmurs and mother’s steam. I sat with my elbows on the table, waiting.

Daddy saw me crying from the onions and his face hung open. His big nose and wider eyes, skin perpetually tan. I held silent, knowing somehow that I would never see him look at me like that again. Like I was the most perfect thing. *But nobody’s perfect*, I

wanted to shout. *Not even me.* He pulled his hands from mother's hair. One of her curls stayed poised aloft around the space where his hand had been. "Ruthie, love," he said.

Between us, the white kitchen table set for three. "Ca va?"

Tears came harder. Mother frowned at her spatula as she burned the onions.

"No," I said. The shake of my head followed. "I did it," I said.

"Did what?" Daddy asked. He stood over the pot, pinching up pieces of chicken and swallowing them whole. Mother lifted the pan to shake the burning onions.

"Do you even know what it's like being in this family?" I asked.

"Ruthie?" daddy asked. Mother stopped, turned, spatula frozen in her hand. She would not look me in the eye.

"Holding my breath for mother to break down. You yelling at me to run faster. Faster! Faster!"

"Stop," mother said. "Please, stop."

"No," daddy said.

"I don't want to run any faster! I'm not an athlete like you."

"Don't kid yourself," daddy said. He licked chicken grease from his lips.

"I did it," I repeated. "It's done."

"Ruthie, language," mother said. "Shh."

"Did what?" Daddy, again.

But it's still me. Ruthie.

"I'm pregnant," I said. I covered my eyes with my hands.

My father lifted my hands one at a time from each eye. "Look at me," he said.

I shook my head. I wanted him to hug me.

“But what about the marathon?” daddy asked.

I pulled myself up from the counter and sprinted upstairs. When I came back downstairs, I held the map in my hands. The one he’d measured. The one he’d drawn. Black ink in hills across white paper. I stood over the trash can and tore it into pieces. I threw it away with the chicken skin.

“Who cares about a marathon? I told you that I am going to have a baby!”

“You did,” daddy said. “You cared.”

“That’s the thing.” I stared at the white scraps of paper in the pile of rot. “I never cared about it at all. I just liked to run. To get out of this place.”

“Ruthie. Don’t lie to yourself. You can still do this.”

I shook my head. Mother came to stand beside me. Her hand stopped just above my shoulder blades, hovering. I could feel its heat.

“This is what I want,” I said. “That’s the thing.”

He watched me long and hard. Smoke still hung thick, making it tough to breathe. *Chris*, a mother shouted through the open window. *Time for dinner!*

“You’re eighteen,” daddy said finally. His steps to his chair in the living room echoed through the whole house. Mother cleaned silverware in the sink, soap on her hands, up her arms.

...

He said the problem was anemia. He said my red blood cells could not keep up with me. He said, that’s why the exhaustion in my legs and the heaviness in my arms, the soft fog I tumbled through. He said, *let’s call it quits on the running, ok?*

His breath was stale with tuna fish and nicotine. To my heart, he placed a cold stethoscope. I held my breath as he listened to my heart. "I'm alive, doc," I said. "You don't have to check." I had dark circles so deep I could feel their hollows beneath the fluorescence of the examination room.

He pulled his lips together instead of laughing. At least I'd gotten him to clamp up the fish smell. "Ruthie," he began. "You're going to be a mother. I ask that you please take this seriously."

I wondered how he kept his jacket so white. If he had a wife who cleaned it by hand every night.

Mother was sitting uncomfortably in a grey chair in the waiting room. Daddy waited outside, even though it was a cold November. When she saw me take in the empty grey chair beside her, she said it was a good sign that he came. She said, *can you remember the last time he took a day off from the factory?*

I walked to the car with my hands clasped around my belly for all the world to see. Daddy opened the passenger door for me, and mother crawled onto the bench in the back.

That Sunday, I sat beside mother in the bleachers with the baby beating inside of me. She wore her lilac cashmere gloves. Without saying a word, I placed her hand on my stomach. We watched daddy skate just like that, her soft, gloved hand on my stomach and my hand over hers. Daddy sprinted in loops around the rink as though he was the only skater there. Even from the bleachers, I could see the tentative pinch of his smile, as though it was the happiest of solitudes. When I looked back to mother, I found that she'd closed her eyes.

He said, he said, he said. I did not cry putting the tennis shoes back in their grocery sack. The worn paper crinkled in my hand as I folded the sack closed.

I swelled like a fruit. One mother might pick up at the market and then frown at with her red-stained mouth. “Too ripe,” she would say with a shake of the head. Her thumbs would leave twin bruises on its offending softness.

Even though it had its own heart, still it used mine. It stole my breaths like I had an infinity of them.

At night, when I stretched out on my back to sleep, there it was above me like a moon –perfect, whole.

At night, I dipped greedy fingers in the soil of mother’s houseplants and brought the dirt to my dry tongue. I let it sit there, folded up in my tongue, to taste the iron in it.

How I craved.

We did it at the farm where there was space and no one would hear me scream. They brought a nurse named Marjorie who fussed with the brown washcloth on my forehead. Daddy and Waltie waited outside. Even in the throes of pushing, I wondered at that conversation.

Mother held my hand. Rings of blinding light. So much light. When I cried, she said, “it’s ok, my skinny. My little skinny.”

But I wasn’t anymore. Skinny.

The baby and I screamed so loud apples shook free from the trees.

I pictured a mother’s face through parted blinds, waiting for me to come home.

Part Two

We let the apples go to ruin. The farm, to seed. In the barn at the edge of the property, an orange feral cat licked clean her brood of kittens. It was apple season. October, again. Mother and daddy were coming to visit. I stood at the front window of the farmhouse, witnessing what I saw through their eyes in anticipation. The landscape heaved with rotten fruit. Perfect red orbs tugged at the branches and littered the overgrown lawn. The sky so big and blue it made me forget myself for one wondrous second. The smell of juice at every breath, like from the wind alone we could become tipsy. I tried to imagine the city.

“On y va!” I called up to Waltie. He did not like it when I spoke French. He said it confused the baby. He said he would grow up unsure of which language to speak. Sometimes, however, the French slipped out when I was distracted. Mother and daddy were coming, with sacks of treats from the city: chocolate squares from the confectioner’s at Hudsons, jars of dilly beans, mother’s canned vegetables and loaves of fresh bread. Months already since the baby was born. The brown washcloth cool on my forehead, the voices of daddy and Waltie sharing a cigarette outside drifting in through the old windows, mother’s hand knotted sweaty in my own. Months since I’d heard their wheels in the dirt of our driveway as I listened to them drive away. Months of silence, and then a phone call: daddy was going to take the day off. He’d cleared his throat instead of saying hello. It was time, they’d said, competing for the speaker of the phone. They were coming to visit.

“We’re going to be late!” I shouted. I did not even need to shout, what with how sounds traveled in this ancient house. A cough into the back of a hand carried like a ghost’s sob. The tree branches through the front window vibrated with the heft of the apples and I thought of my own breasts of all things – how they’d swelled heavy and painful right before the baby came. I’d felt so alive it scared me. Once, I leaned over the kitchen table in mother and daddy’s house when no one was there, just to rest them on the cool Formica.

I tried to spy the farmers across the way who I knew must talk about us to their wives over mugs of coffee, staring at our land – those teenagers who let their land go wild. Those farmers who with their soiled overalls and sun-burnt faces to me all looked loose like mad men: I would have let them in for a cup of coffee just to hear another’s voice fill the kitchen. I would’ve let them in to explain.

Soon, I would have to drive Waltie to the train station for work down that wide, empty road. Through the window, that road burned in the morning sun like it was just a mirage. Waltie did not like me home alone with the baby without a car.

In the kitchen, I paused: filled with that lacey, morning light, it took my breath away. It was beautiful despite its age, with dark, hardwood floors and yellow walls, trees golden through the big window above the sink. Waltie’s coffee hissed on the stove and I poured the steaming liquid from the pot into a thermos. This kitchen was so much nicer than anything mother ever had. It was nicer than anything she even knew to want.

Waltie’s boots sounded on the stairs. He planted a cold kiss on my bare neck. I startled at the sudden feel of him. He smelled clean, like soap. I was like one of those metals we’d read about in third-period science, the kind that can become electric with the

right chemistry of particles. Conductors, they were called: they hummed with the electricity of other's.

I wore a housecoat over my pajamas, my hair pulled up in a loose bun, scuffed slippers on my feet. Using my reflection in the kitchen window, my hand nervously swept blush to the apples of my cheeks. Waltie frowned at me across the kitchen counter. His eyes traced from my feet all the way up, to where my breasts pressed against my pajama top, nearly spilling out. They ached with milk. I winced into a smile to pull his eyes up to my face. I was pleased with the curves left by my pregnancy, the weight of my breasts and the curve of my bottom, soft as I had never been soft. Still, when Waltie looked at me, there was something in his eyes like he was figuring out who I was now. "Good morning," I said.

He opened one cupboard and then another. He no longer wore the grease in his hair, and his cowlick made me smile. "Where are the spoons?" he asked. "This coffee needs a little cream."

"Why would spoons be in the cupboard?" I asked. I went to his side and pulled open the silverware drawer. We had three spoons, three knives, and three forks. Waltie pinched the spider crawling through the spoons and threw it down the drain. He reddened. Both of us stared into the drawer. Waltie squinted at his own reflection in the cradle of a spoon.

"I'm ok," he said. "I'll drink it black."

"Please," I began. "Let me rinse one off for you." I grabbed one from the drawer before he could protest and lathered it with dish soap.

"You're wearing pajamas?" he asked. "Out?"

I watched Waltie's back as he spooned the cream into his coffee and then capped his thermos. The wings of his shoulder blades tensed and then relaxed through his grey coveralls.

"I'm just taking you to the train," I said. "Besides, who is going to see me? Farmer Joe from across the way?"

Walt took a long sip from his coffee. His face was pale; he'd lost some of his light. He turned off the stove and I wanted to reach out and touch the dying red embers of its hot plate, just to have my own electricity. I had these urges that didn't make sense, like I was hungry to pull at the quiet gauze of our life until I could find where disaster was hiding.

"You just look exposed," Walt spat out. A drop of coffee spilled onto his work collar I'd pressed the night before.

"I'm wearing a coat," I said. I said, "Come here."

Waltie set the keys to the Ford on the counter. He walked out the door first. Standing in the hallway with the door swung open, I watched his grey figure move towards the truck. Wind rushed his hair into peaks. His boots crunched against our rocky dirt driveway. I was not yet ready to make love since giving birth. I had been torn and then sewn up with a girl scout's stitch and then declared healed. But when I looked at his back and noticed the way he moved, what I wanted was for him to look me in the eye and hold me in his hands, even if his hands were cold, especially if his hands were cold.

I turned my head to look back inside the house. The kitchen was still. Softened in that drunken, morning light, it looked like an old photograph. The silver of the coffee carafe was in the white basin of the sink, a cloud of steam at its mouth. The stove was off.

I tilted my head, listening. He slept upstairs beneath a blue blanket. We called him Robbie. I pictured the curls of his fingers on both sides of his body and my knees went weak. My forehead found the edge of the doorframe. I closed my eyes. I had to take Waltie to work. There was no other way. I'd be gone just twenty minutes. Twenty-five at most. Robbie did not cry; it could be a good thing or a bad thing.

Waltie sat in the passenger seat with the driver's door open. "I'm coming," I said.

...

I hunched into the horizon, elbows like wings. My tires climbed over apples, spurring a trail of juice. I heard my laugh like it was someone else's charade; I did not recognize the grace in it. Waltie watched the road instead of me with his hands in a white pile in his lap. He looked into the tiny backseat. It was for the baby who slept now in the upstairs window – the one whose sighs in his sleep cracked open my heart, infinitesimally wide, like it could not possibly contain so much light.

I turned onto the long, black road at the end of our dirt driveway, steadying the wheel in both hands. The road gleamed silver in the sun like a knife. Cornfields shouldered the road.

"What do the farmers say," I began. "Corn so high by July?"

Walt coughed. "Knee high," he said.

"Huh?"

"Knee high," he said. "The saying is knee high."

I opened my eyes to the sun across the fields. "Let's run away," I said. I smiled full-watt and grabbed his hand. I tried to bring his face to mine so I could kiss the newly-shaved patch of his cheek.

"What are you doing, Ruthie?" Waltie wrangled his hand from mine to grab the wheel. "You're going to run us off the road." My hand fell onto his denim work collar. I let my fingers stay there, tugging at the fabric. I could feel how Waltie held his breath. The whole car smelled of him. "Ruthie?" he coughed. My face froze into a gesture of a smile. I watched the road. There was something in how the light shook across the windshield that took my breath away. I brought my hand back to its duty at the wheel.

"I was just trying to make a joke," I said. "To make you laugh."

Walt unwound his hands and pressed one to each knee. I watched those hands from the corner of my eye. Sometimes, he cupped Robbie's head in the world of his hand and I could not look away.

"To make you smile," I continued. I smiled then, for him.

Walt shook his head. He looked to his window. "Ruthie, I'm exhausted," he said, wiping the steam from his words off the window. "You don't even know how exhausted."

I did know.

At night, he leaned into the kitchen table, spoon in his fist, soup spilling down his shirt and across the seat of his pants. He fell asleep above the comforter in his coveralls and I had to unzip him naked and cover his skinny body with a blanket.

"I don't know who I am anymore," he said.

When the train station came into view, I held back tears. I did not have the heart to console. I braced myself for the task of driving down that straight road, opening the door to the house, finding myself alone with the baby.

For one delicious second, Waltie reached and touched my face. He placed a finger to my lips, and I kissed it.

“Bye, love,” Waltie said. As he got out of the car, his fingers brushed against my shoulder. I reached to grab his hand but already he was out of the truck. “Don’t,” I said. I leaned over and wound down the window on the passenger side.

I watched Waltie walk into the station. He joined the line of men just like him pushing into the mouth of the train station in their grey coveralls, shoulders forward and a thermos dangling in one hand. They looked unreal, just silhouettes and light. The train sat waiting on its tracks. It was the only thing for miles of corn. The wind carried the smell of hot iron through the window. I nodded at Waltie’s back but he did not see how I kept smiling like a crazy person, even as the rest of my face frayed.

Just before Waltie disappeared through the turn-style, I noticed a small square of tissue from shaving still stuck to his neck. There was something so extraordinarily vulnerable about that pink rectangle of neck that I wanted to push open the car door and run after him, to protect him with my hands. It looked like a schoolboy’s neck and this his first job, like he wanted to make daddy proud. “Be good,” I shouted through the gape of the window, though there was no way he could still hear me. “Be safe.”

I only drove morning and evening and still I did not trust my own hands at the wheel. He would be on the train now, seated next to the window so he could watch the fields disappear, so he could be the first to see the city. It was just metal and fire. It could

have disappeared during the night; he had to see it materialize into view for himself. He would sit next to a man with a new mustache and a boy's hands. The stiff leather seat would rustle at Waltie's back as he shifted, as he leaned his face close against the window. The carriage would smell of gasoline and the juice of a car's engine; these men carried it in their sweat.

Fields through my window and I squinted against the sun. I felt again Waltie's hand against my face. Robbie would be in the upstairs window waiting like an angel beneath a blue blanket for my key in the lock and my voice at the bottom of the stairs. When he heard my voice, he thought, *mom*. He thought, *mom is home*. I pressed harder on the gas.

...

Mother and daddy were to arrive at ten. He was taking the day off. I counted the farm houses I passed on that long, black road home. They were punctuated only by the loping fields of brown and green and gold. Still, the air sparked with the sweetness of apples. I tallied what I had to do before they arrived. I had to press the yellow linen napkins, to put the breakfast rolls in the oven, to ready a new pot of coffee. Already I'd tidied the kitchen but still I needed to mop the hardwood floor. Mother would notice the floor. She would judge its luster like a cipher to the rest of my life. Precision, cleanliness: these were in question, not sanity. Mother had taught me to take pride in the quiet rhythm of a home's needs, to find sanctuary in its quiet. For her I folded and cleaned like this was the only kingdom I dreamed of.

The house pulled into view as I turned into our dirt drive. I thought of the farmers who watched us, who watched me, from their own perches of dirt and sky. The truck

jumped out of my grasp as the wheels reared over a pothole. I grasped it back. My breath returned with the wheel between hands but still my heart ran loose. Milk surged out of my right breast, staining my pajama top. I cupped my hand over it but still I leaked.

“Shit,” I said. “Shit. Shit. Shit.”

I turned off the car at the edge of the drive and rested my forehead across my hands laced over the wheel. The horn wheezed at my touch. I listened to the wind. It was just me and my wild heart and this square of land. Somewhere, a bird cried and I envied its audacity. I’d started to think of the silence as a kind of static between radio stations, like I was just waiting for the signal to come in.

I pulled myself soiled from the car and stood beneath a sagging apple tree with my feet in the dirt. The sound of my steps magnified against the silence. The sky above was so blue I didn’t trust it.

My hands became fists at my sides and then before I could stop I heard myself scream. I screamed and I screamed, feet in the dirt of our drive and the sun in my hair, like I thought I could taunt the trees into screaming back. I waited. I did not care if those farmers and their wives heard me. There was not even an echo. The sky had grabbed up the pieces of my voice. From the upstairs window, the baby’s cry. I’d woken Robbie.

I walked across the bruised skins of trampled apples back into the house. Milk spilled down my stomach, through my shirt, dripping onto the path. The fall apples were about to spoil. They had names, these apples, that we’d never even bothered to learn. Pretty names, too. They sounded like far-away cities on the back of picture postcards like, *St. Saint Marie*.

The house shook with Robbie's cries. I paused outside his room, hand on the doorframe, gathering up the tatters of my breath. Robbie's pink hands reached up, up in the wooden slats of his crib toward the blue mobile above, like he could conduct it. His face twisted red as he breathed in the ragged edges of his howls. Somehow, however, he seemed also to be smiling. The sun through the window cast him in light. I sandwiched one of his hands between both of my own. "Mommy's here," I said. I let go to spin the blue mobile and his eyes followed its movement, dazzled. "Here now," I said, leaning into the crib, pulling him to my chest. My hand cupped his back as I sat against the wall at the window. His cries landed on my collarbone. I breathed in his sweet baby smell.

"Here now," I said. His cries ebbed. His lips puckered against my shoulder. I'd succeeded. I took a deep breath, closing my eyes and then opening them again. I felt a little bit magical, aware of how my own hands could comfort. I pulled Robbie close. I held him a little too tight. Already Robbie bore a few golden hairs atop his head; he was going to be pale and slight, just like his father. Robbie's tiny hand reached to touch my ear and my eyebrow, the line of my nose. "Thank you," I whispered. "Thank you, sweet boy."

I lay down on my back on the rug and lifted Robbie in both arms so he flew above me. "Mommy used to be a runner." Robbie tracked the pattern of the light at the window and the murmur of the wind at its cracks. "But then I had you."

I collapsed his wings. I pulled him close. Back to earth, to me. His hands once again curled in on themselves to make fists. At my neck, he started again to cry, and I shook my head, *no, no, no*. Helplessly, I conjugated French verbs in whispers in his ear. *Je suis; tu es; il est*. Daddy's verbs. *T'ès où*, he'd called, home from work, the bungalow

door shut behind him and his hands at his boot laces, undoing their knots. *Je suis là*, I'd called, I'm here. Right here.

I warmed milk on the stove and heated a bottle. I wanted him to protest that it wasn't his mother's milk, even if that meant tears, but he drank it down hungrily, breathlessly, his cheeks pink.

I wiped down the tables again. I swept a soapy towel across the hardwood floor with my foot. I plugged the holes with steel wool so the mice would not creep in.

My nose against the glass, I peered through the front window. The light through the fields and in the trees was beautiful. I stood mesmerized.

...

I watched their car pull in the dirt drive through the front window of the farmhouse. I imagined the apple skins sighing and then bruising at their wheels. They drove a Cadillac. He'd bought a Cadillac. At my open mouth, hot air steamed the window pane. In the silent tally of things, mother had lost. The Cadillac's grey sheen seemed alien, impractical against our canvas of brown.

The driver's door opened. Mother's hand against the door and then a black loafer in the dirt. Stiffly, mother pulled herself from the car. I did not know that she could drive. I squinted at the passenger seat, but could only see the halo of the headrest.

Mother resituated the shawl at her shoulders. She stared at the house. She turned to judge the horizon and the distant homes that dotted it. She leaned back her head to take in the sky. She held up her hands as though it was raining, but the sky was blue. Heat in July, the farmers said, or something like that. But it was fall. It was fall, again. Mother opened the back door and pulled out a wooden cane. She rested on it as she opened the

passenger door. Two shiny black shoes emerged. Mother leaned in. Her head disappeared. She lifted daddy up by the arm pits. She placed his hand over the handle of the cane, and I heard them both sigh as he stood.

With her hand beneath his elbow, they walked step by step up to the house. Dirt gathered on mother's sensible black shoes. They were empty handed, and I told myself they were leaving the presents in the car, for later.

My heart thudded louder and when Robbie started to cry in the kitchen, I placed my hands over my ears. Like that, however, I only heard my heart louder, and it made me feel dizzy. Robbie came in and out of focus. He could not be mine. This life could not be mine.

He would not look up. Daddy would not look up from his hand on the cane or his feet in the dirt. *Look up, daddy. Please look up.*

I opened the front door. "Welcome," I said. Robbie wailed behind me. "Well, help your father," mother said.

Mother still had his side, so I just placed my hand uselessly on his shoulder.

I'd missed her: how she'd hummed old prayers at the sink, hands making balls out of matzah.

The door blew shut behind them. There mother was standing with her shoulders back in the foyer, wearing glamour like it was just the way her skin hung over her bones. I helped mother out of her wool coat. We pretended not to notice the dizzying sweetness ushered in by the door's quick gust. I did not know what to do with their coats heavy in my outstretched arms. I had not thought this part through. "I'll meet you in the kitchen," I

said. "Robbie's already in there." Mother smiled politely, precisely. She placed her lilac gloves, one tucked neatly inside the other, atop the pile of coats.

Up the stairs I climbed. I made the steps groan. Mother and daddy would be listening from the kitchen as they stared at the baby. I threw the coats atop the bed. Catching my breath, I watched the street through the slats in the bedroom blinds. For one moment, maybe two, I let myself pray for the Ford on the black road, that Waltie had left work early so I would not have to be alone with them. The road, of course, was empty and, besides, I had the Ford. It was parked in the drive before daddy's Cadillac. The farmers across the way would not even know what to think when they saw its dazzle through their window.

"How was the drive?" I asked, joining them in the kitchen. Robbie sat in a high chair at the table watching us. He had stopped crying. Mother looked to daddy. She tilted her head just so.

"Your father had a fall," mother said. I looked to him. He looked at the window. I could not remember my father not in his work clothes or in the track suit he wore for skating. He wore a nice green sweater. "He kaboomed right on the ice." She made to clap her hands together to create the sound, but then stopped, blinking, her hands paused erect around air.

"No more skating," mother said.

"No more skating," my father said. He had hair on his cheek like he'd forgotten to shave.

"Oh," I said. "I made coffee. And rolls."

"It's a beautiful kitchen," mother offered.

“Here,” I started. I pushed a plate of warm croissants toward them. I lifted the carafe from the stove and placed it on a trivet. As I turned back to them, I noticed daddy’s eyes. He searched me but for what I did not know. I shrugged to startle his glance.

“Daddy, would you like some coffee? I made it strong.”

“Yes, please,” mother said. “Just black.” I spilled the coffee on the white counter.

“Daddy?” I asked, holding up the coffee pot.

“It’s just temporary,” my father said. “I’m not an old man. Not an invalid.”

“No, would you like coffee?”

“Though your mother would love it,” my father said. “Having to take care of me. Wiping me clean in the bath with her own hands.”

“Shame on you,” mother said.

They sat elbows out at the table, neither looking at the other. I poured coffee into a mug for my father.

Daddy carried the steaming coffee cup to his lips. Just before he took a sip, he paused. “To think you could have so much land,” he said. He took a long sip, and then sighed. “So much land that you could just waste it.”

In the kitchen window, I watched the reflection of mother shaking her head. Robbie sat smiling at us.

...

My father sat at the kitchen table unwinding the golden skin from his croissant. Mother excused herself for the restroom. I knew she would be awhile. When she was angry, she liked to put on lipstick in the bathroom mirror, blot it off, and then reapply it. It was an act of steadying.

I listened to mother's shoes on the hardwood down the hallway. Daddy was silent. Coffee sloshed over the white rim of his cup. The croissant lay shattered in uneaten pieces on the small plate. I toyed with the cold gold of my slim wedding band as I studied his face. There were new lines everywhere I looked. A whole constellation fluttering out from each eye. Three staunch parallel lines between his brows. I wanted to see what would happen to his wrinkled face when he smiled, if his skin would fracture around all those lines or stretch into smoothness. He'd paled, too. His skin was now the color of almonds.

"There's nothing there to see," my father said. His hands kept tearing at the pieces of his roll. His fingers were buttered.

"Hmm?" I said. "I don't..."

"You were staring at my face. I am telling you that there's nothing there to see."

Robbie clapped his hands in his chair, a golden shard of croissant plastered against his cheek.

"I'm still your daughter, daddy," I whispered, leaning across the table, chapped elbows and breasts against the Formica. "When I first moved here, I stood on the front porch and looked out at that long, smooth road and thought, 'what a good running road.'"

"There are no hills," he said. There were no hills.

My father pulled out his cane from where it was hooked across his knees. When he straightened a leg and leaned against the cane's handle, I jumped up.

"Don't," daddy commanded. "Let me do this myself."

"But mother..." I said, reaching to touch his back.

“Don’t you get it?” he said. He turned to face me. I stared at the cane shaking in his grasp. “Mother can’t yell at you anymore.”

Daddy’s face darkened as he wheezed up and onto his cane. I looked away. Abruptly, I pulled Robbie out of his high chair. I buried my face against his head and squeezed him, and he cried. Daddy’s cane thudded against the wood. I counted its lashes. When his cane stopped, I lifted my face. Robbie’s eyes followed the jut of my chin. Daddy leaned against the sink as he reached for his plate on the table. He tried to push the pieces of the croissant down the drain. When he failed at his task, he sighed. He placed his plate over the drenched croissant floating in the drain.

“Shhh,” I urged Robbie. I was certain he would feel the nervousness of my hands at his back like static electricity. “It’s ok.”

As daddy heaved back up onto his cane and fumbled back to his seat at the counter, I saw him slip like I was imagining it, like time stopped, like someone reached in and grabbed my heart with a cold fist and I could not breathe. The cane fell from his grasp as his bottom reached for his seat. His shiny black shoes slid across the washed hardwood. I held Robbie up before my face so I would not see my daddy fall. The sound of his back and then his head smacking the hardwood shook the windowpanes. I pictured the ghosts woken in the scattering, frantic dust, how they would smooth their tattered white dresses and blink the sleep from their eyes. Daddy’s knees twisted and fell to his side.

“Daddy!” I called. Robbie cried as I wedged him back in his chair. “Daddy,” I said, stooping to my knees beside him. He stared up at the ceiling. The first thing I did was go to his feet and pull off his shiny black shoes. My hands shook the laces.

“Ruthie,” my father said. His voice was like a match striking again and again and failing to spark, and it made me recognize him. It was my father before me on the floor, coffee on his breath, sun across his forehead. My father.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

“Shhh,” I said. “No.” I touched my hand to his forehead. He was warm. When I pulled back my hand, I noticed a trace of blood on my palm. He had a cut just above his eye puckering blood. Staring at his blood on my hand, I noticed the silence. Mother had not come running. She would have heard him fall and still she had not come. I kissed daddy wet on the forehead. “I need to find mother,” I said.

“*Allez-y*,” he said.

The bathroom at the end of the hall was empty. “Mother?” I called. As I turned back to the hall, I noticed the front door loose in its hinge. It was not fully closed. It croaked against the wind. The smell of spoiled apples at the door made me woozy. I opened the front door wide, and then I started to run.

The sky outside was impossibly blue. Our grass was tall and choked with weeds, and it scratched at my bare ankles as I ran. I swatted flies from my face. “Mother?” I cried. I pressed my hand above my eyes to squint through the sun. The sun made everything glint and gleam and I did not know where to search for mother. “Mother?” I repeated, though I did not know if she would be able to hear me over the wind.

I found her finally in the barn in the backyard. She had a kitten in her lap and orange cat hair across her shawl. There was so much light in her face. I had to command myself not to look away. “Mother,” I said, out of breath in the doorway. I felt my body deflate. She looked up to me without saying anything.

“What are you doing?” I asked. Mother pet the kitten in her lap, her gaze tracing the gesture of her hand. The kitten was so small the stroke of her hand covered it entirely.

“Never mind,” I continued. “Daddy’s had a fall and I need you.”

She blinked up at me. The sun disappeared for a second behind a cloud. I could see the sadness there in her face in all the shadows where it hid like a recluse. “He’s not the man I married,” she said. She shook her head, and the shadows slipped from her face like a cobweb she’d stepped into, and then swatted away. “He’s so mean.”

“Mother, we need to go. Really,” I said. “He’s bleeding.”

She looked at me long and hard. “I can’t take care of him anymore,” my mother said. “I can’t.”

Mother watched my back as I ran across the fields, as I leaned into the blue sky, as I tasted the sun.

...

Inside, it was daddy who cried and not Robbie. “Ruthie,” he said, as I bent to his side and placed a warm washcloth on his forehead. I watched the rise and fall of his chest.

“Daddy,” I said. “Do you know where we are?”

“I know that you are Ruthie and that you are my daughter and that you live here now.” He was quiet for a moment. “But I don’t know how.”

I wanted to tell him how badly my legs still itched. How what I missed most was my hill at dawn and the rasp of my lungs.

I smelled mother before I sensed her behind me. She’d sprayed on more perfume. When I looked over my shoulder and up to her face, I noticed she’d put on new lipstick,

too. It was the color of raspberries. “We’ll need ice,” mother commanded. “And a needle and thread.” Cat hair spilled from her shawl as she kneeled.

She wet the thread on her tongue and narrowed it in her fingers. In and out she stitched the thread across daddy’s forehead with a steady hand. I pushed an ice cube behind each stitch. It melted down daddy’s forehead and into his pinched eyes. Daddy winced.

“Is he going to be ok?” I asked.

Mother placed the back of her hand against the three red stitches on daddy’s forehead, and I thought inappropriately of Waltie’s hand on my face right before he got out of the car that morning. His fingers were so long I’d felt perfectly cupped in his hand. I felt hopeless against this love that so often felt like grief, as though by the time you loved someone you were already losing them.

Mother helped daddy up to a seat and then pressed her forehead against his. They both closed their eyes. It was only ten in the morning. A whole series of hours before Walt came home. Hours like ghosts, ghosts like hours. I washed the blood from my hands in the sink.

As I reached to grab Robbie, I cleared my throat. “You came all this way,” I said. I bowed forward, placing Robbie in my father’s arms before he had a chance to protest. “You should at least hold him.”

I watched Robbie, hoping he would not cry or shit or snot, remembering, remembering how it felt to be held in those big hands.

Daddy looked out the window. Naked trees and apples in the grass. Still, his face was a mystery.

...

Mother kissed my forehead and patted the top of my head in the foyer. There were ribbons of grey in the hair she now wore long. Daddy waited for her, leaning against the front door. "Fix your lipstick before you pick up your husband." Mother said. She pulled my father up against her. I wanted to give mother a kitten.

Mother looked happy, which surprised me with a surge of sadness. I could let go. It was never me. It was never me who could make her happy.

I opened the door but I did not watch them walk away.

Take me, I thought I would scream.

I sat on the front steps inside the house and I waited. The tut tut of mother's shoes in the dirt, daddy heavy against her shoulder. I pictured them driving away, mother's hair like a curtain that would not stay closed. I wondered what she was like at the wheel. If her hands got sweaty or nervous or if they stayed steady; if her eyes held up against the sun; what the sky so much bigger than she knew it to be made her feel. If it made her feel dizzy, or lost, or homesick, or wondrous, and if that window above the sink would ever be enough again.

Daddy would sleep beside her with his mouth wide open. Mother would watch him with a sidelong glance, and she would smile. His hand just might reach to the currents of her hair to be soothed.

I did not want go back with them to where I woke up with the metallic taste of the city in my mouth.

There was a knock at the door. The baby cried. The baby cried louder. I stood, helpless. Had I not heard them leave?

I could not see a face in the front window by the door. Just sky. Robbie kicked and screamed in my arms as I felt for the lock, as I blushed at the space of the opening door.

“*Bonjour?*” I said. The man on my front stoop gaped at me. He wore jeans and boots, a pressed flannel shirt buttoned all the way up. I heard the French in the abstract way he stared at me, like he no longer knew how to begin. “Hello, yes,” I said instead. My words were flat and round, American. The man, I noticed, held a pie in his outstretched hand. I could smell the sweetness of the baked apples, cinnamon in their skins.

“I live at the farm across the way,” the man began. He nodded towards neat rows of gold on the horizon. Robbie’s hot hand reached for my breast, and I pried it away. “It looks like your hands are full,” the farmer said. Awkwardly, he handed the pie to my lone free hand. I had no choice but to hold the pie like a waitress would a platter. The heaviness of it settled in my wrist. At my collarbone, my son’s tears.

“My wife said,” the farmer began. He stared at the intricate latticework of the pie’s crust. I saw pink rise in his face above his beard, to his cheeks. “My wife said apples go well in pie.”

Finally, he looked at me. Robbie was unbearably quiet. “She said to say it just like that,” the farmer finished. “Apples go well in pie.”

I blinked into the pie. My lips twisted into a knot. I felt the expanse of the land acutely. There was no distraction. There was no one there to interrupt. I just wanted to set down the pie and see my son’s face, to decipher if he cried out of rage or confusion or hunger, to place my lips to the sweet down of his forehead.

“I don’t make pie,” I said. The words were sharp at my throat. “I’m not that kind of mother.”

“Your land reflects on all of us, miss,” he said into the closing door, into the delirious, sweet sky. His feet sounded across the dirt.

Come home. Hang your scarf on its hook and toss your keys in the bowl. Kiss your wife who has waited all day for you. Kiss your wife like you missed her. Maybe the baby will not cry as you shovel it down. Your wife watches the latch of your jaw and the dusk in your hair and how hungrily your hands move. She worries at the shadows beneath your eyes, the shadows you bring home, to her.

The soup too salty and the roast too dry. “I made a pie,” I said.

...

Waltie took off his wedding band and placed it in the small bowl on the dresser. He was naked except for his plaid boxers. He was one long white line, broken only by his elbows and hips and the knots of his knees. I wore a nightgown that ruffled and gathered at my stomach as I stretched across the bed, my soft thighs exposed. Waltie watched me in the mirror above the dresser.

“How were your parents?” he asked, turning. He sat on the edge of the bed and touched my knee.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi,” he said. He looked at me. “So they were ok? Your parents?”

I thought of the three red stitches on my father’s forehead. I thought of the lock of his face wrenching away the pain as he stood.

I nodded. I grabbed Waltie's hand from my knee and placed it against my heavy breast.

He stared at his fingers and then blinked up at my face. He burped and placed his free hand against his own heart, where it burned. He did not apologize.

I looked away. The window was cracked open, but who would see us here?

"You feel so different," Waltie said. He moved both hands to my breasts, feeling, a giddy smile like sudden light on his face.

I kissed him. "How?"

He let his hands fall. He bit his lip. "You are no longer my runner girl."

"It's ok. I am still me. It's still ok to touch."

I tilted his head to the ripe part of my thigh. His cold tongue reached. His hair in my hand smelled of rust. I closed my eyes. I contained my gasp. This body that was and was not my own. A body with soft flesh and matted hair. The parts of me that received; the parts of me still sore, that still ached, that still wanted. His cold tongue reached.

I came ringing with pain. Like light caught in the fracture of a broken window, stuttered right where the hand went punching through.

...

The night hummed. The house creaked. Hours like ghosts. Ghosts for hours.

Allez-y, he'd said. He'd spoken to me in the *vous* form, the form of command and politesse, of necessitated distance. Like a stranger.

I pulled a cigarette out of Waltie's pack on the dresser and on old red scarf around my hair. A pink layer of lipstick across my crazy smile. I locked the bathroom door, and

then, out its open window I smoked. It was so cold with the window open like that. I liked how my lungs burned. I did not even cough.

As I pulled the scent-smoked scarf from my hair and crawled into bed, I felt Waltie's hand reach toward me. "Where did you go?" he called from his sleep.

Dawn came. The sky turned a shade lighter at the window. I woke before Waltie and pulled on his terry cloth robe. Darkness broke at my shoulders as I stepped outside, shutting the door quietly behind me.

I stooped barefoot in the rough grass to pick up an apple that was more brown than red. It had a maze of wormholes along its skin. I held it up. In my hand, it squished. I took a bite because I wanted to. I swallowed down a bite so sour and sweet that it brought tears to my eyes.

Daddy was a hockey player and mother was herself. Then, daddy made automobiles and mother spoke quietly to herself at her roost at the window. He placed the tire in its track, making it spin. He had big, sturdy hands, a giant's knuckles. I woke every morning to mother's cashmere gloves drying in the windowsill above the kitchen sink like purple hands waiting for the warmth of dawn. I put daddy's coffee on the boil. I readied myself for the spark of the stove.

Then, I climbed up hills just to feel my lungs expand. Up on my favorite hill at dawn, I'd pause to look out at the city – the golden roofs of Greek Town straight to the ball park. My legs were the taut strings of a finely-tuned instrument, my blood the chaos of a symphony. I listened to my body hum.

Waltie would wake for his first cigarette and think of me.

In another lifetime, I was a runner.

Waltie snored quietly in his sleep, tangled in our quilt. I fought the urge to crawl back in bed beside him, to sidle up against his warmth. I went to the closet. I bowed to my knees. My hand reached. I felt the brown paper sack, and the solid shapes inside.

“Back soon,” I whispered.

I laced up the shoes. They were tight against my still swollen feet. The front door rocked closed behind me.

Part Three

It was Christmas Eve in the nursing home. To each door, a holly wreath. In the lobby, a giant inflatable Santa taking a bubble bath. Grand-daughters in taffeta pink dresses and saddle shoes held tightly to their mother's hand, even though they were afraid of how the machines beeped, even though they could feel in the tremor of their mother's hand that something was wrong.

Chloe sat in the nursing home lobby waiting for her Uncle Robbie. One hand stretched across each knee, playing with the worn fabric of her jeans. Her knee bounced up and down. She wore her nicest cable knit sweater, but still she was self-conscious of its pills and how its right cuff unraveled. She tucked the loose string beneath her sweater's sleeve to hide it. "Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer" played on the radio over the intercom, which Chloe thought was distasteful for the circumstances.

Chloe looked through the cracked blinds for her uncle's figure in the parking lot. Outside, the snow kept falling harder. They were supposed to have nine inches by midnight.

The front hallway smelled like home might for some. Stuffing cooked with a whole case of butter, like turkey roasted until it was dry and tasteless. Chloe picked out something else in the nursing home air, too: soiled bed sheets, antiseptic, the smell of age like something ruined and forgotten. Like someone tripped and spilled split pea green soup across the carpet, and no one bothered to clean it up. And then the dog peed on it.

Chloe tripped and fell and ended up in Michigan for the holidays. "Welcome to Detroit," the TSA employee had said at the airport, sitting perched on a stool at the gate

to baggage claim. He said it with a bemused smile. Through the window, Chloe could hear the sleet land on the cold pavement. She and the TSA employee were in on a secret for just a moment about how shitty both of their lives were. He unclipped the rope leading to baggage claim and wriggled his lips into a smile. He looked Chloe up and down, and she felt his gaze on her back as she walked away. He said, “enjoy your stay in our wonderful city.”

She'd forgotten this particularly Michigan sense of humor, so on the surface and straightforward its sarcasm nearly blended into the landscape. Where Chloe lived in Brooklyn humor was so buried in ironies she had to examine the faces of others to see when to laugh. *Now*, their lips said, *laugh now*. Welcome to Detroit: that had been the joke.

A month earlier, Chloe's grandmother had slipped into a coma. She woke up nine days later with the wide, bright eyes of a school girl. They were gathering as a family at Grandma Ruth's side this Christmas because no one knew what would happen next. It was Robbie who'd signaled the call bringing them all back here. Chloe's parents were still driving up from Virginia with a trunk full of thoughtless gifts bought in bulk at discount stores. Chloe had not once gotten what she wanted for Christmas.

In the nursing home lobby, her red hands braced across each knee, Chloe prepared herself for her dad's anger when he arrived to the Home. *They just assume everyone here celebrates Christmas*, her dad would say, and her mom would blanch, and Uncle Robbie would say, *come on, David. They're just trying to make a little merriment so Christmas Eve in the nursing home isn't so fucking depressing.*

Chloe sweated beneath her falling apart sweater. She was twenty-eight, newly unemployed, past the age where it was truly acceptable to be a starving artist. She still liked to think of herself as a poet. It had been two years since Chloe last saw her grandmother. As she waited for her Uncle Robbie, Chloe seethed with anger at herself for staying away. She tortured herself imagining her grandmother's loneliness. At where her grandmother's mind ran when day after day there was no one beside her to call her by her name, to ply at her memory, to ask, remember this? Remember this?

Chloe looked up to see her Uncle in the revolving front door, his hands leaving fog prints in the glass as he pushed. He wore a floor-length down coat with gloves on wool strings dangling from his pockets. He smiled from behind the thick frames of his glasses. He looked just like who he was: the advertising mogul, the CEO of the firm where he'd gotten Chloe a job as a junior copywriter, the one she'd just lost, a pink slip in her mailbox instead of a Christmas bonus. No one knew, not even her beloved uncle. Even Chloe herself could willfully forget the new fact of her unemployment, especially in the vibrant fog she drifted through.

"Uncle Robbie!" Chloe said, standing. Robbie wrapped her in an ice-cold hug and then pushed her an arms-length away. He sported a new beard that was frosted with snow.

"How's my favorite hipster?" he asked. Chloe blushed and knotted her hands. Though they both lived in New York, it had been months since they last saw each other because of how often Robbie traveled for work.

"Oh, Robbie," Chloe said. "I'm too old to be a hipster. I'm just poor."

Robbie swatted the air and grinned winningly. Chloe signed them in at the reception desk.

“Not anymore!” Robbie said. His back was to the reception desk so he could watch the snow fall. “I know that even our junior copywriters make bank.”

Chloe stared at the blue ink on the white paper. She steadied her hand.

“Doesn’t it feel good to sell out?” Robbie continued. “Maybe you can even move from Brooklyn to the mainland!”

Chloe caught her breath. “I don’t know about that!” She widened her eyes. She prayed that the expression on her face was, in fact, a smile.

They stood in the lobby of the humming nursing home as Robbie tried to make eye contact and Chloe resisted. She was grateful that the snow gave her reason to stare. It was the same snow that fell outside of her Brooklyn apartment, but this particular Michigan snow felt thicker, whiter, more potent, the kind that could leave you trapped for days. Chloe shivered.

“This place is terrible,” Robbie said. “Why do we ever come back?” Chloe thought, *especially since you can pay the bills online these days.*

“So...” Chloe began.

“Oh!” Robbie said. He lifted up what appeared to be a football wrapped in aluminum foil that Chloe had not noticed him carrying. “I brought dinner!”

They both stared at the hot, glittering football. “It’s roast chicken!” Robbie said.

“Ah!” Chloe said.

“I stopped at the Meijers on the way from the airport. I’d forgotten how much fun it is to drive. Even in this shit!”

“Is grandma not eating carbs these days?” Chloe asked.

“Shit, I forgot the potatoes,” Robbie said. He considered the steaming chicken football in his hands with something like a frown. “Well I guess we’ll at least get the pleasure of watching her tear at the chicken with her hands like a vulture.”

“It wouldn’t be the holidays without that,” Chloe said. She was proud of being able to keep up with her Uncle’s witticisms.

Robbie set the chicken down on a table in the lobby as he yanked off his beanie and pulled a Tigers’ baseball cap from his coat pocket. “I do this for all my important meetings,” he said conspiratorially to Chloe, dropping his voice to just above a whisper. “I put on a cap of whatever baseball team the execs root for.” He tapped the stitched D. “This one’s for ma.”

Chloe wrapped the chicken in her arms. She smiled at her Uncle. As they left the lobby, Chloe saw Robbie text his almost girlfriend, the newest, *still w mom*. Chloe could not help but picture one of his skinny copywriters in a slinky dress that swooshed as she walked, bored visiting her own family in Connecticut. Robbie turned to watch Chloe. He put away his phone, just a little bit of red in his cheeks. “I see you noticed my beard,” he said. “I grew it for Michigan.”

They walked together down the hall, shoulder to shoulder, past the atrium with its birds chirping in cages and elaborate koi pond, past the dining room where those without family visiting sat in turtlenecks, waiting for their turkey, eyes to the ceiling.

“Are your square parents here yet?” Robbie asked.

Chloe shook her head. “Still an hour south. Nearly.”

Robbie held his hand up to his ear. “You can almost hear the trinkets rattling in the trunk as we speak!” He winked then at Chloe, his dimple a cleft in his right cheek.

“Jewish Santa!” Chloe started. “And his Shiksa helper!”

Robbie handed the chicken to Chloe so that he could bring his hand to his heart as he gasped with laughter.

As they reached her grandmother’s hallway, Robbie stretched out his arm to stop Chloe.

“You’ve heard about her latest obsession?” Robbie said. His breath smelled of mouthwash. Chloe listened to a distant machine meter out the beats of someone’s heart, and it made her shudder.

“She thinks she’s seeing Josh,” Robbie continued. “That he’s coming to her window.”

Chloe blinked and felt the wild gallop of her heart. *I’m alive*, she told herself. “Her and gramp’s old dog? From the farm?”

“Precisely,” Robbie said. His eyes flitted to the end of the hall, to an open door, grandma’s room. “If I could only crawl inside her head, I tell you.”

Robbie burst into his mother’s room, but Chloe waited in the doorway. “Happy holidays, ma!” Robbie chorused. Robbie’s voice crackled with desperation. Already, he was about to run out of the lines he’d rehearsed. On a whiteboard at the foot of Grandma Ruth’s bed, someone had written: *family coming for Christmas Eve dinner. Yum!*

Robbie kissed both of his mom’s cheeks and Chloe looked away.

“Margaret!” a man called as he pushed by in the hallway, leaning on a walker with twin tennis balls for feet. He looked right at Chloe and nodded. “It’s ok, Margaret,” the man said, smiling, and then continuing on.

“Thank you,” Chloe said. As the man pushed slowly on, however, Chloe was not even sure she’d said the words aloud.

When she’d gotten the call from her parents about her grandmother, and then another from Robbie ten minutes later about all of them coming for Christmas, Chloe had been in her basement Brooklyn apartment for two days without leaving. The pink slip was propped beneath her vintage bedside lamp. She had soy milk and old cucumber rolls in the fridge, a frosty Tofutti Cutie in the freezer, enough to last her for a few days. She’d stood with the phone pressed to her ear, stooping to the lone window at the front of her apartment, peering up at the slats of grey sky through her security bars.

To her parents, she’d said, “Uh huh.” To her Uncle Robbie, she’d said, “OK.”

She waited then for her ex-boyfriend to come over from Bushwick with new weed. When he knocked, she unlocked the front door and then the bars over it, and then she grabbed the back of his head and kissed his cold lips there in the dank foyer. She closed her eyes to blink away the spiders watching them from their privileged webs.

“How’s the new corporate job?” her ex-boyfriend asked. They were both skinny in underwear on a rattan mat stretched across her concrete floor. He propped up on his elbow and stared at Chloe’s face. She wanted to hide from the way he looked at her.

“Hey,” he continued. “Shouldn’t you be there right now?”

Chloe faked a cough into her fist. “I’m taking a sick day.”

“Fuck yeah,” he said. “I wish my rich uncle could land me a sweet job.”

Later, they lay like snow angels across the entirety of Chloe's floor, staring at the ceiling, their pinkies touching. When she said, "My grandmother's dying," her voice shocked her. She wanted to whisk away the loud words, back to her heart, to her own private noise. Instead, she surprised herself by laughing.

"Everyone's grandma dies," her ex-boyfriend said. His pinkie moved to her bare thigh. "Mine's been dead for years."

Chloe sat up on her forearms. "Can you go?" she asked. "We aren't even together anymore. You're fucking that pixie princess."

After he left, Chloe pulled overalls over her bra and sat on her mattress, selfishly finishing the joint. Outside, a drunk stumbled, stuttered, singing on the sidewalk.

...

Chloe stood in her grandmother's doorway listening to Robbie recite his lines. She toyed with the silver locket at her neck, one of her grandmother's old baubles, an anniversary present from her late husband. Her grandmother had given it to Chloe the last time she came to Detroit to visit. It was spotted with rust, but Chloe liked its age.

Robbie looked up to Chloe in the doorway from where he sat on his mother's bed. *She's clear today*, he mouthed. He winked at her.

Chloe set the chicken on the dresser beside the television. Oprah was giving away presents in red boxes with giant gold bows. At the window, snow fell and the night grew darker still. Her grandmother had a nice room, thanks to Robbie. Chloe could make out a forest, with a neat hem of pine trees. She searched for any trick of light that could be mistaken for a dog. They should blame her old eyes instead of laughing at her brains.

As Chloe sat opposite her Uncle on her grandmother's bed, the starch, white sheets crinkled beneath her. Her grandmother's brown eyes startled into focus.

"Kiss your grandmother's hand," Ruth said. "I'm glad you're here."

Chloe considered her grandmother's hand. It was spotted with brown, a single blue vein running diagonally across it, her skin puckered like a chicken's. Chloe picked it up and kissed it. Her grandmother giggled with pleasure.

Then, Ruth swatted Robbie's cheek with her free hand. She pointed a thumb towards Chloe. "Which one is this?"

Robbie blinked at his mother. He twisted his lips. He did not have a line ready to go. Chloe looked to her own hands, lines across her knuckles, no longer perfectly young. She stared at the chipped purple polish on her fingers she'd forgotten to take off.

"Chloe," Robbie said finally. "David's."

Grandma Ruth swiveled to Chloe and stared at her long and hard. "You're the one who speaks French? Proper French? Not that Canadian bull shit like my father?"

"I did. Right when I moved back from studying abroad. It's rusty now," Chloe said.

"So you don't?" Her grandmother would not blink.

"They're on their way," Chloe stuttered. "My parents."

"They're driving," Robbie said, rushing in, saving her.

"We're hoping they don't get stuck in the storm," Robbie said, which Chloe thought was graceful, since she knew he thought they were stubborn for driving instead of accepting his gift of plane tickets.

Grandma cackled like her old self. Chloe sat on the opposite edge of the bed from Robbie. “Probably bringing more trinkets as we speak,” Grandma said. “It wouldn’t be Christmas without more shit we don’t need.”

“Who doesn’t need more mugs monogrammed, ‘R’?” Chloe joked. Grandma laughed still, and Chloe heartened. There was life yet in the brown of grandma’s eyes. “Your friends might steal your coffee otherwise!”

The joy in her grandmother’s face as she wriggled in her bed sheets made Chloe’s eyes burn suddenly with tears. She looked to the floor as she stammered them back. Chloe loved her Grandma Ruth, who’d once published a poem, and raised horses, and spoke as though she was painting a picture with great big strokes of color. After her high school graduation, Chloe had found her grandmother in the bathroom drinking red wine out of an old milk bottle. “My life advice for you,” her grandma had said, both of them watching each other in the mirrors above the sink. Her grandmother’s gums were eerily red from the wine. “Is to not worry about what all the fuckers think.”

A nurse in scrubs covered in reindeer walked into grandmother’s room with a series of pills sorted into what looked like an artist’s palette. Chloe got up from the bed and smoothed her jeans. She stood at the window with her back to the room. She could feel the cold press against the glass. “Are these for my old liver or my old heart or my old joints?” Chloe watched her grandmother’s reflection in the window. She covered her eyes with both hands and opened her mouth wide.

“And where should I wheel Ruth later for dinner?” the nurse asked. “What room did you reserve?”

“Excuse me?” Robbie asked. In the window, Chloe watched him place his hand on the nurse’s shoulder. She stayed in his grasp for one long second, before side-stepping out of it.

“Yes, I’ll need to take her there and give her pre-dinner medicine.”

“No, the part about the reserved room?”

“Yes, on holidays, you need to reserve one of our reception rooms.” The nurse looked to the floor: it was yellow tile, speckled with neon, like funfetti cake.

“May I speak with you privately outside?” Robbie asked.

Chloe turned. Grandma Ruth rolled her eyes. Chloe sat beside her grandmother and patted her hand. They listened to Robbie’s whispers. “We just need a private place for dinner, that’s all,” Robbie said. “Away from all this.”

“Can I get you some water?” Chloe asked her grandmother.

“Really?” Robbie said outside the door. “Nowhere?”

A moan sounded from down the hall, and Chloe was surprised by how the body-less cry was tinged with pleasure.

“Well I suppose there is the rector’s office,” the nurse said. “He’ll be at service.” “Perfect,” Robbie said. Chloe pictured him scratching his beard, reaching again for the nurse.

“Let me check,” the nurse said. Her shoes squished down the hall.

Chloe pressed her face against the window glass. Her grandmother sucked at her own lips, clawing them on top of each other. All Chloe could see through the glass was darkness. The closer she looked, the more the night beyond scared her, like it was a hand holding a secret tight in its fist.

“It’s Josh!” Grandma Ruth shouted. “Can you please tell the damn nurse to let him in?”

Chloe watched the snow fall. The walls shook with the machines keeping everyone’s grandma alive.

“Ruth, mom,” Robbie said. He reached for her hand, but she twisted back. Her face bore true horror. “It’s just snow. That’s all you’re seeing.”

“He’s going to die out there in the cold.”

Grandma Ruth sat upright. She watched the window. Chloe followed her gaze, but all she saw reflected back to her was her grandmother’s face, a pale moon, with pink lips gasping for air. “It’s ok, Josh,” Grandma Ruth said. “We’re going to bring you inside.”

Chloe noticed first the dark ring widening across the light blue sheets. Her Grandma Ruth had peed herself. “Grandma,” Chloe said. “It’s ok.”

“Your dad’s just going to have to keep his mouth shut about eating in the rector’s office,” Robbie leaned in to whisper to Chloe, as she pressed the bell to ring for the nurse.

“You know my dad’s always been good at that.” Robbie winced into a smile. He’d lost weight; Chloe could see it now in his face.

“I hope there’s even a cross on the wall. That would make my day.” Robbie’s reflection winked at Chloe in the window.

“Josh,” Grandma Ruth said. “I’m sorry for sitting here peeing while you’re freezing outside.”

“We made it!” Chloe jumped off her grandmother’s bed at her father’s voice.

In the doorway, Chloe's mother coughed into her elbow. "I'm sorry," she said. "I have a bit of a cold."

Chloe shook her father's hand. "Dad," she said. She hugged her mother.

"You made it," Robbie said.

"Josh!" Grandma cried.

Chloe's mother kissed the side of Chloe's face. She frowned at her fingers on her daughter's face.

"Oh dear," Chloe's mother said. "You're just skin and bone."

Chloe shook her head.

"That big city is eating you up and burping you out," her mother continued.

"Will someone please get Josh!" Ruth called.

Chloe grabbed her mother's hand from her face and kissed it across the knuckles before remembering her mother's cold.

"Oh, she's fine," Robbie said. He was suddenly beside Chloe, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. Her mother gave a tiny smile.

...

Her mother brought a cooler on wheels. Her father sighed at the cross on the wall and shook his head. "David," Chloe's mother said, finger pushed against her closed lips. Her mother's voice was her father's lifeguard whistle, telling him he'd swum out too far.

Chloe helped her mother unload the cooler. There were Pyrex rectangles of potatoes and green beans, their glass covers clotted in steam. A liter of Vernor's, her grandmother's favorite.

“Ah, plates!” Robbie said. He smacked himself in the forehead as he watched Chloe’s mother pull out plates, utensils, and napkins. “What would we do without you, Bets?”

“We anticipated that you would be utterly useless,” Chloe’s father said.

“David.” Chloe’s mother again, shaking her head as she spread a tablecloth across the rector’s desk.

Chloe watched how her father’s eyes kept circling back to the cross on the wall.

The office was just a small couch and a desk, and it was a tight squeeze once they were all inside. Grandma Ruth sat in the corner of the office in her wheelchair, a yellow blanket across her lap and a small smile on her face. Chloe watched her grandmother. She felt peace seeing her grandmother sitting there, her hands grabbing onto the edges of her blanket, a wash of blush across her cheeks from the nurses who liked to pretty her up like a doll. Her grandmother looked warm and nearly happy. There was a knock at the door and Chloe startled from her gaze. It was a nurse with two extra folding chairs; Robbie tipped her \$50. “Merry Christmas,” he said, nodding that she could leave.

Chloe sat awkwardly besides her father on the stiff couch. He still emanated cold from outside, like there was a coating of frost on in his skin and a sprinkle of it in his hair. She shivered beside him. “Ohio was a straight shot,” her father said to no one in particular. He whistled as his hand soared through the air.

“That does pretty much sum up the state,” Robbie said. He winked at David. “I prefer to just miss it entirely.”

Grandma Ruth coughed and they all turned to stare. Even Robbie held his breath.

“Shall we stop admiring the wall paper and get wokking and rolling?” Grandma Ruth said. “I’d like the dark meat.”

“It is very nice wallpaper,” Chloe’s mother said. Cold shook loose from her as she moved closer to the wall to examine it. “Are those roses? Quite lovely.”

Grandma Ruth just stared at her plate: Styrofoam apportioned into meat and starch and veggie. Her face sagged toward the food. In the rector’s office with the door closed, Chloe could barely hear the chorus of heart monitors. Still, she had a hard time eating in the nursing home with its litany of smells. Her fork danced around her plate. Robbie placed his hand on his mother’s back and patted softly.

“I have a hard time eating when I know Josh is outside freezing,” Grandma Ruth stage whispered to Robbie.

“Ma, please,” Robbie said. David ate silently. Chloe counted down from 100.

“Ma, eat your chicken,” Robbie continued.

The thing was: Chloe believed her. Or, wanted to. Chloe wanted to be alone with her grandmother. To touch her forehead and brush her white hair behind her ears. So that Chloe might finally confess: *I have no idea what to do. I have no idea what I’m doing.* It was to Grandma Ruth, Chloe decided, there in the Rector’s office with its lovely wallpaper and its cloistered heat, that she needed to admit her failure. Not to her parents who would not know what to do with her honesty. Not to Robbie who would pretend to listen as he played with his phone. To Grandma.

“Why are you wearing that hat,” Grandma Ruth said, a drum of chicken in her fist and grease shiny on her lips. “The Tigers didn’t even make it to the finals this year.” She

bit into her chicken, chewed with her mouth full, staring at Robbie. “No one wears baseball caps in winter. Not here.”

Chloe’s mind wandered to the Detroit suburb just beyond the woods and the nursing home where she’d lived on a street called *Mulberry* in a small brick house with a screened-in porch until she was seven and her dad’s office transferred him to Charlottesville. At night as a little girl, she slept with her window propped open so she could listen to the night throb with tree frogs. Her mother even let her keep one as a pet in a lunchbox cooler Chloe wore around her wrist. Her name was Ruby. Ruby lasted two days. Her mother buried her in the backyard while Chloe watched from the screened-in porch, completely silent. Chloe remembered as she watched her grandmother eat how she’d felt then seeing her mother’s hand dive up and down in the mud -- not sad, but helpless. Like she didn’t know until she lost it that she’d been entrusted with a life.

“Brownies?” her mother said, passing around a sheath of aluminum foil with melted bricks of chocolate inside.

“I have nothing left,” Grandma Ruth said to her plate, empty except for the green beans. “So I hope that’s not why you’re all here.”

“It’s nice though,” she said nodding. “I’ll say that.”

“That’s enough, mom,” Chloe’s father said. He rested his empty plate atop his wife’s though she was still eating. Betsy looked at her smothered plate with consternation. “That’s enough!” David repeated.

He stood and wagged his long finger at his mother. “We drove eighteen hours through a blizzard to get here, and this...” Tears started in her father’s eyes, and Chloe looked away.

“David,” Chloe’s mother said.

“No, I’m done. She is crazy.” David gasped for breath. “Why will no one just come out and say she’s crazy? She is bat shit crazy.” He opened the door of the rector’s office and a stifled breeze found its way inside. Chloe was grateful for how it cooled her forehead.

David shut the door politely behind him. He stood in the hallway on the other side of the wall with his arms crossed. They could see his shadow through the closed blinds of the office’s window.

Grandma Ruth took small, ladylike bites from her drumstick, a piece of chicken skin stuck to her cheek. “Crazy is relative,” she said with her mouth full.

Chloe hid her smile in a swig of lukewarm Vernors.

“What does he want?” Robbie said with his mouth full. Chloe’s mom reddened, hands shaking at the edges of her Styrofoam plate. “A fucking medal?”

“Come on, Robbie,” Betsy said. “Is swearing really necessary?”

The chaos made Chloe feel brave. “I...” she started, before swallowing back down her desire to confess. She looked to her napkin and pulled a pen from her purse. On her napkin she wrote, *I’m taking you out of here.*

“Grandma, do you need a napkin?” Chloe asked. She squeezed the napkin into her grandmother’s hand.

“I’m just going to the restroom,” Chloe continued.

As the door closed behind her, she spotted her father in the hallway.

She gave him a quick nod. “Dad,” she said.

...

At the end of the nursing home hallway, Chloe noticed the staff break-room lit up bright. Garlands stretched across its glass walls. Chloe pressed her nose up against the glass and stared. The room was nearly bare, with just a fridge, a coffeemaker, and two card tables. To Chloe, however, it seemed like something of an oasis. Its light beckoned her. When she tried the door, she was surprised that it was unlocked.

The quiet inside the break room was luxurious. Nothing blinked, or stirred, or cried. Chloe searched the cupboard for the coffee and filters. She shook grounds into the filter and turned on the coffee maker. The carafe hissed as it heated and the room filled with the rich smell of coffee. The smell of it made Chloe feel alive again. There was blood at her fingertips.

When a man cleared his throat in the doorway behind her, Chloe jumped. She turned. The man watched her with his arms stretched across his broad chest. He wore a white coat, *Dr. Storey* stitched in black thread above his chest pocket. Chloe nodded at him. Her hands itched with restlessness. She burned up. At the card table, she took off her sweater and hung it over the back of the chair. In just her tank top, she immediately felt better.

Chloe watched the doctor's back as he rinsed clean his thermos in the sink. He had big hands and did not wear a ring. He turned again to Chloe, and Chloe looked to the floor.

“Are you a volunteer?” the doctor asked.

Chloe braved his gaze. She shook her head. She could not lie.

“Families really aren’t supposed to be in here,” the doctor said. He looked nervously to the glass wall, as though already someone was watching them from the other side.

Chloe took a deep breath. “I just needed some quiet,” she said. Then, his eyes still on her, she added, “My grandmother’s dying.”

The doctor was silent. The coffeemaker steamed.

“I thought a cup of coffee might make me feel better,” Chloe continued. She threw up her hands and shook her head with the ridiculousness of it. “Coffee!”

Dr. Storey smiled politely. He pulled out the carafe from the maker before the coffee finished brewing. The coffee fell in steamy drips onto the hot plate as he filled his thermos. The sound of the drops on the hotplate made Chloe flinch.

“It’s ok,” he said. She was taken aback when he pulled out a chair at the card table and sat down across from her. “You take your time.”

He looked at Chloe as he sipped at his coffee. His eyes were green. He had the start of a beard. Chloe reached over and brushed her hand over the doctor’s arm, back and forth. He stared at her hand for an interminable second before standing up and shaking his head.

“No,” the doctor said. Coffee seeped onto his chin. “No.”

The door shut loudly behind him. Chloe stared with horror at her guilty hand still frozen in mid-air. “I’m sorry,” she said in the empty room. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

She could not see the snow outside fall from the windowless break room, but she knew the air was thick with it, and unforgiving, and that snow blanketed the earth.

...

Chloe walked red-faced and sweaty down the long hallway to her grandmother's room. The noise of the nursing home no longer rattled her. She let it hit her without wincing.

When she found her grandmother alone in her room upright in her chair before the television, Chloe remembered the note she'd foolishly passed to her grandmother.

I'm going to take you out of here!

Chloe hoped her grandmother had used the napkin to blow her nose and then thrown it away.

"Ah, the fake French one," her grandmother said. "The last one remains!"

"Grandma," Chloe began. "Where is...."

"Everyone left me here to die," Ruth said.

They both turned as a nurse knocked at the door. "Chloe, your uncle went to the hotel to check in," the nurse said. Chloe burned imagining the nurse already knew what she'd done to the doctor. They were all snickering about the grand-daughter who made a pass on the doctor. Chloe nodded to the nurse. He hadn't even been that handsome. "He'll be back to pick you up." The nurse smiled and left behind a fog of lavender perfume as she walked away.

"That too," Grandma Ruth said. She hit her legs in her wheelchair. "I get so angry at these useless things!"

Chloe watched her grandmother strike her own legs. "Ok," Chloe said. She grabbed the handles of her grandmother's wheelchair. "Let's go find Josh."

Grandma Ruth whooped.

...

Chloe took the red beanie from her coat pocket and placed it across her grandmother's head. Grandma Ruth murmured at the feel of the fleece on her cold skin. Just before her parents left the Home, Chloe had stolen the hat from the big pocket of her father's down coat. She took her own gloves off her hands and pushed them onto her grandmother's fingers. "We don't have a scarf," Chloe said, lowering herself to her grandmother's ear, and whispering. "So we'll have to zip you all the way up."

Chloe stood behind her grandmother's wheelchair in the lobby of the nursing home. Both of them watched the snow fall through the front windows. "We're just waiting for my dad to pull around so Ruth can say goodbye," Chloe said to the receptionist. Beside them, Santa whistled elegiacally as he started to deflate in his bubble bath.

Then, when the receptionist turned to go into her office, Chloe slammed her hand against the big, blue button that opened the front door. "Run!" Chloe whispered to her grandmother, pushing her through the door and outside. Grandma Ruth closed her eyes and smiled once the crisp air hit them and snow drifted across her face. Chloe wheeled them away from the front door where the receptionist could not see them. Twin fluorescent lights covered with snow filled the parking lot with hazy light. Grandma Ruth gulped at the snow. She sighed as she shivered. When she opened her eyes, they were bright, even in that half-darkness. "I can't remember the last time I was outside," Grandma Ruth said. She reached behind her and grabbed her grand-daughter's hand.

"So," Chloe began. "Where do you think we'll find Josh?"

“Josh!” her grandma called into the wind. Chloe pushed her grandmother around the corner of the Home, down a sidewalk leading to the courtyard. They retreated from the light of the front entrance. From the courtyard where the sidewalk ended, Chloe hoped they might be able to make out the forest behind her grandmother’s room. There in the courtyard, however the darkness was nearly so absolute Chloe could barely make out her grandmother before her, save for the puffs of her breath crystallizing in the freezing air. They stood between two wings of the Home. Wind caught there, and rattled.

Each minute was an opportunity to tell her grandmother that she’d lost her job. The words were right there waiting. Her grandmother still held her hand. The black of the sky seemed to swallow up Chloe’s thoughts and the words at her throat. The air starchy quiet in the cold.

“I,” Chloe started. She faked a cough to hide her words.

“Grandma,” Chloe began. In the distance, a bird cried out, and Chloe’s shoulders tensed; for a moment, warped by the wind, it had sounded like a dog barking.

“Yes?” Ruth answered.

Snow gathered on Chloe’s eyelashes and melted into her eyes.

“Grandma, Robbie told me you ran a marathon once. When he was little.”

Grandma Ruth shook her head, but Chloe could not tell if she signaled *yes*, or *no*. Chloe could hear in the growing rasp of her grandmother’s breath that the cold was starting to take its toll on her lungs. They were running out of time. “How?” Chloe asked.

“How did you do it?”

“I had to,” her grandmother said. “You find a way to do the things you have to do.”

Chloe could not think of anything she had to do. Maybe once, but not now. The realization took Chloe's breath away, but she blamed it on the cold.

"I was a bad mother," grandma Ruth said.

"No!" Chloe said.

"I left Robbie alone so I could run. He was just a baby."

"I don't..." Chloe started.

"Josh!" her grandmother called. Grandma Ruth took off her right glove and pulled two bare fingers to her mouth, and whistled. "I think Josh is sleeping in the woods," Chloe said. "I think he found somewhere warm."

Grandma Ruth nodded. For a moment, the snow stopped falling.

Chloe felt her grandmother's shoulders shake as she started to cry in her wheelchair.

"There is no Josh," Grandma Ruth said. She pulled her bare hand from her warm pocket and wiped her nose on the back of it. Reaching up to the sky, she shook her hand out. They both watched as the snot scattered into the wind. "I know there's no Josh. There's no Josh, right? Right?!"

Chloe leaned closer to her grandmother and kissed the back of her head. When she tasted fleece, and remembered her father's hat, Chloe pulled up part of its fabric so that her lips could find the real warmth of her grandmother's head. Chloe folded her grandmother's hat back down. She patted it over both of her ears.

"I don't know, Ruth," Chloe said. "I have no fucking idea."

"Sometimes," Chloe continued, "I wake up so dizzy I can't see straight."

It was quiet between them and Chloe wasn't even sure her grandmother had heard her.

"It's not you, dear. You're not lazy," Ruth said. "It's your iron. God did not mean for you to be a vegetarian."

Her grandmother's laugh turned then into a scream. "Why did you bring me out here?" Grandma Ruth said. "I could die out here!"

...

When they came back inside red-faced and wet-eyed from the cold, nurses smiled sympathetically in the hallway. To them, it was just a granddaughter saying goodbye to her grandmother. Their tears were believable.

Grandma Ruth reached long from her wheelchair as they returned to her room. She grabbed the wreath from her door and threw it against the window. Plastic cranberries loosed from its ribbon rattled frantically across the tile floor.

"I don't celebrate Christmas!" Chloe's grandmother cried. "Mother wouldn't let us!"

Grandma Ruth slouched her shoulders and tried to slink out of her chair onto the floor.

"Grandma, stop!" Chloe cried. Breathless, she yanked her grandmother up by the armpits.

"Don't make me go back in there," Grandma Ruth kept shouting, until a nurse pushed Chloe out of the way and took over.

“Don’t make me!” her grandmother cried, turning from her bed where an orderly held her down to Chloe watching from the doorway. Grandma Ruth winked at Chloe. Chloe nodded.

...

“So did you find Josh?” Robbie shouted through the rolled down window of his rented Jeep. He’d returned to pick up Chloe at the Home after checking in at the hotel. His eyes glinted. “I think he was taken into a good home,” Chloe said. She slid into the car, holding her hands up to the heat.

In the silence between them, Chloe started, “I felt like I couldn’t hold onto her.”

Robbie laughed, which surprised Chloe. The sharp sound of it chafed her.

“Chloe, dear,” Robbie said. “I never felt like I could hold onto her.” Chloe looked at her uncle’s profile long and hard. She tried to find the boy who once grew up here, on an apple orchard outside the city.

“Robbie?” Chloe asked. “Will you take me somewhere? There’s somewhere I need to see.”

...

I saw it happen as Chloe wheeled me back to my room. I had her pause at the entrance so I could take the wreath off the door. Before me, my bed was empty, its white sheet pulled back. The television was off. The curtains shook at the wind pressing against the window. I smelled my scent rising up from the bedding like I would a stranger’s. I smelled like a dried-up rose. I smelled like perfume left open on the counter for too long. I stared at the empty bed. White sheet, hugged in a blanket of apricot.

It would be David there with the last box. He would pause and turn on the television. The batteries in the remote would be dying, and he'd hit the remote against his palm to shake juice into its batteries. He would try to change the channel. "Damn't," he would say. Before him, the last box, tape up its seam, no label. He would be angry at the wrong things. Robbie would rent the moving truck, but he might not even show. The floor of my room would suddenly be so bare. Light would rush across it with glee.

And where would Chloe be? This lone grand-daughter with the nervous breath behind me. Her skin was so porcelain it was blinding. I could not look right at her. I had to look away. She'd sat at the edge of my bed, her hands worrying at a silver locket at her throat – a gift from a lover, I hoped, because she seemed too thin, too lonely – and I had not recognized her. She had a woman's voice when she spoke. She wore the wrong shade of lipstick for her pale skin. She looked like a girl who'd run away to the big city and never come home. Then, I recognized her: twenty-five in an unraveling sweater, chapped hands, a young woman who'd given her light to the wrong things. She'd said, "Grandma, I'm Chloe. David's."

Her skin so bright I had to look away. She had a single freckle on her long white neck. She had that lovely French name, *Chloe*.

She would be here when it happened. She gave her light to the wrong things. But still, I could not picture her besides the heat of her swearing father. She would melt. No, she'd be out in the lawn, peering into the forest, calling out for ghosts.

At the door to my room, I said to Chloe, "Let's take this wreath down." I could feel her hands grasp my wheelchair tighter. "For mother's sake."

After she left, I lay in bed and commanded myself to picture Waltie's face. His wide smile. His hair of gold. His hands swarming with freckles. His hands on my cold knee, his hands before his lips pleading *shh*, his hands leading me up the creaking stairs of the farmhouse to our unmade bed. My toes curled beneath the stiff nursing home sheets. I suddenly felt the cold from the courtyard all the way through. I prayed long and hard for his heat, until I felt it there beside me, charged with static.

I had lied about the dog.

...

There was not a Christmas tree in the front window, which she had not expected. She had not expected Jews to still live here. There was a single light on upstairs, a child's small shadow through the curtains.

"Here," Chloe said to Robbie. "Stop here."

Every other house on Mulberry had Christmas lights stitched across its roof. The street trembled with blinking lights. Chloe got out of the Jeep. Her feet slid on the ice, and she had to steady herself. She walked up her old driveway. As the lights around her stammered, Chloe was hidden for a moment in shadow, and then exposed in a burst of light.

She stood in the driveway. She closed her eyes and then opened them again. Upstairs, the child moved away from the lit-up window. Here, Chloe kept a tree frog in a cooler at her wrist. She'd thrown in fistfuls of grass, unsure what tree frogs ate. She hadn't thought about air holes. About how the thing would breathe. Beneath the frost in the backyard, in a subterranean swallow of mud, Ruby dreamed.

Chloe shook there in the drive as she had not been able to then. She'd been heedless with that tiny life.

“What are you doing?” Robbie called through the Jeep window.

“I'm looking for Josh,” Chloe replied, and meant it.

...

In the car, Chloe's hands trembled inside her cheap wool gloves. Robbie scraped off the snow that had gathered on the windshield just in those few minutes. From the wetlands, the snap of an ice-laden tree branch, falling. It was cave-like inside the car. Chloe's breath was a cloud. A square of light broke through at Robbie's hand, and then another. The ice scraper against the window was loud. The world emerged. The side of a pine tree wrested of its needles. One lone window laden with icicles. A piece of the sky with more stars than Chloe remembered. She had not remembered these stars. How had she not remembered?

Robbie got in the car and chucked the scraper into the back seat. There was frost in his beard.

They sat. Chloe waited for Robbie to pull the gear into reverse. The roads were only going to get worse. Instead, Robbie twisted into the backseat and pulled a plastic container into his lap. It was a rotisserie chicken.

“Chicken?” Robbie asked, tossing the lid over his shoulder into the backseat. He pulled a skinned leg to his waiting teeth. She shook her head no. She listened to the meat slide down his throat as he swallowed.

“I bought two chickens,” he said between bites. “I only took one in.”

“You bought an extra chicken for yourself? For after?”

With his mouth full of meat, Robbie smiled. The street's Christmas lights were so bright against the front window Chloe had to hold up her hand against their glare.

"Isn't it cold?" Chloe asked.

Robbie shrugged and bit into the chicken leg.

"Uncle Robbie, I have to tell you I lost my job," Chloe said. "They fired me."

Robbie made a gurgling sound with the back of his throat as he slid his hand across his neck.

"I knew it wasn't going well," he said.

Chloe looked to her uncle who nodded at her, and then she turned away from his gaze. "That job wasn't you," he said.

"Well, I don't know about that!" Chloe said. She stared at the meat in the plastic tub. She took off her gloves and rested them on her lap. She took a breast and bit into it. She licked her lips clean. Her mouth froze around a circle of air. "I'm sorry I embarrassed you," she added.

They ate the meat with their hands. Slowly, silently. The sky above was choked with stars.

"I'm getting married," Robbie said.

"What?"

"You're the first I told."

"Well, shit."

"Rebecca from copy. She's the one who came up with the sudsy bubbles campaign."

“Congratulations!” Chloe gasped.

“I’ve waited all night to tell someone,” he said. “It feels so good to finally have my life together.” Robbie closed his eyes, and Chloe watched his lips part into a smile like he was dreaming. He burped unapologetically and opened his eyes. Chloe looked away.

Robbie rolled down the window and threw the bones onto the driveway. Then, he powered up the window. In the warm car, sweaty with its smell of meat, Robbie rested his head against the steering wheel. Chloe watched him breathe. The curve of his back was softened by the puff of his coat. She thought of reaching across the cup holder and patting his back, but she still held a chicken bone in her hand. She rested the bone in her lap and placed her hand against his downy back. He murmured at her touch like a baby.

Chloe looked out her own window to the street they called *Mulberry*. Robbie pulled himself up. He blinked and licked the grease from his lips. Without announcing it, he pulled the gear to reverse. Chloe knew the streets were too slick to drive, but Robbie would do it. This skating rink, after all, was where he grew up. Chloe reached into her pocket and pulled an Atavan left over from the plane from a crumpled Ziplock bag. She swallowed it whole, without water, and then stuck out her clean tongue, just like grandma.

She turned on the Christmas carols to drive away the ghosts. Tunes for grandmother’s with sloppy lipstick drinking eggnog out of granddaddy’s coffee mug, taping up the tartan paper, fixing the ornaments chiming on the tree, someone else’s grandmother.

She sat with her chicken leg in her hand on her lap, wordless. Their profiles were too rigid to even acknowledge the other with a sidelong glance. They hunched into the quiet.

