

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: **THREE STORIES**

Carissa Halston, Master of Fine Arts, 2015

Thesis directed by: Emily Mitchell

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The stories in this thesis feature women sacrificing parts of themselves in order to escape situations borne of societal pressure. The instances of emotional, mental, and physical sabotage my protagonists exact on themselves allow them to respond to the expectations placed on women. In “Into Thin Air,” the expectations are professional and result in two women being distanced and detached from their bodies. In “Storied,” an elderly woman’s body is ruined through self-harm. And in “The Daughters,” each woman becomes a mother on terms that extend beyond the simple desire to bear a child.

THREE STORIES

by

Carissa Halston

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
2015

Advisory Committee:

Professor Emily Mitchell, Chair
Professor Maud Casey
Professor Howard Norman

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Dedication

As always, for Randolph.

Acknowledgments

I've done extensive reading about the current war in Afghanistan and Iraq to finish the current draft of "The Daughter," the final story in this thesis. The subplot involving Marie Coe is inspired by the real life events that led to the death of US Army interrogator Specialist Alyssa Renee Peterson in Iraq in September 2003, as well as the death of an Afghan known as Dilawar of Yakubi at Bagram Detention Center in Afghanistan in December 2002. I'm indebted to the ongoing journalistic efforts of retired US Army Reserve Colonel Ann Wright, whose articles shed light on the Army's disavowal of violence against women in the military, as well as philosophy professor Rachel Lu's articles on interrogation and torture.

I also owe an immense debt of gratitude to Emily Mitchell for her guidance in directing this thesis. Her advice allowed me to circumvent my traditionally lead-footed methods of revision. I can only hope to continue apace ever onward.

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Into Thin Air

MONTHS 5-21

Everybody loves a stewardess outfit. The tie. The vest. The clingy, thigh-high hemline. So androgynous—there's something for everyone. The Stewardess's everyone included four passengers. Two women, two men. Always in the lavs, always all the way. She left the door unlocked. She left her shirt unbuttoned. Just once, she left her nylons in the sink.

But no one noticed. No one cared. Not when they had Cleo, the overachieving, overbearing dynamo.

While Cleo zipped up the aisle, the Stewardess unzipped her skirt. Cleo collected garbage. The Stewardess collected names. Not real ones, but pet names. Words a normal person would consider memories: Hairy, Eager, Supple, Coarse. Names as consolation prizes. Distractions from domestic. A happy happenstance that happened to pass the time—not every time, just certain times when the Stewardess looked at a passenger and saw that they knew what she knew, that what they wanted was what she needed. And once they landed in post-coital territory, the Stewardess regained her sense of duty, laying down the rules as she saw them.

First, there was an agreement. The Stewardess would leave first. Second, the prevention of discovery. She'd put an OUT OF ORDER sign on the door. Third, an understanding. No repeat performances. Fourth—and finally—a handshake. It was official. It was professional. It was the closest the Stewardess ever got to control. After the handshaking and sign-hanging, the Stewardess always ducked into the neighboring lav. Going

from double occupancy to single took her from shoebox to cavern. The cabin's well-known narrowness fell away. The Stewardess would surface, and the aisle would feel titanic.

Until Cleo made her grand appearance:

“The Captain gave the cue for final descent. Let's get the last announcement on deck.” As if the last announcement could be split or even shared. “Then we'll do the seatbacks-and-tables song and dance.”

The Stewardess loved and hated Cleo. Actually—both emotions were too strong. Revered and feared. Worshipped and resented. Trusted, but didn't quite respect. Cleo had a slew of tics that begged for the Stewardess's ire. Cleo always arrived at work at least two hours early to sidestep the crashpads' ten-minute bathroom rule. She'd shower at the crashpad before dashing to the airport to openly assemble herself in the ladies'. Starting with her hair: combing, yanking, twisting, clipping, gelling, spraying, then violently tossing her head back and forth to test for potential wind damage, Cleo regularly left the sink so full of platinum blonde discards it looked like the vacant nest of a bachelor tarantula. She would then move to the next sink over to brush and floss her teeth, swish with Listerine, and gargle with water she drank directly from the tap. Abandoning the mirror now flecked with mint and food, Cleo would graduate to a third and final sink to sculpt a second face over her face. The Stewardess knew Cleo's strict routine. 1/Lay the foundation. 2/Rouge and buttress the cheeks. 3/Affix red stain to the lips. 4/Line the eyes until they look like unlit runways. 5/Gird the eyelashes to rival jet propellers. 6/Blot and shine to heighten tense serenity, the thing the Stewardess knew set Cleo apart. Manufactured nature. Effortless exertion.

Finished with her regimen, Cleo would leave the ladies', tugging her tidy Samsonite in tow, arriving to the gate with at least thirty minutes to spare. That alone was reason

enough to abhor and admire her, but it was her work capacity that sent the Stewardess spinning. Cleo upstaged the Stewardess as if it was part of the job—Cleo could manage the meal cart, dole out blankets, and defuse an in-flight movie snafu all while arranging her legs in a way that was both comely and practical. She could perfectly hide an ungainly run in her regulation stockings, a desecration no other attendant could get away with (except of course Darlene, but that point was moot because Darlene had switched to reinforced support garments, the likes of which could withstand armies of rankled passengers hanging from her garters while she swam them all to safety following a proverbial crash-and-burn on a transatlantic flight that skipped the *trans-* and focused on the *-atlantic*). But even if the Stewardess could see past Cleo's formidable verve and egregious bathroom ritual, what irked the Stewardess most was Cleo's insistent need to be involved in every last function of the job—a job the Stewardess knew Cleo didn't even care about, because the Stewardess knew Cleo didn't have to care. Cleo could have any job she wanted. She could work in grounded hospitality. She could be a bank teller. She could be a receptionist. She could be an executive assistant. She could brand her looks and live off the royalties. Cleo of the fatless calf and goddess cheekbone. Cleo of the lightweight brow and pillowy, regal lip. Cleo could be homeless and destitute and pregnant and diseased, and she'd somehow be just fine. A philanthropist would find her and feed her and decide he was going to save her. He would tell her, *There's something about you. He'd say, It's something in your face. Your eyes. Your hair. I just couldn't look away.*

No one could. Not even the Stewardess.

And certainly not Darlene.

MONTH 1

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MONTH 5

Cleo was a serial implier. She'd say things to the Stewardess like, "The spare cart looks like a cyclone hit it," or, "The blankets and snacks haven't been inventoried in a dog's age." The Stewardess understood Cleo's need to assert control: she was giving the Stewardess menial tasks to perform. The alternative was offering to cover the aisle while Cleo managed whatever needed doing, but the Stewardess lacked Cleo's omniscapabilities. The sole time the Stewardess attempted to manage on her own, one passenger became ill with eruptive motion sickness while another demanded a seat reassignment to get away from a third who'd just exposed her breast in order to feed and silence the baby who was wailing and flailing in her lap. Silence had yet to be attained when the Stewardess offered a blanket to the mother and a sick bag to the nauseated passenger, whose vomit had surpassed projectile and whose sickness quickly bubbled into, around, and beyond the eponymous bag. The mother looked at the Stewardess like the proffered blanket was infected with small pox,

and the passenger requesting reassignment said, “I’d be just as happy to sit at the end of the aisle.” The Stewardess shook her head and explained the seatbelt light was illuminated, so no one should even be moving throughout the cabin, but if they could all just wait a second—the mother, her child, and the needy request for removal—the Stewardess would consult her fellow attendant to help them resolve the situation in a way that could suit everyone’s overbearing needs. The Stewardess legged her way up the aisle to find Cleo angrily scrubbing the lavs, karmic retribution for Cleo’s regular disgrace of the terminal sinks. Cleo took in the sight of the Stewardess—the sick bag in trembling hands, forearms speckled and spackled with bile, face flush with frustration and grief, eyes crazed and insistent and afraid—and said, “Motion sickness?”

“Major. 7D. And a breastfeeding mother in 5A with a request for seat reassignment in 5B.”

Cleo hurried to the first aid kit and palmed a roll of smelling salts to the Stewardess. “To start.” Next to the kit was a box marked AIR SICK: inside, an empty cup, a teaspoon, dish soap, hydrogen peroxide, and a box of baking soda. Cleo passed it to the Stewardess and said, “Two cups peroxide, two teaspoons baking soda, two drops soap. Mix it together so the soda dissolves.” While the Stewardess prepared the cleanser, Cleo cracked the seal on a sheaf of plastic cups with a violently bright sun—the Airline logo—stamped against their sides. She pulled a cup from the top and lined its bottom with liquid Dramamine, then crammed the cup with ice and ginger ale. She tended to the motion sick passenger while the Stewardess spread the concoction over the seat and floor and the passenger’s trousers and shoes. The cabin’s odor dove from pungent acidity to dully-chemical cleanliness.

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MONTH 2

When the route assignments came down and the Stewardess got an eyeful, she made a B-line to Darlene's office.

“Twenty-four months domestic? Come on, Darlene—what gives? Who's a girl gotta know to see some water?”

“Routes are based on seniority, ace. Every mouth has to work her way up.”

“I could work extra shifts.”

“Wouldn’t matter. It’s as much about the length of the flight as it is about rank. We need to know you can hang in there for the duration.”

“I could pull double duty. Back-to-back shifts. I could get twice as much experience in half as many days—”

“Honey, my hands are tied. Seniority is based on consecutive years served, not hours or shifts or even flights.”

“But Cleo said that Janet—”

Darlene held her index finger to the Stewardess’s lips in a way the Stewardess didn’t feel wholly uncomfortable with. “Lesson number one: Never incriminate your fellow mouth. Not unless you want it to come back to bite you.” The Stewardess had been keyed up to act. Now she didn’t know where to go with it. “Come on, now. Don’t look so down. You might learn to love domestic.”

MONTH 9

“Welcome on board Flight 2619 direct to Atlanta. Our aircraft is under the command of Captain Mitch Cortez. He has informed me that our flying time will be approximately two and a half hours. While we are here to ensure that you do have a comfortable trip with us today, we are also concerned about your safety. With that in mind, we ask that you take the Safety Information Card out of the seat pocket in front of you and follow along as we perform our safety demonstration. Your seat belt has been designed for easy fastening and release. To fasten, insert the metal fitting into the buckle, adjust to fit snugly with the loose end of the strap and simply lift the buckle release to unfasten. Your seat belt should always be worn low and tight across your lap.

“You are on board an Embraer 190 twin-jet. There are six emergency exits, three doors on the left and three on the right, each marked with a red EXIT sign overhead. All doors except those overwing are equipped with slide-rafts. These rafts may be detached in the event of a water landing. The overwing doors are equipped with a ramp and off-wing slide. Operation and use of the exits, slides, and rafts are illustrated in the safety information card. I’d like to take this time to ask you to please locate the two exits nearest you, keeping in mind that the closest exit may be behind you. If you are seated next to an emergency exit, please read carefully the special instructions card located in the pocket of the seatback in front of you. If you do not wish to perform the functions described in the event of an emergency, please ask a flight attendant and she’ll be happy to reseat you.”

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MONTHS 2-21

The Stewardess lived with Cleo at twelve different crashpads, according to Darlene's unwritten rules. Paired mouths room together for at least the first two years, and could only be separated by pregnancy or marriage. Being new to the Airline, the Stewardess and Cleo were relegated to top bunks in the room closest to the loudest hallway in an apartment building of a complex crammed with pilots, flight attendants, and their respective superintendents.

Despite the crashpads' varied placement throughout the country—JFK, ATL, LAX, ORD, DFW, DEN, SFO, CLT, LAS, PHX, MIA, SEA—the Stewardess found them mostly interchangeable. Every night, at every pad, the hallway crew was cast, choreographed, and directed by none other than Janet herself. The voices were never the same, but the tone was always consistent.

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MONTH 12

The Stewardess could only find half of her uniforms: the top half. The bottoms were missing. She'd had three skirts, all identical but for their varying states of collapse. The first one, she'd worn to the brink of drastic pilling. The second, she'd split straight up the seam. And the third was the skirt she referred to as her "best" for its lack of obvious strain. She reserved her best for meetings with Darlene and days when she felt definitively plain.

The Stewardess rifled through her luggage to no avail. She went through her bunk and her purse. Nothing. She had to find them soon—she had two coast-to-coast jags with a series of layovers to turn the day after tomorrow.

She asked Cleo if the crashpads had a lost and found.

"What's gone missing?"

"My uniforms."

"Really? Which parts?"

The Stewardess, bent at the waist to see under the bunk, craned her neck to squint up at Cleo. Abandoning the bunk, she stood up straight.

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“Excuse me. But you do. That warrants at least a little restitution.”

The Stewardess shut her eyes and took off her pants. They faced each other in their sweaters and socks and skivvies. The Stewardess couldn't swallow the desire to contrast and compare. Her dimpled thighs. Her veiny calves. Her two-and-a-half-day stubble. Versus Cleo's smooth and lithe and crystal clear all-over.

The Stewardess hastened forward, took her clothes, tried to focus. She looked through the skirts. She couldn't find her best. She couldn't tell any of them apart.

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MONTH 13

Janet asks: How many attendants does it take to correctly identify an emergency?

“You want an emergency? I’ll give you an emergency.”

“I got your emergency right here.”

“How about new recruits hogging the crashpad bathroom?”

“Not an emergency.”

“But it should be.”

“Telling Darlene you want a day off during a blackout period.”

“Relevant!”

“A fair request!”

“However: not emergent!”

“(Also? Denied!)”

“Recruits pretending to be full-fledged mouths so they can fly for free.”

“Wow. Definitely not an emergency.”

“Also, who would do that?”

“Pleading the ever-loving fifth.”

“I’ve got one: new mouths acting like their lives are over for having to fly domestic.”

“NOT an emergency. Pay your effing dues.”

“New mouths complaining that they don’t like their paired mouths.”

“So not an emergency. NO ONE LIKES HER PAIRED MOUTH.”

“Hear fucking hear.”

“Your schedule is not an emergency!”

“Your bunk is not an emergency!”

“Your lack of a sex life is not an emergency!”

“Real emergencies only happen onboard!”

“In the event of an emergency, grow the hell up.”

MONTH 19

The Stewardess showed up in Darlene's office by request, prepared to show off her longevity on the off-chance Darlene might give even the slightest indication to maybe knocking a few months off of her coupling with Cleo, or any of the usual shots in the arm a visit to Darlene could provide.

But Darlene turned her attention to a sheaf of papers on her desk, and asked, "How do you feel about some supplemental training?"

The Stewardess caught Cleo in her restroom regimen. Stage two: floss and polish. The Stewardess skipped the pleasantries, assuming Cleo wouldn't reply.

"Darlene grounded me."

"Gren-in ush, puh jennuh."

"Care to repeat that?"

Cleo held up one bolus-flecked, floss-wound index finger, then went back in to finish up. The Stewardess found Cleo's hygienic silence awfully convenient, but she swallowed her suspicion and tried to seem like they'd never stopped talking at all.

"She wants me to do an audio recording of the passenger announcements. As in, all of them. The safety guidelines. The action plan. Water landing. Final descent. Even the turbulence announcements, 'just in case.' And one she called 'intro and outro' that'll play while people are waiting to sit or stand that honestly reminds me a bit too much of church, which I could get over if I had to, but what's even worse is that they're going to be installed on every single plane. My voice is going to be on all the planes, even when I'm not. You know what that means? Even when I'm dead, I'll still be stuck at this job. Darlene's grounding me to turn me into a ghost."

Cleo dropped her floss in the sink and swirled an ounce of Listerine against her teeth. She spat a stream of foamy copper across the degraded floss and drank a hit of tepid water from the faucet. She sidled to the next stall over. The Stewardess gave her a wide berth.

“Darlene’s grounding both of us, per Janet.”

“Why does Janet know about this before I do?”

“Somebody’s always the last to know. In this case, it was you.”

“So why does Janet have to be the first?”

“Janet’s always the first.”

“I don’t believe that. Someone, somewhere, is the first to know her own business. Somewhere, there’s a secret that Janet doesn’t know.”

Cleo shrugged with the hand that held the brush that pushed pigment across her cheek.

The Stewardess hated having to even ask. “What’s Janet saying?”

“Same as you, only unofficial. Also that we’ll both be cooling our heels for at least a few days while you make your verbal mash note for Darlene.”

“It’s not a mash note.”

Cleo gave another cosmetic shrug.

“Have you even actually spoken to Darlene yet?”

“No,” Cleo said. “Just going by Janet’s word.”

“Then it’s not actually final. She could still re-pair you with somebody else.”

“Not a chance, wishful thinker.” Cleo assessed her second face, freshly applied.

“There’s nothing about this girl that needs repair.”

MONTH 14

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MONTH 18

“Have you heard what happened to the Mouth with the Voice?”

“No. Tell me.”

“Wait— who’s the Mouth with the Voice?”

“Darlene’s favorite. The one who flies with the Leggy Mouth that boinks Captain Steward.”

“Okay, I’m with you. What happened?”

“Wait— who’s Captain Steward?”

“Christ. Can somebody get her a scorecard?”

“Is it my fault that everyone’s got to have a fucking nickname?”

“Janet wouldn’t be Janet if she didn’t protect the innocent.”

“Get *her*. Like anybody’s innocent.”

“Can we please get back to the point?”

“Touchy.”

“Darlene’s going to ground her.”

“Wait— who’s getting grounded? The Mouth with the Voice or the Leggy Mouth?”

“Both.”

“So what? They’re grounded. That’s hardly news.”

“But that’s not the half of it. The one with the voice is being told she’s grounded to make recordings of all the announcements—”

“Are you serious? Don’t say it if it’s not true. Because I honestly hate reciting those things.”

“—and the leggy one’s getting recorded too, but for the accompanying visual.”

“Wait—does the Mouth with the Voice know that?”

“If I had to guess? Highly doubtful.”

“You don’t know?”

“Come on. Janet can’t know everything.”

“If that were true, there’d be no point in talking to her at all.”

MONTHS 15-18

Months and days and weeks and hours and shifts of petty silence. Cleo traipsing back and forth, pouring coffee, palming peanuts. Not a word beyond the usual.

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MONTH 19

The Captain had a reputation for getting mouths to close, especially the ones who threatened to bite their partners. He was both a softer and harder touch than Darlene, thanks to his aerial knowhow. He knew from flying. He knew from attending. He knew the whole sordid system—as well he should have: The Captain kicked off his career as a flight attendant.

At the end of every shift, when the jet bridge met the plane, the Stewardess saw Mitch hightail it toward ground transportation. Per Janet, his usual speed from cockpit to crashpad was 30-35 minutes, depending on the length of the airport and whether he stopped to smoke before hunting down and getting in a cab. In longer airports, where it was a trek just to reach a restroom, Mitch usually skipped the smoke and darted through the concourse. But in difficult airports—the spectacle mazes—where Mitch should've been able to make quick

work of the walk, he had to sift through bands of tourists who clogged the moving walkways, throwing elbows to get shots of the attractions.

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As they walked to the Terminal Bar Lounge, Mitch asked her if she'd noticed anyone singing on the concourse.

“No. Why?”

“Right before I saw you, I could've sworn I heard somebody singing.”

The Stewardess changed the subject: “Is it true what Janet says about you?”

“Lady J says a lot.”

“Is it true that you were a steward?”

Mitch had been a pilot for seventeen years. Janet said he'd flown four emergency landings and could pull a high-speed stall to yank an airbus from nosedive to nonesuch. He knew disaster when he saw it, and the way he looked at the Stewardess, she saw he knew, sooner or later, he was going to have to stall.

“Yeah,” he said, “it’s true.”

“So how’d you wind up as a pilot?”

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“Affirmative.” The Stewardess sighed. “Not the answer you wanted,” Mitch said.

“I’m beginning to think it might be easier to go ask Janet.”

Mitch laughed and shook his head. “I’ve heard Lady J called a lot of things. But nobody I know has ever had enough brass to come right out and call the lady *easy*.”

MONTH 20

The Stewardess felt like a goldfish in a dime bag.

Pacing a space one-tenth the length of an aisle, talking just so someone could capture the sound of her voice. She never felt more trapped in her repetitive life, repeating the same words she said on every single flight, sometimes as many as four times a day, five days a week, in that same put-on tone, knowing it meant next to nothing because next to no one listened because they had heard it all before, knowing that on the recording it meant even less because there were no passengers to ignore it—just the audio crew, who knew what she’d say before she said it, which made it even worse because she knew they knew too; not just because they’d heard her say it fifty times, but because everybody knows what the Stewardess says and everybody wants the Stewardess essentially erased, replaced with something easier to ignore. And that’s what they’d do once the recording was done: four times a day, five days a week, they’d ignore her. They’d splice together the parts they needed—the varied iterations. “Welcome on board Flight [choose from the recorded numbers], [non-stop/direct/with stops] to [Detroit/Seattle/New York/Chicago/Boston/Miami/Atlanta/Charlotte/Denver/Los Angeles/Portland/Santa Fe...]—” The Stewardess would hear every option. She would be the only one listening. She would be the only one who couldn’t unhear it.

MONTH 21

While Cleo attempted her star turn, the Stewardess tended to Mitch.

They started by playing poker in the crashpad, then quit when word got around.

“Captain Steward’s got a new side project.”

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And this woman's frigid back. And I'm trying to save everybody's face. I cater to the woman. She's the only one on my side. I bring her drinks. I bring her food. And finally, she pulls me aside. She says, *I don't like the way she's treating you*. She, meaning Cleo. And this woman touches my forearm and that's it. I walk back to the lav, and she comes with me. And once we're inside, I tell her I don't like the way Cleo was treating her either. Then we got

down and threw ourselves a little commiseration party. And my day improved considerably after that.”

It was late afternoon and the sun was starting to fade, but the Stewardess could still see Mitch’s face. He was handsome for his age—handsome for any age, really—though he looked younger in the dying light. The Stewardess could tell he was waiting to respond. She said, “I’m done. You can talk.”

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She held the plane at arm's length and left it there.

MONTHS 22-23

Welcome on board Flight 4395 direct to Miami.

Fade in to a woman with a red, refined mouth. Smiling. Talking. She gestures toward her surroundings.

You are on board an Embraer 190 twin-jet.

The mouth is Cleo's.

There are six emergency exits—

The voice is not.

The video covered only the safety procedures. Seven and a half minutes of litigation prevention featuring Cleo throwing the Stewardess's voice. Cleo refused to watch it. She sat in the cockpit with Mitch. The Stewardess watched it once and couldn't shake it. She was her voice. Her voice was her. But now her voice belonged to Cleo.

The announcements were now controlled via a touchscreen near the jumpseat. Cleo took charge of their systematic broadcast. She dictated their frequency. She decided their volume. And she still ran up the aisle to translate the Stewardess's voice into an appropriate pantomime.

The Captain continued to make his announcements himself.

Sitting in the lav, alone, or squatting near the jumpseat, the Stewardess mouthed the words to each recording.

MONTH 23

The Stewardess had stopped speaking altogether in the crashpads, though she'd started emitting a constant baritone hum. A monotone for monotony.

At the end of the second month since the video's implementation, after a week and a half chockfull of four leg turns, Cleo and the Stewardess got a day to rest. They woke up late to Janet at the door.

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MONTH 24

Darlene and the Stewardess talked at each other. Cleo and the Captain. Domestic and international. Voices and silence and betrayal. Their overlapping voices seemed subsonic, ratcheting through the Stewardess's head—taxiing, stalling, delaying the delayed.

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“But you’re only three weeks away from international—”

The Stewardess almost wished she could remember how it felt when that would have been enough. “I’m sorry, Darlene. But that’s a week longer than I can handle.”

On the Stewardess’s last turn at the Airline, Cleo spent the flight looking like she’d been served divorce papers.

They didn't talk. They closed the doors. The flight began. They taxied. They took off. They flew. Up until then, the Stewardess had understood that the Captain was an off-limits subject. But she wondered, so she asked.

"How's Mitch?" the Stewardess said and let the question hang between them like the obvious, bloodied, poisoned bait it was.

Cleo's response came with knives. "*The Captain* is fine."

Their first conversation in months. The closest they'd stood since their kiss. The Stewardess noticed Cleo's face had changed. Gone was the godlike stone. Replaced with standard-issue skin, the sort that sagged and responded to stress and time. The Stewardess missed Cleo already. She'd find a new job. She'd find a new roommate. She'd find a new place to live. But she'd never recover Cleo. The Stewardess wanted to give her something back.

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The Stewardess watched Cleo scramble to keep up. Cleo struggled to maintain her poise. She held the end of her tie above her head to communicate *self-inflicted sabotage*. She pointed to her back and stabbed the air for *betrayal*. She thrust her hips for *intercourse*. She made her hands into claws for *control*. She bared her teeth for *spite* and *an overbearing, insistent need*. She struggled to translate *a skewed sense of self-worth*.

“This is not an exhaustive list.”

Cleo, the epitome. Cleo, the perfect mouth.

“Though it may seem like a threat—”

The Stewardess saw her voice stand on its own.

“—this is not an emergency.”

Storied

Jason read his grandmother's message. Bianca had taped it to the refrigerator, covering lines of broken CSS and photos of downtown Bozeman in the snow. He reread it, then skimmed it. It was worse than broken code. There were so few variables he barely understood it.

"Bianca?" he shouted toward the living room, where he knew she was entrenched, watching episode after episode of *Homecoming*, the reality show about Amish teens who spend a year in secular society before getting married, having kids, raising barns, and dying bored. Bianca's favorite segments were the drug scenes.

"It's like they want to OD," she'd say. "It's like they know how bad we sort of want to see it."

"I don't want to see it," Jason said.

"Yes, you do. It's like a sex scene. Even when it's grotesque, you still want to watch it."

"Bianca," Jason said again. He stood in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen, waving Mina's message to get Bianca's attention.

"Hey," she pulled out her headphones. "I didn't hear you get in." She pointed to the message. "Did you call her back?"

"Not yet. What did she want?"

Bianca cast a sideways glance at the screen. "She wanted you to call her back." Jason got close enough to the sofa to see what she was watching. Amish kids were throwing themselves in front of cars.

“I wouldn’t have to call her back if you’d taken a real message.”

Bianca shot Jason a heated glance that had once meant something else. “Excuse me. I wrote down her name. I wrote down her number. That’s a fucking message.”

“You didn’t even write what time she called.”

“I do enough of that at work, thank you. Just call her back.” Bianca lifted her headphones. Jason pinched the cord to stop them from reaching her ears.

“I wouldn’t *need* to call her back if the details in the message were clear.”

Bianca yanked the plug from her laptop. The narrator’s voice filled the room. The Amish teens were having a run-in with the law. “That clear enough for you?”

Jason shoved her laptop shut and went back to the kitchen. Bianca followed him, yelling about “a thing called personal space.” Jason turned and made an overblown show of dialing the phone, a gesture meant to shut her up and to get her to realize that he was obviously the bigger person.

Bianca said, “Oh, really?” then held her hand to her ear like a phone, and slowly began to fellate her own pinky. By the time she was knuckle deep and making smothering noises, Jason’s grandmother’s phone had started ringing. Bianca mumbled, “My name’s Jason and I’m SO mature,” before stopping short and mouthing, *Grow up*.

Jason angled the receiver away from his face and said, “I hope your Amish show gets taken off the air.”

“Not a fucking chance.”

“Then I hope they all buy TVs and start watching reality shows about Glenview. I hope they convert to Catholicism. I hope they all become Mormon. I hope they do the least interesting thing conceivable.”

“Like writing HTML? Or how about CSS? Which would be duller: PHP or Javascript?”

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When he went back to the living room, Bianca was on the couch. Her laptop was open and throwing sickly blue and green shadows across her face. Her headphones were in. Jason stood in front of her.

Jason said, "I have to go home."

Bianca pulled out her left earbud. "What?"

"I have to go to Montana. Meemaw's in the hospital."

Bianca's face weighed pity against disappointment. "Again?" she said.

"Yeah."

"Fuck."

"Maybe try to sound a little sadder."

"Jason, I'm sorry. I just feel bad for her. After three times, you think she'd catch a break."

"What, so then I'd have to go to another funeral?"

"Come on. You know that's not what I meant."

"Forget it. We can fight about it when I get back." Jason went to the bedroom and Bianca immediately followed. He threw shirts and jeans and socks inside a backpack. Bianca watched for half a second before pulling a duffel bag from under the bed and stuffing scarves and sweaters and underwear inside. "What are you doing?"

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Jason and his girl showed up the morning after Mina had shuffled from the roof into the yard. Mina had never seen the girl. Not even a picture. Annette had said they weren't quite a thing. Well, she'd said they were and they weren't. The girl wasn't his "girlfriend." Something apparently wrong with the word. Bottom line was this girl and Jason were *something*, but not *the* thing. Listening to them squabble over where they'd put their bags and when they'd be getting up and which one of them'd have to sleep on the side of the bed facing the wall, Mina thought they were something, all right. She offered to fix them both something to eat. Get a little food in their systems besides plane grub. They nodded like she'd just used magic to guess their names: Jason, who hadn't been back since Annette's funeral, and Bianca, his squirrely-haired girl with her threadbare shirt and her pants that looked like a pair of dark nylons. Mina told Jason to take the bags upstairs and put them under the bed in the guestroom, and she scolded them both to take off their shoes: the rug they were on's an antique. They both took wide steps off the carpet and stood on the runner in the hall. Jason used his feet to shove off his shoes. Bianca stepped right out of her unlaced boots, then started to follow Jason upstairs. Mina called her back, brandished her bandaged arm, said she'd need some help in the kitchen. The girl's eyes were triumphant. Her two specialties in life were apparently sandwiches and TV.

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Jason and Bianca found Mina in the front room, a pile of cigarettes burning in her lap. She was in the process of shakily lighting two more. “As soon as I get these,” her flame flickered, “I’ll light some for you.”

Jason rushed at her, all palms and wrists. “Meemaw, what are you doing?”

She held up the hand with the cigarettes and waved it like a bored sports fan with a pennant. “I decided to take up a hobby.”

“Smoking is not a hobby.”

“Smoking’s not my hobby. Death’s my hobby.”

Bianca held up a hand. Mina high-fived her.

Jason said, “Bianca. *Homecoming*.”

“On it.”

Meemaw called after her as Bianca left the room, “Bianca. Shoes.”

“On it!”

“Meemaw, you can’t just decide to kill yourself, then go do it. You aren’t even doing it right.”

Mina took a deep breath and held it. She exhaled with a cough. “Thanks for noticing.”

Jason took the cigarettes from her hand and put them out on the sheep plate. “I meant you haven’t even written any notes. How am I supposed to know what to do?”

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She heard him coming up the stairs and went to the door to sell him on the guestroom's whacked-out erotica potential. But when he got to the doorway, she saw his face was damp. He looked like he'd been fighting. And the fight had not gone well. Jason walked past Bianca but he didn't sit down. He stood in one place and shuffled, foot to foot. His body moved like a sideways nod. Bianca asked what happened with Mina.

“I was trying to make up for missing her call.”

“Okay—”

“So I said I would help her. I promised. I said I'd help. But I didn't know.”

Bianca knew. There was only one thing Mina would ask for. She said, “Assisted suicide.”

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Bianca, Mina, and Jason sat in the room with the good furniture. Cigarettes burned like incense, arranged on livestock plates. Seven on a rooster-shaped dish. Ten on a pig. Fourteen on a plate shaped like a goose. Bianca called their meeting, OPERATION END: WHAT MINA WANTS MINA GETS. Mina thought of Gwen Verdon. Bianca said the options were pills, guns, and carbon monoxide poisoning. Was carbon monoxide fast, Jason wanted to know. Bianca shrugged and told him she'd never tried it. He bet her twenty dollars it was slow. Bianca looked it up: fifteen minutes. Mina thought that seemed like a while. Jason told Bianca to pay up. Bianca told Jason he could eat it. Mina wasn't sure about guns. Jason said they were fast at least. Mina told him she had never shot one. She was sure to do it wrong, she said. Bianca said guns were probably expensive anyway. The list was down to pills. They ruled out painkillers and anything prescription. Bianca said why not cyanide. Jason asked if cyanide would be painful. Bianca turned to Mina and told her no offense, then reminded Jason that Mina had been in pain ever since the roof. Mina told Bianca she wasn't

offended by the truth. Jason said he didn't want to hurt Mina further. Bianca said there's no such thing as a painless death. Mina was tired of pussyfooting around. She said let it be an accident. Something no one had to buy. Something that looked like it just one day up and happened. Bianca said, the car. Jason said *fifteen minutes was too long*. Bianca said, Mina's garden is right next to the driveway. She could be gardening and they could accidentally hit her with the car. Jason said no one gardens in the snow. Bianca said that's why it would be an accident. No one would expect her to be there. Mina suggested they decide a day to do it. Bianca said Saturday. Jason said Sunday. Mina said they could do both. Just before sunrise. A garden party in the dark. An early winter, Sunday morning send-off.

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Mina had to hand it to her: the girl could make a sandwich. Jason agreed, though he hadn't touched his food. Bianca ate her egg salad sandwich with a knife and fork. She said it always fell apart anyway. Jason said something about getting out of the house. They could go downtown or go for a drive or go wherever Mina wanted. The important thing was the going. He thought she needed some fresh air. Mina asked if he'd ever told Bianca about Annette's dog, Yip. Playful thing. Loud as hell. Would bark you deaf if you let him. Mina and Phil got Yip for Annette on her eleventh birthday. Annette's eyes went up like leaky water balloons. She ran around, telling everybody: this here's my dog, Yip, until the whole damn neighborhood shook that dog's hand. That's how good Yip was. He had a smile for everybody. Him and Annette were basically two of a kind. But a couple of days after they brought Yip home, Annette broke out in a rash. Red all over her face and neck and hands. Then her tongue started to swell. She couldn't barely talk. They tried to keep Yip away from her, to see if that would help any, but Annette wouldn't listen. She kept on going back. Finally, they got Annette to the doctor. Sure enough: she was allergic. Mina told Annette Yip had to go. But the shelter couldn't take him right away, so Phil put him in the yard. And over the weekend, of course Annette crept out there. She slept out back in the grass. But that was all she did. Come morning, she couldn't bring herself to play with him or take him around or

really even touch him. Annette went to Mina and told her Yip would think she was just being good to him on account of feeling guilty he had to leave. Yip acted like he could change anything, carried on by not carrying on. No barking. No whining. Just followed her around—at a distance, like he knew—until the day came they had to drop him off. When she got older, Mina said, Annette had talked about the way animals know things without anybody having to tell them. But now it seemed old ladies knew the same sorts of things as animals, only it was worse because old ladies knew how to talk. Mina said she didn't want to go joyriding in the car. She didn't want fresh air. She wanted her cigarettes. She wanted to spend her last days in the house. That's where her whole life happened. And when The End came, it could meet her there.

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“Shouldn’t we start at the beginning?”

“No the first season’s terrible. And the cast changes every year. Like *The Real World*, only Amish. So it’s better to watch the other seasons first, then go back to the first season, so you can experience it in a so-bad-it’s-almost-good sort of way.”

Jason fell asleep. He drifted back only briefly, to pull the pillow off his face. Bianca hadn’t paused for air. “—one of the best scenes in the entire series. The kids are shooting up into their eyeballs. They shot drugs between their toes before, which the announcer says is so the track marks don’t show, but the eyeball thing is the worst thing they’ve done so far. It’s so personal. And the way the camera gets in there, you can see them trying not to look.”

“At the camera or the needle?”

“Probably both.”

“Why is this the better scene? Why is it better than foot injection?”

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Bianca got another card. She pivoted at the elbow. The card bounced off the armrest, hit Jason's foot, but fluttered to the ground. Bianca groaned deep in her throat. Jason didn't wake up. "I suck at this."

"Come on now. You hit his foot and he's still asleep. You haven't lost yet."

"You mean there's a way to actually win?"

Bianca looked at Jason, not the card, as she said it. Mina asked, "How long have you two been—?"

"Just about two years."

"Annette had told me three."

"There was an off and on period." Mina looked unimpressed. "I know. It's lame. But we met at this party. This poseur thing. One of a hundred that happen in Glenview all the time. They're so weird. Everybody goes, then acts like it's this sacrifice just showing up. Like any of us have anything better to do. I guarantee if you're leaving one of these parties before 1am, it's only to go to another party exactly like the one you're leaving. And at that party, the same shit will be happening. Everybody will be standing around like it's their kid brother's birthday party that their mom forced them to be at."

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“He’s in his head a lot, you know? It can be exhausting. Especially because I’m *never* in mine. Well—actually, okay, no, I am. But not the way he is. I get in my head when I’m wrapped up in a really good TV show. Or a song. Or sometimes a really good meal. But Jason gets wrapped up over a regular afternoon when nothing’s even going on. Like, *bam*: he’s a million miles away. He does it all the time and I barely understand it, so I can’t even ask him where he goes.”

“So—no kids then?” Bianca barked a laugh. “You’re better off. They just wind up outgrowing everything you give them.”

Bianca watched Mina watch Jason sleep. Seeing her see him, she realized Mina's death would make or break them. They'd give her an assist and be stronger for it, or they wouldn't be anything at all.

*

Thirty hours left. Jason couldn't sleep. But he lay in the guestroom and pretended. At first, he'd watched the rain change to snow. Then he felt Bianca shudder. Cold vs. dreaming. Maybe a little of both. She was a stranger to Montana winters. Illinois picked one temperature and stayed there. Montana was a serial vacillator (by morning, it'd be back to rain). He pulled the blanket up to Bianca's chin and smoothed her untamed hair. Her shudder persisted, but her head moved forward, leaning into Jason's hand. An arguable victory, small or pyrrhic (the apparent theme of the day), he thought it was worth savoring regardless. It was maybe the last of its kind.

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“You know, the view is kind of nice from up here.”

The view was the yard. Half of Mina’s garden. The hammock and the trees. And beyond them—around them—the fence. The distance between the roof and the fence: half the length of a swimming pool. Bianca envisioned Mina’s body right off the roof. A slow-motion soaring, her bandages flapping, Mina arced, then settled on the fence. The picket was clean, except where the wood met Mina’s superimposed skin. Through her back and her front, a pair of red rings glowed like a fire, like a TV, like the cigarette Bianca held out to Mina. Mina took it and the smoke sidled up to her, circling her head like a scarf, a veil of gray she tore with her own white breath. Bianca wore a hat and coat. Mina wore her robe. She said, “Annette loved the view. Before she died, she tried a thousand times to get me out here.”

“She obviously never had to pleasure of pushing you out that window.”

“Just you wait. You’re going to have to get me back in.”

“What? I thought you were just going to jump down.”

“I’m afraid of heights.”

“Get out of here.”

Mina shook her head. “Was then. Still am.” Mina shut her eyes, opened them.

“Annette always said we could have a party up here. Some tea and bread. I said we could have it right near the window. Told her it’d be just as good inside. She said no. Then she wanted to do it when she was strong enough. She told me I had to. If she could get well enough to do it, then I had to come out too.” Mina passed the cigarette back to Bianca. “After what she went through, I thought I owed it to her.”

“Do you miss your other kids?”

“Sometimes I forget they’re gone.”

“What, like dementia?”

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Saturday night, Bianca and Mina watched *Homecoming* specials.

They were halfway through a tease-and-tickle, twenty-minute featurette, a spot that coincided with the fourth of July. The Amish teens were tilt-a-whirling, trying to swallow lit sparklers. They used the extinguished metal to brand their skin. Their faces, their eyelids, their arms and necks and wrists. Everybody got a bleeding star or stripe. Bianca and Mina squealed accordingly.

Jason asked, “Can you please give that a rest?”

Bianca paused the video. The screen froze on a double-exposure. A white-tipped branding element. A laugh. A silent gasp. The moment between pain and recognition.

Mina stood and stretched. “I guess it’s time to be getting to bed anyway. Big day tomorrow.”

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Bianca looked at Jason like he'd taken her toys away, when the problem was that he'd outgrown their game. He wanted to give her something new, some unknown part of himself, some variable that would keep her attention and hold it, if only to give him more time to figure out how to rewrite their fragile code. Jason could read it but couldn't write it—he didn't know the language that way. But he knew its logic well enough. He knew he loved Bianca the same way she loved mayhem. In the way that Meemaw wanted out of living, that's how he loved Bianca. In a stupid way, a stubborn way that mixed his love with hate (a way that made him love to hate to love her). He wanted to break his hate against something old.

“Let's leave,” he said. “Let's just go.”

“What?”

“You haven't seen downtown yet.”

“You said there's nothing downtown to see.”

“I was wrong.” He pulled her up. “Come on. I'll show you the jail. Get dressed. I'll show you the horse. It used to turn, but someone climbed up and broke it.”

Jason was rarely insistent. He hoped it was enough. He wanted to salvage something from the night.

*

Bianca stood under the sign announcing the Ellen. She breathed out a cloud just like in a cartoon. It was the best thing about cold weather. It made life feel realer than TV. She pointed up and said to Jason, “It’s the theatre in the photo. The one you keep on the fridge.” She tilted her head back and read the marquee. “This is going to sound weird, but it feels a little like I’m meeting a celebrity.”

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She faced him and her ribs lurched. He didn't want her to want this—she saw it in the way he held his mouth: inward and unwelcome, his lips pressed just enough to tell her he wasn't open for business.

“The Ellen doesn't play movies anymore,” he said. “They only run plays now.”

“That might be cool.”

“Plays make me feel like a stalker. Like I'm watching someone actively live. Come on, let me show you the museum.”

Standing in front of the Gallatin History Museum, Bianca said, “This used to be a jail? It looks like a castle.” Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. In vel sollicitudin felis. Curabitur vitae justo tellus. Aliquam sagittis ligula urna, sed sollicitudin lorem ultrices eu. Vestibulum sagittis euismod nisi sed blandit. Ut id augue mattis, fringilla mauris et, euismod ligula. Morbi finibus, est ac cursus ornare, risus odio pretium leo, at dapibus urna neque non leo. Phasellus tristique elementum tellus et varius. Donec rutrum bibendum diam ut rutrum. Maecenas rutrum, elit id lacinia placerat, elit risus malesuada dolor, ac placerat metus dolor et enim.

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“And the shape and the height and the door—and the lamppost in front that looks just like a flagpole! Please tell me you dressed up as Mario for Halloween and took pictures. Please.”

“I didn’t.”

“Ugh,” she turned away in mock disgust. “You should’ve lied. I would’ve believed you.” Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. In vel sollicitudin felis. Curabitur vitae justo tellus. Aliquam sagittis ligula urna, sed sollicitudin lorem ultrices eu. Vestibulum sagittis euismod nisi sed blandit. Ut id augue mattis, fringilla mauris et, euismod ligula. Morbi finibus, est ac cursus ornare, risus odio pretium leo, at dapibus urna neque non leo. Phasellus tristique elementum tellus et varius. Donec rutrum bibendum diam ut rutrum. Maecenas rutrum, elit id lacinia placerat, elit risus malesuada dolor, ac placerat metus dolor et enim.

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Meemaw as a thing to be defeated. It seemed fitting, but also made Jason queasy.

“Can we talk about tomorrow?” Bianca asked.

“Is there any way to get around having to talk about it?”

“No.”

“What’s there to talk about?”

“For one, which us is driving?”

“I’m not doing it.”

“Neither am I.” Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. In vel sollicitudin felis. Curabitur vitae justo tellus. Aliquam sagittis ligula urna, sed sollicitudin lorem ultrices eu. Vestibulum sagittis euismod nisi sed blandit. Ut id augue mattis, fringilla mauris et, euismod ligula. Morbi finibus, est ac cursus ornare, risus odio pretium leo, at dapibus urna neque non leo. Phasellus tristique elementum tellus et varius. Donec rutrum bibendum diam ut rutrum. Maecenas rutrum, elit id lacinia placerat, elit risus malesuada dolor, ac placerat metus dolor et enim.

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“I don’t know. No, I do know. I just—feel dumb saying it.”

“What?”

Bianca sighed. "I'm going to miss her."

*

It was still dark when Mina woke up. She put on her gardening gloves. She held a bag of soil in her good arm and slipped a packet of hollyhock seeds into her pocket. She stepped slow on her way to the garden. The air was cold. It smelled fresh. She was glad she hadn't taken painkillers. Jason had offered. She'd told him no. There was no such thing as a painless death. She was going to miss Bianca. She looked different when they were on the roof. Less squirrely. More glamorous. She'd worn sunglasses like James Dean's. Wore them and looked better than he did. More alive. Mina knelt in the ice and the snow. It was hard on her knees.

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*

Jason and Bianca sat in the car in the parking lot of the Bozeman airport, the terminal entrance dead ahead. Mountains on all sides, blue-hued and distant: the head of a giant, laid out by life, flat on its back and reeling.

“Why did you come back this time?” Bianca said. “Mina drank bleach—you stayed in Glenview. She bashed her own head with a bottle of rum—”

“It was whiskey.”

“Still. You didn’t come back. What was different this time?”

Jason didn’t look at her. His eyes hung on the horizon. The range that seemed to escape while standing still. “The first time, with the bleach, I forgot she was alone. I forgot Mom wasn’t there to help her.” From where Bianca sat, the mountains had Jason surrounded. Hard places grew from his head. “The second time, she didn’t tell me. She didn’t call until she got back from the hospital. And when she finally told me, all she said was, *It wasn’t serious.*” Jason half-laughed. “I thought the opposite of what you thought the day she jumped. I thought: well, she seems okay enough to be on the phone—” Jason shoved the

heels of his hands against his eyes. He spoke facing the steering wheel. “You think this is my fault.”

“It’s no one’s fault.”

“But if it was, it would be mine.”

“You’re smarter than that.”

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“And we can’t take her.”

“*I know.* But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to do it anyway. She’d love it.”

“She would.”

“So tell me you’ll tell her.”

“I won’t not tell her.”

“Stop trying to code around me. You’re smarter than that.”

“Get out of here.”

“Not until you promise to tell Mina. Tell me you’ll tell her without making her ask.

Tell me you’ll give her the option.”

“She’ll never go for it.”

“That doesn’t matter. She has to know it’s a possibility.”

“You’re going to miss your plane.”

Bianca started toward the airport, pointing one middle finger to the sky. Jason wanted to yell after her to hurry. He thought better of it: “I’ll tell her if you promise not to come back.”

Bianca broke into a run. Jason watched Bozeman surround and miniaturize her. It was unnerving: Bianca in Montana. A small thing that upset a larger order, a blip in the unwritten code, the ghost that ruined the machine.

The Daughter**Honey.****Seattle. 1903.**

The day you meet your mother is the day your mother dies—the perfect preparation for a life of battle: blood and pain and death, and you’re barely a day old. But it’s a duel you wish you could unwin. By your eighth birthday, you’re stealing memories. Stories from your father. Glimpses into who she might have been. Dad tells you all the time:

“You look just like her. That cowlicked head.

Them freckles. The scrawniest of runts.

The spitting image—”

He’s always been a flatterer. Aunt Mardi is the one who finally shows you photos.

“Cheaper and easier than time travel.”

It’s like looking into the future through a dirty glass, like someone built an older, blurry you. Dad’s there: younger, offering you his hand—offering someone who isn’t you his hand. You memorize her expressions, the way she looked in photos—the way she looked at him in photos. It’s all you can do to pretend you knew her. You become her mirror. You stare out your bedroom window at night—out it, then *at* it—trying to find her face, trying to find it

and keep it under glass. Eventually, it overwhelms you. The resemblance becomes too much. The resemblance reintroduces you to war.

1914, you're going through the closet. You find a box of her remaining clothes. You put on her Sunday bonnet (helmet), her brass locket (identification badge), and her housedress (a uniform that fits you like a tent). You go in search of a mirror, but find your Dad instead, the color from his face rerouted to his eyes.

“Take that off, Honey.”

“But I'm pretending. Look—”

You hold your head straight. You steady your eyes. You slowly explain:

“I'm a ghost.”

Your shoulder fits the palm of his hand. Dad pulls at the dress till it tears. Your arm goes through the seam like a bayonet. You cry at the sight of it, harder at the sound. Dad lets you go, but hangs on to the sleeve. He enlists a month later, leaves Seattle for boot camp. The day he goes, you sit in his room and cry. Aunt Mardi is there, unpacking her suitcases.

“Quiet, now. At least you're not alone.”

You hush because you know Aunt Mardi knows loneliness. Twice widowed, she understands your dad. She explains why it hurt him so much to stay. You're eleven now. Eleven years, you've been a reminder: your mother's small body, bloody, breaking for you. Your birth forced her to force it. She tore herself a hole, an escape hatch, an exit you two would share. But your exit was also your entrance, your chance to become—

“—your chance to make a life apart from hers.”

“But apart from Dad's too?”

“Just a life of your own. That's what your dad's out there doing.

He wants to serve the country. He wants to see the east.

He wants something bigger than what's here.”

“Bigger than Seattle?”

“Bigger than Mount Rainier.”

You want to want more than a mountain. A year later, you want something else: you want Dad to come back, and when he looks at you, you want him to see something new. In 1915, you begin your life apart. You start with a job at Seattle Textiles. You stand on a beltline and bang up your knuckles. They're swollen, then broken, then scarred. For two years, you push metal through cloth. Buckles on aprons. Buttons on uniforms. For two years, you outfit

soldiers and wives. And widows: you buy an apron for Aunt Mardi. In return, she gives you a hobby. It's summer, 1917. She hands you a basket of seeds:

“War gardens. Two of them.”

“Two? What for?”

“One for now and one for when Dad gets home.”

He hasn't shipped out yet, but if letters were promises, it would surely be soon. His letters from boot camp sounded like he was describing the house since he'd left it.

It's strange. We're training, but nobody's saying what we're up against.

Sometimes, it feels like we're preparing for something we'll never see.

Dad's empty room, his empty chair, his unread paper and unworn shoes—you were also getting used to the unseen. You wrote that life was strange at home too. You hoped he understood. Now he writes to tell you he's leaving.

We'll be fighting with the French and the British, but we'll be in it to win it for Wilson.

Now we're all waiting for his official word. Then we'll be off to Germany.

You don't even know where Germany is. You know it's far and away and apart. You know he might not come back. But here's Aunt Mardi, telling you *when* he gets home instead of *if*. She's offering you optimism. Optimism eventually takes you elsewhere. You start walking after dinner, then walking after work. Walking to avoid the house because when you're there, you know he's not. But when you're out, you can at least pretend he's in. Outside, you can picture him in his favorite chair, rustling his paper, giving a summary:

“War and parades.”

His usual report. After a while, your walks work in reverse. You still avoid going home, but your reasons change. You suddenly realize he could be outside too. Because he could be anywhere, you see him everywhere. You feel him most down at the docks. Each night, you watch the naval ships block out the view of Seattle. Just seeing them, you understand why they're called battleships. They're big enough to wage war on. Sitting on a fence in Pier A in Smith Cove, you listen to the sailors and soldiers:

“That's what I'm saying. Machine guns shoot themselves.”

“But you need to have three guys behind them.

One to hold it, one to load it, one to stop it from overheating—”

“Who the hell cares? They'll help you catch Germans.”

“Fuck Germans. I’m worried about catching measles.”

“All I want to catch is a French girl.”

“You and me both, brother. I’ll make you guys a deal:
whoever nabs the most Frenchies in three years wins.”

“Three years? I could be dead by then.”

“You could be dead by dinnertime.”

“Yeah, but at least I’ll have died in the war.”

Dad’s been gone at least three years. Where would he be in 1920? And where would you be? Still here, walking every pier in the Port of Seattle? There’s life to be had outside this city. Outside Germany and measles and machine guns. There’s even life outside your dad. You know you need to find it. Expecting something magical, you find a naval bill on your walk home.

NAVAL MACHINE SHOPS NEED WORKERS

A drawing of a lady soldier stands beside the words. You're sure it's meant just for you. You apply straight away and the shop says yes, so you say yes and trade one factory for another: from textiles to the Navy, from making uniforms to manufacturing arms and ammunition.

You sit down and write your dad a letter.

Dear Daddy, I got a job making things at the Naval Station.

I'm going to build a Navy tank where the sailors will live.

You envision submarines as flat and square as safes, with locks that only open from the inside. Before the safe slips off the belt—the biggest belt you've worked on, the biggest belt you've seen, a belt so big it would carry you off if you let it (and you'll let it)—you hop in the safe and ride it out to sea. When the sailors find you inside, you beg them not to send you back. You explain you're there to help them help your dad. You tell them it's urgent. You say it's a matter of national obligation. They have no choice: they have to let you stay. They give you a bunk. They give you a uniform. They even give you a name. They call you The Daughter. You stay for the duration. You help them fight the war and, hopefully, help them win it. Then you and Dad come back, arriving at the same pier on the same day, to march in the same parade where everyone shouts and cheers.

But Dad comes home to no fanfare. August, 1918. He shipped out in January. Aunt Mardi holds her breath. There's been an outbreak of flu.

“Would they send Dad home on account of flu?”

“It’s not flu I’m worried about.

He’s only been gone eight months.”

“He’s been gone since 1914.”

“Three years domestic.

He’s been gone just eight months.

I’m worried it’s too soon to come back.”

You’re worried that she’s worried. Aunt Mardi doesn’t worry. When your mother died, she became your nursemaid so she wouldn’t have to worry you were alone. When Spanish flu broke out, she marked your door quarantined so she wouldn’t have to worry about it reaching you. When you started going down to the docks, she gave you a sock full of nickels—

“Anybody gets fresh? Wind up the sock.

Swing and aim for the eyes, and follow through.”

Aunt Mardi’s never had to worry because she’s always had a plan, so you assume Dad’s early return wasn’t plannable. You want to ask her what to do, but instead, you tell her not to worry. You tell her you’ll get flowers for the table. While you’re getting flowers, she gets a newspaper to put in his favorite chair. You yank a head of lettuce from the garden. Then

carrots and beets and onions. You check the time once a minute. You repeat a phrase you picked up at work:

“Hurry up and wait.”

When Dad finally gets home, you’re still on your knees in the garden, and you’re still in your work clothes. Grease and grit piles in fits and starts across your waist. You whisper an apology.

“I forgot to change.”

Aunt Mardi steps in to forgive you:

“I’d say you’ve changed enough.”

You expect Dad to smile, to look at you at least, but he just hobbles in while Aunt Mardi fusses over his limp. He says it could’ve been worse—they let him keep the leg, at least. Aunt Mardi calls it a commemorative souvenir. You hug dad’s side and welcome him home. He looks down at his hands. His eyes seem weak, like they can’t see or don’t want to. You clutch his fingers and they twitch and dangle in your sweating palm. They do it again, that same dangle-twitch, the morning he passes away. Ten summers after he trundled home, an infection creeps into his leg. No matter what you say, he won’t see a doctor. Aunt Mardi tells you later:

“He was afraid they’d lop it off.

He said it was all he had left from the war.”

You promise yourself you’ll never marry a soldier. Then you meet Lou at Dad’s funeral.

He’s got a mess of brass on his lapel—he wears a blue uniform and white gloves. You worry he’s about to salute you.

“Lou Henry. Sixteenth Infantry Regiment.

Your father was a fine soldier.”

“Thank you, Mr. Henry, but my father was a fine *man*.”

“It’s Corporal Henry.”

You don’t believe him. He looks too young for any sort of title. Then you look at the brass again. You remember there’s so much you’ll never know.

“My apologies.”

“My condolences.”

He seems about to leave. Then he stops because you’re asking, because you’re unwilling to go on not knowing.

“Corporal Henry, my father came home injured.

He never told us how.”

“He may have wanted to spare you.”

“I may have never asked.”

“No offense, but you don’t seem the type.”

“Which type is that?”

“The type who knows when to keep her mouth shut.”

Later, when you tell Aunt Mardi, you impersonate his voice.

“The type who knows when to keep her mouth shut.”

I wanted to argue with him, but I also wanted to prove him wrong.”

“So did he tell you?”

“About dad? No. He wouldn’t at the funeral.

He said I’d have to make him supper. The gall.”

“Gall? You’ve been cooking for two for ten years,
and you weren’t even married. If you ever want to be,
you’ll call that man up and make him a meal.”

Lou shows up with daisies. He pulls out your chair. He tells you he likes your perfume. You
tell him it’s garlic. He says it’s floral. You remind him he brought you flowers.

“You’re smart. I like that in a girl.”

“You don’t like it in everybody?”

“Just like your dad. You both could hold your own.”

After supper, he explains.

“We found him in a trench, enemy fire in his leg.

But he gave it back. Took out two Germans by himself.

Hell of a soldier, your father. He really knew how to fight.”

When Lou proposes, you accept because you love him, and you love him because that night,
he fashioned a new piece of you from parts you’d always thought belonged to someone else.

January 5, 1931, the evening you marry Lou, you hear a phrase rippling among the guests,

“Nobody listens to soldiers’ wives.”

You soon find out they’re right. You try to tell Lou you’re afraid of having children. You try to explain about your mother—her small body, your inheritance—you can tell he isn’t listening. You ask Aunt Mardi,

“Do you think they’re right?

That nobody listens to soldiers’ wives?”

“No, they’ve got it wrong. Nobody listens to *midwives*.”

Aunt Mardi used to tell you about rubbers. She used to warn you about VD. When she found out Lou was a veteran, she bought you a new diaphragm and a year’s worth of spermicide. But as the years go by, she reverses her stance. And as soon as you turn thirty-seven, Aunt Mardi tells you nothing but horrid facts about your body: Your ovaries are fragile and finite. Your womb is doomed to expire. Thirty-five is middle aged and you’re two years past.

“The feminine organs aren’t piggy banks, Honey.

You don’t save them for a rainy day.”

You liked it better when she warned you about VD. In fact, almost everything you love about Aunt Mardi has to do with her lessons in survival. She's been teaching you how to stay alive ever since you learned there was such a thing as death.

"Midwives always listen, even to soldiers' wives.

Women get lost as often as women get pregnant.

The only thing for it is to remind them they're still alive and tell them there's more to be won than just a war."

You ask Aunt Mardi if your mother had a midwife when she was pregnant with you. Aunt Mardi asks if you heard Italy invaded Greece. You tell her of course you heard. It's impossible not to when Lou's the one doing the telling:

"First, it was France. Then Egypt. Now the dagos got Greece.

We're letting them make fools of us over there."

"Quit riling yourself up.

"Roosevelt said we're not going."

"Roosevelt is a milquetoast who thinks we're the Swiss."

"Staying neutral isn't hurting anybody."

"I've got a news flash for you, Honey.

The point of a war is to hurt the other side.”

You want to tell him war sounds remarkably like marriage. Instead, you leave the room without saying goodnight. Lou dogs you up the stairs, asking, of all things, why you married him. You give him a good once-over. You’d wanted to see him in a suit. Not his uniform, but a suit he wore for you. You wanted to have one goddamned day when his life was about something other than fighting. You tell him you married him for company.

“You want company: raise a family.”

“You’ve got a funny way of making a pass.”

“You and that smart-alecky mouth—if we ever do have a kid, he’s going to have to learn to ignore what he hears from his mother.”

“Don’t say that.”

“What does it matter? You don’t want it.”

“It’s not that I don’t want it—”

“Then tell me why. Eight years, we’ve been married.”

“Nine.”

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The week after Roosevelt wins, Aunt Mardi gives you a bouquet. The card reads, *Happy Armistice Mother's Day*, and includes a list of directives about how to dispose of your diaphragm. Your days are suddenly busier. Frantic and fizzy with plans: mental lists of the ways and means of babymaking. It's exciting to think of your options—on your back, your side, the floor, the bed, standing, sitting, bending over—exciting until Lou decides to enlist.

“They’ll station me in February. We’ve got a month at least.

Time to stop fooling around about fooling around.”

You laugh, but you don’t mean it. You lay out a schedule. Before bed, before dinner, before work. You give up trying to sleep. You’re afraid you’ll miss a shift. Your body adopts a state of civil unrest. To keep yourself awake, you take to walking the halls. You tell yourself it’s practice for late-night feedings. When you admit you might be wrong, when you realize your days are lists—indexes of everything you’ve surrendered—you think about your mother and everything she lost. You remember how you forced her to give up. Since he enlisted, Lou’s started comparing his service to yours. As a veteran, he owes the country at least one year of duty. As his wife, you owe Lou at least one child.

It’s as simple as that, he tells you. It’s as simple and as difficult as that.

Blondie.

1964: Berkeley.

You are an expert in combat. Born in World War II. Brought up alongside the Cold War.

College-educated in step with Vietnam.

So when Robert is drafted, you become his expert strategist.

“Just tell them your wife is pregnant.”

And what do you suppose he says to that?

“My *wife*?”

“Is that a yes?”

“Can we go back? You said *pregnant*.”

“You want to talk about babies before marriage?”

The nerve of some people’s children—”

“Blondie, will you knock it off already?”

I need you to be serious for a second.”

“One second and counting. Not a moment longer.”

“Were you kidding just now?”

“About which part?”

The marriage, the baby, or being serious?”

“The first two.”

“Dead serious.”

“Holy hell.”

“Is that a yes?”

The next day, you exchange vows at City Hall.

Your love for Robert has always been charged, but it suddenly feels detonative—if you pulled away, it would take your head right off. So you spend your days as newlyweds knit to each other’s faces, until the blast radius from his deferment blows you miles apart.

Dependency deferment only grants a one-year extension.

“But the baby will still be an infant.

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“There wasn’t room for that sort of soft touch in The Great War,”

like there was anything great about it. Your mother doesn’t mention your grandfather and neither do you. Robert smiles at your father and tells him that the times, they are a-changing. That’s when your father usually starts in.

“They’re already changed. Nowadays, you only get one war.

When I was your age, I was between wars. *World wars.*”

“Dad, when you were our age, you were pitching long-term woo at Mom.”

“*When I was your age—*”

He talks over you.

“—I was already a veteran. All done fighting, so they said.

The war to end all wars.”

He laughs at this, your father.

“But that was 1920. Then I went back for round two. I chose to go: *volunteered*.

And look at you now, still at it. Fighting even better than we were.

Surface-to-air missiles—we would’ve *killed* for those.

You’re lucky the gooks don’t got ’em.”

“I’m not really sure why *we* have them.

No one’s attacking us from the air.”

“Course not! They’d be fucked if they tried, wouldn’t they?

Because we got all you fine kids to protect us. Educated and willing to march.”

Whether your father means a protest march or a soldier’s march, no one asks. Robert and your father mostly agree to disagree.

It’s Christmas Eve and you’re bloated as a sea cow. You keep looking at the wedding photos and thinking, “*Just one more month. One more month before I can writhe about, giddy, motherly, in exhausted, victorious triumph. Then it’ll be me and baby, flowers in our hair.*”

Robert's sent a letter from Laos, but it says he's leaving for Vietnam in the next few days.

They're sending him to a city called Pleiku. Your mother's clamoring for news, so you read the letter to her and your father eavesdrops.

"Demonstrations in Laos on S. Vietnam's behalf.

They're afraid of increased violence and socialism."

"They're afraid of getting a Berlin Wall in Vietnam!

Wouldn't be like the one they got in China."

"Lou."

"What? Am I wrong? Socialism means they gotta work.

They gotta work to give all them freedoms away.

I read that manifesto. That fucking *waste*."

"Lou."

"What. Go head and tell me I'm wrong, Honey.

Or Blondie, since you know so much.

From you and your abilities, to me and my need,

you stand there and tell me I'm wrong."

Slowly, you continue.

“Robert says that everybody’s really fighting for Kennedy.

‘We all rally behind Jack’s memory.’”

“Oh, youth.”

Those wistful words are your mother’s. Your father grumbles something about weaponry, about coups and advantage, about liberalism and Cuba—

“I’m going to read my paper in peace. But don’t get too excited.

It’s not the kind of peace you’re thinking of.”

You want to write to Robert then and there, but how can you relate the here and now? You sit down and get as far as,

Merriest of Christmases, darling.

I’m wide as a barn and it’s all thanks to you.

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Seven months later, November, you watch ten thousand people protest the war. You watch them on TV, though the march is only five miles away. You watch until you realize you're waiting for the protest to turn. You're waiting for the violence to find you the way it found him. In the end, you stay away from the rallies. You stay away from the war. Nobody could ever say that you were brave.

Baby gives you a Valentine on the month following her fifth birthday. There is a drawing of you together—*Mommy & Me*—surrounded by flowers just like the ones she's seen in your wedding album. When you cry, you tell her you're not sad, just very tired. February is your time to look at photos, Valentine's Day, your holiday of reflection. It is that February, in

1970, that you realize your wedding ring has permanently indented your finger. It floats below your knuckle, a lifesaver. You try to focus on what's still left to save. You and Baby visit Robert's headstone before returning home to call your mother. She's unwell. You tell her to get some fresh air.

"It's not good to sit inside all day.

There's enough smoke in there to start a brush fire."

But your mother insists that she's fine, and if not fine, then used to it. At any rate, she says, your father will never quit. You know he won't, and you know she won't leave the house without him. Devotion is a dangerous state of mind. You think of saying so, but you've already caused your mother enough undue concern. Instead, you make an excuse to say goodbye and crawl back to bed. Baby burrows under the blankets, hugging your midsection. You won't let yourself be thrown back to when she lived there. You pull her up and out, see her fretful face, see how it's already mirroring your own. She used to have Robert's curious, open expression. Now it's your guarded eyes, and stubborn mouth set in a resolute line. At least she got to keep his hair. No matter what, she'd never be able to pass for blonde.

Two months after giving up smoking and consequently developing a great distaste for the smell of cigarette smoke, your father dies of a coronary. It is 1972. Your mother is at his side.

"We were walking through a park past a crowd of smokers. He couldn't catch his breath."

You imagine his passing. You hear his last words:

“Bastard kids—couldn’t they have the decency to smoke inside?”

You imagine them crowding him. You imagine their cigarettes molting ash into his face and mouth. You imagine your mother trying to wave them away. You imagine her yelling something—*No* or *Go*—which one, you can never decide. Finally, you imagine the kids still standing there, sharing your inability to look away. You know it didn’t happen that way but you can never bring yourself to ask your mother what actually happened, so you replay the scene in your mind. She wants to fight, wants to save him, wants to kill every one of the stupefied kids crowding them. But she can’t, so she doesn’t. Your father vanishes. Your mother cries.

Her face at the funeral is so in love and without and alone. In a span of hours, you watch your mother age. Grief creases her forehead and lips. It freckles the backs of her hands. It spends her years for her—it spends her whole. You recognize yourself. You remember your own trials with mourning. Then you remember Baby, your living love letter from Robert. You pull her close and briefly feel like a proper half of something. You lead her to her grandmother and ask for a moment away from the assembled mourners. Your mother looks unsteady, maybe even afraid. You want to tell her you understand. You know where she is. Stuck in a house made of apologies and an increasing need to go on. But before you can say it, there’s Baby, pulling you together. She’s tugging at your leg and pushing her grandmother

over and into a chair. She puts a hand on her grandmother's knees and dances her fingers across them as she talks.

“Gramma, don't be sad. Grampa's with Daddy now. They're going to fight war in the sky. And even if they don't win—Mommy said war's hard—at least we know they're together.”

She's so damn smart sometimes, it kills you.

Ten years later, 1982—the year of your diagnosis—a monument is built. You travel together with Baby to the nation's capital to see it. The monument is a wall, a wall designed by a young Chinese woman. You can only guess what your father would've said about that.

The stone is the color of soot, the names, the color of ash, and among the names, Robert's is toward the wall's highest ledge. If you stood on a chair and stretched, you could touch him, but from your regular height, you can just barely see his name.

Baby, just seventeen, is taller than you. She takes after Robert that way.

“Can you reach him?”

She extends her fingers to graze the bottom of his last name, the one thing you three share. With her free hand, she reaches out and grabs your nearest fingers. It's the closest she'll ever get to holding both her parents' hands. You witness her realize it. You watch it straighten her

spine. You see it push her closer to his name. She turns to you. The sun is behind her. Her face is in shadow. She could be anyone. You don't cry. She faces him again, stretches farther, one foot arched off the ground. Her fingers tremble in your hand. His name holds steady.

“Mom?”

She needs your permission. You're at a loss—you, whose middle name is Loss. You lift her hand toward him. It's all you can do. She stretches, then leans, then makes contact—

Her full weight is against the wall before you can say which of you let go first.

Baby.

Sacramento, 2006.

You can build a battlefield in just three words. College: broken engagement. Nursing school: abortion. Hospice: foster care. You went from studying to cheating, from curing to killing. And now that you want to save and salvage, you're resorting to pain management. But, as Mom so frequently reminded you, especially at the end of her life,

“Baby, it's all pain management.”

Of all your hospice adages — your anti-platitudes — that’s the one you use during intake. It normalizes hospice care for incoming patients and usually sets them at ease. Only recently, you realized the intake Q&A mirrors the test you had to pass before fostering Foster, starting with,

“Would it be okay if I talked to you about your served Time?”

“Would you tell us a bit about your decision to provide foster care?”

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“Specialist Turner? Hi. I’m your intake nurse.”

You write your name on the white board posted near her door so she’ll remember it.

“I’m here to ask you some questions and help you get settled.

Just to confirm, you’ve opted out of dialysis.”

“That’s right.”

You nod, relieved. In your experience, it’s easier for patients who’ve never had it, so if they want to end dialysis, they’re at no risk for withdrawal. You notice a catheter hub in Turner’s arm.

“I see the IV squad’s already landed. How’s your pain?

On a scale of 0-10, where 0 is pain-free and 10 is unbearable.”

“The usual. Stiff ache in the joints.

Low-grade headache. Maybe a two or a three.”

“We’ll get you some Tylenol.”

You leave and return with an IV bag on a cart. During your brief stint in pediatrics, you used to dance the cart into the room to ease the tension. No antics today, but you still aim to please. As you connect the drip to the hub, you try to open the floor:

“Are those photos of your family?”

“Of my granddaughter. Amanda.”

“She’s pretty.”

“She’s a terror.”

You’re fond of Turner already. Most soldiers can’t say *terror* without whispering, *Never forget.*

“Not half as bad as her mother though. This picture here? Last October. That’s a real gun. I said to Jenna, her mother, my daughter, *Loaded or not, you don’t give a kid a real gun.* So she says she did it for me—Amanda as a soldier—says the gun was a final touch. Wound up being a final straw. We got in a screaming match over who was the worse mother. Me, for raising Jenna an army brat? Or Jenna, for being thoughtless, careless, *reckless*—”

You think either situation sounds okay when compared to having had to mother your mother, to having been parent and child and long-lost husband to a stubbornly willful ghost. You think of your childhood as lessons in deciphering your mother’s coded moods. Crying was

coded as “tired,” but really meant “depressed.” Grief was never “grief” because grief was common, as commonplace as sleep. So when her mother died, your mother didn’t “grieve,” but was “tired,” then wistful, then stony. But at least she responded. It seems Turner’s daughter won’t visit her mother at all:

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Turner pauses long enough to give you adequate reason to resent the intake questionnaire. You write *Obviously* and feel that's enough to proceed when Turner answers in a way you feel you haven't earned.

“The sergeant who taught me to sew up a wound said a suture should be tougher than a soldier.

And a soldier should be tough as a set of woodpecker lips. I gave birth in a military hospital. I got through labor with Jenna by reminding myself of all the ways labor was better than war. I’m telling myself now that this is somehow better, that the pain in my kidneys is better than war.

That’s trauma. But ducking enemy fire to gather the dying. Lifting broken bodies in broken skin.

Threading broken bones with metal rods. Telling patients they’ll be bionic. Watching them heal.

That’s the best part of saving soldiers. If I had to choose, I’d say that’s the best part of a war.”

You write *romantic*. You write *savior*. You write *uses heroics to cope*. You ask what the worst part of war is. She hesitates.

“The rule about not asking or telling in the Army?

It goes far beyond boys sharing bunks.

Don’t ask about anything you’re not ready to hear.”

You write *resistant* and tell her to go on.

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You want to apologize, but you stop yourself. Foster says you apologize too much. More specifically, you apologize for everything. So when you apologize every time you yawn too loud during a movie or hug her too long at school, it means less when you apologize for confusing her with the baby you aborted the year Foster was born, the baby you didn't want because you were a baby—because it was your goddamned name, the baby you resented because you had plans, the baby you missed when your plans fell through, the baby you tried to replace thirteen years later in a group home, all grown up. When you act like you've

known Foster for more than three years, when you treat her like a secondhand sweater, when you behave as if the person she was before you met disappeared once you took her home, when you offer to get matching hairstyles or shoes or bags to bump up any faulty resemblance, when you remember she has her own unsettled past, you know *I'm sorry* won't be enough. You appreciate Foster's honesty, but in these cases, you still almost always apologize, so you wish she were here to see you resist, to know her mom is good for more than fucking up:

"I know you know this, but the body can create trauma to combat trauma. Like when muscles around a torn ligament beef up to support the tear, and wind up overcompensating even after the body's done regenerating, so then the muscles are overworking themselves to protect a closed wound, and the body is suffering undue stress. Not to say your stress is uncalled for, but memories aren't that different. The body will strain to mend the mind."

Turner looks at you and you see her eyes shift. You take her hand to rein her back to now.

"It'd be easy for me to tell you to try to forget. It would be easy, but it wouldn't be honest. I don't expect you to forget what happened, but remember that the body processes grief. I lost both my parents to different kinds of war. And my body weathered those losses."

Turner doesn't laugh, but you suspect she wants to. Her body's weathering more than loss.

“I carried anger. I hurt myself. I wanted to earn my right to a new family. I tried to make one. Then I convinced myself I wasn’t ready. I told myself I’d fail. I used trauma to cope with trauma.

So I abandoned both. I had to, *had to* forgive myself. I had to get past the ease of placing blame.”

You need Turner to understand you’re not telling her how to heal. End-of-life care is about comfort, not recovery. But bodies gravitate toward relief if they can. You only want to put it within her reach. She nods and thanks you, possibly just being polite. You encourage her to call if she needs anything.

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When you get home, Foster's watching *American Idol*. You ask her to put on the news. She asks you why her name is written on your hand. You explain about the intake question and foster care questionnaire overlap.

“So, what was your answer?”

“To what?”

“About why foster care.”

She asks with the same even tone she asked why her name was on your hand. You tell her: Children imply origins. They imply mothers. Their mothers are understood. A stranger could look at Foster and intuit you. Your lives are so obviously bound. And from there, you and she surpass intuition. You drive and strive toward understanding. You want to reach beyond it, to outweigh your secret doubts: your fears about motherhood and the horror of ongoing labor. The work you’re doing for Foster and for yourself and for you both. How unstable it can be, how prone to human error. The persistent detachment you understand too well. But there are other persistent moments, resistant to doubt, instances when you recognize a life inside your life, a self beside your self, and you get a glimpse of what could have been—of what has indeed become—not a mirror and not a shadow, but something else entirely, something altogether more. The two of you together, combatting the lonesome alternative. You and you, for good and always, even when it’s eventually only her.