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BORN HERE ALL MY LIFE: A NOVEL

By

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## PROLOGUE

They were fourteen and sixteen the first time their parents let them drive from Santa Fe to Buffalo alone. It wasn't as much a gesture of trust as a reflection of their parents' mutual distaste for spending money, travel, and each other. Their mother thought that flights were an unnecessary expense when she'd just contributed \$400 towards the purchase of Eliza's first car, and besides, how else were they to get around town all summer, get jobs, not just lie around on her couch watching music videos (*who even watches MTV anymore*, Ximena mouthed, Eliza's hand covering the speaker as they eavesdropped on the fourth tense negotiation of the week) or sleeping all day in their muggy, air conditioner-less, second-floor bedroom.

Raoul wouldn't have minded taking a road-trip with his daughters, he said, but balked at the thought that he should drive back alone. Bad enough that they were leaving him behind for the entire summer (*Papa will be so lonely*, he said, though Ximena suspected he would move his new girlfriend in the moment they were not around to make her presence unwelcome). In the end, though Eliza was still scared of driving behind semis or in the rain, especially when combined, the sisters too were excited to be off on their own, to have something to brag about to their friends with the summer barely started, and two whole days to slip off their dad's suffocating, regimented kind of love

before taking up their roles as Joan's polite yet disappointing daughters. They could linger in that middle without performance, without jealousies or missteps.

They packed their dad's tent and their own sleeping bags, patched and purple. It had been years since they'd been camping at the lake but he'd kept all of the gear stacked in shed: the propane stove and cast iron pans and the enamel coffee pot, the camp shower that had always leaked and dribbled as they stood hidden between the trees, shivering. Their dad had urged them to pack it all, stretch the drive out and stay at some parks, really make the most of their time, but when they considered this, Ximena and Eliza thought of the hours spent lighting a fire, the beans burned and cold in the pans, and they opted to just get McDonald's on the way out of town, figuring they could grab whatever they needed on the road, though he insisted they bring two gallons of potable water and some Power Bars, just in case. He told them they'd always find great jerky along the byways.

The morning they left, things nearly went bad when Ximena drank the last of the coffee before their dad had had any and he looked certain to erupt, but Eliza saved the goodbye by running to the little café in El Dorado to get him a cappuccino instead, telling him they'd wanted to do something sweet for their poor papa because they'd miss him so much. He gathered her in his sunburnt arms, and Eliza hugged him back, watching over his shoulder as Ximena stared off at the twin inverted crescents of the Ortiz mountains. She went somehow both limp and stiff, as always, when it was her turn to be squeezed tight. Raoul's eyes were damp and he blew his nose on a turquoise bandana, and Eliza made her eyes glisten too, and that seemed to satisfy him.

Promising to call every five hours and only use the credit card in a real emergency, the girls finally got in the car just after nine, Ximena sliding in the first road trip mixtape and cranking the volume way past the red mark Papa had made for a safe and acceptable maximum before they'd even pulled out of the driveway onto Old Las Vegas Highway. Eliza's stomach spasmed reflexively and she lowered it, glancing in the rearview mirror, but he had already gone back inside. Probably to call Michelle over to bring breakfast and sympathy. Her fear fell away with the pink adobe behind her as she turned onto the highway, turned the music up, past even what Ximena had considered transgressive, and her sister jabbed a middle finger out the window as she sang along with Fiona Apple: *I got my feet on the ground/And I don't go to sleep to dream*. By the time they merged onto I-25 North, both girls were howling, thumping the dash against the rattling percussion.

They felt invincible through that first leg, the roads dry, the semis well-behaved. They took their time, camped once along the Mississippi, once in a national forest, and stayed two nights at KOAs, in Tennessee and then Ohio. It was easy, they thought, being on their own. But the summer wore them down—Joan avoided being alone with her daughters, so it was two months of awkward dinners with tall uncles and their quiet wives, their kids forced to bring them along to parties with their friends, where they'd introduce Ximena and Eliza as their cousins from Mexico and Ximena would respond to

questions about why she looked so white by slamming shots of tequila—and when they opted to return two weeks early, they chose the quickest route.

Both were edgy by the last day, not speaking for half of it after a blow-up about who's fault it was that they'd gotten off-course in Kansas, wound up adding five hours to the trip by crossing into Colorado. Their hearts pounded from the 24-ounce gas station white chocolate cappuccinos, plus the Trucker's Friend pills Ximena had grabbed by the register, the stoned clerk raising a pierced brow but bagging them along with the Gem donuts.

At three a.m. they were about to cross into Northern New Mexico when the deer started jumping through the road. Eliza wanted to pull over and camp near Trinidad, but Ximena had been wild-eyed since the man approached her at the rest stop, asked her how much while Eliza was peeing. Now she was tapping her nails on the window—when Ximena felt agitated she played a sort of air piano, though when she was really angry, she'd find a surface and click click click until Eliza wanted to tear her hands off—and everything she wasn't saying filled the car. Eliza had been running through all the things *she* should say, ways she might be able to fix this, but that familiar sense of hopelessness kept her from trying anything. Better to focus on the road. She pressed the fluid button to wash the smashed bugs off the windshield, but her blades were too dull and just streaked them back and forth instead.

They saw them lining the twisted highway, disappearing in and out of the woods, the full moon hardly lighting the black night beyond the reach of the high beams. Ximena had pointed out the deer crossing signs some miles back but neither had taken them

seriously; generally at this point in any road trip they'd both be asleep in the back of their dad's Suburban, a scratchy Indian blanket shared between them.

The first deer was already on the other side of the road when they caught it in the beams, but Ximena still flinched and Eliza nearly slammed on the brakes. This was when she realized how dangerous it was that she was hurtling them through the night in the old Land Cruiser, too high and shaky like a boat riding on something so much more nebulous than asphalt, feeling the world like a dream, absorbing her sister's mania as it seeped across the consul, and she turned the music up even higher, trying to wake up at least that survival-driven lizard part of her brain and drown out the nails clicking against the glass. The next deer paused straddling the yellow stripe and she saw them bearing down, imagined blood and fur against metal and glass, her sister forced to stop the fucking tapping and open her damn mouth, and she didn't swerve, the deer jumping towards the trees just in time as Ximena shrieked and covered her head.

Eliza pulled over, got out, walked in front of the headlights towards the woods, stood just in their glare and vomited, bent over, into the dark. The sticky white chocolate and chunks of elk jerky tasted the same coming up, because the bile hadn't had a chance to seep in, begin to coat and break down and ruin the flavor.

She stayed for a few seconds with her hands on her knees, breathing, partly because the night breeze made her feel awake, and partly so she wouldn't have to face her sister.

The passenger door creaked open, slammed. Eliza let her hair fall into her face, expecting Ximena's hand to pull it back. Instead, she heard the sharp cracking of high desert scrub—dead wood snapping and the crunch of dried brush—and she realized

Ximena had walked into the woods. She swore, followed with large, hesitant gestures, her feet making circles over the brush, bushes, the things on the ground that she could not see, the Land Rover's engine still growling behind her.

It was insane to run after her sister into the unlit forest of Southern Colorado (or were they in New Mexico by now?) at past three in the morning, but there was something comforting in the dynamic, in having something the chase. She resented these moments, but she enjoyed them too. Ximena's tantrums were freeing for Eliza; she was terrified, but she was also the one who would fix this for both of them, and that felt good.

But after a few minutes, she could no longer hear branches bending and breaking. She called to Ximena again and again. Nothing. Eventually, she retreated to the car, turned off the engine. Listening to the night noises, she slept in starts, jerking herself back every time the wind shook the branches of the small trees. Only a few cars passed, and no one stopped. Finally, towards dawn, Eliza awoke to find her beside the window. Her face was streaked with tears and dirt, and Eliza wondered if she'd poked sticks into her knotted hair deliberately.

“Can I drive?”

She nodded.

Ximena only lasted an hour or so before her chin started drooping, and after they stopped again for coffee, she slid back into the passenger side. As they drove through Española, past the Dandy Burger, the Guadalupe murals, the broken-down cars that lined the road,



the sun began to rise. The brown and red hills dotted with piñon and juniper glowed in the pink light. Ximena leaned against her shoulder, and Eliza knew that they were both feeling the sharp lift inside that meant that they were almost home. She gripped the wheel underhand so that she wouldn't disrupt the physical affection that came so rarely between them, rolled down her window with her other hand. The cold air hummed through the crack.

It was bright and hot by the time they pulled into the carport. Raoul was coming down from the kennels, already finished with the morning walks.

“My girls!” he called, waving both arms as if they could miss him; he was short, their father, but never seemed it.

“How was the drive?” he asked, pulling the cooler out of the back with one hand, pulling Eliza in with the other. “Did you girls take care of each other?”

Eliza looked over his shoulder at Ximena, who stared back at her.

“Always.”

## CHAPTER ONE

For a few weeks now they'd been setting up a new irrigation system in Tesuque, and now Eliza crouched among the rows of soil, trying to fix what her boss had fucked up the day before without letting the clients know they were paying twice for the same work. She sank onto her knees, unkinking the thin line of hose, trying not to disrupt the young shoots of bamboo that they were trying to coax up in the western corner.

The problem was, Eden had really fucked it up. The hose he'd used was too thin, the connecting stumps cut too short, and she was at a loss for how to fix it, short of relaying the whole yard. The work they'd done was as interconnected as a vascular system; if she ripped out the arteries, the capillaries were toast. She wondered if he'd been stoned. She wondered if any other landscapers were hiring. She pushed her fingers into the earth, still soft from being turned the day before, porous.

“How's my baby?”

Eliza pulled her hand into her lap like she'd been caught. It was the younger wife, the one with the pierced septum and Henna-red hair, standing just beyond the plot. She'd married into the money and now spent it well. Eliza had been working for rich people all her life, but they never stopped making her jumpy.

“Baby?”

“The agave. She looked a little sad this morning, so I watered her again. Will you tell Eden she needs more than you’ve been giving her?” She was standing on the patio in the blinding light, just outside the plot of earth with its web of hoses, and Eliza couldn’t tell if it was obvious they were hundreds of dollars worth of useless. Probably not. Clients rarely took an interest in this side of their gardens, not until the plants started dying. She got up, brushing the soil from her jeans.

“Don’t do that,” she said. “Don’t err on the side of too much. You’ll kill it faster that way. Her,” she amended.

The wife twisted her prayer beads so hard Eliza thought the thread would snap, send the polished malas tumbling to the ground, leaving all those future mantras uncounted. “Fine,” she said. “Well just make sure she isn’t thirsty. She’d cost thousands to replace.” She spun hard on her Texas, kicking pebbles into the soil they’d spent days de-rocking.

Eliza watched her retreat up the path. It was easier with the younger wife, the bluntness. Eliza had at least ten years on her, sensed she was used to being talked down to. She really shouldn’t have said that—telling a client they were wrong was the fastest way to poison a relationship—but it felt nice to condescend to someone. She’d really been missing that lately.

Late spring was fading into early summer and the monsoons were supposed to start, but the air was still and arid after weeks of spring winds. So far, there had been no hint of change, no migraine-inducing shifts in barometric pressure. No rain. White clouds scattered across the blue sky, lovely and empty. It was already nearly ninety, hotter than

it got when she was a kid, as hot as people who'd never been to northern New Mexico thought it was, so much hotter than it should be.

During those long summers, her father's sisters would visit with their families, and all the cousins would crawl on their bellies, army style, through the arroyo, follow the leader through the spiked grass and moss and across the soft cracked earth. Sometimes she felt cactus in her belly but kept moving, dragging herself with her elbows, and later on she'd lifted her shirt to show off the dried blood, and they'd looked at her with frank admiration, and she felt, for once, strong and proud. At least until her little sister upped the stakes by climbing to the highest branch on the big pine behind the barn, dared Eliza to join her, knowing she wouldn't. Ximena had grinned down through the layers of green needles—she'd always be the brave one.

Might as well check on the agave, make sure that wouldn't wind up on the list of fuckups, too. She walked around the west side of the property, through the cherry trees they hoped to make an orchard, now barely at her knees, past the Desert Willow espaliered into a lattice against the pottery studio, the Russian Sage blooming around granite statues, the dark pink Hollyhocks growing wild beside the carriage house. The older wife had wanted the Hollyhocks pulled when they'd moved in; she said they didn't "go" with the spare aesthetic of the property. Eliza knew she didn't think they looked contained enough; their heights were uneven, their flowers too bold, too bright, far from that desert sepia the artist had probably envisioned. But Eliza had left them anyway, and no one had said anything to her when they reemerged this year, just after the last frost. Hollyhocks had always been her favorite.

The agave cactus stood in the far corner of the Zen garden, looking neither thirsty nor over-watered. It was a majestic plant, nearly ten feet tall she'd guess, easily fifteen wide. It had to be at least thirty years old, but so far showed no sign of flowering. A plant like this would be heartbreaking in bloom: a gorgeous death.

She wondered what the younger wife had seen. To Eliza, the agave looked exactly as it always had in the years she had been working at this house, before the artist had purchased it. The agave, like Eden and Eliza, had been inherited from the previous owners, or rather, Eden's company had just been recommended, but Eliza often felt like she came with the property. It wasn't like she had a choice. She wondered again if anyone else was hiring.

She examined the tips of the spiny blue leaves for rot, palpated them to make sure the young wife was wrong. She was. The agave flourished with minimal care or concern.

She smiled. It was quiet outside, not even a breeze to rattle the piñons. The cicadas were always thrumming and scratching when she was a kid. Back then, cicada shells were currency; they'd pick them out of the dirt in the foothills behind the house, perpetually scanning the ground for the brittle, empty husks.

Now that it was so much hotter, she would have thought that sound would be everywhere in the summer, but she hadn't heard them at all this year. She wondered if they were dying off, or if she was just misremembering their constant present in her childhood. Maybe it was just a few, vivid days. Maybe those details stood in for so many things she could not remember. She closed her eyes: no memories came. Just the same blank tightness in her chest.

She craned her neck to check once more for the sprouting of a stalk that would carry those first and final flowers. It was too tall to tell, so she stepped backwards. Her heel tried to fix itself to the ground but the ground moved, writhed instead. She turned, one foot still in the air, and saw the snake. It was coiled now a few feet away, reacting faster to their collision than she could. It was thick, faded easily against the unworked earth just outside the line of smooth gray stones. The black-ringed spots spaced evenly along its back, veed a bit toward its rattle and opened softer, rounder towards its head, like a row of little baskets which seemed to be both moving and still and Eliza, pressed against the cactus, was both calm and frozen. The rattle sounded nothing like dry seed pods, as she'd been told, but was deafening, permeating, and her hands quaked against the spines of the Agave. She did and didn't feel their points against her skin like a multitude of fangs.

Since she was a kid, she'd been terrified of snakes; hating them was one of her few areas of self-certainty. She had always been most empathetic towards non-human life, even and especially those that were harder to love, trapping and releasing black widows into the woods, sobbing when her parents had the house fumigated after her mother had found the cat dismembering a still-dancing centipede in the bathtub. But snakes. She had recurring nightmares in which they'd slithered out of the ground, hundreds, one after another, wrapped around her, tighter and tighter, and she'd wake up gasping. Because of her devotion to animals, her family had all thought Eliza's fear was hilarious; her father had once hidden a rubber snake in her bed (telling her mother, she had found out later, that this was called exposure therapy and would help), and he had only stopped laughing when he saw the urine soaking into the pink carpet. But, Eliza

realized now, maybe this seemingly irrational fear had been a warning. She must have known, somehow, that this is how her life would end, just as everyone said, after they found her sister, that they'd always known Ximena would die young (the cause too was unsurprising, though this truth went unspoken).

The snake was watching her. She watched herself watch the snake. Although she couldn't remember ever touching a real snake, she must have once, because she'd felt it in her dreams, tight, slick skin, the softness and hardness of it against her own, the coiled mass of muscles, contracting and contained. They were trapped together; Eliza could not retreat, and she knew the snake, by its own survival instinct, would not relax against a threat. It continued to warn, shaking faster now, and this change in tempo shook her out of her paralysis. She threw her arms up, and just before they covered her face, she saw it lunge. The world went white, as though she had looked straight into the sun, then tried to blink itself back into focus, the images out of sync and vertiginous: the snake sinking its fangs into her bare thighs, again and again; Eliza sliding down the Agave, feeling neither spines nor fangs; blue sky flickering; poison running down her legs; warm stones against her skin; silence.

*Old Las Vegas Highway used to be the only route that connected Santa Fe to Las Vegas, before I-25 was built. The two ran mostly parallel for the first twenty or so miles out of town, until the highway's end, and if you were headed to Lamy or Cañoncito or El Dorado, it was only a few minutes faster to take the interstate. Still, even when Eliza was*

*a kid, the only people who regularly took the highway were the ones who live in the houses that spread across the surrounding hills, bored teenagers, and drunks who thought they had a better shot of avoiding the cops.*

*The highway started at the southern end of Santa Fe, as much as the twisting lump of a town had any ends or direction at all, dead-ending at the end of a steep hill, where it turned beneath a bridge and into nothing. Ximena and Eliza used to ride their bikes down that hill. They'd stand on their pedals and try not to scream as the wind roared through their ears; in those days none of the kids in Cañoncito wore a helmet. The seconds it took to hit the bottom were the best and worst of Eliza's day. Right before the hill dipped, she inevitably panicked and almost bailed, but Ximena was behind her, and she couldn't let her see her that way. She always wanted Ximena to idolize her, to want to be like her in a way their dad hated. He was always worried by how well they got along, how similar they were, what he perceived as his children ganging up against him. Really, he hadn't wanted Eliza to align herself with his difficult, disruptive child. She didn't understand that for a long time, but later, afterwards, she thought Ximena always had.*

*The road started to even out alongside the tiny old cemetery, at which point she would settle down and pedaled harder. In all the years they biked down that hill, she never set foot in the cemetery. Ximena did once, and Eliza had let her bike fall to the ground and screamed at her from the asphalt. She never saw anyone else in there either, although she thought the crumbling building beside it was a church. It was unclear to Eliza, as an adult, if someone had told her this or if the cross above the door was all she needed to assume.*



*Just past the cemetery was the bridge where the highway ended, and they would curve left instead, follow the dirt road to the creek, soak in the deep spot they dammed up themselves with stones and logs one summer when no one needed their dogs boarded and they had little else to do. They would double back up the creek and ride beneath the bridge. There were three tunnels, and they would ride their bikes through the water as fast as they could, pretended that they were Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory, which Eliza had only just learned about from a book she wasn't supposed to read. Her parents never spoke about that kind of thing.*

*Heaven was on the left side, had the most light streaming through from either end, and the water was lowest and made a beautifully ripping sound as they sped through. It was fun, but there was never any danger to it. Hell was on the right, closest to the cemetery. Sometimes Ximena and Eliza speculated that they were connected by underground tunnels, but she would allow these conversations only when they weren't there. It was the darkest, rockiest, and the water was high. They fell most often in Hell, scraped knees and once knocked out a tooth. The water seemed colder here, and occasionally she thought she saw needles or razor blades glinting beneath the surface, snakes winding through the stones, though when they went to investigate, it was usually just a trick of the light. Hell was the most fun though, the sudden dips, the water a little too high, the dark things it always seemed to be hiding.*

*Purgatory was between the two, and felt cramped and longer than the others. They might ride up and down Heaven and Hell for hours, but they went through Purgatory only and always when they were finished, even if one or both were hurt. The water was sometimes low, sometimes high, but never seemed as easy nor as thrilling as*

*the others. Echoes seemed louder and they were always quieter, even when they fell. She never liked riding through Purgatory and couldn't explain why they always did, beyond that those were the rules and had to be respected.*

*Looking back, the thing that stood out about the tunnels most of all is that they were all the same.*

Eliza opened her eyes. She was spread out against the base of the agave, clutching the leaves she'd broken off. She dropped them on the stones, saw that her palms were creased with painful red grooves. Her legs were sticky with pee and sweat, but her thighs, doughy and dimpled, were untouched. The snake was gone. She stayed there on the ground for a few more minutes, still and quiet with the thrumming of her body. The sun burned her shoulders and her feet went numb beneath her, and she wondered if she'd ever felt so happy. She stood, still shaking, began to walk, then run back the way she'd come around the house. The winds were finally picking up, and the pink hollyhocks swayed as she ran between them, knocking against her bare, sticky shins. A chipped clay pot rolled into the path, and instead of stopping to right it, she pushed off hard with one foot and sailed over it, as though it were the marked off square in hopscotch. The impact of her landing, bones reacting to the hard earth, that slight shock of pain, was welcome, and she wrapped around that joy of feeling, that the tenor of the feeling, pain or pleasure, was irrelevant. The wind blew dust into her eyes, burned her lungs, and she was glad.

When she finally arrived at the front of the house, that garden and its defunct irrigation that had stressed her out so badly less than an hour ago, she found the young wife back, picking apart the tubes that wound around the furrowed earth. She sat up as Eliza came through the gate, looking embarrassed and defiant at being caught.

“I was just wondering why you spent so much time crawling around over here when Eden was doing the same thing for four hours two days ago.”

Eliza smiled. The wife was so young, occupying that space between being able to ignore disrespect and dismiss being disliked for it. Eliza had lived in that space for years. Ximena had died in it. Her poppy-bright hair blowing at all angles in the wind, and soil streaked her cheeks; she was so desperate, Eliza realized (her epiphanies unfolding so easily) to assert her value. She was not just the new model of trophy wife: queer, woke, deliberately unpretty while still timelessly beautiful, and so fucking young. She was a person in the world, occupying a role, both marginalized and privileged, that had existed so long before her. And Eliza saw how she had upheld this binary, this didactic, misogynistic model of categorization, and she felt humbled— not ashamed, per se, but filled with the knowledge and need to make it right.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I always forget your name. Can you tell me, one more time?”

The young wife, the woman in the dirt, still holding up pieces of broken tubes, was for a moment unable to shift away from her indignation. But it wasn’t an easy question to refuse. “Apollonia,” she said.

“Like from Purple Rain?” Eliza marveled at how unmoored she’d have to be from the world, her day-to-day interactions, to forget this.

“And like Greek. Like the god. Besides, she was a musician in her own right.”

Defensive again, still, and who could blame her, her namesake mostly remembered— or, Jesus, was probably still alive— for her fictional romantic connection to genius.

“Are you an artist too?”

“I paint, yes. Not much these days. I was never an artist like Ko.”

“But what does that even mean? I mean, how do you decide if you’ve earned that title?” Eliza was really interested in the answer to that question, but more than that she was struggling to stand still, wanted to move, get away from this place, wanted to be real with someone who could serve it back. These impulses were clear and urgent, and she felt profoundly unwilling to bend.

“These tubes are fucking broken,” said Apollonia. “And I checked the receipt. \$700 he billed us. I’m not paying again.”

“And you shouldn’t. And it will be wrong of him to ask you to, which he will. Or would. I guess I’m voiding that option for him. I mean, we could also talk about the right and wrong of building a system of nonbiodegradable plastic that will divert so much water to grow and maintain essentially a four thousand dollar lawn in the middle of all this poverty and drought. But,” trying once more to venture into an unbarbed, unmasked connection, she touched Apollonia’s arm, a faded sleeve of coyotes howling towards a weeping red moon, “I’m so supportive of you affirming your place in all of this. Whatever I think of the system that supports you.”

“This is not a fucking lawn!” Apollonia ripped up a length of the thick, center hose, pulling webs of smaller offshoots with it, the sprouts that had not yet burst through the soil.

“It is. But. Shit. I’m so sorry.”

She was. Not because she had gotten them fired, at least not yet. She was sorry that she had, despite her pure intentions, managed to undermine, erase Apollonia more than ever.

“It’s a spiritual oasis!” she heard as she walked away with only her spade, leaving the useless pile of broken pile of tubes for Eden to deal with. “And you smell like piss!”

Eliza sang loudly with the radio as she sped down the narrow, twisted highway, marveling that she still felt so, so high.

## CHAPTER TWO

The house stunk of rot when she got home, hit her so hard as she stood in the doorway that she thought she might puke on the tile, though maybe that was just the shock wearing off.

“Babe,” she called, yanking her shirt over her nose. “What the fuck?”

“I’m fermenting cabbage,” Jake yelled back. “I know, it’s bad, but we’re going to be drowning in kimchi all summer.”

“I hate kimchi,” she said when he walked into the living room.

“Because you’ve never had mine,” he pulled her shirt down and kissed her wetly.

“I’m not sure it works that way.” She wondered if he’d brushed his teeth. She knew better than to ask.

“Felt lonely when I found you gone this morning, Monkey. Had to drink your mocha myself. Where’d you go?”

“Job.” The whole way home she’d wanted to tell someone this story, but there was no way she could. Not to him. Not among the stink of cabbage. She sat on the couch, remembered the pee on her legs only as she felt it gluing her to the leather.

“Why didn’t you answer my texts?”

“Spotty service in Tesuque.” She’d put him on Do Not Disturb two months ago. She kept meaning to take him off, but she’d gotten hooked on regulating his smothering in secret. It started because he’d always wake her up with his end of shift updates:

So ducking sick of this place.

Gabes being such a tool tonight. I’m not cleaning the grill for him again

Miss you baby. Should be soon.

Ducking Gabe forgot to prep the corned beef for tomorrow, so looks like Im cleaning the grill after all. Yay

Done. One shifty and I’ll head.

Gabes gonna buy me a beer. Just one!

Need to hang with him a little while longer. Guess Connies been a bitch lately.

Baby you sleeps? You mad? I’m sorry I said bitch.

Don’t be mad.

Loves yoi baby.

Pls dont bemad.

Sleeping princss. Hope yoi wana wake when I get there....

Winky Face. Avocado

Sweet Potato.

Eggplant!

Haha

Giving Gaabe ride

Home son

“Shit, I’m out of jals. You need anything from the store?” He came up and crouched behind her, wrapping his arms across her chest. “Whoa, Babe,” he said.

“Cabbage isn’t the only thing smelling funky. What’d you get up to in Tesuque?”

“Fertilizer,” she said.

She stood in the downstairs shower for nearly forty minutes—the water pressure was better down here, but, as always, she was unable to find the right point between scalding and too cold. She knew he was back already, because he’d knocked on the door twice, called, “Drought, Baby,” and then, “Baby, Drought,” but it wasn’t until she emerged from the thick steam and found him in the kitchen, frantically chopping piles of vegetables that she realized how incapable she was of being near him right now. Lately when she daydreamed in the shower it was about how their breakup would go, even though she didn’t think she really meant it. Still fresh from the fantasy, Eliza recognized that if she broke up with him tonight, he probably wouldn’t clean up this unholy project.

Ximena would have hated Jake, but Eliza’s mother loved him. She always remarked on his loveliness, his kindness, how thoughtful he was, brought this up whenever Eliza did call her, though Joan had met him only once on a brief, polite trip to Buffalo the Christmas before last. He’d personally brought her several jars of green chile, even though Eliza had told him her mother preferred red. Still. It was a nice gesture. He *was* lovely. And Eliza loved him. For awhile, the first and second year, she felt nervous that she didn’t love him the right way. The in love way. Because he never seemed to



question that's what it was and told her so, so early that she knew it would have been over if she hadn't said it back. The attraction of his newness, her fear of his body, faded, as it always did, and she just more than endured their awkward, sloppy sex. Other than the periodic premature ejaculation— probably for the best, less time she had to pretend— it wasn't his fault. She never truly enjoyed sex with love. Which is to say she almost never came unless she smoked before, and even then she would instruct him to lie still while she rubbed herself along him for not more than thirty seconds, a shudder, a swallowing groan.

Ximena would have dumped him within six months, claimed it was because of his laziness, his borderline alcoholism, which never seemed to get much worse but didn't get better either, because of the way he performed wokeness around their friends yet made those little digs when she gained weight, the way he pretended he hadn't meant them, because of the mediocre sex and the low-level foot infection he'd been refusing to go to the doctor about for months, treating it half heartedly instead with an expired tube of preparation H. She would have told Eliza she was leaving a guy like Jake for all those reasons, but Eliza would know that, really, Ximena just couldn't handle being loved this way, with this kind of certainty and constancy and yes, clinginess. But Eliza had never doubted where she stood with him. She'd never felt, even in the beginning, like if she called too many times, sent a too long text, swung for a full day between crying and wanting to talk about it NOW and telling him to leave her the fuck alone for no discernable reason, that he was going to be done with her. And she didn't think Ximena had ever wanted it to feel that easy.

But those nights she fell asleep before he got home, when she could sense it in the way his headlights spun across their bedroom wall too fast, the slam of the car door not hitting right, uneven crunching of his no-slip shoes across the gravel. When she knew he was drunk before the smell of it filled the bed. Those nights she couldn't think of why she didn't leave him. He sank in beside her, sometimes throwing a sweaty limb across what he assumed was his loving, sleeping girlfriend, pinning her there, and she let her resentment fill her suffocating chest, catching in her throat.

When she got out, she wrapped his robe around her, went back out to the couch, and laid down. She closed her eyes and he kept talking from the kitchen, telling her the story of last night, how a ten-top had come at one minute 'til close and that little shit had sat them, not even told them they needed to hurry, told the guys when he heard them grumbling that the numbers had been shitty and everyone needed to do a little more right now. Fucking left five minutes later though.

The story began to form itself in images in her mind, scenes that became more elaborate and disjointed as she sunk further into sleep. Her high school US history teacher was working the line with Jake, but they were both just grilling elote. They hadn't removed the husks and she kept trying to tell them they were going to char the corn, that it wasn't even in season and no one would order it. Mr. Perez just told her to get out of the kitchen. "You shouldn't be here," he said, and she started walking backwards, even though she knew what was behind her. She was crying and Jake was rotating the ears, berating Mr. Perez for letting them get too charred. "I can't do your job too," he said, and

then she felt coils tightening around her ankles, pulling her down, and she couldn't scream.

She had never been able to scream in her dreams, she remembered, and this realization helped her break out, up, blinking her eyes at the slats of light moving across the tile. The house was quiet but for the steady chopping, still stunk of cabbage. She lay there for a few minutes, letting the dream fully dissipate. Her crotch and legs felt damp again, though she was pretty sure that now it was just sweat. Or at least, sweat mixed with the dried pee. She couldn't smell it anymore. She didn't think she'd wet the couch, though that she had to wonder was a bad sign.

When she stood, the room tilted, and she staggered towards the kitchen, leaned against the cool adobe, so smooth it was almost slick. It reminded her of the snake.

"I thought I'd order Domino's. We can finish Queer Eye?" asked Jake.

"I told Maddie I'd meet her for drinks later."

His glanced towards her as the giant knife kept beating its rhythm. "Seriously? I've barely seen you all day. Remember when Sunday was our time?"

"I need my own time." She cupped her hand on the edge of the counter, with the other swept up the bits of vegetable that had flown off the cutting board. She couldn't take that wounded look she knew he was trying to hide. He was immune to the onions by this point, but Eliza felt her eyeballs burning. Jake reached towards her cheek, the tears already sliding down it. She pushed him away. "You are handling. Jalapeños."

He thwacked his palm on his own forehead. "Sorry, Sweets. I'm the worst."

"You're not," she said. She wondered when she'd turned into such a bitch.

“You’re not a bitch,” said Maddie, who had been happy to be an excuse to get away from Jake. “I thought we weren’t using that word anymore. He’s the bitch.”

She’d never liked him. Then again, she’d always been much more forgiving of her own boyfriends faults and weaknesses than she was of the guys Eliza dated. She was sort of like Ximena in this way, although, now that Eliza thought of it, Ximena never really forgave anyone. She just pretended to move on, would bring up a comprehensive, catalogued inventory of slights and mistakes the second she was backed into a corner.

“He’s wormed in good, is the real bitch of all this.” Maddie topped off both of their glasses, opened another bag of blue corn chips, the spicy ones they both liked. Red Hot Blues. Her cat had shredded every screen but the studio was a sauna this time of year with the windows closed. They were wide open, north, south, and west, and Eliza could just smell the smoke from the fire beyond the Jemez. Eliza hated that she slept this way, out here alone, Ceyjan always out on tour, but Maddie insisted that she was safe this far outside of town. Besides, at least it was hers. Paid for by her mom, but hers. Her housing had never been dependent on who she slept with.

“Wormed in good,” Eliza murmured, lying back on the futon, now folded up into a couch. The wine was building in warm little waves, and she wanted to sink into it, drift further from the day. “I loved earthworms when I was a kid. Did you love worms?”

“My brother used to put them in my cereal, so, no,” said Maddie, sitting on her feet. “But I remember that you did. You and Ximena used to feed them to your chickens, right?”

“Grubs!” Eliza pointed in emphasis, spilling wine. “Oops. Never would we have fed worms. Worms are helpers. Grubs are gross.” Hunting through the compost pile, using fingers instead of their little shovels so they wouldn’t halve those thick, majestic earthworms. Opaque blue bodies curled tightly, and she’d pinch them just a little, just enough to feel their fullness. So satisfying. The fuckers would bite though, if you didn’t drop them in the empty milk jug in time. “Worms eat trash, turn it into soil. Potential. They’ve earned your respect.”

“I respect the shit out of worms,” said Maddie, mopping up the wine by hooking some sweatpants with her toes, sliding her foot back and forth along the tile. “That snake though. Fucking hell. Girl.”

“I know it,” said Eliza. “I respect the shit out of that snake. I keep thinking, you know, that maybe he left me alone for a reason. That’s stupid, right?”

“She. Had to be.”

“She. She marked me. Also, I pissed myself.” She stared up at the vigas of the ceiling, could feel Maddie’s ass shaking on her feet. “I know. I buried the lede.”

“You baptized yourself.”

“Dude, really though.” She kicked her feet, jostling Maddie, still laughing. “There’s the other thing. That it was the second mother fucking snake of my week. And I ran over the first.”

The other morning, she’d turned into the sun onto Rodeo, and her eyes had been tricked by a slight dip in the road, this variance in texture combined with the brightness making everything blurred and blue. She’d grabbed the wheel hard as if she could pull it

into her chest and swerved the car, but the snake was so long it seemed to stretch across both lanes, though this was impossible; snakes that size didn't live in New Mexico.

She had not felt a bump, and moments later saw the long ess in the rearview mirror, but in that bright, blinding sunlight, it was impossible to tell if the thing was still moving.

“I didn't mean to, but right after I felt this intense fear, like it was going to come after me or something. Revenge. I almost even turned around to run over the fucking thing again. And then, not even two days later, this attack turns to mercy, and, stop, I'm serious! Listen! Really though— does this mean something?”

Maddie's cat jumped into her lap, walked up Eliza's leg, and curled up on her chest. Maddie was frowning. Eliza knew that she really did believe in this shit. They'd both grown up, in some ways, with the same kind of parents— their mothers New Mexico transplants, fleeing from the Northeast, Maddie's mom from New England and Eliza's from upstate New York. These women hated their traditional upbringings, would forever cling to what they saw as the trauma of familial repression. Yet after each of them had come to the Southwest, one chasing creativity and the other spiritual healing, they'd run straight into the arms of conservative and controlling men. Eliza realized early that destiny was less fantastic and magical and more just the predictability of people choosing familiar choices.

Her mother had been a painter once, had come to the high desert to live in Abiquiu and work at Georgia O'Keefe's Ghost Ranch. She'd met Raoul when she rented a tiny cabin on his family's land, and within a year, they'd respectively left behind dreams of artistic grandeur and the family farm to start a horse boarding business just

outside of Santa Fe. His brand of control looked so different than the classic rigidity of Joan's father— Raoul was gregarious where Jack was quiet, an atheist while Jack was a devout Catholic, an early supporter of the Green Party while Jack was buried, as requested, in his Ronald Reagan commemorative cufflinks.

Raoul wanted always to be outside, moving, whereas Jack went from bed to desk to armchair to bed again, his outdoor time limited to the space between his driveway and front door, the once a week when he reluctantly mowed the front lawn. Raoul was Hispanic, his grandparents from Chiapas, and though Joan would never admit it, Eliza knew that marrying a man who wasn't white, despite and because of what her parents would think, had been part of the attraction. She maybe hadn't anticipated the way Eliza's grandparents would never really take to her or Ximena, sending unsigned birthday cards with ten dollar checks and leaving them out of their will entirely, but it's not as though that'd be a reason not to marry someone, though maybe she could have tried a little harder to understand and protect her own kids. In so many ways. Raoul's temper, debilitating stubborn streak, the chronic cheating, these were the signs Joan should have seen. But even as a kid, Eliza knew that her mother was a terrible judge of character.

Maddie's mom, on the other hand, was intuitive to the point of clairvoyance. Sometimes it served Maddie, like when Rowena demanded she be transferred off her first grade soccer team and it turned out later the coach had molested several of the girls, but usually it just meant that she always had her drugs confiscated in high school. Eliza was pretty sure that Rowena was just perceptive and smart and great at spying, but she tried to hide this belief. Though, of course, Rowena always seemed to sense her doubt, gripping her wrist and twisting it a bit for emphasis whenever she offered a warning or prediction.

She'd followed a series of prophetic dreams to Taos, where she'd lived in a solar powered house built against a hill, an earth ship, with her lover, the famous guru, until he'd flung himself over the Gorge Bridge at the height of a bad trip. Because Rowena was that rare breed of pragmatic mystic, she had turned this tragedy to this advantage, writing a best-selling spiritual memoir based on the experience. It was still considered a classic of the genre.

Maddie's father had managed to piss away a good chunk of the book money before she finally left him, but Rowena wrote more, albeit less successful books and after her divorce she managed her money well. When they met in middle school, Maddie's family was more than comfortable and Eliza's was doing fine, so they hadn't been stratified into separate scenes by financial disparity. Over the years, unencumbered by her father's dead weight, Maddie's family moved up the rungs of one of Santa Fe's distinct social ladders— artistic, New Age, liberal, yet filthy fucking rich— while Raoul's business bled and Joan left them all to return to New York, never sending a single child support check, though Eliza supposed she never asked for alimony either.

In high-school, Eliza and Maddie had gotten into stealing, Maddie for the fun of it and Eliza because she couldn't afford the Clinique and Kiehl's and Victoria's Secret any other way, and it had felt fair, like making sure she not be punished any further for her parents' many mistakes. That's how she justified it at the time. Rowena had found out, of course, but she had punished both girls herself, never told Raoul. And her reasoning for that too seemed obvious, whether it really was in Eliza's palms, like she claimed, or just the way Eliza wilted the morning after a sleepover when she heard her father's diesel pickup coming up Rowena's rose quartzed driveway.



Maddie had inherited her mother's beliefs, if not her talent, and could usually be relied on to attribute some hidden significance to the large and small tragedies of Eliza's life, to confidently predict their endings. Eliza had more or less absorbed her father's skepticism about runes and cards and stars, but she couldn't fully discount all of it. She'd seen Rowena proven right about too many things, weird crap that no one could have guessed— she'd dreamt Trump would take office the year “The Apprentice” premiered. Besides, some days Eliza knew that if she didn't believe something good was coming out of all the shit she'd been wading through, that there wasn't a higher reason behind any of it— well. She was not so different from her sister.

“Yeah,” Maddie finally said. “Yes. Of course it means something.” She leaned over, rifling through the pile of books on the table. “Look,” she said, holding up *Omens and Oracles: Finding the Seeker Within*. “I think it's time we did a little ritual.”

She woke up as the sun was rising, left Maddie a note with her poetry magnets— Maddie never moved on from any trend— and headed home. The clouds were pink above the mountains, and the dead brush along the highway glowed. Eliza reached into her consul, remembered that she and Maddie had smoked all the cigarettes last night.

They had gathered the many white candles and sage and Himalayan salt crystals somehow contained within the studio's well-ordered 600 square feet. Maddie had already taken out her contacts, been a little too drunk to find her glasses, so Eliza had read the

instructions aloud while Maddie laid everything out on the round table Eliza had purchased as a birthday gift a few years back.

They'd closed the windows and turned off the lights and she'd smudged the four corners of the house with the sage, coughing on the heavy, sweet smoke, repeating the mantra Maddie's book had provided: I shed, I coil, I strike. She felt stupid at first, but had gotten lost in the words, the smoke giving texture to the dark, the candles flickering from the center of the room. She nearly tripped over a kachina as she passed from west to south, and when the tip of a wing pricked her calf, she remembered her vision, or maybe it was just a fear-induced hallucination. In that moment she'd been so sure the snake had really bitten her. She thought she was going to die. For an hour or so after she found herself unharmed on the ground, everything seemed very clear. Still, she couldn't figure out if, in that moment, when she *knew* the poison was inside her, she'd felt a fragment of relief.

Maddie had called her back to the table, made Eliza read the summoning spell by candlelight, but the wine and the dancing flames made the words swim. The book kept telling her to request the wisdom of the ancestors, and she'd wince and tell Maddie this felt like appropriation, and Maddie had argued that she'd been attending the Laguna and Acoma Pow Wows since she was a kid, that it was completely different when you're educated on Native history and participate in the community. Finally, the smoke had overwhelmed them both, and they'd cracked the windows, but it wasn't enough. Eliza had fanned the door, and this caused the candles to blow out, and when they turned on the lights they'd found the cat was gone. Maddie was vigilant about keeping him in after dark. So they'd stumbled through the woods with flashlights, neither admitting that the

whole thing was more than a little spooky. Coyotes howled loudly nearby, and Maddie sobbed, scared it meant they had found her cat. When they'd finally made it back to the house, he was curled up on the table amid the spiritual debris, and the women had both collapsed onto the bed fully dressed.

“Maybe the ancestors will visit you in your dreams,” Maddie mumbled before passing out, and between this pronouncement and the spins, Eliza lay awake for hours before finally sliding into a nauseous, empty sleep.

There were cigarettes at home, but only those crappy, stale coffee beans that they both kept refusing to use or throw away. Besides, she wasn't ready to be home. She pulled off at the Sunrise, the lot empty and strangely clean. Maybe she swept on Sundays. It was still five minutes until the store opened, so Eliza sat in her car, her aching head resting on the steering wheel as she stared down at her phone. She typed in “What does it mean to keep seeing snakes,” picked a website called spiritanimals.com.

*Often reviled as evil (particularly in misogynistic, Western religions), snakes in fact represent the primal self. If a snake crosses your path, the universe may be trying to tell you that you are neglecting ancient components of spirit, perhaps even your higher purpose.*

She looked out the window towards the southern stretch of Old Las Vegas Highway. Raoul would have been up for hours, already walking back to the house after checking on the horses. No, that wasn't right. The horses had been gone a decade. She

remembered his face the day they'd loaded up the last of the Paso Finos. It had been just a few months after Ximena died.

She looked back at her phone, scrolled down through the species: Boa, Corn, Milk, Python. Rattlesnake.

*A Rattlesnake is truly a potent sign. If this spirit animal appears before you, ignore it at your peril.*

She laughed. Such insight. Realizing it was now a few after, she climbed out of the car. Her legs felt heavy.

The Sunrise convenience store used to be called Sunset. It had been renamed years ago with a change in owners, but most people could never remember which name was now, not then, and so it was widely known as the Sunrise-or-Sunset-or-whatever. It was about a mile from town on the highway and relied entirely on the laziness of its local clientele, mostly people who lived southeast of Santa Fe, to keep it afloat. Prices were nearly double the grocery store just seven minutes further, but it was quiet and easy and stocked some version, albeit not the best one, of everything one might be too ashamed or depressed to go further for: Ben and Jerry's ice cream, generic brand chips, an unknown brand of condoms, Camel Reds, Tecate Light, boxed wine, and single-ply toilet paper. Eliza lived two miles away and within city limits. She could have, should have gone to the Conoco or the Giant station just a few minutes further away, but she liked the privacy of the Sunrise. The older woman who owned it was the only one Eliza had ever seen working there, though she'd been in at both ends of the Sunrise's eighteen hour day.

When she walked in, the store too was empty, and she had to call out a few times before the owner emerged from the bathroom, spraying a can of lilac Glade behind her.

“Too much coffee,” she explained.

Eliza nodded. “That what I need.”

“I’ll brew a new pot.” She got out a tub of Folgers, started scooping it into the greasy little machine without changing the filter.

“I’m just going to grab a bottled Frap,” said Eliza. “It’s gonna be hot,” she added, gesturing vaguely towards the door. “And Spirits,” she said. “Yellow. You’ve got those now, right?” She’d put in a request the month before, and the month before that, when the woman promised her they’d be in by Easter.

“You can give them up for Lent,” she’d advised.

“I’m not Catholic.”

“All the more reason.”

It wasn’t logical to argue, to hold stubbornly to the idea that she should even get this special order. For fuck’s sake, she lived in a big small town, and there were hundreds of places for her to buy cigarettes. There was no reason to cling to this weird, one-sided standoff. Still, May was almost over, and she’d been promised. She only asked because she wanted to gather more proof that people today would invariably let her down.

The old woman stretched her arms, squinted at Eliza as though she were part of an ongoing dream. “Mija,” she said. “What are you wearing?”

Eliza looked down, poked a finger through a bleach hole in her hoodie. She often suspected, even in the middle of her most consuming spirals, that she was performing the role of a broken woman, even to herself. She wore the costume well– bug-eyed

sunglasses, unwashed, tangled hair, the stained, oversized hoodie that said I DID IT that she'd found beneath the seat of her car, the bike shorts, no bra— but the obviousness of this look was embarrassing, as though she were trying to prove that she really was this bad, this far south of okay. When she caught a glimpse of herself in someone else's expression, the convenience store owner's concerned, bemused, she felt ashamed not of being the crazy lady they saw, but rather, of pretending to be. Like burrowing melodramatically deeper into her dysfunction was easier than actually figuring a way out of it.

“It's early,” she mumbled, in lieu of explaining any of this. “Is the fridge working today?”

The older woman gestured towards the back. Eliza stood in front of the drink section with the door open, staring down its many options. She picked up and put back a diet caramel frap six times before grabbing the largest bottle of Fiji from the bottom, remembering she had yet to drink water today, thinking maybe when she finished the bottle, she'd feel clean.

She slunk back to the register, gestured towards the cigarettes behind the counter. “The Blues are fine,” she said. What an asshole she was. “How are you?”

“How am I,” the older woman sighed, slipping Eliza's change out of the register one coin at a time. “That's a story. You know my husband died last year.”

She did. They had discussed it often. Eliza was not often skilled or even competent with social niceties, but she was good at interacting with grief. The trick was not succumbing to the urge to wrap things up on a positive note: he's at peace now, or, it'll get easier. At least she didn't suffer.

“And my daughters have been telling me, Mom, it’s time for you to get back out there. Try and meet someone again. So they set up a profile for me on one of those dating applications. They tried to make me do the one where the lady has to ask first but I told them, I haven’t dated in forty years! You think I need to come up with pick-up lines too? It’s been fun though, having men flirt with me again, even if it is just on the phone for now. My son, you know, he hates it. Boys are such babies about their moms. So his sisters said, Bobby, you want her to cry over Dad the rest of her life, it’s going to be a shorter one. Then again, sometimes I think they just want me around to watch the grandkids. Still, I suppose it’s nice that they think of me at all. Some of my friends, their kids never even think about this kind of thing, worry if their parents are lonely. You check on your mom?”

She touched Eliza’s hand with this last question, shocking her out of plotting an escape. “Yes,” she said. “Sometimes. Not enough, I guess. I try.”

“Try harder. You don’t know how long you got.”

Eliza nodded.

“The thing I don’t tell them is that I never really loved their dad. I mean, he was a pretty good man. He worked, he took care of us. He was a good dad. It never occurred to me to leave him. I think my daughters probably know it. Are you divorced?”

“No.” No one had ever asked her this before. Just if she was married. God, was this one of The Questions she’d get in her forties?

“But you have a boyfriend,” the woman affirmed. “I’ve seen him in here. Shaggy guy. Little tummy lately.”

“That’s him,” said Eliza.

“No kids,” the woman said.

She knew it wasn't a question. “No,” said Eliza. “Not yet.” She wasn't sure why she added this. Worried, she supposed, that the woman would judge her for not wanting them.

“Yet?” The woman raised her eyebrows like, you really think you still have a yet?

“Just the Blues,” Eliza said.

The woman put one hand up in surrender as she grabbed the pack.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “You're very young, for me. Just maybe not for a baby.”

“I don't need a bag,” said Eliza. “And you're not supposed to use plastic ones anymore.”

“I still have thousands in the back.” She touched Eliza's hand again, lightly, as she grabbed the cigarettes. “Matches?”

“Sure,” Eliza said.

The woman began sorting through a drawer beneath the counter. Eliza didn't know why she'd said yes. She had two lighters in the car. Finally, the woman pulled out a half used book from the Cowgirl Hall of Fame.

“Thanks,” Eliza said.

“Listen, mija,” the woman said. “If you can leave the wrong man, before there's kids I mean, do it. That's all.”

“Right,” said Eliza. “Well. Have a good day.” She hustled out the door, which jingled as it swung open and closed again. She walked straight into the bare chest of the next customer. She recoiled from his sweaty pecs as he apologized. She stared at them. He smiled down at her.



“Trail running with rocks in my backpack,” he explained. “So much harder than that CrossFit shit.” But it wasn’t his considerable build that had stopped her, but the tattoo on his chest: a snake, diamonds down its back, swallowing its tail.

## CHAPTER FOUR

When she got home, she'd stood for so long in the shower, letting her blocked sinuses open, her face tilted into the stream. Warm and sleepy, she let herself imagine going to sleep in her own bed, knowing that no heft and stink would wake her up halfway through the night. Taking showers in a bathroom without his flower-scented products, all those oddly mainstream brands like Suave and Irish Springs, no one reminding her about the drought. She wondered how long she would continue rebel against Jake's nagging. Maybe she'd start limiting herself, taking showers of reasonable length. Maybe she'd had it in her to conserve like an adult all along. She held one foot, scrapped the soft skin off of her heel with her fingernails then scrubbed it with a pumice until it was raw and pink. She wanted to feel new.

She thought of when would be a good day to end it. The water was starting to feel a little cool, so she pushed the nozzle all the way to the left, until it scalded her again. Tomorrow he was working a double again, and on Thursday Eden had scheduled four jobs. On Friday his boss was having a party, and she knew it'd be bad for him to miss it. She wouldn't go— it would be too hard pretending, having to hold his hand and let him pat her on the ass while he told his stupid jokes— but he couldn't miss it, so she'd have to

wait until then. Saturday he worked at night, and she had agreed to watch Eden's kids during the day.

It would have to be Sunday, she thought. It would be hard that he still thought of it as their day, that she'd be ruining this for him. She knew she'd be ruining a lot for him, for awhile. She wondered who would possibly help him cope. She wondered if the skanky waitress with the dyed-black hair and the septum piercing would make her play.

It would probably happen fast, once she did. Eliza pictured them eating ice cream together on *her* couch, streaming some prestige show during sex, finishing with the credits. At least that bitch would never know she was getting fucked on cushions Eliza had once slept on while covered in pee, she thought, re-soaping her thighs with the memory.

She was the one who had introduced Jake to *The Wire*, *Sopranos*. When they met, he watched *Family Guy*, had to be stoned to sit through something longer. He didn't even read before she came along, and now she'd catch him recommending her books to his friends, offering reviews cobbled together from thoughts she'd voiced to him. It was annoying, but flattering too that he actually listened well enough to plagiarize her. But if it was him playing teacher to some younger girl using the syllabus she'd written? She was preemptively furious at him for erasing her, for the way he wouldn't even admit to himself that he was doing it. She had made him better, more cultured, more thoughtful, and now he'd be passing this new self off as just being his own man. If she was mentioned at all, it would only be the moods, the sudden tears, the way she stopped going down on him last year and blamed her TMJ.

The water was cooling so slowly, her mind so full of planning and rage, that when it dropped suddenly to icy she jerked a little, the way her body did sometimes when she was trying to fall asleep. She realized she was so, so tired.

She changed the sheets before bed, couldn't stand the stink of him on the pillow. But she wasn't ready to walk away. Probably. Not yet. Not with so much shakiness in everything else. She fell asleep fast and hard, and for once, his texts didn't disturb her at all. It wasn't until he was above her, jostling her, switched the bright overhead light on, that she finally woke up, and even then, it took a minute to be able to force open her eyes.

“Please,” she murmured. “I’m sick.”

“Eliza,” he said, and this did it. She couldn't remember the last time she'd heard him say her name, unless he was referencing her to someone else. It was always either the standards— Babe, Baby, Angel, Sweetness, Beautiful— or the the more specific, weirder, more embarrassing: Monkey, Munch Muffin, Mushy. The last one she really hated. In the beginning she'd tried to save from this trap. Nicknames were infantilizing, impersonal, libido-killing. But the more comfortable they got with each other, the more enmeshed in each other's routines, the harder it was not to slip into this easy shorthand. She would call him Baby and curse, and he'd laugh. In some ways she too thought it was funny, but that visceral sense of shame and revulsion persisted. Why does intimacy translate to such a fundamental loss of identity? The only times she heard him say her name were when they were with others, and even then, it was usually when he was talking to someone else. “Eliza's dad ran a pet crematorium behind their house,” she'd overheard him telling his coworkers at the Cowgirl the other week. “She used to hear ghost dogs whimpering outside her window at night.” They'd been telling ghost stories, talking about all the

haunted spots they'd worked around town. It was like him to borrow from her life when he'd been drinking and wanted to hold court. He'd looked towards her, reflexively, had the sense to look ashamed when he realized she'd been listening. It was only because the sound of his voice speaking her name was so foreign it was startling. She had missed hearing it for so long. Now it sounded like danger.

“What the fuck,” he said. “Who is this?” He was holding her phone.

She took it from him, even though she knew immediately what he had found.

Had fun today ;)

In bed thinking of you.

Hope your having some sweet dreams

She hadn't saved his number, but they were all previewed across the screen, interspersed with Jake's own clingy texts.

“Who.” he said.

She sat up. She was too tired to lie, but she couldn't tell him the truth either.

“A guy I met on a job,” she said. “He was laying flagstone.”

“I'll bet he was,” said Jake.

“I'm not sure what that means.” She could front this dry, weary tone like his clumsy euphemisms undermined the fear they were formed in. Just to buy some time.

“Why is he texting you this shit?”

His face was so close to hers that she could see that one blackhead he never got out. She'd begged him to let her once, and he was grossed out and embarrassed but he let

her, wincing and whining with pain as she told him not to be a baby, her heart bursting with pride and excitement as the long, thick tail of it finally pushed out, curled around and around against the bulb of his nose. It had grown back, of course. The pore was too damaged, too enlarged by years of distortion to sit empty or snap back into a reasonable size. Her mother had warned her, the first time she'd caught Eliza pressed up against the bathroom mirror: Once you start picking at your face, you're never going to stop. She was right but already too late.

She knew she should reach out and touch him, offer some kind of tenderness, but it would have been easier to stick her hand into their black widow-infested stack of firewood than touch that whiskey-soaked skin.

"You fucked him," he said.

"No. Nothing happened," she said. "Not really." So she was lying. Well. She hadn't decided yet if she should go. She couldn't figure it out now, her head full and aching in the dim light, when all she wanted to do was go back to sleep. Whatever she chose, it'd be better for both of them, all of them, if he never knew. And it was only somewhat a lie.

"I don't believe you." He sat up but didn't stand, made no meaningful movement away from her. She could see how badly he wanted to. She could convince him to at least pretend, if that's what she'd wanted.

"He kissed me," she said. "I kissed him back. And then I stopped it. I'm sorry. Babe, I know this is fucked up, but I'm really fucking sick. Can we please talk in the morning?"

“Fuck!” he stood, turned against the wall, and for a moment she was afraid he was going to punch it. Instead he leaned against it, pushed his whole body into the corner like that might hold him the way she couldn’t. She watched him, recognized that pain, and wished she could absorb it completely, even as she still couldn’t make herself go to him.

“Do you want to be with him?” he spoke into the wall.

“No,” she said. It was true so easy to admit. She wanted to say that she was sorry, but it seemed too cruel and insufficient.

When he looked back, she saw hope fighting at the pain. It would be easy, she realized. He really could believe her. Instead of relieved she felt nauseous. He sat beside her on the bed, his big hands in her hair. She smelled the grease from the grill on his fingers. His touch was wrong. She forced herself to take it.

“No,” he said. “Fuck. Jesus. Okay. We’ll fix this. I can get past it.” He pulled her head towards him, gave her a slow, wet, kiss on the forehead. “I love you so fucking much.”

She recoiled, jumped back as far as she could go, feeling the corner of the headboard pressing into her back. Fully awake, she couldn’t look away from Jake’s eyes, so wet and disgustingly broken, hopeful, and open. She felt frozen in their raw vulnerability. She realized that in her whole life she’d never hurt anyone the way she was about to hurt him, and even then she couldn’t help but feel a little staggered by this knowledge, file it into her internal collection of Big Moments.

“Jake,” she said. “It wasn’t about him. It’s me. I can’t be in this anymore. It’s not right.”

“Right?” he said. “What does that mean? If you don’t want to be with him, and I forgive you. I love you. How is this not right?”

He reached for her hands, and she pulled them against her chest. For a year it’d been too hard to even imagine how this would go, too painful, and now any semblance of discussion or even explanation required so much more than she had.

“I’m not in love with you,” she said. She was grateful that he crumpled to the ground, horrified at herself, again so fucking tired.

He moaned, a long, slow-building crescendo as his shoulders began to heave. It felt like something she wasn’t meant to see, but of course she couldn’t leave, so instead she watched his shadow shake and shiver against the uneven finish of the adobe.

Someone else should be here, tell them what to do. She’d had three real breakups before this, but each time it had been Eliza who was left crying on the floor. She always thought that she would be better than the men who walked away, once literally over as she grabbed at his shoe. He’d shaken her off as though she were a tantruming child.

She’d dumped a few guys casually, but never someone who really loved her, who she had loved. She still loved him, in some way, but it was like something had dropped between them, and all she could feel for him now was revulsion. She realized all these men before must have felt this for her, disgust, embarrassment, anger, irritation, in the exact moments of the worst pain she’d ever felt, outside of finding Ximena, and this realization broke through the immobilizing aversion. She could be better than them.

She rolled her legs off the bed, wincing at the aching in her thighs. Fucking amateur. There had been no need for him to spread her legs that wide. Plenty of room for his head. Porny showing off was what it was. Young guys had such a warped idea of



what was expected of them. Crouching beside Jake, she hoped she'd scrubbed herself well enough. It seemed to her that she could still smell foreign saliva and shampoo wafting up, but maybe it was just like the heart beating beneath the floorboards. The telltale fluid secretions.

But when she leaned in closer, all she could smell was the sweetness of his own smells— the piney soap he bought from 10,000 Waves, the grease, the grill, the perfume-y Suave that she hated, the whiskey— all coming off of him with the heat of his tears. She could see, beneath his crossed arms, that his curly hair was already damp and sticking to his forehead, and she had a pang of tenderness, remembered when her little cousin had fallen from the tree and sprained his arm, how she, sixteen, had sat and held him while Ximena ran for parents. Was that really the last time she'd been this close to male tears? No. Plenty of the guys she knew cried when they were drunk, the night Obama won, when Prince died. But maybe that was the last time she'd felt like the one simultaneously responsible— she'd let him climb too high, distracted by bickering with Ximena—and like she was the only one who could make it better. Though she couldn't un-break her cousin's arm, couldn't pretend like she loved Jake again. Did she still love him? Had she ever? At least, she couldn't make herself stay with him anymore.

She rubbed her hand in slow circles along his back. When he grabbed for her hand, this time she let him, and when he grabbed her face, she let him kiss her too. He pushed down on top of her and she folded for him like a doll. She let him fuck her on the floor, her head pushing back and forth along the carpet, bumping up against the bedpost. She didn't come, not even close, but it didn't feel wrong either to give him this, the way he needed it. She could let him wrap around her, cling, cry, I love you, please, please,

please, without answering, without feeling afraid or dirty and disgusted with either of them. She felt tender, maternal, just kept stroking his sweaty hair as she wiped his tears with her thumb so that they wouldn't fall on her own face. That, she didn't think she could take.

She let him lie there inside her as her legs cramped, crying against her breast, the right, his favorite, and occasionally she fell asleep, and he would sense this, grip her wrist, whisper, just stay with me and sometimes half in the dream she whispered okay, and when he finally fell asleep and she was able to roll out and away, she covered him with their quilt, the one they'd bought at an estate sale in Hyde Park despite both agreeing that it was creepy, but it was so beautiful, so much nicer than anything they ever could have afforded without the death discount, and she left the house as the sun was coming up, barefoot, smoking a cigarette and drinking the rest of a flat can of black cherry Zevia from the day before, driving into the sun towards Maddie's.

## CHAPTER FIVE

She wept against the wall for the better part of most days, or so, at least, it seemed. It felt. The summer monsoons finally came, and her tears dampened the the already cool adobe. Sometimes she felt too far gone to cry, but the pressure of the wall beside her was reassuring, so she leaned against it, pressing the crown of her head, or her cheek, or just palm into its bumps and lines.

Someone had spackled a safety pin, open, into the wall of her childhood bedroom, painted Pepto Bismal-pink. It was just behind her headboard, so that she could only see it if she rested her chin against the mattress, but she could feel it, the curved head, the dulled point, and sometimes when Ximena was being punished in the living room Eliza would bury her head beneath her pillow, wedge her hand beneath the headboard and trace the shape of it again and again and again.

The summer began to pass. Ximena's birthday, as always, marked its beginning. Her mother's, just past the solstice, as it drew nearer always gave her that heavy, tired feeling that signaled it was time for the long, full days to shorten, little by little, as if time itself was something that could crumble under its own wear.

She waited for the pain to draw out, to get on the other side of it. At first she tried to go to sleep in the bedroom, their bed, but, inevitably, she would get dizzy alone in the

darkness and slipped downstairs to the crappy couch, to the walls that glittered in the dark.

She slept on the couch, or lay on it, anyway. She streamed violent movies and Holocaust documentaries, left the porch light on and watched the moths swarming against the sliding glass door, against the shots and screams coming from the TV. They were only the small brown ones; when she was a kid the hummingbird moths, abdomens thicker than her fingers, crawled up and down the walls, the posts of the portales under which she and her sister sat covered in blankets, drinking Sleepy Time tea, watching the moths, which sometimes landed on their arms and crawled up, feelers tickling, the weight of those large bodies satisfying. She wondered if their migration patterns had changed, if Santa Fe had become too hot. She wondered if they flocked to higher and higher altitudes, to the aspens that grew at the peaks of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range, or was it farther. She wondered if the cicadas were up there too.

Sometimes she tried to sit outside instead, with the moths, feel the calm the night air gave her when she was a kid, but they had lived in the country, and her casita had neighbors on three sides, and with the sound of the cars, the neighbors calling to each other, the pedestrians walking by, she felt uneasy.

She breathed in her own scent; sour, and the oil of her hair rubbing into the wall, mixing with the memory of asphalt, and burnt rubber, and organs in the sun. It felt fitting, as though in this place and posture, she and the wall had been distilled to their initial, essential parts. Or maybe the must was just the beginnings of decay. Maybe she was beginning to decay. She pushed her index finger against her nostril and blew. A web of

mucus shot onto the asphalt floor: green and opaque. She watched it crust over and flake off over the next week, until the floor was, or appeared, clean again.

In the fourth week she started to call in sick, or text, sensing even in the thumbs up emoji reply that she was, in her stupor, drifting into a dangerous spot with her Eden. When she did go to work, she went through the motions in a sort of trance, forgetting to water entire swaths of a vulnerable, young plants, fucking up irrigation lines worse than Eden ever had. She often wound up just kneeling among the tilled earth, pushing her fingers again and again into the soil. She couldn't handle the thought of tree pruning, the violence of it, so she always found a way to leave those jobs early. She searched herself for a sense of shame or fear, but found nothing.

She poked at her stomach, concave, noticed the deep ache of nausea and hunger without being able to attach herself to even that basic need. Swallowing had become to painful but she managed to make herself get through at least an Odwalla a day by letting the milky thickness, cloying and chalky, slide, unhurried, down her throat. She bought them four at a time from the Albertson's on Zia Road. The old woman at the Sunrise felt too close, too personal for Eliza to manage.

By the first week of July that she began to wonder how much longer she could exist like this without falling into something much darker. Or even hoping that at least she would, because that might be less pathetic, have more shape and distinction than the just-visible dip she had made in the adobe. It was smoother in the spot where she sat, the blisters and veins of the wall rubbed clean by her body, wrapped in worn cotton. Her shoulder blades were beginning to feel curved, and they gasped every time she uncurled, extended. She had only sent in half the rent that month, told the landlord the rest was on

the way. It was a problem that still, somehow, seemed removed from the tangible reality of Eliza and the wall.

It had started to feel pointless to brush her teeth at night, to just give them a cursory once over as she sat on the toilet until three minutes after work began, to move her laundry from the dryer to basket to drawer, to separate lights from whites from darks, bras from towels, to limit load sizes to the manufacturer's recommendations, and then one day the overfull dryer began thrashing back and forth, and she heard it from her spot on the wall, but she figured that eventually the thrashing would stop on its own, along with the high pitched squealing that followed, and finally the thin stream of smoke the wound out of the laundry room. Which eventually it did. She didn't want to call the landlord, especially when she was unsure about raising together the rest of the rent in the next four days.

So instead of fixing the dryer she began to hang clothes from the surfaces, from the unused table, the lamps, the blades of the fans left off, the dry heat creeping through the house even around the authentic adobe, the heavy blue curtains he'd hung when they moved in. She hated clutter but the clothes seemed to fill the space, soften the noises she made as she shuffled from couch to wall to kitchen to couch to bathroom to wall, to couch, to wall. One morning the sunrise was too bright to sleep through, so she made it up to her room, though she skipped the bed to lie on the thick scratchy carpet. Still, she had drifted off at some point but woken up closer to refreshed than she had since she started sleeping downstairs. When she walked onto the landing and looking down at the living room, the morning light had caught the rainbow of clothing hanging from the curtain rods, her faded cotton panties somehow lovely in the glow.

The eviction notice came that week, and she packed a few bags and moved into Eden's house, leaving the shitty art he'd forgotten and the couch they'd found by the side of the road. She didn't think the landlord would find chasing her worthwhile.

## CHAPTER SIX

The days stayed warm but got shorter. By October the mornings held their chill long past sunrise and the harvest from Hatch came in, late this year with the drought, and then the smell of roasting chile filled the town. They set up on roadsides and in front of grocery stores and tied bandanas over their faces and cranked their drums over a high propane flame as the bright green chiles tumbling in the barrel blistered and turned black.

The men would turn away from the smoke but still their eyes watered until the tops of their bandanas were damp. By the end of the day they were red and dry and their hands were raw beneath their gloves. They bagged them whole without pulling off the cracked skins and people took them home and froze them that way so that they would keep their flavor and so for the rest of the year they would cry over the sink rubbing off the cellulose char and tearing open the meat and pulling out the seeds then rinsing everything beneath cold water as their fingertips split and stung.

Eliza almost missed them, but one day driving home, she got stuck at a light beside some vendors. She'd been playing a Jeff Buckley tape for days, and the nostalgia of the music, the smell of the chile rising up from her vents finally broke through her fog. She pulled over and gave the guy a twenty, looked up at the mountains while he weighed the bags.



“The aspens are turning,” she said, surprised. The Jemez were going yellow where the deciduous trees outnumbered the evergreens, like yolk dripping down the side of the mountain

The man shrugged. “For weeks now.”

She hadn’t noticed.

She went to stay at Maddie’s mostly full time, even though the Wi-Fi never worked there and the smell of Nag Champa gave her a constant low-grade headache. She started calling clients who’d asked her about house-sitting in the past.

“I absolutely know dog CPR,” she promised, “and I would never bring parabens into your home.” She walked their Lhasa Apsos and Airedales through the meadows by the ski area, mountain trails that passed homeless camps that seemed to spread every time she saw them.

Once she got a three-week job taking care of a Maine Coon. She’d watched the cat a few times over the past year, and it had become comfortable sleeping in the bed with her. The owners were retired, working on construction on their dream house in Costa Rica, or overseeing it, at least.

“You’ve got to visit,” the woman said, squeezing Eliza’s hand as she sat on one of the high bar stools in their open-concept kitchen while the woman brewed their Matcha. “It’s going to be all windows, a wrap around deck. I’m going to spend all my time in that sun. Fuck skin cancer!” She laughed. Eliza smiled.

“We just eat fruit and fresh fish all day, lie around, paradise,” she said. “The fruit down there is fantastic because you can actually pick it ripe. Half the produce in Whole Foods is from Mexico, you know, but they pick it when it’s just green little nubs. Plus, you just don’t even know where things come from, who’s picking it. But everyone is living well in Costa Rica, or mostly everyone anyway. So we don’t feel so bad enjoying our blessings.”

“You feel bad here?” Eliza asked.

“Well no, more frustrated. I mean, yes, Santa Fe has always been an economically complicated place. Did you see that that writer bought the old bowling alley though? Gave it to some artist kids! I think things are turning around here. Not counting the rest of the damn country of course. *Those* people,” she said, waving her hand.

“Didn’t someone get murdered at that bowling alley?”

“Oh, probably,” said the woman. “You know what I started thinking about one day, though? Someone has been murdered absolutely everywhere. I think every every square foot on this earth has seen a murder at some point. Maybe not those really high mountains,” she conceded, “but the habitable spots. And energetically, you’d think that’d do something to all of us. But maybe it’s just a part of that creation/destruction dichotomy. In a very literal way this violence is providing the soil in which new life blossoms. And isn’t that a more lovely way to see it?”

“Sure,” said Eliza. “Yes. It is.” She hadn’t meant to be snarky about the bowling, just really had been trying to remember if the murder had prompted the bowling alley to close, or whether it just wasn’t doing enough business regardless. She remembered going there in middle school as a field trip.

Ximena had bad nightmares as a kid, the kind where she woke up screaming, sometimes walking or even running out of bed. Eliza had once tackled her to the floor, afraid she was going to slam straight into a wall, and their father had yelled at her for this when he burst in to see what was wrong.

“You could have really hurt her,” he shouted, as he rocked Ximena, who was crying on his shoulder. It was one of the only times Eliza remembered Bailey melting into him that way; she hugged her father when commanded, but her body always stayed stiff and prickly.

The nightmares were Eliza’s now. Sometimes she woke herself up fully with her own screaming, sat up and let the dark settle around her while she shook and cried and tried to breathe. Sometimes she just woke up in the morning and felt the skin on her cheeks a little tighter, her eyes puffy, the hangover of an epic cry without the relief of getting through it.

The cat liked to stretch out on the other side of the king bed, a fluffy boyfriend pillow. She thought that she’d been doing much better lately.

That night she woke up with claws everywhere before she knew where she was, the cat shrieking as she tried to fight him off, finally darting across the room as she managed to roll off the bed, to land hard beside it.

“Fuck!” she screamed after the cat.

She woke up in the night and saw shadows in closets, heard creaking around the house. She burned sage, visualized an army of angels flanking her bed, wielding crystal swords;

she had found this on the internet. She walked beside the river, or riverbed, really; the rivers around town had been running dry for years. When the days were too quiet, she turned her podcasts up as loud as they would go. When the sun began to set, despite age and logic, Eliza's chest tightened, and she fled for higher ground.

Every kid in Santa Fe grew up scared of La Llorona, the weeping woman. The legend was that a beautiful woman named Maria—so key, Eliza thought, that she was beautiful; how else could she be worthy of a story? Maria married a Spanish general and had two children with him. Then, the man left. He'd probably had important raping and pillaging, general genocide, to oversee. When he came back, he was with another woman. She was even younger, more beautiful than Maria. Obviously. While he greeted his children warmly, the general refused to even speak to their mother, his wife, Maria. (Eliza had always pictured all of this happening with the man and his newer, younger, more beautiful new wife on horseback, never dismounting as they greeted the children and ignored Maria, reaching up from a dusty road.)

The Spanish general had left again, left Maria. In a fit of jealousy (and probably a desire to evoke some sort of emotion in her cold, gaslighting ex), she had flung the children into the river that flowed through the arroyo; rivers still flowed back then. The second she'd done it Maria came back to herself, back to her body and realized the unspeakable horror of what she'd done. So she threw herself in; this part of the story always made the most sense. Suicide was her best, most honorable option.

But God couldn't let her off the hook so easily, or maybe it was just her own guilt. Maria was doomed to wander the arroyos of New Mexico forever, at dusk wailing "Donde estan mis niños?" If she found a child, her centuries of unexplored trauma would

prevent her from recognizing that it was not her own, the eternal irony of grief obscuring its source. She would drag the child away with her, to some place never specified but surely Hell (where all the beautiful women go), and they were never seen again.

It was, of course, just a way to keep children out of arroyos, particularly after dark, which could fill in the event of flash flood. Now, in this century's weather patterns, it was more likely that some other harm would come; one of Eliza's friends was raped in an arroyo downtown when they were young, as her mother smoked out with the other parents in the park above. As they got older, the terrified children realized this. Still, there were few children of Santa Fe who felt comfortable, even as adults, near arroyos as the sun began to set. And this was one of the reasons she thought that Ximena's suicide was especially fucked up.

Eliza had found her under a hot pink sunset, purple clouds twisting and around beams of light shooting from the western mountains. Her face had been unrecognizable.

Ximena hated guns, but their father had checked his cabinet as soon as Eliza told him she'd gone missing. She was glad he'd done this later, because maybe in some way she'd been prepared. At the time, she was furious at the cold pragmatism of the gesture.

Their search party had been making their way across the land since morning, after securing (with an infuriating degree of difficulty) permission from the famous actor who owned the southern side of the mountain to trespass on his land. It was entirely volunteer,

as the sheriff's office said it was policy not to send their own once it was confirmed that a gun was gone as well.

“But that makes no sense.” Eliza was furious at herself that even then, during the worst few days of her life, she was polite with the cop, who had shrugged at her in return.

Several friends had offered to team up with Eliza, but she wanted to be alone. She knew Ximena was dead, and she couldn't deal with taking care of someone else who was trying to take care of her, when the last thing she needed was to be taken care of.

She had spent the night before imagining how to say goodbye, thinking her way into acceptance. She'd known this day was coming for years; she'd stopped fighting it a long time ago, or so she'd thought. The nights Ximena had gotten wasted at some strange guy's house and she'd had to come get her, to half carry her from stranger's house to car and car to her house, sitting on the bathroom floor all night, falling over, trying to stay awake because Ximena was begging Eliza not to leave her like this, while she threw up and cried and stared with glassy eyes into hers, pleading, “Why am I like this? Why is it so hard from me?” She'd never known. Eventually, Ximena would start falling asleep, jerking himself up to make her promise that she would try to let her go. “Just please don't be mad at me, when I do,” she'd slur, and Eliza would tell her that they'd talk about it later.

But they never talked about what she said the next day. She'd make them coffee and drive Ximena back to her car, and they'd listen to the Gypsy Kings and Ximena would lean in to rest her head on Eliza's shoulder and she'd think, it was just a bad night.

There must be many people who left friends and family in shock when they killed themselves, but no one who really knew Ximena was surprised it had come to this. The

timing, the method of course; Eliza remembered telling the barista at the coffee place they'd both gone to nearly every day, so casually curious she was about their mutual absence, the way she buckled, crumpled when Eliza had told her, and how she'd both loved and hated her for it.

The thing she and her father could never discuss was the relief. Eliza did not like to think she was like her father, but she knew they were both defined by their need for certainty; at least that had been true. She wasn't sure how to reconcile this urge with the chaotic, ill-defined nature of her life and relationships for the past few years, but, then again, it seemed like a long time since she'd had a strong opinion about anything.

For years she had been feeling a little less present, less tied to Ximena and the turbulence of her emotions. She had been trying since she was nine to find the words to soothe her, to make any sort of dent at all in her misery. The day she found Ximena was the worst day of her life, but she knew that something had shifted too. A trapdoor that had been open for decades finally closed. She just wasn't sure she'd ever stopped falling.

In August, Maddie left to spend a few weeks with Ceyjan on tour. The house was too small for two, but it felt weird without her there, and Eliza was relieved when she got a last minute house-sit in the Village de Cañada. Over the phone, the client explained that their regular girl had fallen through (most Santa Fe house-sitters, it turned out, were in high school or college, and prone to unreliability) and they were in such a rush to get to

the airport that she'd just leave Eliza instructions and the key in the mailbox. The dogs were lovers, she said, and always thrilled to greet whomever strolled into their home.

She still felt anxious whenever she started a new job, a new house with its strange creaks and groans, but anxiety was more or less a static state. It would have been nice if it was worse when things were really wrong, given Eliza a connection between the events of her life and her own well being, she thought, packing up her duffel as Loots watched from behind a bookshelf. But that just wasn't how she was built. She stuffed only the dirty clothing in the bag; these clients lived just beside the National Forest, which generally either meant wealthy or poor but entrenched. They owned two pure-bred Airedales, which Eliza knew cost upwards of two thousands dollars a piece. They probably had an amazing washer/dryer, and sprang for the pricey, all natural detergent.

She made the bed a little, stretching the comforter to each corner above the twisted, untucked sheets, checked the fridge out of habit, knowing she'd just eat whatever crap the clients had left, or else buy frozen pizza at the Sunrise. Though pizza was tough to get rid of. Maybe she'd make macaroni.

She poked at the pot of soup she hadn't bothered to transfer into a Tupperware, wondered if it had gone bad. Ditto the mixed greens. Something stunk in the fridge, and it didn't really matter what, not right now, when everything would turn within the next week anyway. She closed the door. Swinging the duffel over her shoulder, she looked around the tiny house. Maddie said she'd be back by mid-September, but she'd done this kind of thing before, disappeared to South America for six months to an ayaguasca retreat. Impulsivity was fun if you could afford it.



The candles, the incense, the Tibetan prayer flags and kachina in the corner retained the memory, the feel of her, but beneath this lovely, holy veneer, Eliza could sense her own rot. Some people were built for studios, could co-exist with their thoughts, with serenity, within six hundred square feet. When Maddie was here, this house felt cozy and inviting, not claustrophobic, suffocating. At the same time, Eliza had never felt quite comfortable here, even that one December when she'd stayed over for two weeks straight. Both of them had been a little low; Maddie and Ceyjan were sort of over again, and things at Eliza's landscaping business were sort of falling apart, and then there had been that epic blizzard.

Loots mewed and threw himself into her shins, probably sensing that he was about to be abandoned again. For him too, anxiety was the norm, not the exception. She overfilled his bowl, threw a handful of catnip on the floor behind her, and left the cat and the house that weren't hers for more of the same. The sun was setting as she pulled out onto the driveway.

As she drove up the pitted dirt road, Eliza, who had only ever been familiar with villages in fairy tales, didn't see how Cañada was more than just a cluster of dilapidated houses at the foothills of the Santa Fe National Forest. Perhaps it had been, once. Now even the lone church was rundown, its facade crumbling into the dead foliage of the courtyard. Although no one was buried here, Eliza found herself holding her breath when she drove by, that trick Ximena had invented for the cemetery at the bottom of the highway whenever they'd bike by.

She had been instructed stay in the master bedroom, sprawled between the two Airedales on the California King; apparently they'd get nervous if they had to sleep

alone. The clients hadn't bothered to change their sheets, and with the Airedales snoring beside her, Eliza slept badly. The unfamiliar scents of perfume and body odor, the blended residue of strange hair and skin, were par for the course in housesitting, and she thought she'd gotten over the discomfort of existing among them. For some reason, this night was different. The smells, their strangeness, reached Eliza unconscious, kept triggering some kind of survival reflex. Over and over again, she fought her way out of vertiginous dreams with a start. Each time she sat up, the dogs jumped off the bed, hopeful for breakfast and a walk, and the clattering of their long nails on the Saltillo tile floor set off the panicky thumping in her chest.

Just after dawn, she finally gave up and took them on a hike through the forest. The shades of pink were still fading in the east as the sun rose higher, stronger, lighting the trees with an incandescence that was so sincere and hopeful that Eliza felt shamed by her inability to enjoy it. She tried to commit to the moment, to be touched by the fuzzy caterpillars and matte black beetles crossing the path, blanketed with dead piñon needles and lined by wildflowers, the bird songs carried through the trees along the morning breeze that smelled of moss and earth. The dogs chased each other with frenzied, barking joy, deepening her formless, cyclical anxiety at feeling nothing else in the midst of so much beauty.

It was the beauty of these things that she'd lived among her entire life. Those wildflowers, sticky purple ones that grew in spiny clumps against the dry earth, the taller stocks that bloomed in soft orange clusters—she loved these ugly, common things so much more than anything she had to plant herself, tend to, just as she loved the twisted juniper and piñon trees with their peeling bark, their brittle branches. The black beetles

she and Ximena had played with as kids, tipping them over with pencils as they ambled, awkward and determined, towards mysterious destinations. Their legs would spin frantic in the air, and Ximena and Eliza would right them, ashamed of themselves, of picking on such vulnerable, serious creatures.

When she was 25, Eliza had moved to the Northwest for six months, following Maddie, who'd been following her boyfriend. Whenever they'd gone hiking the two of them would spew superlatives about how majestic, stunning, breathtaking, the dense Ponderosa forests were. Finally one day Maddie had admitted, "The thing is, I just look at all this and feel nothing." And Eliza was relieved to identify and acknowledge this lie, the emptiness that had been growing since the day they'd arrived.

They'd driven back home for Christmas, and she felt like herself again only when she'd reached the high desert in northern Utah. She let Maddie take the wheel and slept through the night, and when she woke up with the sunrise among the sparsely dotted pink and brown hills of New Mexico, her heart broke a little, and she knew she wasn't home for the holidays, but for good. She didn't used to have to try to be moved by the caterpillars.

The trees were growing taller, thicker as they climbed higher up the mountain, and she remembered a sort-of date twenty years ago, when she'd finally gone hiking with the boy on whom she'd harbored a long and mostly-unrequited crush. He'd beckoned her close to a pine tree, leaned in and sniffed, and when she awkwardly copied him she'd smelled a distinctly un-treelike sweetness, so unlike the spicy, crisp scent of the needles. Vanilla, she thought, though he said that for him it was some combination of oranges and

cinnamon. She'd been stunned that she could have spent every day of her childhood in the woods without ever knowing this smell.

That day he'd taken her hand to help her down a steep, rocky bit of path, held it for a few beats after they'd hit level ground. Nothing more than that had ever happened between them—they'd wandered by a clearing in which an older couple was fucking enthusiastically and he was furious and embarrassed while she couldn't stop giggling, though at the time she was so infatuated that she'd tried to ignore the importance of these clashing reactions—but for months afterwards she could feel flushed and devastated just remembering the way his index finger had moved, softly and probably without intent, across the center of her palm. It had been years since she'd felt like that about anyone. Most days she thought she never would again.

Her exhaustion had started to make her feel a little drunk, giddy, and she started running with the dogs, who were thrilled to race her. After a few minutes, the long night and recent lack of exercise kicked in and she stopped, doubled over, feeling like she was about to pass out or puke. Leaning against a tree, she spat a string of mucus onto a pile of needles. She stayed hanging there for a minute, focusing hard on her untied laces. She didn't straighten up until her breath was no longer a pant.

Keeping one hand wrapped around the trunk, Eliza closed her eyes and pushed her long nose into the bark, but jerked away as she felt spider webs. "Fuck, this," she said. The dogs whimpered, impatient to continue the game. She wanted to go home, smoke some weed, and head out a day early to her Wednesday gardens. Tomorrow it might finally rain. But she thought she was probably close to the lookout point she'd seen on the map by the trailhead. Eliza knew the danger of giving up on her small, daily goals.

If she stopped doing everything that felt pointless, her bullshit routines, this rickety pretense of health and sanity would collapse. She listened to the birds singing for whatever stupid reasons birds have, re-tied her shoes, and moved on.

Ten minutes later, she decided that the bird sounds were making her chest tighten, so she pulled her phone and earbuds from the pocket of her track pants. She was midway through the final episode of the podcast about Watergate, and sunk back with relief into the interviews and evidence, even as her mind wandered simultaneously over her schedule for the day, mapping out the homes to hit by location, scale of workload, and in inverse order of how hard they'd be to finish high. It was soothing, this planning, like counting sheep or worrying a perfectly round, smooth stone. She stopped seeing the beetles and caterpillars, the shadows playing across the forest floor. Her chest loosened, or maybe she just stopped noticing that it felt any way at all. Eliza was so checked out that she barely noticed the mountain lion a dozen yards ahead of her, standing just beside the path. It was half covered by the branches of a juniper tree, yet unmistakable. She froze. The dogs were already a few yards ahead of her, clueless and happy, investigating a pile of deer poop.

“Francis!” she hissed. “Bacon!” They were stupid dogs but eager to please, and both came bounding back to her immediately. She hooked their leashes on with shaking hands, without looking away from the mountain lion, who had not moved. Don't run, she thought. Everyone knew that. She'd never considered how deeply unhelpful this advice would be in the actual event of emergency. She tried walking backwards for a few steps, but the dogs got tangled around her legs, and they all almost fell over. It occurred to Eliza that she'd be better off letting them fend for themselves, but even for her, this was a little

bit too selfish. Besides, she'd never get another house-sit in this town if it got out that she'd lost \$5000 worth of dogs in one morning.

She pulled the Airedales close to her sides, turned around and walked, slowly at first, then, after turning back and confirming that the thing wasn't following, a little quicker. Finally, and perhaps too soon, she was flying straight down the mountain, not bothering with the zigzagging path. She crashed through juniper and piñon, which fought back by clawing at her bare arms, her face, leaving behind tiny pieces of blood and skin and collecting collecting cactus needles in her sneakers, whose laces had again become untied. Of course, she didn't notice any of these losses and gains while she ran. It wasn't until they reached coyote fence that lined the property, until Eliza passed through the gate and latched it behind her, that she realized that the earbuds were still in, the closing music of the podcast just beginning to play. Stranger than this was that sensation of weightlessness, the lack of anxiety; her heart was pounding, sure, but instead of clenching tighter with fear, her chest felt wide open. She stood under in the shower, the hot water stinging her scratched skin; her whole body was buzzing. Dressing quickly, she shut the dogs inside and grabbed the car keys. She was giddy at the thought of telling someone what had just happened, and for some reason she couldn't articulate, it had to be Raoul.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

As far back as she could remember, Old Las Vegas Highway had more than its share of fatal accidents. Most of these could probably be attributed to New Mexicans' wide disregard for the legal blood alcohol limit, higher than the national at point one, but people don't think they're drunk until they're falling. Even then. The joke was that one New Mexican says to another:

“I'm too drunk to walk. Let's drive.”

Maybe the speed limit was too high for a highway that cut through so many spider-webbed dirt roads, so many pickup trucks that were nearly as old as their Eliza that turned onto Old Las Vegas widely, wobbling, fishtailing a little with their loads of bricks, firewood, unrestrained dogs and children. So many children driving, as Eliza had, years before they would be legal, because outside of town, people made their own laws.

The road was straight, but hilly, visibility limited, and these drivers turned out from their potholed driveways like they had all the time in the world. The roadside was dotted with white descansos for the dead, some hung with rosaries or photos or fresh flowers. A Star of David marked the Jewish sixteen year-old who was in the backseat the



night her friends decided to race each other, the same night a forty-year old man decided to have twelve beers and drive himself home.

Eliza never took the interstate though, despite all of the stupid, tragic deaths. The highway was beautiful, lent itself to memories and sentiment, to old songs in tape decks, in the way I-25, just a dozen yards over for some stretches, just couldn't. The speed limit let her drive fast enough to feel free, slow enough so that she wouldn't miss the houses and hills and colors that she knew so well. Even the descensos were comforting to her.

There was a bus that had been broken down for thirty years a few miles from her old house, just past the turn off to El Dorado, the more affluent, suburban community. It was maroon and white, nothing like you'd see on the roads today, its tires sunk deep into the ground. Bailey and Eliza used to fantasize about running away and stealing it, some hazy idea of hotwiring that they'd seen in a movie. But that fucker was never going anywhere. Still, it comforted her to drive by and see it stuck, just like seeing the sign advertising haircuts with a woman she knew had been dead at least a decade. These tangible memories functioned like a childhood blanket worn thin with years of worrying, spaces that had never moved on without her. They were sights she saw without seeing, so inevitable and constant, that she could float above them as she drove and still feel reassured.

Of course, some days, she would notice a new house, a dirt road that had finally been paved. It really hurt when they took out the cattle guard a half mile from the house; she and Ximena had to pick up their feet every time they drove over it. The familiar twisted and all she could feel was trapped by this stupid highway that went nowhere, that

could only offer, on its best day, the scent of nostalgia, memories that had been mined so hard they felt flat and unreal as a photograph.

Eliza's dad still lived in the house she and Ximena had grown up in, still owned the surrounding seven acres, though the stables and the kennel were closed, the pasture grown over with weeds. Eliza had sold the horse and canine boarding LLC to a young couple just outside El Dorado, who'd picked up the reputation and the equipment for pennies on the dollar, but had declined to keep up the grimmer branch of the family business.

She wanted to sell the property and the house too, move Raoul closer into town, but he'd fought her as long as he was lucid, and now that she could fully exercise her power of attorney, no one was biting.

"The market *is* strong," the realtor had said, surveying the dilapidated barn, the untended, diseased cherry trees, the overgrown pet cemetery. "But it's not magic. If you're not willing to invest some serious time and money into turning this place around, I can't help you."

So Eliza had taken the property off the market, used the money from the sale of the business to supplement Raoul's insurance and hire two part-time aids, and ignored the rotting abscess of her family legacy. She never officially moved out, but for the last eight months had settled into the habit of seeing her father just once a week, making them both dinner on Sundays and giving the aids the night off. Raoul didn't know that he saw his daughter so little, although, so far, he still knew that she was his daughter, that he no longer had two.

As she drove up the long, winding driveway to the house, Eliza still felt that buzzing. She sang loudly to The Clash, giddy from her adventure. Even the sight of the dying cherry trees, which she'd planted and raised from seeds, an unspeakable tragedy, didn't dampen her euphoria.

“Shareeeef don' like it!” She and Ximena used to jump from couch to chair and onto the coffee table as they sang this song, when they were playing Kitty Cats in Hot Lava—if they slipped and hit the pink shag carpet, they had to moan, and writhe, as they burned, painfully, to death. When the cousins came out, Eliza had tried to teach them this game, but the oldest had scoffed, “I *know* about the lava game. My friend Camille *invented* it.” Eliza remembered telling Ximena, how shocked they both were that their world wasn't as unique as they'd always imagined.

She pulled in front of the house, even though Raoul had always gotten pissed when she parked there. “We park in the back,” he'd say. “Don't need to let the whole neighborhood know whether or not we're home.” Though the only neighbors who could have seen the cars, or lack of cars, had been elderly and housebound, it seemed, since Eliza was in high school.

She charged through the front door, which was never unlocked. “Dad!” she called. When she entered the living room, Raoul started awake; he'd been napping along to Chris Matthews. At least it wasn't Fox News, Eliza thought. Not yet.

Raoul looked at her with his runny brown eyes, his remaining tufts of hair sticking up as soft and fine as a baby's, and she marveled that she was ever scared of him. “Eliza.” Raoul now made a point of voicing any piece of information he knew that he knew, even and especially the name of his only remaining child.

“Yup,” she said. “And you are?”

“Ha!” said Raoul. “Know that one, for now.”

For now. “How are you, Dad?”

He turned his left palm face up, held two fingers from his right just below his wrist. He considered for a moment, then nodded solemnly. “Still here,” he said.

It was a joke he performed to anyone who asked, and Eliza had long stopped pretending to laugh. It wouldn't matter anyway; in two minutes he'd forget the question, the answer, and whether or not he'd understood the context for her visit. If she stopped coming by each week, he wouldn't know. Until he died, she would be performing their relationship only for her own benefit, solely to assuage her guilt. Raoul's guilt, whatever there had been, had long since become too complex for him to carry from one minute to the next.

“How about a drink?” Eliza asked. “I'm a little wound up.”

“Goodness,” he said, squinting at the clock on the wall. It was a little after ten. The morning nurse must have just left, and the evening one would not be in until four. Her time with him had been so structured lately; she would cook dinner, they'd eat, and then she'd do the dishes and help him get ready for bed. It was stupid of her to think she could just pop by and tell him a story; for over a year, she'd needed an activity to fill her time with this new, vacant father, to tolerate his proximity.

“Alright, then let's take a drive,” said Eliza. “Why don't we go see the horses?”

“Horses,” said Raoul. He turned towards the east window, though the pasture, before the fence had crumbled, had stood west of the house.

“Our horses. Or yours, anyway. Do you remember your horses?” It was a cruel question, though her tone was gentle.

“No,” said Raoul. “I don’t... maybe.” His eyes unfocused a little, and Eliza wondered what he saw.

“Bud,” she prompted. “And Sally. The Paso Finos.”

“Dancers.”

“Yes,” she said. “They don’t live here anymore. Do you want to go see them?”

“Whatever you want,” said Raoul, pushing himself, painfully, from his recliner. “I’m easy.”

“Sure are,” said Eliza. “The easiest.”

“Do I need a jacket?” Raoul shut off the TV, padded himself down for keys.

“It’s July,” said Eliza, shaking her own keys.

Raoul grabbed a cardigan from the stand in the hall, fumbled with the buttons while muttering, “Goodness,” or “Oh boy.” One of the weirder aspects of Raoul’s dementia was that his vocabulary, expletives in particular, had regressed about seventy years and several parental advisory ratings. This man who’d regularly referred to his children as fucking bullshit artists before they could read now swore like Shirley Temple.

“Do you need to go to the bathroom?” The last time she’d asked this question in this tone, with a hint of suspicion and accusation, she’d been in high school, babysitting.

Raoul shook his head. He’d started requiring the diapers, or whatever euphemistic name she was supposed to use, about when she realized how bad his senility was getting. She’d called his doctor after he’d had an accident in the Bobcat Bite, that old diner right

off the highway. They'd never talked about it, but the next time she went in the pantry, she saw several green packages of Depends stacked beside the canned tomatoes.

She opened the front door, and he looked outside in surprise. "You parked in front," he said.

"Yeah," said Eliza. "Sorry about that."

"It's fine with me," he said.

"Eagle 20s buy two packs get one free," Raoul read off the gas station sign as the Honda idled at a light beside the entrance to El Dorado. "'Smoke 'em if you got 'em.' Ha!" he snorted.

For the past few years, Eliza's father had taken to reading each sign aloud as she drove, which she understood as a way for him to mark their movements for himself. He had already asked several times where they were headed, though the answer never meant much to him.

"Have you told me where we're going?" Raoul asked.

"Yes," she said this time. She did this some of the time to amuse herself. He wouldn't remember her rudeness anyway. She weaved between the slow cars in the left and right lanes without signaling or braking.

"You drive like a man," he said for the fourth time.

Eliza didn't answer.

“I mean it as a compliment. Your mother was such a timid driver. Scared to take the interstate.” He picked up an empty cassette case from the floor. “The Cranberries,” he read.

“Mom still drives,” said Eliza. “In Buffalo. She drives.”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Raoul.

“Do you think that’s why she left? Because she was scared of you?”

“Who? Your mother?” He was startled. “My goodness. Of course she wasn’t scared of me.”

“It must be nice, that memory of yours,” Eliza said.

“You kids were scared of me,” he said. “I remember that. Hiding under my own bed when you broke the rocking chair. Screamed about those spankings worse before than while it happened. I barely touched you.” It was the most he’d said to her about her childhood in years.

Long, full clouds were stretched across the sky, but Eliza didn’t think it would rain. Looking up, she saw they were pure white along the bottom, no hint of warning grey. She sped up, knowing the cops rarely patrolled past the affluent, suburban community.

It was always only “spankings” that he’d threatened, yet Eliza remembered that fear of anticipation, the recognition of a look, a tone, that signaled that her father was going to lose control.

She glanced at him from behind her sunglasses. He was staring out the window. “Dad,” she said. “Do you remember where we’re going?”

“Horses,” he said.

“Yeah,” she replied, surprised. “That’s right.” But when she turned towards him again, Raoul was pushing one finger against his window. A group of horses were grazing on the other side of the barbed wire fence. “Horses,” she repeated. She pulled the car over, and watched Raoul watch the horses.

“Dad,” she said. “I saw a mountain lion today.”

“Oh boy,” said Raoul, turning away from the window. He looked up and down the highway. “What are we doing here?” he asked.

“I’m just taking you home.” She pulled a U-turn on the empty road.

Eliza had moved in with her dad seven years earlier, when her own landscaping business had begun to fail. She’d asked for a loan to keep things going, and he’d refused. He had, however, allowed her to live in the guest house rent free, on the condition that she plant new fruit trees, help his one remaining employee keep up the stables, and kill the thorny weeds and vines that had grown up beside the driveway over the past decade.

“So, be the groundskeeper, then,” she’d said. “That’ll be my rent.”

They’d been walking the property together as he outlined all these tasks. It was early summer, and the monsoons had already begun. Dark nimbus clouds were rolling over the mountains, and air was full, tense, waiting for the rain. The sun had been shining in a clear sky less than an hour before, but that was always the thing about Santa Fe this time of year. Eliza thought of one of their dogs who’d always been so scared of thunder,



how even on a perfect day they'd know a storm was coming if they found her trying to hide under Ximena's unmade bed, her big black legs poking out beneath the comforter.

For some reason they'd ended up by the old kennels, walking in the overgrown dog run. In a morbid but logistically necessary move, this area had been sandwiched on the other side by the crematorium, long abandoned, its royal blue smokestack flat and toothless against the gathering clouds. Her father had been trying to sell the thing for years, but it needed so many repairs to be brought up to code. Eliza wished he would just take the hit and let someone haul it away for free. But Raoul was too stubborn for that.

He had bent over to pull something out of the weeds, holding his cigarette in his teeth. Straightening so carefully Eliza winced, he held it up for her—it was a rubber ball, bleached and cracked after God knows how long. There hadn't been a dog out here in years. Eliza thought she could make out a white star on the side, not quite faded away.

“I think that was actually mine,” she said. “Ours.”

“Nah,” said Raoul. “Can't have been out here that long.”

“It was white and gold,” she remembered.

He tossed it over the chain link fence, and she heard it bouncing back into the darkness of an empty kennel.

“You shouldn't need compensation for helping out your dad,” he said. “And I don't need my daughter to pay me rent. You do chores if you live under any part of my roof, that's all.”

“Same as it ever was,” said Eliza.

They walked back as the rain began, torrential, not bothering with a preliminary drizzle. By the time they'd reached the carport, it was hailing.

“About quail egg, you think?” he asked.

“Bigger.” Raoul went inside, but Eliza stood beneath the tin roof for a little while, listening to the clatter, watching the hail smash into the dark pink hollyhocks that grew wild along the house. She thought it was the size of a child’s fist.