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GAZE TOWARD THE CITY THEY WON'T ENTER AGAIN

By

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Bachelor of Arts, Carlow University, Pittsburgh, PA, 2006

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## Rumble of Passing Boxcars

The smell of indoor pools always made me nauseous, the chlorine so strong that it felt like I was poisoning myself, but I couldn't just leave. Anita kept swimming in sloppy laps, drifting from one side of the lane to the other, and I was supposed to be timing her instead of concentrating on the feel of sweat dripping along my back, soaking into my shirt. She was going for a forty-five second lap, and I kept getting distracted by the lifeguard prowling around the pool in her long sweatpants over her pink bathing suit.

"Time," Anita said as she slapped her hands against the concrete side. Her bathing cap was starting to bubble up, showing off two inches of her dark blonde hair.

I glanced at the stopwatch again, shifting in my crouch beside the pool. "Forty-seven?" I hadn't been paying attention.

Anita flipped her goggles up to look at me, one long look before she snapped them back into place, pulling her cap down before she slid under the water and pushed off against the wall. She took this more seriously than I did; she was starting to develop secretary's butt.

I sighed and restarted the watch, trying to pay attention to the numbers rolling over and over as each second passed instead of the way my feet were beginning to cramp from squatting for the past forty-five minutes. Anita needed me to do this. She couldn't take accurate time on her own, and I liked how her skin was cleaner and paler in the water.

The lifeguard passed behind me again, almost bumping into my back, humming under her breath, and I didn't look at her. When we first started coming to the Oliver Pool, she used to make noises about how I'd be more comfortable in the pool instead of hanging out in shorts and

a t-shirt while Anita did her laps. She used to say other things, too, ask questions about how long Anita and I had been together. She hastily changed the question to, “How long have you been *friends*,” when Anita came up behind me and touched my shoulder.

Anita was great for that, for getting people to back away from me when I was too tired to get my brain and tongue to cooperate. Her brain was up and firing at six in the morning; mine was still slogging through the grill orders from the night before: two burgers, no cheese on the first, two slices on the second; grilled cheese with on Texas toast, cheddar cheese if possible; and breakfast smiles. There were always more smiles than I could remember; I wouldn’t eat eggs because I was so used to them being used as the eyes. It would have been like eating an acquaintance.

I looked at the watch just as Anita slapped down again. Water splashed against my calves and toes. She didn’t look up at me, prepping herself for another go. “Forty-four,” I said. “Can we go home now?”

“One more lap,” Anita said. She turned her head, so I could almost see part of her face. “You can go outside if you want.”

“You’re a peach.” I reached over and pinched the air bubble at the top of her cap, keeping hold of it as I stood. Her hair fell out, the ends of it dipping into the water.

Anita tried to launch herself out of the pool, after me, but she didn’t have enough time or leverage to make a go of it. She fell back with a splash, and I watched her hair fan out under the bubbles.

“No horseplay,” the lifeguard called.

Oliver Pool was a twenty-minute walk from our apartment in winter, less if you could slide down the sidewalk. Most of the streets in Edgewood were still brick. Its hills were some of the steepest in Pittsburgh, worse than Mount Washington and Carrick, and most of the salt trucks were old, relics left over from the 80s that just couldn't pull themselves up the slick streets. There was a city-wide clean sidewalk law, but no one would drive around to enforce it. No one really seemed to care that the snow would begin to freeze too, and soon there'd be a real risk of losing your next-door neighbor, because in Pittsburgh at least one of them is always an octogenarian, to a bad slip on the ice.

Of course, the negligence of the city police and PennDOT wasn't the real reason we were able to get the top two floors of a house for well under a grand. There were train tracks beside the apartment. The landlord had assured us that they were only busy on Saturdays, and we believed him. This was Western Pennsylvania, home of more abandoned railroad tracks per community than anyone wants to think about, and we were dumb college kids who were almost aglow with our luck.

The 7:13 was just passing as we turned onto our street, shoulders bumping together. Anita had her hood up to protect her wet hair, hands tucked into her pockets. We didn't talk, making slow and careful steps towards our front door. It was early enough still that the middle school kids weren't up and pissing around in their yards while waiting for their school buses and late enough that the high school kids were already gone, along with their parents. With the train past us now, it was a good kind of quiet, except for the buzzing of the street lamps that hadn't turned off yet.

Anita went right into the shower when we got inside, leaving her pool bag and coat in a pile on the floor, her sweatshirt a few steps beyond that, then her bra. She wouldn't pick them

up, and by Sunday, there would be a winding trail of clothes heading toward the bathroom, and if her mom didn't come by for dinner, the trail would grow broader until all Anita had were the shirts left over from when she lived in Nanty Glo.

I went into the kitchen and sat at the table, stretching out. My ribs and back ached. I hadn't had a chance to relax after work, just long enough to shower and change. Our chairs didn't match, bought at two different garage sales when we decided to move in together. I had stayed at Pitt as a Super Senior until Anita graduated, a linguistics major unable to hack the Romance language requirement. My high school years had been dedicated to anime instead of French film, and my grades reflected it.

Now I worked at the Eat and Park in Edgewood Center as a cook and covered the rest of my bills by translating Japanese porn comics on the internet. If I was any good at art, I probably could have quit the restaurant to do porn full time, but I couldn't have everything.

I fell asleep at the table, head pressed against the cool wall, until Anita woke me up slamming pans in the cupboards. "I want pancakes," she said, and I nodded, keeping my eyes closed as I listened to her digging for forks in the sink. We didn't have any clean spoons. I couldn't imagine making pancakes with just a knife. "Do we have any ready-mix?"

"There's a bottle on the top of the fridge." I cracked one eye open to watch her. She was a fuzzy blob of a person, pale limbs and a splotch of blue that was probably a towel wrapped around her body. She didn't like to put on her scrubs until she had dried her hair, and she didn't think I really saw her, just the handfuls of skin on her thighs. "I don't think it's been opened."

I heard the *click-click-fwoo* of our gas stovetop, and she started talking again about one of her patients. She worked admitting at Western Psych, so she saw all sorts of interesting people.



It was why she wanted to be a nurse: not to help people, necessarily, but to see how bad life could be and turn a profit at the same time. I wondered how long it would take her to burn out. I would've bet five years if I had someone to bet with.

She told me about a sixteen year old who got into a screaming match with her parents after a milligram of Ativan and still wouldn't calm down. "We had to admit her. We weren't going to, but she was a real risk to herself, I guess." Anita came over to the table and rapped her knuckles against it. "Pay attention, Corey. You haven't heard the best part."

I didn't want to hear the best part. "Are you going to finish making food so I can get some sleep?" I looked at her as she walked back to the stove. Her hair stuck to her back like wet straw and the towel gaped when she moved. I looked away.

"God, you're a pain," she said. She waved the spatula at me, like she was my mother chiding me. I didn't have time to fall asleep again before the next train came past, making the lamp above the table vibrate just enough that it looked like it might fall apart.

Anita put the first pancake into the pan and reached up to turn off the smoke detector. "You could probably do this better than I could." I didn't respond to her as she started another story. "They brought in this homeless guy yesterday, from in front of the Parkvale Bank. He had this huge orange sombrero, and his hands were frostbitten. I don't know why they brought him—well, I do know *why*, but I don't know why we were choice number one. Presby would have been better. Their ER at least handles medical emergencies, and they could have given him a bed before they tried to pass him off to us." She stretched her arm out and bent it back, like she could see the skin firming.

She went back to the pancakes, flipping them before she looked over her shoulder at me. Clumps of wet hair fell over her eyes. "Do you remember the pancake video?"

“I didn’t think they’d have that in Nanty Glo,” I said. Anita and I had met in college, in an anthropology class that we were both failing, after she started arguing with the TA about the place of women in Mesopotamian society, and I laughed at the points she’d made.

We both bonded over being small town kids in the big city. Nanty Glo was an old coal-mining town that Anita couldn’t wait to escape, and I was from Erie, at the tip of the state. She gave me a place to crash after my parents stopped calling me back, and her parents started buying me birthday presents.

“Oh, they had it, the dad sitting down for a heaping plate of uterus pancakes. I didn’t have a pancake for almost a year after that.” She poured out another two pancakes into the pan and fixed her towel again. “If we had a dog, it could eat the tester.”

“It’s another hundred a month.” I looked at the pan, at the bubbling and creamy batter surrounded by the popping oil. My appetite waned, and I pressed my lips together. “Put mine in the fridge. I’ll eat later.”

I woke up, went to work for the evening rush, clocked out, and ate dinner without talking to anyone at the restaurant. It was almost five-thirty by the time I got back to the house, late for me. I watched lights in houses flick on as people started to get ready for their day, early morning showers and traffic reports. I was running late for Anita’s laps, still in my black pants and polo with grease in my hair from the fryer. I could pull at it with my hand, feel it there as it was drying in strange, gritty clumps.

Anita was one of the people up, lights on in the kitchen as she threw together her protein smoothie, half a cup of egg whites from a carton with frozen strawberries and canned peaches.

“You’re gonna make us late.” She looked cheery and rested, hair braided up into a bun. Her pool bag was by the stairs and I knew there was a fresh towel inside.

“Give me a minute,” I said. I didn’t walk to the bathroom and shed my clothes on the way. I knew how to use a hamper, shoving everything down and spraying it with air freshener so the entire apartment wouldn’t start smelling like grease. I pulled on a pair of shorts and an old t-shirt and grabbed a sweatshirt to throw on over it.

We ran through the snow, in the yards, so we wouldn’t slide on the ice. It was supposed to warm up soon, maybe into the high thirties, and I was looking forward to it, just to be able to maybe run while Anita swam laps for a half an hour. I could time her at the end instead of staying there the whole time, instead of watching her legs rise up in the water. She couldn’t see me, but the lifeguard could. I didn’t want her to see.

Anita ran slower than I did, half a block behind me by the time I got to Oliver Pool. I waited and watched cars pass in front of the old car dealership. There had been a big city project, townhouses and a Whole Foods. It was going to revitalize the area, and some company bought out half the block before the money ran out and the dealerships just sat empty with boarded windows and chained lots.

“You didn’t have to stand out here,” Anita said when she reached me. I smiled at her. I didn’t tell her that I didn’t want to go inside without her, not with the lifeguard and the thick feel of the pool air. My skin always felt overheated in that building, dried grease on my skin and under my nails. I could imagine it liquefying again and sliding down along my temples and neck, under my t-shirt and along the center of my chest.

Anita and I flashed our tags, and she ducked into the locker room to change into her suit and get ready. The lifeguard smiled at me before she let me through the office, into the pool.

“Her laps are getting a lot stronger,” she said, following me.

Her footsteps felt like they were tracing mine. Her suit was purple today, sweats green. I didn’t remember her ever wearing a suit that was the proper color, lifeguard red or blue.

“Yeah,” I said. I didn’t know what else to say to her. I didn’t know why she was talking to me, today of all days. My hair was sticking up in strange directions, with an indent from the band of my visor. I had my arms over my chest. “She’s working on it.”

The lifeguard smiled. She was almost as tall as me, and her teeth were crooked, canines a little longer than the rest of them. She was standing too close. “She could probably take an intermediate class here on weeknights. That would help her with her form and turns.”

“Right.” I rubbed my hands on my shorts, feeling the fabric brush against my knees. We were at the corner of the pool. I wanted to get to Anita’s lane; she liked to swim in the exact middle lane.

The lifeguard smiled again. “I’m Katherine,” she said, and I knew that already, from one of the other swimmers saying hello to her. I didn’t like to call people by their names when they hadn’t been introduced to me. Titles and labels were easier to manage than names.

Katherine crossed her arms under her chest, and I looked away from her. I knew the trick; I’d seen Anita use it before, though Anita had more to push up than Katherine did. “Corey.” I looked over her shoulder, at the lady’s locker room to see if Anita was coming out.

“So, you and your friend come here a lot,” she said, and this time she bounced in place. Katherine’s hair was short, almost as short as mine, with curls at the nape of her neck.

Anita came out of the locker room, but she stayed back, goggles wrapped around her wrist, and Katherine didn't notice her, stepping just a bit closer into my space. I couldn't step away; I'd fall into the pool. I stared at her, and my chest felt tighter than normal. "So, um. She said that you guys weren't dating," Katherine said.

I nodded, and I slid my hands into my back pockets to keep her from seeing how they were shaking. I wasn't used to this part. I was twenty-five, and I didn't date. I hadn't dated in college, and especially not before that, when I couldn't look at anyone without thinking about pancakes and the sexual awakening you were supposed to find in romance novels.

This girl, probably in college herself, looked at me with her dark eyes, all but blinking bashfully, and I felt like a deer in the crosshairs. I didn't want to let her see it. I stepped to the side and waved a hand out, hoping Anita would be able to come around and break this up. There were laps to swim, and if she could just come here and take a lane and get started, Katherine would just have to settle for prowling again.

Anita started walking to us then, her large hips swaying languidly like she couldn't see my distress. Her grin was huge. She liked this, liked seeing me squirm.

"So, um. I was wondering. I mean, I know we don't really know each other that well, but you come here a lot with your friend," Katherine said, biting at her lip and not looking at me.

"Anita," I said. I wanted her to stop.

"Right, Anita, and I think it's really great how you help her out. Not a lot of friends would be willing to stay here for an hour." She smiled, and there was a faint sheen of sweat on her skin.

I hadn't thought much about how it would feel to work here for days at a time, in the heat and the humidity, the never-ending smell. I would come home smelling like burgers and fries,

fish bakes during Lent, sometimes chicken fingers, and I was sure, suddenly, that she always smelled like chlorine. It would be in her hair and deep into her skin, and it wouldn't just wash out like grease could.

Katherine's smile began to fade a little, like someone had their hand on her dimmer switch and was slowly, slowly turning it down. "Um," she said again, and I clenched my hands into fists because I couldn't close my eyes and wait for her to move away.

Anita reached us then, coming around and almost between us. "Corey, can't you see the girl just wants to take you out for a coffee." Anita laid her hands on Katherine's shoulders, and I stepped back now. Anita wouldn't let me fall in.

Katherine uncrossed her arms and bit down on her lip. "It's okay, you know. If you're busy, or if you're seeing someone."

Anita pulled her silver bathing cap onto her head, over the bun at the nape of her neck. She turned me towards her, eyebrows raised, and I didn't know what she was trying to tell me. Her bathings suit was black, pulling over her stomach so it shone differently. I wanted to tell her to stop smiling, but she didn't. She walked around me and went into the pool, in the first lane, and her lips were still pulled up. Her smile looked plastic.

Katherine stepped back. "Sorry," she said again, and she put her hands up, like she had to protect herself from me.

I looked at Anita, and she raised her arms over her head. She never stretched this much, just enough to loosen her shoulders up a little before she pushed off the wall and began to swim. "Corey, it's okay," she said. "Just ask her."

I looked back to Katherine, and my stomach was tight, like it was coiling up. They were both looking at me. I couldn't look at Anita's fake smile. "Give me your number," I sighed,

finally, making myself smile at Katherine. I didn't have my cellphone or paper on me, but she didn't seem to mind. She went to her chair and found a piece of paper, scribbling out a number for me.

I didn't give her mine.

We got home late, twenty to eight, with the middle school kids starting to jump through the yards to reach the bus stop. It was possible to forget the kids in the neighborhood from time to time, when Pittsburgh's freezing rain and sleet kept them inside. No one wanted to be the kid who slid to the bottom of the street.

"You should call her," Anita said after we were in the apartment. She dropped her shit and pulled her t-shirt up over her head. "It's just coffee, and she'll probably leave you alone after one super awkward date." She threw it aside and rolled her shoulders again. Her tone was wrong.

I didn't answer her, going into the kitchen to grab something to eat out of the fridge. There was a plate of blackened pancakes still there, wrapped in cellophane. I didn't touch them, taking a yogurt out instead. I didn't wait for Anita to come out of the shower before heading up to my bedroom, stretching out and staring up at the ceiling. We never painted the room, and I didn't bother with posters and pictures. I wasn't attached to the memories of old pictures, and all I had left now was a picture from my First Holy Communion and another of a cat I'd left in Erie. Everything else was recent and sat in frames on my dresser, pictures of Anita and the dog she wanted to bring from Nanty Glo, her mom's house at Christmas. I didn't need anything else besides those, just a bed and a dresser to stack my old language and syntax books on top of.

The clock in the hall chimed nine, and I closed my eyes. There would be a train in forty-one minutes. I hoped I would sleep through it.

I didn't call Katherine before work, rolling out of bed and stumbling into the last pair of clean work pants I had and a black polo from the laundry basket. I got to work at five, just as the dinner crush started, and punched in.

I got on the line, taking sandwich station, and adjusted my visor, keeping my eyes low and only looking up to check the laminated signs when I forgot exactly how to put a spicy triple turkey cheese together. Oscar clocked off at ten, and Eva replaced him. She was younger than me, maybe twenty. I didn't know much about her—neither of us were big talkers—but she had GED'ed out of high school and started working for the restaurant soon after.

After three AM, Eat and Park quieted down, enough that we could hear the lyrics to the music and the customers chattering. Eva turned off the grill to clean it, and I started restocking the sauces and mixes.

Tony, the night manager came in, barking about the freezer being a wreck. It always was after a Friday night crush, but he raised his voice and Eva ducked her head down, concentrating on the grill. "I'll do the freezer," I said, looking at his shoulder instead of his face, at the ketchup stain that seemed to stretch down to his elbow.

Tony nodded, once, and patted my shoulder gingerly. "Thanks," he said, barely looking me in the eye. "You can go after that. We're good with Eva here. Things are quiet."

"Of course," Eva whispered without looking up.



I didn't say anything, because I was used to being cut loose by Tony. He only worked nights on Fridays, and I couldn't avoid working with him. He didn't like to be around me, and he would cut my shifts as soon as he could. There wasn't any point to complaining to our main manager.

Eva tapped on the grill with her brush, loud enough to get my attention. "You only get to go home because you're creepy, you know?" Eva's hair was pink at the ends and braided up into buns by her ears, like she had come to work straight from a scifi convention, and she had a snake tattoo dragging along her neck to the underside of her jaw.

"I'm creepy," I said. Eva was taller than me in bare feet, and I wouldn't bet against her in a fight.

"Yes, creepy." She bowed her head over the grill and hunched her shoulders forward. "You're like a rat, all creeping around and looking like you're going to break if someone touches you too hard. It's a kitchen, dude. Not a warzone."

Eva cocked her hip to the side, smirking a little like she knew me. We had little two-second conversations about how I was a failure at linguistics and she was a failure at high school. We'd decided that we were both probably going to stay at the restaurant until we retired, backs permanently bowed from bending over grills and fryer pits.

"I'm not creepy," I said again, and I thought of Katherine in her bright colored bathing suits and odd colored sweats.

"Creepy," Eva said again, almost singing it, and she let her face go pinched and stern, in an expression that I guessed was supposed to mirror my own. "Trust me. I know creepy. I used to date a midnight gas jockey, and you make him look like a puppy."

I stood up a little straighter. "Shut up," I said softly before I went into the freezer.

The pool wasn't open on the weekend, which meant I had time to get home and scrub my hair. I didn't try to think while I was in the shower, paying attention to the feel of the soap sliding over my skin instead of the discussion at work, instead of the fact that there was a number in the pocket of my shorts. I was used to that at least, just thinking about soap and water in the shower and nothing about reality.

I stayed under the spray until the water went cold. Anita wouldn't need to be up for hours yet, no laps to time, so she wouldn't complain. I wasn't even sure if she showered on days she didn't swim.

The shorts I had worn yesterday were on the top of the hamper, and the paper with her number was still tucked inside their pocket. I could smell the pool on the paper, making me think of Katherine, if she would be like the paper, if everything soaked in so deep that she wouldn't be able to rinse it out. On bad days, I could use dish soap in my hair to get the smell out, to cut the grease down and wash the mess away. I didn't think there was a way to wash out chlorine, because it was too close to bleach.

I took the paper into the kitchen, waiting for the train to rumble past. It was early, much too early to call someone. The sun would rise soon, the dark grey starting to turn into a lighter blue-grey, almost purple. We might be have been able to actually see the sun around noon, maybe. I wondered if Katherine was awake. Sunrise seemed like the most appropriate time for coffee.

I dialed instead of waiting for the train to pass. It was Saturday, and the schedule was harder to monitor. Sometimes trains were late, sometimes they didn't come at all. I didn't expect Katherine to answer, not really, but she did..

“I can meet in an hour,” she said, and she sounded like a child on the phone. I wanted to hang up. I said okay instead and told her where to meet.

She wore black jeans and a yellow sweater, pale and fuzzy like Easter, when we met at a diner. It was between our apartments, and she was serious about that coffee. She was already drinking it when I came in and sat down across from her. She grinned at me. “Corey,” she said, and she bounced a little in her chair. She looked better in yellow, with her short hair curling at her temples.

“Katherine,” I said, and I did my best to keep my shoulders as straight as possible. It was an old diner, the kind with shaky, silver-flecked tables and red vinyl seats that were repaired with layers of duct tape.

“I thought we could maybe get something to eat. Or ice cream.” She grinned again, and she seemed confident, safe, and it made me think for a minute that Eva was a moron, that I wasn’t as strange as she wanted me to think I was. I was good at blending. Katherine was a lifeguard who wore sweaters that looked like fuzzy baby ducks. She would be creeped out if I was a hunching around like a serial killer.

“Okay.” I wasn’t going to argue. I hadn’t eaten dinner yet, and I was tired. I got a pop and a burger while Katherine ordered the breakfast special with egg whites.

“So, your friend—”

“Anita,” I said

“Anita,” Katherine said, and she smiled again. “She’s a very dedicated swimmer. You get used to the regulars, and I see her so much. I can’t believe I didn’t know her name, though I guess I didn’t really know your name before yesterday.”

I nodded, and I let her tell me more about the other regulars, the fifty-year old woman who kept her pugs in the car while she swam and sometimes tried to let them stay in the office, and the old people that came and swam enough miles to make Katherine feel tired. There was a whole tirade about aqua-joggers, and I just nodded through all of it, concentrating on my Coke and the waitresses coming back and forth.

She knew things, too, real things like their names, and she knew that old Mr. Jenks was afraid of his children sending him to a retirement home, so he swam three miles to prove he could, or that the woman with the blue bathing cap just had a divorce and intense swimming was just part of her therapy. I didn't ask how she knew these things. I never paid much attention at the pool, just to Anita and her sloppy laps that made everyone hesitant to lane-share with her.

It took almost thirty minutes to get our food, and I started to drown out her talking again as I concentrated on my burger, layering mustard onto it and then on my fries. She poked at her eggs and took a few bites of bacon before she laughed softly. "Do you eat these?"

I blinked and looked up at her plates. There was a stack of two pancakes, covered in butter. "They're okay," I said carefully. I hadn't eaten the black, crispy things Anita left in the fridge.

"It's just, okay. You remember back in grade school, when they separated all the girls and boys for a very special discussion about the wonders of puberty," she said with her eyes on the pancakes. "And there was this video where they made the reproductive system with batter, and then the dad ate them. It was the grossest thing ever, and I haven't been able to eat pancakes since without thinking about it since. Oh, it was just so gross."

"Anita said she had to watch that same video," I said, and I could feel my shoulders curling in a little.

“Yeah? Does she eat pancakes?” Katherine perked up again, her fork raised over her eggs. She was smiling, and I smiled back, tentatively. Her foot kicked against mine under the table; I didn’t kick back.

“Anita’s not much for cooking.” I didn’t know what else to say, and she didn’t seem to mind that I wasn’t really answering her question.

Katherine poked her eggs with her fork. “I didn’t mean for coffee to happen so soon, just you seemed nice.” Her head was bowed over her plate, and I could see her looking at me through my lashes. “You’re really nice and quiet.” She brushed her foot against mine again, and this time there was something to her smile.

I nodded at her while I tried to think of something to say to that. I settled for “Thanks.” I didn’t want my burger now, and I pulled my feet under the chair, hooking them around the legs like that would get her to stop.

Her smile disappeared, and this time she went back to her eggs and bacon, throwing in little comments about her life and her family. She had two brothers; they lived in Swissvale still with their mother. Their father died last year. “We miss him a lot, of course, but he was happy, I think. He really liked his life,” she said, and she sounded young, wistful and almost dreamy. “What’s your family like?”

“They’re from Erie,” I said. “We’re not close. I mostly see Anita’s mom.” I pushed my burger away. There was grease beginning to congeal on the bun, and the mustard on the fries looked like it was growing skin.

“Oh, that’s a shame.” She reached out and touched my hand, her fingers wrapped around my wrist. “I don’t know what I would do if I had to deal with my friends’ parents instead of my

own mother.” Her hand felt strange, hot but clammy, and she didn’t take it away, brushing her thumb against the skin of my wrist.

I curled my shoulders in more and wished that I had woken Anita up before I left, so she could be curious and come see what the hell happened to me. “It’s not a big deal,” I said. It wasn’t. I was used to it by now.

“Even for Christmas,” she said, and she leaned close enough that I could hear the underwire of her bra creaking, and I could smell it on her, under the weird lilac and mint perfume she wore, the chlorine with her hand damp on my skin. “How sad.”

She was close enough that I knew I could lean forward to kiss her. Her lips were pink from lip gloss, and it looked tacky, like glue that was almost set, like it would hold me to her after even just a second and I’d have to breathe in more. My nose would burn and I couldn’t be able to tell her to stop.

I wanted to stand, but her hand moved from my wrist to my arm, and she was too close. “What’s wrong?”

Katherine was just touching my shoulder, her thumb against the strap of my under-shirt, and I could feel the tightness again, the gripping around my ribs that I could almost block out, and I was sure she’d touch me again, come closer and more into my space with false sympathy to keep touching me and coming more into my space, and I couldn’t stand it.

“Katherine,” I said, and I barked her name, too loud and too high and her hands slipped away as she stared at me, her eyes on my face for a moment and then to my chest, my hips, and I didn’t care. I liked the way she stared at me with her big doe eyes and tacky lips open, like she was ready to scream or say something. I wasn’t willing to hear either. I grabbed twenty dollars

out of my wallet and put it on the table, and she didn't stop me when I drew away from her, taking her hands away and stepping back out of her chlorine smell, the lilac and mint overlay.

She didn't say goodbye, and I wouldn't look at her, keeping my head down. I hadn't worn a jacket to the diner, just a hoodie that I let flap open. The bell dinged when I opened the door, and the waitress behind the counter said "Welcome," without looking up to see me. I didn't glance back. I didn't want to see Katherine sitting at our table with her baby duck sweater and sad expression, like she had everything she needed to know now. I wondered if on Monday she'd still prowl so close to our lane that I could feel the fabric of her sweats against my arm.

It wasn't snowing when I went outside, just rain that would probably freeze when it hit the brick streets. The sun was blocked, and I wasn't sure if the ground was still frozen or not. I kept my shoulders hunched forward and head down, watching the children sitting on their front porches as I passed into the neighborhood, their eyes watching the sky. I didn't smile at them, and they didn't smile back. The 8:40 train rumbled somewhere in the distance, a few blocks from where we were now, and none of us paid any mind.

## In the Light of the Door

Chas waits by her bedroom door like a child, listening to her mother's slow and unsteady footsteps as she passes. The floor creaks, and the house seems to pitch from side to side in the wind. It smells like ammonia and damp plaster, and when she touches the walls, her hands come back covered in bits of grey sand.

“Chastity, are you sleeping?” her mother calls. She doesn't respond, curling her fingers around the door frame.

Her mother goes into her own room. Chas hears her walking around the bed, the rustle of blankets before she bolsters herself up onto the mattress.

One of the cats runs down the hall, and her mother turns the radio onto KDKA and droning Steelers reports. Then Chas eases the door open. The overhead light doesn't work anymore, now that Gran can't use the stairs. Her mother trusts that Chas can use the stairs in the dark and insists that she herself has excellent night vision.

Everything still smells the same as it did when she was a child, except that there are more cats and litter boxes. The tomcats piss on the couches, and the upholstery is shredded now. Her mother doesn't believe in de-clawing or spaying. Chas wasn't sure how she felt about it before she moved back in. Now she supports it.

She sneaks through the living room, past the couch where Gran is sleeping. A cat brushes against her leg, purring for food, and Chas ignores it. Her heart is pushing against her ribcage like when she was a child and first thought of sneaking out to see her friends. At fifteen,



she'd started taking the chance, but when her friends went to college and she had her own shoe-box apartment in Squirrel Hill, going out seemed less important. Now she needs it again.

Gran can't hear anything anymore without her hearing aids. She should be in a home; when she started taking ill, Chas' mother should have put her away instead of bringing her to shrivel on the couch with the cats lounging around her.

Chas was thirty when her mother fell and broke her knee last year; that alone hadn't been enough to make her move back home, but her mother called from the hospital and told her about Gran and the cats, and how she couldn't carry Gran upstairs to the bathroom every day. Gran couldn't really be trusted not to fall on the stairs.

That wasn't enough to make her move back under the same roof with someone who'd decided "Chastity" was ever going to be an acceptable name and liked to collect filth. She moved in only after her bathroom's mildewed ceiling caved in. It only took a day to pack her entire life into her little Chevy Cobalt and leave the furniture to be picked over by college kids.

Her mother wants to sell the Cobalt. She says the old white boat from 1985 is more than enough car for the three of them. It talks and tells people to buckle up, that a door is ajar. It eats gas and someone has busted the back window.

Chas has given up on reminding her mother that she's thirty-one now, old enough to have a husband and a child or a dog that is ferocious enough to eat cats. She'd never thought she'd want something big and mean, but she knows that when she moves out, she's getting a dog.

She drives to a bar. It's so close to the river she can smell the diesel from the barges. She's getting a late start. The bar is already packed with people, laughing and yelling over the too-loud bass, and she fights her way to the bartender.

Bars are good for exactly two things: getting drunk and picking up. Right now, she isn't sure what she needs more of.

The bartender, a little slip of a girl who doesn't look old enough to be slinging drinks at all, takes her order—shot of whiskey and then the cheapest thing on tap. The shot burns going down, but her cheeks warm and she feels better instantly, almost able to forget the house and the cats. She probably even smells like cat. It'd be the only reason she misses when people would smoke inside.

She sniffs her hair, but she can only smell people and maybe a little bit of her body spray she'd layered on in the car before she'd started driving, and her ankles itch just thinking about the cats and their bright eyes in the dark.

A guy approaches her. He's shorter than she is, balding, and his belly looks paunchy under his Steelers shirt—NFC champions 1994, one of the years they printed Champ shirts before they ended up punking out. She isn't a prize either, taller than most of the men in the room, with broken teeth and a waist that is just as wide as her hips. If a guy is interested and doesn't look like he's going to dump her in the Allegheny, she can be interested back.

They have sex on his living room floor under posters of Mean Joe Green and signs that say "Sixburgh." When she goes, she takes a statuette from the television stand, a penguin with a yellow stomach and a football helmet.

When she gets home in the early morning, Gran is sitting up on the couch, a blanket over her legs, but it isn't tucked in. "Good morning, Gran," she says softly, and she takes a step into the living room before the smell makes her gag a little. It's always hard to keep the disgust off her

face. She thought the old diaper smell was over when her mother stopped babysitting neighborhood kids, when she started collecting cats.

“Chastity Grace,” Gran says. She shouts because she says she cannot hear over the television. “How are you, sweetheart?”

Chas needs a shower, and she has the penguin in her coat pocket, wrapped up in dirty underwear. “I’m fine.” She takes off her coat, putting it on the television set where there’s less cat hair. Chas has wiped Gran down with the flushable wet wipes and changed her on the couch before, but the smell is worse now. There are wet sounds when Gran shifts. “I think you need a bath, don’t you?”

She brushes her hand over Gran’s face, over the craggy skin that looks like it should be loose and delicate instead of rough and hardening, like she’s going to cocoon herself in her own skin and then break out as some new girl. Her eyes don’t focus on Chas immediately. There are days when she’s sure that Gran doesn’t know her anymore. Chas doesn’t mind, but her mother seems to.

“I’m fine, dear. Your mother helped me,” Gran picks up one of the biggest cats, the old fat calico that feels like a stone when he tries to settle on your chest. He doesn’t have a name. None of the cats do.

Chas pulls the blanket back from Gran’s legs, and sees the nightgown is wet. The stain’s spreading outward, down toward her knees. “We need to get you bathed.”

“She would’ve had a bath if you hadn’t stayed out,” her mother calls, and Chas is sure she was waiting at the top of the stairs.

Chas bends to gather Gran up off the couch. “We’re going to take care of you, Gran,” she says as she lifts her. For a moment, she can’t smell the cats at all, just her grandmother’s urine.

She gets Gran onto the stairs, and stops to rest against the wall and readjust her hold. It’s hard to carry a full grown adult, even though Gran’s lost weight. Her skin looks like it lies directly over bone and veins now, all the fat and muscle eaten away.

“You’re going to drop her. We can’t afford another hospital bill,” her mother says, from the top of the stairs. Gran’s bills are starting to reach the point where she’s too expensive to keep around, even with state assistance.

“Can you start her bath,” Chas says.

“You were out all night,” her mother says then. She looks down at Chas, gripping the banister with one hand. Her surgery was almost a year ago, and she did the therapy half-assed. Anyway, they couldn’t afford to keep the therapy going when the hospital started billing. She’s gained weight since she stopped, enough that there’s an overhang of flesh on her elbows.

“I wanted to have a night to myself,” Chas says, and her arms are burning, and her clothes are damp with piss. She feels dirty, her skin itchy and ready to slough off. The cat smell is even worse upstairs, because her mother likes to keep as many up there as possible. Chas won’t let her put a litter box in her bedroom. Her mother keeps one in hers, and there’s one in the bathroom. She won’t let them stay and sleep with her. The old stories about cats sipping out a soul are just stories. She knows that, but she doesn’t like waking up to the smell of ammonia, with the big calico or a set of tabbies peering at her.

“Where are the cats?” she asks. She wouldn’t drop Gran, not on purpose. She’s a hell of a lot more likely to trip over one of the cats and bring all of them down in a heap.

“I was watching television,” her mother says, eyes wide. Her hair is uncombed, with mats forming at the base of her neck that Chas should comb or cut out. Her mother hasn’t washed her hair without prompting since the daycare was closed.

“Can you at least get her a nightgown,” Chas pushes past her mother, trying to ignore the way her mother wavers on the stairs, and takes Gran into the bathroom.

On Sunday, she goes to the grocery store and buys new litter; that’s the day she spends on her hands and knees, changing the liners. She uses that day’s paper, the sports section then the culture. She reads about shows at the Benedum Center that she can’t afford and the new Pirates season, how it’s going to be different. The cats come and rub against her hands, like they’re thanking her that she’s willing to pour their disgusting litter into garbage bags. Only the big calico grey one bites her hand, but she’s better with biting than she is when they lick her hands, the little rough hooks of her tongue making the itching worse. She washes her hands three times, but her hands still feel grainy from the litter.

She has six bags to go to the dumpster, and they are heavy, banging soft and squishy against her knees as she tries to carry all six at once. The asphalt on her street is cracked, pitted from the spring rains falling and freezing and falling and freezing. When she was a child, she used to pick up pieces of the road and throw it at other children. The chunks weren’t this big. They would have had a lot more fun if they had been.

There’s a dog that runs wild in the neighborhood; it must belong to someone who lives in down closer to the river. It has a collar and tags that click together as it walks, so she knows it’s following her toward the dumpster. It must like the smell of her bags, sitting by her leg as she lifts up one of the big plastic lids and licks her hands when she’s done. Her hands are still stiff

from the cold and from over-washing them and now with dog saliva. Still, she wants this dog, if only because she's seen it kill alley cats.

Chas pats the dog again, then rubs her hands on her jeans to rid of the feel of its fur. She gets into her car. It's a bad night to go out—she needs to be at work in the morning—but she makes the drive to Squirrel Hill, to one of the little all-night restaurants that are always full with Pitt students who don't have shit to worry about.

She orders a salad and stares at the print that seems to be in every restaurant, Jerome Bettis ready to tackle someone in the new stadium that she's never been inside. She won tickets to a game once, but she wouldn't go alone, and she didn't want to sit beside someone who would spend the whole game leaning away from her. The waitress drops off another pop and a plate of chicken salad thick with cheese, French fries, and two containers of ranch. She turns her nose up when she goes.

The penguin is still in her pocket. She'd meant to leave it at work, in the lobby, where some mother would take it for the family collection. She can't have it at the house; they don't need more stuff. Her mother would find it and start talking about going to the old baseball stadium as a child. It's the only sports memory her mother has, outside burning couches for the Super Bowls.

Chas leaves the statue with her tip.

She spends the rest of the night watching the river on the hood of her car and only goes home when the sky gets light enough that people can see her. Her mother comes outside onto the front stoop when Chas pulls up. "Gran needed you last night," she says instead of a greeting.

“Did you take care of it?” Chas slips around her mother and sees Gran sleeping on the couch, one of the cats draped over her belly as if it's the only thing keeping her soul inside.

Her mother shoos the cat, and Chas takes the stairs two at a time to get away from her. Her eyes are burning, and she can't tell the colors of the clothes she's pulling out of her closet. She thinks she has a jacket at work, over the back of her chair, and if she clashes enough for someone to say something, she'll cover up. She doesn't think anyone will.

Chas looks at the clock and tries to judge how long she has to get a shower. Nothing washes the stink away. When she first moved back home, the office manager told her that if she couldn't manage her hygiene, they would have to let her go. They already cut her down to part-time. She keeps Febreze in the car now, sprays herself down every morning and after lunch, but she can smell the cats in her hair.

“I can't lift her,” her mother calls from the stairs. “I need your help.”

“I need to go for a run before work,” Chas says.

She gets sweat pants on before her mother can make it to her room. There's a park close to work, with community showers. She can get shampoo and soap at a drugstore. She doesn't put on her good tennis shoes. The shoes she's wearing will do.

Her mother grabs for her wrist when Chas passes her in the hall. “Chastity.”

Chas breaks away and runs down the stairs. Gran is still asleep, and another cat has draped itself over the back of the couch. By the end of the morning, they're going to be all over her. She's soiled herself again; if she gets Gran to the edge of the couch, then her mother can clean up the mess.

She shoos one of the cats away--most of them know that she will hit them.. The smell of Gran is overwhelming. She tries to move Gran's legs, but her body feels as if it has doubled its weight over night.

Her mother is still calling for her. Chas pats Gran's leg. "I'll try to remember to check on you at lunch," she says. It's a lie.

One of the cats makes a warning sound at her, and when she turns her head, she watches the big calico lean over and nibble at Gran's ear, like a lover would do. Gran doesn't move.

Chas keeps her eyes on the cat as she settles her clothes under one arm. She watches it bite at Gran's ear and watches another cat settle on her lap, where her palm turned up and waiting for someone to press the remote into her hand. The cat licks at Gran's fingers.

She grabs the cat by its scruff and tosses it to the floor. It yowls and scratches at her hand, but she doesn't feel it. She lays her fingers into Gran's hand. It's cool, and when she lets herself touch Gran's wrist, she can't feel anything. Chas stares at Gran's face before she makes herself stand up. Gran's eyes are closed, and her eyelids seem wrong, glued down already.

Her phone is upstairs. She doesn't go after it.

Her mother calls the office a little after noon, to tell her that Gran is dead and she needs to get home because there are papers to fill out and arrangements to make. Someone needs to throw the couch out. The cursor on her computer blinks in time to her mother's statements.

"If you had come home last night," her mother says, and then she sighs, like there's some thing that she's afraid to say.

On the way home, she stops at a shelter to talk to them about the cats in her house. Chas doesn't tell them what she's seen them do, not all of it, but the lady at the desk seems worried



that they're feral. If they're feral, they'll be put down. "Cats are nearly impossible to socialize once they've gone feral."

"I'm all right with them being put down," she says.

There's no one parked outside the house when she comes in, not even a police car. Her mother is sitting on the couch, beside the stain with tissues scattered across her lap. "Oh, sweetheart," she levers herself onto her feet. She starts to shuffle forward with one arm out, like she could pull Chas in.

Chas backs away, closer to the door and the fresh air that's coming in off the river. The boats are blowing their horns at each other, and she thinks she can hear people laughing on the ferries.

The two cats are still in the room, lounging and watching them both with bored eyes. The big calico yawns and flicks its tail. She doesn't know where the rest of them are, maybe in the kitchen or locked in her mother's room. She doesn't think the medical examiner would have come in with a torrent of cats getting in the way of his stretcher.

"You said you wanted the couch out," she says, and she pulls her hands together behind her, lacing her fingers. She does not want her mother pulling her in for a hug or tucking her head under Chas' arm like Chas would protect her.

"Well, I was thinking we could go to the outlets for some nice cushions, maybe a cover. That would look nice, don't you think." Her mother smiles, and her face seems looser, the skin heavier so it begins pulling from her skull.

“We should just throw it out,” Chas says, and her voice seems far away. The couch is empty. She hasn’t seen it empty since she came home. “You can get another one delivered for cheap.”

“But it’s not ruined.” Her mother steps back to the couch and touches the arm. There is yellow and white stuffing seeping out of long claw marks. “And we do all need a place to sit. We could get another instead.”

Chas’ eyes itch and her skin feels hot, like she’s burning inside. The smell of ammonia is making it worse, the knowledge that there’s more old litter that needs to be changed and she’ll have to buy cat food soon, some noxious smelling kitty kibble that is supposed to taste like salmon and white fin tuna. She’ll have to spend more money on trash liners and flea collars. She has to scratch at her wrists; the marks from the cats feel enflamed and infected. “I’m not sitting on that couch,” she says, and now she does move around her mother.

“You can sit on the new one,” her mother says. She doesn’t go after Chas.

Chas can’t breathe when she goes up to her room. There are three cats lounging in the middle of her bed. They look at her as if she’s just dust floating in sunlight, mildly interesting but inconsequential. She throws a duffel onto the bed, and they’re gone when she turns around. She doesn’t know what to put into the duffel—anything she takes is going to smell like this house. She grabs underwear, a bra, and some work clothes.

They’re empty, no cats. There’s a bible that she didn’t know she had and a few balls of paper, but no cats. No cat bodies of any kind. She scratches at her hair. It probably still smells like litter and Gran. If she had clippers, she would shave it off.

Her mother is sitting on the couch when she comes down with the duffle, and she watches Chas navigate it through the narrow doors. Some of the clothes spill out and Chas leaves them. She doesn't need them.

“When you get home, I think maybe we should clean out Gran's things,” her mother says. “We could use the extra space for storage.”

What do they have to store besides cats? Chas kicks one of them aside as she goes through the living room, to the door. The calico is just before the door and its mouth is white. It looks at her, watches her move.

“Chastity, when you come back,” her mother says again, and Chas leans down to scoop up the calico in one arm. It purrs at her; she almost drops it. She closes the screen door behind her and lets the inner door hang open.

She puts the calico in the back and the duffle in the trunk. She doesn't want the cat near her things. Chas starts the car with the calico's big gold eyes watching her in the rearview mirror as she pulls away from the house, her window open so she can hear the boats calling on the river.

## **Amber Waves**

At seven, Sam decided that she was going to grow up to be Captain America, because he is always right and knows right from wrong. He has a shield instead of a gun, and he doesn't have a dumb sidekick like Batman.

Her father kept old comics in cellophane paper. He would let her open one at a time and turn the pages with tweezers. This is one of two clear memories she has of him, him handing her the tweezers and saying "you have to use these." The rest of her memories of her father are distorted, like they've taken on water.

She told Courtney this, and Courtney laughed. She said, "You can't grow up to be something fake." Courtney never told anyone else. They were ten, and Sam's father hadn't gone yet.

Now, Sam doesn't tell anyone anything. She hasn't for two years. She sits next to Courtney in Spanish class and does not raise her hand. They have to take one year of foreign language to graduate. Sam's mother does not believe in special education.

"They only educate you because of the Industrial Revolution," she says, when Sam brings home papers requesting meetings. Sam reads them. She's not stupid; she's dumb. It's a joke that she would tell people, except that when she opens her mouth, she can only make the sound of a river.

There's a creek, behind Courtney's house. They wade in it when the weather is good. There are no fish in the creek, at least none that they can catch. The water smells like sulfur and the rocks are stained orange.

When the bigger rivers in the area flood, the creek runs that same orange and they cannot go in. They'll sit at the edge and dip their toes into the water.

"Do you think this will make you a mutant, like the X-men?" Courtney asks. She asks every time. She's shorter than Sam but rounder. She already wears a bra and opens her mouth like a fish when she and Sam run together, wide and desperate. She dares Sam to stick her whole foot into the water.

Once, Sam waded out to her knees and then couldn't wade back. The water felt like pudding when she lay down in it, gripping at smooth stones to try and pull herself back. Courtney watched from the bank and laughed.

On Mondays, Courtney has chorus after school, and Sam runs home by herself. She thinks she can smell her feet. Her socks are three days old. Someone yells at her from the bus when it passes.

Sam likes coming home before her mother. There is usually a roast or meatloaf in the fridge and she has to put it into the oven, but that is all her mother wants. Sam is too old to have toys in the living room, and her mother has a rule against other kids in the house when there are no adults home. Courtney's mom doesn't allow Courtney at Sam's house at all, and Sam has no other friends.

Sam likes being home alone because she can strip out of her school clothes and inspect her body in the hall mirror. She has freckles on her hip that look like the Big Dipper. They point to a scar on her thigh.

She's not built to be as big as Captain America, but that's okay. She looks like Steve Rogers did before he went under the experiments, when he was 90 pounds and too sickly to fight Nazis. If Steve can become Captain America, she's halfway there.

Her mom calls her weedy; the kids at school say that she's too poor for food. She eats the crusts off the sandwiches her mother makes her and throws the rest away, burying them in paper towels in the bathroom like they're evidence.

Sam has breasts now, but they hang empty, like skin tabs. She thinks about cutting them off sometimes, because they will just get in her way. She can't gain weight because her breasts will start to fill and she'll need to wear a bra with wire like Courtney.

When her mom comes home, they eat in front of the television, and Sam does her homework. She reads two comics before bed. She still uses the tweezers.

There are tryouts for a play, and Courtney gets a role. Sam comes with her to the call back auditions and watches the girls read for the White Witch, Susan, and Lucy. One of them will end up being the lion. There aren't enough boys for all the parts.

Courtney takes her by the arm to look at the cast list, when it's posted. "I'm a unicorn," she says, pointing to her name.

Sam smiles, but she doesn't think that Courtney will make a very good unicorn. There are other names on the list, the girls that laugh at Sam when a substitute asks her a question.

She moves her fingers to start to form letters. “Stop it,” Courtney says and grabs Sam’s hand.

Holly and Lindsey are standing in front of them. Sam doesn’t like Holly or Lindsey. When her father made the papers, they asked Sam about the details, wanting to hear the story. Holly lives next to Courtney and makes jokes about earthquakes when Courtney walks.

“Are you guys going to lunch?” Holly asks. She is shorter than Sam.

Courtney steps in front of Sam. It won’t hide her, and anyway Sam doesn’t like to be hidden. She should stand up to both of them.

“Why?” Courtney asks. She has her notebook hugged to her chest.

“We’re going, too.” Lindsey tucks hair behind her ears with both hands. “And we’re going to be in the play, too, so we thought maybe it would be cool to hang out. We never hang out.”

Sam shakes her head and pulls on Courtney’s sleeve, even though Courtney says, “Okay.” She says it like it’s a bad idea; she’s right.

Lindsey and Holly let them sit at their table with their friends. They talk about the play and their roles. One of them--she’s in different classes than Sam--is the witch, and everyone keeps shaking her shoulder like this is the best thing ever. She points at Sam and says, “Did you try out.”

Sam shakes her head. Courtney says, “Sam doesn’t talk.”

“I know.” The girl picks up a french fry and dips it into dressing. “But I think plenty of famous actresses have dads like yours. This could be your big break.”

“I’m sure there’s still a spot for you,” Holly says. “You should be the lamp post.” The girls giggle, and even Courtney smiles.

Sam’s fingers move, and she tries to remember the signs for “stop” or “jerk,” she’s only seen them in books, and her fingers are clumsy, just spelling the word. Lindsey notices and pulls her hand above the table.

“What are you trying to say?” she asks. Sam’s thumb is tucked over her fist. “What’s that one supposed to be?”

She’s looking at Courtney, and Courtney’s face is all pink, like it is when she’s running, the same gloss of sweat on her forehead. “I don’t know,” she says. “I don’t get it.” She wriggles her fingers.

Sam tries to pull her hand away from Lindsey. Lindsey digs her fingernails into Sam’s skin. “What are you trying to say,” she asks again, and she grins. “Do you want to ask if you can be in the play?”

Sam slaps her hand on the table. Someone’s milk spills over, and two of the girls jump back. The cafeteria is too loud to hear the clatter of chairs. The girls wouldn’t hear Sam even if she could talk.

Holly starts laughing, and Courtney’s flush leaks down her neck. “She wouldn’t have time anyway.” Courtney says, and her chair is angled away from Sam. “She wants to be a superhero.”

Sam turns her head, and the other girls laugh. She watches Courtney’s mouth while Courtney tells them about Sam wanting to be Steve Rogers, as much as she can before Courtney’s laughing just as hard as everyone else.



Sam's feet feel like there's sand in them, clumsy when she tries to pull her legs out. Her eyes are itching, and the girls keep laughing and looking at her. She listens to Courtney try to tell them more of it, her voice getting louder every time they laugh.

Lindsey lets go of her hand and it falls into the tray of food that Sam hasn't touched. The chicken patty feels slimy. She had told herself that they were army rations, but that doesn't make it feel better.

Courtney says, "She goes running every day, so she stays skinny. She thinks someone is going to dip her in some secret solution and make her strong."

Holly is not exactly smiling at Sam when she says, "Isn't Captain America a boy superhero?"

Sam opens her mouth. She tries to say something to that, but the words just burble at the back of her throat.

Sam sits in a different seat for Spanish, and Courtney doesn't come home with her anymore. There is play practice every day but Fridays, and on Friday, Courtney rides the bus home with Holly.

"It's really too far away from school," Courtney says to Holly and Lindsey, when they pass Sam in the hall. She and Sam have walked home together since the fourth grade, on the side of Thoms Run where there are no sidewalks.

Sam goes home and fills the bathtub. She pushes herself under the water and stays there until her lungs hurt. She comes up for air and does it again until everything is cold and her mother comes in to sit on the toilet.

“Your teachers called about special ed again,” her mom says. Her work slacks look hard, like she’s wearing asphalt. “They’re worried about your grades.”

Sam puts her head under the water again. The bathroom door doesn’t lock, and she should have remembered her mom coming home. She forgot to put roast in the oven. The house smells cold.

Her mom is still sitting on the toilet. The bathroom is too small for two people. “Honey? Do you want to get dressed and go to the store?”

Sam shakes her head. She wants her mom to leave. There are no bubbles in the water. She’s practicing dunking, to hold her breath in glowing green water like in the comics. There’s no reason to worry about getting clean.

When she comes up again, her mom puts a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Honey,” she says again. No one calls her Samantha except at school. She wants her name to be Steve, just to make it easier when it does happen.

She knows it will happen; if Courtney can be a unicorn in white lycra and lace, Sam can be a superhero.

Her mother reaches down and pulls out the tub stopper. “We need to get some food in you,” she says. “You really are too skinny.”

Sam doesn’t go to the cafeteria for lunch. The girls from the table call her Uncle Sam now, because they feel that they are clever. She sits in the library with the comics she’s stolen from home and reads about old adventures. There are posters for the play. Her mom wants her to buy tickets, so they can see Courtney.

Sam writes notes to her mother, but she can't write *Courtney told my secret*. Most of her notes are silly things. *My socks all have holes :(* and *I drank the last of the milk*. She does not put down the things about how Courtney won't look at her anymore, even for her mom.

All of her classes are with Courtney. Two weeks before the play, Courtney huffs and pokes Sam before class starts. She pokes with her pen and leaves a large green dot on Sam's hand. "I'm sorry," she says. "I was a jerk."

Sam nods but waves her hand. She's used to people whispering and giggling behind her back. She's lonely, though. Running home alone seems to take longer, now that Courtney isn't puffing behind her and demanding they take a break at the next turn.

"My mom said you could come to my sleepover."

Sam cocks her head to the side and mouths, "What?"

"I'm having a sleepover, and my mom says you should come," Courtney says, but she does not look at Sam while she says it. She looks towards Holly and then the window. "I think you'll have fun. I miss you."

Sam smiles and scrawls *Miss you too* to the side of yesterday's math notes, and then Holly laughs. When Sam looks at her, though, Holly is facing straight ahead. Her mouth is turned up, but she doesn't look like she's smiling. She has a pink pen that scratches on her notebook. She's writing fast enough that it's all Sam can hear.

Sam writes *There is a sleepover at Courtney's* on a piece of paper and puts it on her mom's spot on the couch. She packs her bag carefully, putting in the tennis shoes that do not rub at her toes. She has no pajamas, but Courtney knows that. She takes an old shirt that her mother does not

know that she has, one that belonged to her father. There are stains across the chest. It doesn't smell like her father did.

Sam doesn't read the comics that night, but she does practice her breathing in the tub. The creek would be better; she could practice in moving water instead of still. Swimming would decrease her air.

Courtney lives five blocks away, on the other side of the hill, and the trail is wet from rain, the leaves slick under her shoes when she runs there. Her stomach feels pinched; she forgot to eat at home. There will be popcorn and chips. Sam rubs her fingers over her hip bones. She can feel them through her sweat pants.

When Courtney lets her in, Holly and Lindsey are waiting in the living room. There are sleeping bags and folded blankets on the floor. Sam has neither. She looks at Courtney and takes her bag off her shoulders and opens it

"It's okay. I can get you a blanket," Courtney says. She touches Sam's back, along her spine. It feels like she's counting the bones. "We're going to the creek though."

It's dark already. Her mom says the days are getting longer, but it does not feel that way yet. It's the end of February, and they shouldn't go into the creek. Sam shakes her head and picks up a game controller, and starts pressing the buttons. They click, too loud.

Holly takes it from her. "Don't worry, Sammy. Courtney said you guys hang out down there, and Lindsey and I wanted to see. It'll be okay." Her hair is newly dyed red. There is pink skin along her part.

She pulls at Sam's hand, and Sam shakes her head again. Holly should not be this strong. Holly is small and made of soft pieces. Her bones should be weak and easy to bend like straw.

“She doesn’t like being called ‘Sammy,’ remember,” Lindsey says. She takes Sam’s other arm and they carry her like it’s a dance move. It’s not; Sam’s ankles drag on the front stairs. Courtney holds the door.

Sam opens her mouth and yells, but it’s just spit welling at the back of her throat. She doesn’t know a sign for help. There’s no light in the yard, but there are flashlights floating.

There is more laughter ahead, and the creek is louder. “Do you think this is what your dad did?” Someone asks it. It’s not a girl she knows.

The water has to be high again. She can smell it.

“So about the comic guy,” Holly says. They slide down to the creek. Sam’s ankle bangs against a rock. She tries to yell again. She tries to breathe louder than the creek, but the girls are giggling. Someone’s hand catches in her hair.

“Maybe if we put you in the water, maybe you’ll come out fixed.” It’s Lindsey this time, and she lets go of Sam’s arm. Sam reaches out and grabs hair, yanking hard. The floating flashlights shine in her eyes and she can’t see what she’s doing.

Lindsey shoves Sam away from her, into Holly. They’re at the edge of the creek, and Sam hears splashing. Holly screams that her hair is wet, that it stinks. It sounds like she’s crying. Sam tries to stand, and the girls are laughing and shining lights at her. There’s water lapping over her shoes. She feels the thickness of it over her toes.

“I dare you,” one of them says, and Sam reaches out to hit her. She misses. “Come on, Sam. Old times. It won’t hurt. You’ve done worse.”

It’s Courtney, and she swings again. Her fist hits something hard; it’s a shoulder maybe. Courtney screams and shoves Sam back, and Sam has her hand in Courtney’s shirt when she falls into the water.

Courtney's heavy, and she's scrambling, her knee pushing into Sam's chest. Sam holds her breath and can't open her eyes. She feels like she's falling under, pinned down with needles pushing against her skin. This must be how it starts, when the transformation starts. This must be what it feels like to be Captain America. She feels strong when she bucks under Courtney and throws her back.

She can feel the thick water on her face and running into her eyes as she gets on top of Courtney. She thinks she screams. One of them does scream, and then Sam feels Courtney's head go under the water. Courtney scratches at her arms, and Sam uses her thighs to keep Courtney under, the way her father taught her. The muscles in her legs are the strongest.

Courtney punches her thighs but can't get Sam to move. Sam digs her fingers into the creek bed, around the rocks. She anchors herself in the thick water and feels her skin start to expand, ropey girl muscles growing into something else. Her chest fills up but doesn't deflate. The water rushes over her skin, and it starts to change her. It's happening.

The other girls are yelling and one wades into the water. She pulls at Sam's hair, and Sam doesn't care: her body feels charged. Her eyes can't focus and her mouth is covered in the thick water, but she is better. It takes three girls to pull her back, and they scream "Crazy fucking bitch," and her legs are new and solid when she wades out of the water and crawls up the bank.

No one touches her. No one stops her from running through the house and to the trail, fighting her way around the hill until she is home.

Her front door is unlocked, and her mom is on the couch. The light from the tv is hazy and blue. Her mom screams when she gets inside. Sam undresses as she walks to the bathroom, leaving her shirt and sweats in a pile.

“Sam, Samantha, look at me,” her mom says. She’s not strong enough to hold Sam now, though. She’s not strong enough to do anything.

Sam feels taller as she rubs the creek from her eyes. “I did it,” she mouths to her mother. Her throat feels dry and raw, as if she actually had yelled. She opens her mouth and thinks she hears herself again.

The bathroom mirror is dusty, some of the silver backing chipped away. Her body is changed, under the coppery mud, it has to be, but she can’t see it. She sees her narrow face and the thinness of her neck. Her hands are small when she looks at them, before she runs them over her hipbones and then between her legs.

She’s still a girl there. She’s not Steve yet; she’s not done. She runs the water; she needs to go back under. She has to soak. Her mother touches the scratches on her arms and cries. Sam dumps bottles of shampoo into the water to make it frothy and bubbling, and uses toilet bowl cleaner to make it blue. It smells different than the creek, sharper and cleaner, and this will be right. She steps into it with her socks still on. She thinks this will be enough.

## Animal Positions

He moves her arms the way he wants them, bending them over her head until she's stretched out. Her bare legs are against the radiator. It vibrates when it clicks on, and she moves her feet apart, so she can lift her thighs up and away.

"Kaliegh, no," he says, and he pushes on her hips with one hand as the other adjusts her face. He pulls her hair down in front of her eyes. "This is the pose I need."

She raises herself up onto the balls of her feet. Her back hurts already. "I can't hold this one for long." The wall is painted stone, cold against her back.

He doesn't respond and settles back on their couch. She can hear his pencil, quick scratches against the paper. Her toes are cramping. She can't see him through her hair. That's what he wants of course.

Months ago, when a friend introduced them at a vampire role-play game, he'd asked her, "What's your fursona?" She expected him to say that he was a Malkavian or a Gangrel. He didn't. The question was serious.

She smiled around her fake fangs and said, "Oh, totally a porpoise."

He didn't laugh with her, but he asked her out for coffee afterwards.

"What's this one going to be?" She tries to hold her arms still. The muscles in her legs are twitching, and when she tries to shift, her thigh catches on the hot metal. Shifting makes him sigh. She's stretched out and exposed, her head bumping against the wall.

"I'm going to do a book of cheesecake shit." His pencil moves again. "Don't talk."



He wasn't a furry. That's what he told her when they went to the coffee shop and he ordered them both macchiatos. He *drew* for furies. "I don't understand what gets them off on it, but it's easy money," he said, and he nodded to a booth.

"But you're still drawing animals having sex." She didn't see the difference.

"Sexy animals having sex." He smiled. "And I wanted to ask if you wanted to model for me."

She left her coffee on the table and went home on the bus. In the morning, she had three texts: *I wasn't being a creep. And no, seriously, you have the kind of hips I'm into drawing right now. And you can wear a leotard.*

They share a basement apartment with two windows. Both are above her head, but if she sits in the kitchen, she can watch feet passing by on Liberty Avenue. The windows are sealed, so she can't hear shoes on the concrete, but sometimes people kicking their heels against the window while they wait for the bus. Kaliagh watches the glass rattle and shake and waits for the splintering to start.

"After lunch, I want to try you in another pose," he says. He hasn't looked up from his sketch. She has big bunny feet and ears in his lines. Her eyes are wide with fear. He's always been good at changing her expressions.

The stovetop clicks at her when she turns it on. The igniter is busted and has been since she moved in here. She lights a match and drops it close to the burner, turning away when she hears the flame catch. "I'm going to make soup," she says. She puts on the robe that she tossed over one of the chairs. It's old, with a frayed hem and the seams coming undone at the armpits.

He nods, and pushes his chair back onto two legs. He hasn't shaved in a few days, and the stubble makes his face look blue. They don't turn the kitchen lights on for lunch, no matter how dark it is. "Don't make that weird mushroom shit again."

"You bought it," she says. There are only three kinds of soup in their cupboards: chicken noodle, vegetable, and cream of mushroom. She's allergic to tomatoes.

He sighs and the chair squeaks under him while she makes lunch, chicken noodle and cold cheese sandwiches that make him huff. The rabbit grows more details, a pattern in her fur and tears at the corners of her eyes.

Kaliegh moves her chair so she won't be able to look.

He has her pose at least once a day, usually every day. Neither of them has a real job. She used to. She used to work at restoring books at the library, when she couldn't find anything better with her Library Science degree. She uses those skills now to keep his sketches neat, free from creases and finger marks. He has printed copies of his work, comics she's afraid to open, and she keeps those organized on the shelves high above their bed like trophies.

"I'm going to Anthrocon this year, since it's in town," he says on a Thursday when he's getting the light in the living room ready. She's still wearing the shirt she sleeps in and rubbing her eyes. Sleep has her eyelashes pasted together. "I want to get a new book together before then."

Kaliegh shakes her head. "Let me eat something first," she says. Her eyes can't focus on anything beyond the Joker poster he put about the couch, a green and purple blur. He's already changed the layout of the living room, the television and table blocking the door and the armchair pushed into the kitchen area.

“Your stomach will get puffy,” he says. “It will take like thirty minutes, and then I can go get us something at Panera’s.”

When all the lights are set the way he wants, he grabs the hem of her shirt and pulls her to the couch. She lets her feet drag on the cold linoleum. He pulls the shirt over her head. “Just stretch out on the couch,” he says. His hands help her move her legs the way he wants them, until she’s in a careless sprawl, palms turned up.

He touches her knees to move her legs, opening her as much as he can, and she fights him then, tensing and lifting her head up to see him. “That’s too much.” She tries to pull her knees together.

“Please,” he says, and he grabs at her ankle. His thumb presses against the bone, and she bites her lip.

In the end, her legs are how he wants them. When they started working together, when she still wore body stockings and he would touch her like she was made of crepe paper, she thought his eyes were too light a blue, almost white. They looked fake, but it was only when she woke up to him watching her that she realized the color was real.

Kaliegh lifts her head so he can adjust her hair now. He wants it to fall a certain way. “Could you hold your mouth open?” he asks, pulling at a knot that she hadn’t had a chance to comb out.

His eyes are close to hers. She thinks if he blinked, their eyelashes would touch. He presses down on her chin so her lips part. Her teeth seem brittle in the time it takes him to adjust the lights. She can’t erase the feeling for hours, even when he comes back with vegetable soup and bread bowls.

"It's not that I think they're sick or anything," he said, on their second date to the same coffee bar. They were sitting outside. She could see his breath. "It's just, that they're *animals*, and everyone thinks they're kind of gross." He made a face, wrinkling his nose up. "I knew you weren't one when you said you were a porpoise. Girls always pick sexy animals, like cats and shit. Dolphins aren't sexy."

"They don't have ears," she said. She hadn't known if that was what people liked about furies, but it sounded right. Everyone loves a catgirl. They were going to his apartment after this. He wanted to try drawing again.

He shook his head and started talking about the next character he was going to bring to the role-play game. He gave her his worksheets, and she corrected his spelling and tried not to smile when their hands touched. He touched her cheeks and said she looked like porcelain.

She gets emails sometimes from Lilith, the girl who introduced them. Lilith was the one who'd said he was serious, about the modeling. Lilith knew him and she posed with Kaliegh that first day, when he drew Lilith as a mouse and Kaliegh as an otter. He said that was the only sexy sea mammal. Lilith laughed first.

Lilith signs her name "Theresa" now and says she's done role-playing. She's moved back to card games, because they required less work. Kaliegh responds with short messages about what they're doing and the conventions that he's been to. She doesn't go with him; she doesn't mind the posing or the art that piles around their apartment, but even thinking about going to a convention and seeing the suits and the parades, to see the guys who have seen her nude in animal form would make the room too small. They might try to touch her, and her skin will shrink.

“Call me sometime,” Theresa writes. “We’ll catch up.”

Kaliegh looks at the walls of their bedroom. He’s put up the sketches he wants to use, the rabbits and a few deer. He uses a tablet now, to ink his work digitally, but he still likes the feel of the paper. She can’t blame him. She has old books that she likes to take out, fingering their flaking covers and broken spines.

“I lost your number,” she writes back.

Three weeks before the con, he brings the sketches down from the wall and arranges them across the bed like mahjong tiles. She concentrates on erasure marks and where the lines in their faces have wobbled. “I could make this into a comic,” he says. “Not in time for this con, but definitely in time for the next one.”

He forces one at her, of her on the couch, and there’s a shadow across the rabbit. She makes herself see the rabbit as something else; it’s not her. “Like I could do a whole fantasy thing. Girls really like that fantasy, playing that they don’t like it.”

She puts the picture face-down on the comforter. The rabbit looks afraid. All the animals do. “It depends on the girl,” she says, and she feels like she’s tripping when she says it.

He pulls out another sketch that looks nothing like her, piling one after the other into her lap. “I could do a whole book on those, kind of a Harlequin romance comic.”

Kaliegh runs her finger around the edge of the pages. “It’s late.” It’s a quarter to twelve. She begins flipping over the sketches. She wants to fold them in halves and quarters.

“I just want to see one thing.” He moves the papers off of her and to the floor before he pushes her down against the mattress. The bed frame creaks.

He takes her arms and lifts them over her head, so her knuckles scrape against the wall. He straddles her thighs and stares at her with his doll's eyes. She looks away, and he says, "Yes, just like that."

She's not surprised when he gets the sketchpad and brings it into bed, balancing it on her stomach so he can get a good look at her face. He stays seated on her legs. He waits twice as much as she does. "Keep your arms just like that, Kaliegh," he says.

He's not the first guy that she's lived with, but he's the first who didn't want her to hold down a job. "You have no idea the shit they'll buy and what I can write off," he said when he wanted her to quit her job. She was coming home every night with glue making her hands like a mummy's, and he said she should stop.

She selected the midnight showings they would go to, would go to them even if he wasn't interested, and he touched her skin like she would rip if he pressed too hard. He was the first guy to let her hang her posters beside his, even her poster of Alicia Silverstone as Batgirl. It was only when she said Batman wasn't the best superhero that he'd patted her head and said, "I'm sorry that you think that."

He's in the bedroom with his computer and tablet, adding color to the pictures now. The con is a week away. Kaliegh sits at the kitchen table, so she can watch the feet pass. There's a pair of cobalt heels outside the window, probably waiting for the bus. She watches them and thinks they sound like the clicking stove when the woman walks.

Sometimes people will drop keys or their cellphones, and Kaliegh will have a moment to put a blur of hair or a hand to the shoes. The cobalt heels must belong to a redhead.

“Kal,” he calls. She’s supposed to be making sandwiches. He likes seed-topped bread, even though he almost always eats in bed.

“Lunch isn’t done.” She gets up from the chair and goes for the bread.

“I need you in here.” He sounds angry, and she can hear the bed creaking, as if he’s going to get up to check on her progress. She meets him half-way.

He stares at her. He still hasn’t shaved. “I called for you,” he said.

She wipes her hands on her sweatpants, even though they are no crumbs. “I was busy.”

She follows him into the bedroom. He starts pulling her shirt off. She’s wearing a bra; she wears one when he doesn’t need her to pose, when he’s moved on to the computer part of his process. He begins to pull at her sweats, and she shoves his hands away.

“What do you need?” She holds her shirt in front of her chest.

“Anthrocon said I can bring you as a booth girl. I wanted to see if you’d look good in costume.” He holds up a white disk that she realizes is supposed to be a tail. “I think it would help sell our books.”

“Not really,” she says, because the bunny girls have fur to hide everything. She thinks of the men and wants to run. He pulls at her sweats again, pulling them down so she can step out. His nail catches on the back of her thigh.

He presses there again, and turns her body so fast she nearly stumbles. “You have a vein,” he says. Kaliegh doesn’t recognize the tone; she’s heard him sick, angry, annoyed, and happy. She hadn’t thought his voice had more than four settings.

She reaches down to where his thumbnail is pushing into her skin, as if he could push the vein back in and everything would go back to how it was. “You didn’t notice it before?” The

skin feels different there, spongier, but she can feel the cellulite at the backs of her thighs. Her legs were never her best feature. She didn't know why he liked them.

"I can't show you with that." He moves away from her and goes back to his computer. "You should get some makeup to hide it."

She touches her leg again. There are marks on her thighs from him repositioning her knees how he wants them, bruises that look like dirt smudges and only hurt when she presses her own fingers into them.

There's an outfit on the bed with a skirt too short to be believed. She feels like she would be an anime character, like one of the girls who used to be on their walls before he put up all the animals trying to run away. She puts on the bunny ears as a test, and the headband pinches too tightly around her head.

"You'll look ridiculous," he says. He's typing now, maybe an email to say that he can't have a booth girl at all because his girlfriend has dimples on her skin. She's not as beautiful as he can make her. "Just go finish lunch. I'll be out when you finish filling your trough."

Lilith—Theresa—got her into role-playing because they used to talk about books together. "You can be beautiful for a night, like poem beautiful," she said with complete sincerity, and she helped Kaliegh make a worksheet for the character she was going to become. She let Theresa pick the vampire clan and figure out her character points. She tried to follow the rules.

Internet rules are different than LARPing rules, and her first character was apparently so annoying that someone killed her in a frenzy at the first outing because she couldn't fight back. Her second and third didn't do much better, one left to starve to death and one slain by the game runner for being too pretty and too smart. It was the fourth character, a Malkavian named Thalia,



that lived long enough to meet him when he started playing as Blake. She recited lines of poetry, the “Tyger” poem because it was all she knew by heart, and he stared at her. He asked her fursona and didn’t kill her character. They stopped playing when it became too cold to play outside and the game moved into someone’s living room.

He’s printing off copies now and arranges them into one continuous story about the rabbit and the deer. “There’s interest in this,” he says, and he shows her a page where she can see inside the rabbit’s body. “That one is what I’m going to use as a preview.”

She stares at the picture, and there are dialogue bubbles ready to be filled. “What are you going to have them say?”

He leans against her, so her arm is pinned against her side. “I was hoping you could help me with that. You used to write.”

“On the internet,” she says. “When I was twelve but not anymore.”

He moves closer to her, as if he could make their skin grow together. “Well, what would you say?”

She looks at the pictures. The comforter is turned down. The only lamp on in the room is on his side of the bed. The papers are all over the wall. She can’t make out details now. The rabbit in her hands is screaming. She can remember his hand when he made that first sketch, the way his pencil barely touched the paper.

Kaleigh puts the paper on the bed. “You don’t need me for that. It’s just porn dialogue.”

He takes her wrist and holds it his against his thigh. “That doesn’t mean I don’t need your help.” He watches her. His legs are short, so sitting they are nearly the same height, but he

seems taller. She thinks she can see him in all the pictures now. The bed frame feels like it's shaking.

She stays home during Anthrocon. He hasn't taken the pictures down but packs some of the early sketches with his things to sell, so he can sign them and make ten dollars off the deal. The book isn't finished, but he'll take pre-orders. She stays at home and eats soup out of the can. She doesn't feel she can go into the bedroom and face the rabbits now. She should take them down before he gets back. She can make another binder for the book, something he can reference if he wants to return to the poses.

Kaliegh starts the binder, labeling it with the date and the animals used. She doesn't write what the book is about; she thinks he'll remember by the animals. He likes to draw animals in the same positions: mice are sensual, foxes are eager, otters are sluts. She stands in front of the room and tells herself that it's okay to go inside.

The door slams open, handle striking the stone walls. "Kaliegh," he calls. She keeps the binder in front of her when she watches him stride across the apartment into the hall, towards her.

"Kaliegh." He grabs around her arms and shakes her. "We got preorders, Kaliegh. I ran out of sheets. You were right about the Harlequin angle. Girls were eating it out of my hand. One of them wants to come over and model tomorrow, and I said you'd stand with her. Tasteful stuff. Leotards."

She hasn't worn a leotard to pose for him in months, since before they lived together. His eyes look less glazed and doll-like. He's smiling, showing teeth, and she nods like he's pressing a button in her back. "That sounds great. I'd love to," she hears herself say.

“You wouldn’t believe how incredible sales are at the con.” He’s rambling now, telling her about parades and making jokes about fursuits. “The model said she’ll wear your costume for you, if you don’t mind.”

She blinks. He’s shaking her with every other sentence, as if she could fall asleep when she’s got a binder digging into her chest. He doesn’t let her go when he stops talking, when he’s just staring at her.

The apartment door is still open. She can hear people outside, and he doesn’t notice it. The buses are much louder. He shakes her again and she backs into the hallway wall.

“Why are you home?” she asks. She can’t think. Her head is heavy, like it’s filled with sawdust and she has to concentrate on just holding it upright. He doesn’t let her go.

He blinks at her, like he hadn’t considered this before. Maybe he hadn’t. “I ran out of stuff to sell. I’m going to sell some of the other sketches tomorrow.”

He keeps talking, and it’s like a tape running in her head. There’s a party after these things, and she knows that. He isn’t there, though. He’s back here with her, and tomorrow they’re going to pose again. Maybe she can be the mouse this time. Won’t she like that.

“I can make some dinner,” she says. She drops the binder on their feet so she can grip his hand. Her nails feel too blunted, and he doesn’t seem to notice them pressing into his skin.

“Yeah,” he says. He lets one of her arms go so he can sniff at the sleeve of his shirt. “And I kind of smell like pandas.” He smiles to tell her it’s a joke. She smiles back. Her lips are numb.

She tugs at his grip on her other arm and has to do it twice before he’ll let her go. He goes into the bathroom, leaving the door open.

In the kitchen, she clatters pots around, listening to the stove click. There's no noodle soup left, just the mushroom and vegetable. She spins the pot on the burner before taking a can blindly from the shelf and then the matchbook. One of the buses pulls away from the corner, and girls are laughing.

Red soup splashes into the pot, and the shower turns on. She folds the match book in half and pulls a match. The head breaks off. She does it again, with the same result. There are two left in the book. She turns the gas up as far as it will go. It smells sweet.

He calls, "Kaliegh," through the noise of the water, and she tucks the matchbook into the waistband of her sweats. She looks at the window, but it's dark and she can't see anything but the flashes of headlights on the building. She thinks she can hear the soft scuffing of tennis shoes. Her own feet are bare when she goes out and closes the door.

## **Bless the House that Shelters You**

They didn't have a wake when her father died, just the memorial service, and Niamh and her mother waited in front of the church like a bridal receiving line. Her mother wasn't wearing black. Her skirt was brown and her shirt royal blue, the neckline low enough that Niamh could see the rise of the red lace on her bra. Niamh didn't murmur to the mourners. Most of them were her mother's friends, people she didn't know.

Midir, her brother, was the last person out of the church besides the minister. He took Niamh's hand without being asked. He wore blue like their mother, but his pants were at least dark grey, pressed. He looked appropriately somber. He had been the one to find their father, days after he died. Niamh wondered how he had looked. She'd taken a forensics class in college. She knew the skin could swell and split after only a few hours.

"Mum's gonna pay the church and take the bus home," Midir whispered against her ear. Their mother didn't drive. She had never wanted to learn, saying her life was going to stay home with her babies. Niamh was sure that there was a time when her mother had wanted more, when she was a young girl in Cleveland and hadn't met any fleeing terrorists fleeing from the IRA, when she thought six-packed meant being young and fit and not having your six major joints shot out.

"I want to go to St. Basil's," Naimh said. She had her baptism there and her Communion, and she could remember Midir serving as an altar boy. They'd been in the same Confirmation class, and they'd stood next to each other in line to receive the Sacrament. They

had been members of that parish and received personalized donation envelopes in the mail as thanks for their continued support.

That was years ago though, before her father told the Brownies he would buy their cookies if they would promise to take home literature to their parents, pamphlets about saving the Six Counties, pamphlets he had printed himself with a Yeats poem alongside images of bus bombings and the Virgin Mary. The police came to give the warnings, lights flashing so all the neighbors came out to look. She'd been seventeen, almost out of high school, and she remembered how embarrassing it had been, more than Midir coming home in the back of a squad car after spray painting the side of a school and then again for breaking the windows of the Church of the Redeemer. Her father hadn't even blinked, just said how proud he was, and she remembered the guidance counselors at school calling her into the office to suss out how she felt about the IRA.

"I hate that place." Midir shifted uncomfortably, as if he remembered the feel of the white robes. "You have no idea how boring three Masses in a row can be until you've served through them."

"You didn't need to learn Latin," she snapped at Midir, remembering how her father ranted about the laziness of the current church. She let her right hand touch the mailboxes and tiny, fenced in trees as they passed them.

"No." Midir stroked his fingers against her wrist. This was the first funeral they had been to that wasn't at St. Basil's.

Morgan's had been the first. Morgan was two years younger than Niamh. She had the best name. Morgan had been so happy that she was the only one whose name was butchered by the catechism teachers, no "Nee-am? Nye-m?" until someone would finally say "Ne-v." On

Niamh's eighth birthday at the ice skating rink, Morgan stayed home with the flu and weird bruises, her hair slipping out like cornsilk, and she was gone by the spring, before Midir turned nine. There were elf circles in the lawn when Morgan went into the hospital for the last time, and Niamh used to sit in the middle of them and wait for Morgan to join her. Morgan had been tall, blonde, pale, and her father used to say that she looked like a fairy. She should have appeared when she died.

The priests waved their censers, and their clothes smelled like the smoke. Their father had given the eulogy, calling Morgan their doll and their gift. He cried when he talked about how he had wanted to take them all to Ireland before Morgan's death. He didn't say anything about not being safe there anymore.

She went out to the mushrooms at the wake, people from school and work friends of her parents. Her father had been the one to make her come inside. "Niamh," he said, and he sat beside her in funeral best. "She's not coming, love. She's gone to Heaven with Jesus. Fairies took her there." He wasn't crying. Midir said he had seen their father break down, at one of the wakes, but Niamh hadn't seen it.

It was dark, streetlights coming up over the house. She wanted to pretend. Her dad gave her a prayer card and kissed the top of her hair. "Your mum will be looking for you soon," he said, and then he was gone. It was the only funeral she remembered. Morgan had been old enough to have friends to cry for her. Siobhan and Patricia had been too little.

Niamh pulled Midir's arm over her shoulder. "Do you have money?" she whispered. Midir was tall and pale, too, but their father never called him a fairy. Midir was a bad Irishmen. Her father had said that many times. It didn't matter that her father had been a bad Irishmen too,

running away from his beloved revolution when it began to turn against her members. He didn't want to be six-packed because someone thought he was whispering secrets to the English.

"I have enough," he said. He smelled like frankincense, even though they didn't burn that in the Lutheran church. They didn't have saints in the windows, painted martyrs who reminded the parishioners how they could never be good enough.

St. Basil's always smelled of candles and incense, and sometimes like wine, as if someone had broken into the Communion supplies and spilled the wine down the aisles before it could become the Blood of Christ. It was older than the Lutheran church, made of soot-stained stones that felt comforting under her fingers as they walked inside.

They held hands as they came to the entrance, until they passed the first stoup. They blessed themselves, and she went down far enough to feel the worn carpet on the entryway on her knee. The confessionals were open, lights on, and Niamh felt the same old tug inside her gut. She'd always confessed here. At eight she had to think of sins, stealing cat-shaped erasers from her deskmate and telling her mother that she was stupid.

Now she knew there were things she could say, envy or lust or refusing to visit her father in those last months after he'd shown up at her job drunk and screaming, but instead she took Midir's hand again, walking to the side of the altar where the candles were housed. Niamh kept her head down.

Midir gave her four dollar bills, and he released her hand to select his candles, lighting them for the little sisters who were gone now and for their father. Niamh stared at the multicolored votive holders.

She looked over at the statues of the holy family, Mary and Joseph holding the infant Jesus with a lamb against their side. The church was bright, the glass windows painting colors



over the aisle and the few people who had come to pray. The side pews, where the altar boys would sit, were blocked off, like someone would dare vandalize the church when the priests were waiting in empty confessionals.

“Niamh,” Midir whispered, and he cracked his eyes open. “Are you going to light the candles or not?”

She pushed the money into the box. She only lit candles in blue votive holders. When she was little and their father brought them here to pray for the good of their family across the ocean, she used to tell herself that the blue candles were used exclusively to pray to the Virgin because she always wore blue.

It was just a quirk now. Mary wouldn't have owned anything blue. She looked over at the statues again. She couldn't see their faces, just the outlines of their stiff, ceramic clothes and their hands folded as they fawned over a ceramic Christ.

Niamh began to whisper the Hail Mary. She never knew exactly what she should pray for her dead sisters. She couldn't wish that they had been able to see Ireland. Her father's Ireland was bloody and poor, and she couldn't think of it otherwise. She couldn't wish that they had been around to see their mother turn bitter and angry.

In the end, she whispered, “Mary, Mother of God, keep my father and sisters,” in the same dead tone she used to pray in.

Midir kissed her hair. She had worn it back for the funeral, gelled and braided down. “They're at peace now,” he said.

Niamh looked at the windows again, a scene of John the Baptist as the blade came down, his eyes toward God. “Of course they are,” she said. Her father's name had been John, and he

used to say that he was named after the Baptist, even though they all knew he'd been born on another St. John's day.

On Saturday, Niamh drove Midir to their father's apartment. The landlord promised to let them out of the lease if they had everything thrown out or taken away in three days. Most of his things would end up in the dumpster, but there could be pictures or knickknacks that they wanted to keep.

Their mother was already there. She had all the windows in the front room opened, letting in cool air to wash out the smell of bleach and their father's death. There was a stain on the floor, in front of the television, and Midir wouldn't look at it, gripping Niamh's hand again. It was where their father died.

"Your father loved his cigars," their mother said. She was scrubbing the walls. "If we're going to get the security deposit back, we're going to have to clean this."

Niamh looked at the stain. It seemed larger than her father, stretched out and bloated. She couldn't see a man in it. She wondered if her father had been face up or down when he'd been found, if he'd been listening to the radio or if he had been watching the news.

There were pictures of them on top of the television stand, Midir in his altar boy robes, and Morgan wearing Niamh's Communion veil, like a child bride. Niamh was in her Confirmation dress, when she'd taken the name Brigid so she could have a saint of her very own and so her father would smile. She knew their names were his idea, like having strange consonants would make them more prone to learn a dead language.

Niamh thought maybe Siobhan would have tried to learn Gaelic, if she hadn't died before her third birthday. It was easy to imagine Siobhan doing anything. It was easy to imagine her

doing anything. She wasn't a fairy or even a child bride, just an old photograph. The last sister, Patricia, was born before Niamh could walk, and she died in the hospital, baptized in their mother's delivery room at St. Francis. Patricia felt as real as the window painting. She could at least remember the stickiness of Siobhan's kisses.

Midir's fingers were growing damp as he clung to her, and his eyes were closed again. He wasn't praying, breathing loudly out of his nose as they stood in the room. She wanted to ask if he had tried to roll their father over, and if his skin split, and if that was why the stain was there. Midir was holding himself too still to ask. He hadn't shaved since he found their father, and there was sweat catching on the gingery hair growing over his lip.

"We're going to pack the bedroom," Niamh said, and her mother didn't hear them or she didn't care, scrubbing furiously at the wall over the couch, water spilling down along the paint, leaving rust-colored spots on their father's black couch.

Midir sat on their father's bed as she began to dig through the dresser. She had black garbage bags and she threw their father's underwear into the bag without looking. She didn't want to see stains. There were things that she could not know about her father, even if he was lying on a slab somewhere, ready to go into a furnace.

"Do you think we should keep his uniforms?" She touched the gas station logo on one of the shirts, looking over at Midir. He stared at the cracked wallpaper, where the blue roses had grown green from age. "They may want them back."

"Throw them out." Midir didn't look at her, staring ahead at the mirror above the dresser. They hadn't covered it, hadn't stopped the clocks. The bedroom window was locked.

Her father had always insisted on going overboard for a family wake. It seemed odd not to at least open the windows and cover the few mirrors he left behind. It would have been strange if the apartment didn't smell vaguely of diapers.

"This place stinks," she murmured. She forced the window open.

"Yeah." Midir was still staring off, picking at the side seam of his jeans. His t-shirt was old and green, holes under the armpits. He only looked at her when she tossed an old ratty towel over it.

"You don't need to do that. He's not here to get upset," Midir said as he stood up and took a garbage bag from her pile. "We should probably be donating this shit. I'm gonna go ask if she's called the Salvation Army about his furniture."

Niamh nodded. She still wore black, down to the gumbands around the end of her braids, and when he had gone, she started going through her father's clothes more carefully. She threw out almost everything—there was something odd about the idea of other people wearing her father's clothes—except for one of his old sweaters and the rosary he kept tucked between two pairs of dress pants. She tucked that into her back pocket and threw the sweater over her t-shirt. It was too warm for it, and the sweater was pure wool, rough against her bare arms.

It was almost dark when she finished digging out the closet. She found the prayer cards her father never threw out, tucked into the pages of an old journal. Her father never owned a Bible of his own, preferring to believe that the priests knew how to understand the word of God better, but he had scrawled out his favorite prayers on the lined pages.

Niamh set the journal aside when Midir called out that he was taking their mother home. He'd be back to pick her up soon, he said. They could pick up a pizza or something, leave the apartment for the night. She pulled at her father's old coats and jackets, balling them up and

shoving them into the trash bags. She didn't stop to think about the memories associated with them, like the jacket he wore when he left her mother's house six months ago or the one that he wore to her winter concert when she was eleven.

She tied the bag off and opened the bedside table, pulling out the small bottle of holy water. She rolled it over in her hands. When she was little, she liked to try to drink the water from the stoups and fonts, like somehow they would taste different after being blessed. It tasted like salt sometimes, always brackish and slightly gritty. She didn't stop until she got a bad flu and her mother insisted that was why.

She took the journal from her father's bed and walked out of the room. Midir wasn't out front yet, but she knew he would come eventually. She wanted it to take longer. She wanted to feel weird or scared in the apartment. She wanted there to be some sense that her father had died in the front room, that he had laid down on the carpet and messed himself and began to decay before anyone had thought to come look for him. It shouldn't have been Midir that found him. It should have been her.

Carefully, she sprinkled some of her father's holy water on the stain. She didn't think her father's soul was attached to the carpet. For all her father had done in life, if any of his rantings were to be believed, he had been a good Catholic and a decent man after he came to America. The medical examiner promised he died after Sunday Mass, that they had found him half undressed in his Sunday suit, and Niamh was sure that her father's soul had left for Heaven.

She traced the outline, but didn't say a prayer. She didn't know the blessing for this. She slid the rest of the water into the pocket of the sweater.

Midir slept on the couch of her apartment on Saturday night, when they came home too late and too drunk for him to drive out of the city. “Dad’s at peace, Niamh,” he said as she laid a blanket over his body. He was too long to fit on the couch, his knees bent up and toes tucked into the pillows. “He’d want you to be at peace, too.”

She smiled and kissed his forehead. “Sleep,” she whispered. He smelled like beer and pepperoni, and there was sauce at the corner of his mouth that she wiped away with two fingers.

“I mean it, Evie,” he whispered, grinning at the old nickname. He caught his fingers in hers. “You look better in colors.”

“I think I’m going to go to Mass in the morning.” She stood and walked back from the couch, towards the arm chair that blocked most of the kitchen doorway. “You’re welcome to sleep in my bed after I leave, unless you want to come along.”

“Ain’t no way,” he grumbled. It was nearly three now. He turned off the lamp by the couch. “We’re supposed to help get everything ready for the Salvation Army around noon. She’s expecting us.”

Niamh watched Midir fall asleep between infomercial demonstrations. She watched his knees relax and his legs shift under the blanket, until he grumbled and turned so his legs hung off the end of the couch. He snored. The bone in his nose was crooked, just enough that his glasses wouldn’t sit straight on his face when he wore them.

She didn’t sleep that night, watching her brother and turning on infomercials around four. Her apartment had the same empty feeling as her father’s had. She’d lived there two months now, and it wasn’t her home, too small and with bare walls where she was used to seeing flags and framed devotions, pictures of the men and women that her father had to leave behind. She pulled the sweater tighter around her body before she dug the rosary out of her pocket.

There used to be a story behind the rosary, something about it coming from Rome and being given to her great-grandmother, but she never could remember it. Her father never carried it; rosaries were for women, men wore crucifixes. She passed the beads over in her hands, counting off the prayers that she should be saying.

Midir rolled again, his snores breaking. "Go sleep, Evie," he mumbled, and he sounded lost.

She turned off the television and shifted positions in her chair, so she could watch the sunrise from the little window on her east wall. She'd never bothered to put a blind over it.

The first Mass was at eight-thirty, but the confessionals opened at seven. She changed back into her funeral outfit, a black camisole and slip under a button up and knee-length skirt. She wore long socks for the cool morning and her father's sweater. She kept the rosary in her pocket, gripping it tight as she left the apartment and walked to the closest Catholic parish. She had moved out of the old neighborhood as soon as she was able, moved somewhere where no one remembered her crazy father or called Midir her Irish twin.

She had only been to this church once before, when she first moved into the neighborhood to see the hours for services and confessions. She needed to be able to tell her father them, because he would ask. She didn't have envelopes to donate, and the priests didn't know her name. The bricks were small and yellow, and the grout wasn't stained from years of steelwork. The wood of the pews hadn't aged, and there was no blue historic landmark sign out front. Bridgeville was newer than Carrick, paved farmland instead of remodeled row houses; the Catholics only started pouring out of the city when the mills left.

It was easy to slip into one of the two confessionals and kneel against the cushion. It still felt thick and full under her body, the foam not yet broken in by hundreds of penitent. She breathed out slowly before she pulled the curtain back, looking at the priest on the other side. The screens never gave perfect anonymity. When she was little, she was sure that one of the priests always looked at her when she was behind the screen. They were supposed to face the side, but she could remember seeing parts of the priest's blue eyes.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," she said quietly. She gripped the rosary tight in her pocket. "It has been five years since my last confession."

"That is a long time, my child," he said. He sounded nice, his voice soft and kind. He said nothing else. She waited in the soft dark of the confessional for him to say something. The confessional smelled different from the one at St. Basil's, less like old books and wax and more like old perfumes.

"I have disrespected my father," she said. "He died." He'd hit her the last time she saw him, when she told him to leave. She'd shoved him out of the store, and his hand had come up. The strike left her head cloudy. He cried for forgiveness by the time Midir arrived to take him home.

She ran her thumb over the medal of Mary. She looked at the priest's profile and waited, listening to him breathe. When she was little, she would confess until the priest would say, "Enough, my child," and would give her the penance she was clamoring for.

Now she just rested on her knees and pressed her forehead against the frame of the screen, tracing the metal with her finger. The sweater smelled vaguely like her father's house, the weird mint from his candies, tobacco from his cigars, and that awful smell from her father's



death. She needed to take it off before the smell began to leech out. The wool scratched at her neck.

The priest shifted, and he looked at her through the screen, enough that she met his brown eyes and he looked away, like she had caught him at something he wasn't supposed to do.

“Have you anything else to confess, child?”

She traced the pattern over the screen with her nails. The confessional even smelled wrong. It reminded her of the pantry in St. Basil's, where she and Midir had once hidden with Eucharist wine. The confessional shouldn't smell half as clean. “Nothing mortal, just venial,” she lied. “I accidentally kept an overage a few years ago, when a cashier gave me an extra few dollars. I didn't notice until I got home, and then I didn't go back.”

He kept quiet for another long minute, and she could hear the other parishioners beginning to line up, waiting for their own chance to receive Reconciliation. She gripped the rosary. She could smell candles being lit, the sounds of the church being set up for the first Mass. “Father?” she asked.

The curtains on his side of the screen twitched. “You understand it's important to respect your father. The Lord said to honor thy mother and father.”

“My father would have wanted a Catholic Mass said for him, but my mother held a Lutheran memorial. It was closer to her house.” She looked at the screen again. They were old sins, one she'd made up, but they seemed silly now. She'd used up the last one when she was almost fourteen, to cover the things she and Midir would say after he came home with stolen Communion wine.

“You should say three Our Fathers and recite the Act of Contrition daily from now on,” he said, finally. “And light a candle for your father, so that his soul can find peace. If you want

to arrange a Mass to be said for him, you can call our offices.” He was tentative, and he turned a bit to look at her again. “There are other parishes of course, but we would be happy to help.”

“Thank you, Father,” she said, and she waited for him to recite the absolution, crossing herself with him and echoing the Amen. She smiled at the other parishioners when she came out of the confessional, mouthing, “Sorry,” before she walked to the back of the church and out to the cool morning.

It was still early when she drove to her mother’s. Midir was still asleep, and she wanted to make sure that their mother had a chance to finish her cleaning before they began to move everything to the main room to prep for the Salvation Army to come and take their father’s things away. She knew that her mother would be awake, rattling around in the old house with its empty bedrooms.

“Mum,” she said, opening the door. Her mother made sure that both she and Midir had keys, in case anything bad should happen. She wasn’t afraid of their father, but she joked that there was always a first time.

The house was quiet as she set her keys on the entryway table. She wondered if this was what it was like for Midir—except that he would have opened the door and smelled their father. The house hadn’t changed, the same photographs on the wall and the same flag hanging on the wall beside the kitchen door. She remembered when her father agreed to leave, when her mother had too much and wanted a divorce.

They’d have to appeal to the church, her father had said. He wouldn’t sign anything until there was a response from Rome. Niamh wasn’t sure that Rome still handled divorces.

“Mum,” she called again, walking into the living room. Her mother wasn’t on the floor, and she wasn’t sure if she should feel relieved. She looked at the magazines on the table, self-help and weight loss, celebrity gossip. There were no travel magazines or books about the church in history. The crucifixes were still on the wall, and her father’s pictures of his home in Cork, but their wedding picture was gone.

She listened for the shower as she walked into the kitchen. There was fresh coffee on the stove and a bag of waffles pulled from the freezer next to the pile of mail on the counter. Under that mail, there was a grey metal box. She could see a yellow paper sticking out, thinner than the envelopes. Niamh picked it up and let it shift in her hands so she could feel the ashes move. She thought it should have been heavier. Her father had been a big man.

Niamh held the box as she went to the second floor. She could smell hairspray and burning hair before she could see her mother, the upstairs bathroom door open. “Mum,” she said again, and this time, her mother turned around. She had a straightener in her left hand.

“Niamh,” she said, and she smiled, already made up. “You and your brother are going to meet me later.” She put down the straightener, leaving her hair half frizzy and the other half almost flat. When she was little, her mother always left her hair curly. Her father had loved it.

“I know,” she said. She looked at the grey box in her hands, and the date on the cremation. Her father had been picked up Friday evening and had Saturday’s mail piled on top of him. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine, sweetheart.” Her mother was still smiling, and there was something off about it now that she saw the box. “I thought we could scatter those as a family,” she said. “I was thinking into one of the rivers. Your father loved the water.”

Niamh looked at the box and shook her head. Her father would want to be scattered in Ireland. He'd want to go home, where people understood what it meant to have a country conquered and conquered and conquered and then sawn in two. He'd want to be spread in one of the six counties after the English rule had ended. "He hated grey," she said.

"I know, sweetheart, but I didn't want to waste the money on an urn. Midir has no desire to take your dad. It's cheaper to keep him in there." She squeezed Niamh's hands around the box. "Did you want to pay for some fancy urn that your dad never would have wanted?"

Niamh looked at her mother's hands, her carefully painted nails. She shifted the box, trying to listen for bone shards.

"Are you and Midir going to come over before breakfast?" her mother asked. "I was just going to make waffles, but if you wanted, I could put together some sort of breakfast. I think I have some bacon or sausage somewhere. I couldn't handle a full fry, but I could manage something."

"I'll ask Midir if he wants to come over. He's pretty tired though." She could feel the crumbs from old toast on the box, the stickiness of jelly. "I should get home to him."

"Call me," her mother said, and she went back into the bathroom to begin to straighten her hair again.

Niamh walked down the stairs and through the kitchen, into front hall and passed the flag. There were other pictures on the walls, a picture of the PO and one from a magazine, about the Hunger Strike. They needed to come down.

Midir was in her bed when she got back to the apartment, and she kept the box against her chest. Her fingers were sticky from holding it, and she didn't look up until she had placed it on her

dresser. She didn't have a place to put him, not even a vase. She pulled a green shirt out of the dresser that she never wore and wrapped the box in it, before she set it behind her alarm clock.

"What are you doing?" Midir grumbled, turning over in bed as she pulled the sweater off. She left the rosary in the pocket.

"Getting a shower." Niamh unbuttoned her shirt and opened the dresser to set out clean clothes. She didn't have a closet to hang her funeral clothes in, and they probably needed washed anyway.

She could see Midir getting out of bed in the bedroom mirror, watching him push her sheets back, still wearing the same old t-shirt with his jeans undone and belt lost. She watched him as she pulled her shirt off, tossing it aside to the stack of clothes that sat on the floor.

She left the camisole on, glancing up at Midir in the mirror again as he slid off the bed, coming up behind her. "Mum is expecting us at noon," she said. He didn't know where the ashes were, and she wouldn't tell him. Her fingers fumbled on the side clasp of her skirt.

Midir's fingers covered hers and he helped ease down the zipper, his fingers brushing against the edge of the camisole in a way that made her stomach go tight, toes curl in her thick socks as she shifted. "Did you go to Mass?" he asked, his voice normal. He stared into the mirror above her shoulder as he pushed the skirt down.

"Yeah," she said. She smiled at him and tried not to look over to her dresser in the mirror, to the green lump that was just a little larger than her jewelry box. "I went to Mass and checked in on Mum. She's going to meet us at noon, like I said."

"I don't want to go back there," Midir said, and his hands stayed above her slip. His hands were big enough to cover her hips. "I keep seeing him. I can't get that out of my head."

She nodded, and she didn't ask what he looked like, if he was covered in flies and purple, if his eyelids had split open. "You could go to Mass."

He kissed the top of her head and he flicked her side. She looked away from him as he began to do up his jeans. "I'm going to go pick us up some donuts." Midir pulled her messy braid, where she hadn't had the energy to rebraid her hair. "I'll be back in fifteen."

Niamh waited for him to go into the main room before she pulled the camisole and slip off, folding them on the bed before she set out a t-shirt and jeans. She could hear Midir still rumbling around while she began to run the water for a shower, trying not to think of the stoup or the bottle of holy water in the main room. She left the door to the bathroom open as she stepped under the water and grabbed for her shampoo.

## Wool

Anne was born with six fingers on her left hand, a mid-ray duplication. It was rare, our mother told us. It was rare and special because it wasn't just an extra. It had nerves and joints and moved like normal fingers, and anything so special and secret had to be kept safe. "It's not ugly," she'd said, and she made us fingerless gloves to wear, knitted sheaths to wear over our wrists and the palms of our hands. She would tape Anne's extra finger to her palm, and there was a gap between her fingers. Mom promised no one would see it and we believed her longer than we probably should have.

At night, when our parents were in bed, Anne and I would sit on my bed and trace each other's faces. We did not think we looked alike. Her nose was longer than mine, and my lips were thinner. She had a small freckle on her eyelid, but when we went to school we were Anne-or-Mary because we both wore the gloves, and our mother wanted us to match. Mom liked patterns, ordering things in neat rows. We had the same things, and if we could not have the same things, we could not have them. She liked things neat.

She would not have liked the crabapple tree in the new house. It was old, splitting under the weight of too many summers. The old owners had wrapped it with wire and promised that it wouldn't die as long as we kept wrapping it every spring and fall. The split was dark, and the wood was softer when I pressed my fingers inside.

Anne climbed the tree anyway, and she made Dad promise not to have it cut down. The wires were good footholds.

Mom died when we were ten, on the Turnpike between Cleveland and Toledo. We had a picture of the two of us standing beside her coffin, black dresses and tight braids. Dad kept it framed on the living room table. He called us her bookends. For months after the funeral, he asked us if we knew how much she loved us.

Dad didn't make Anne tape her finger to her palm every morning, an extra step in the morning routine—pee, wash hands, brush teeth, wash face, tape, breakfast—that I didn't have to do. He said she could do what she wanted, but Anne still kept a roll of white tape in the bathroom drawer. She put black gloves beside my breakfast if I forgot.

“You can't forget,” she'd say, and then she would pick up a piece of fruit. “It's important.”

The gloves scratched and my palms turned red after wearing them for an entire day. Mom made them from wool, so they would hold up better. I could feel where Mom tied off each glove, the knots digging into my skin in math class when the teacher began to explain the FOIL method.

I didn't know we were the same until I was five. I knew Anne was important, that she was my sister and that I couldn't remember not waking up and seeing her there, in the blue bed because all of Anne's things were blue and mine were purple. Dad told stories about coming into the bedroom when we were babies and we would coo at each other in strange baby language. I think we must have understood each other better then, and I wished for years that it was like in the books, that we had an actual secret language, as older girls, or telepathy. I watched old cartoons and decided that if we were like the Wonder Twins, it would be better to be Jan. She always got to turn into an animal.



There used to be a picture by the door, hung next to one of our parents from their wedding at the courthouse. Mom wore pink shoes in our picture, holding both of us in her lap. We looked like marshmallows in the Christening gowns, with full ruffles that covered our pudgy baby fists. Mom said I was on the left, and Dad said I was on the right, but sometimes they would change their minds. That picture moved into our bedroom after Mom died. The babies in the picture watched us sleep, and I thought it was sad that no one knew who was who.

Anne was smarter than I was, funnier. Her hair braided better, and I heard one of the other girls say she was the prettier twin. Anne laughed at that, and she looked at me. They were probably right. Her eyes were a better shade of brown, chocolate instead of beer glass. She never touched anyone besides me, though.

Anne would hang out with the girls in the parking lot, at the weathered four-square court. She wouldn't play, but she watched. She kept score and refereed. I only came over when she waved to me. She leaned her shoulder against mine. "Amy is having a sleep over. I'm invited," Anne said. She touched my gloves, adjusting them.

"That sounds nice," I said. Anne wouldn't sleep over. Anne couldn't risk someone seeing her hands.

She touched my arm with two fingers, her nails starting to press in. "Just me though," she said.

I waited for her to pinch me before I started to cry. It didn't hurt, not really, but I couldn't cry on demand like Anne could. When Mom died, she cried when Dad came into the room and would stop when he left. I just sat and stared at the old pictures and waited for

someone to tell us where to stand. I didn't like being fussed over, and the too-long sleeves on our dresses were scratchy with lace.

She pinched harder, nails pushing under my skin, so there would be actual tears, so I was a convincing crier like her. She looked back at Amy and sighed. "I don't think Dad will let me go anywhere without Mary."

The other girls rolled their eyes at me, and Anne kept pinching me to remind me to snifle. The playground monitor let us go inside.

There were things Anne wouldn't do because of her hands. Swimming was one of those things. We both knew how, but Anne only swam when no one else could see her. There'd been a swimclub at our old school, but Anne begged Mom not to let me join. People might figure out Anne's secret. Anne told me that the rash from the gloves would get worse in chlorine.

But the new school had swim days in gym, last thing on Thursdays, so we wouldn't have to sit in class with wet hair that smelled like chlorine no matter how many times we scrubbed it. Dad let me swim, and my hands didn't itch any more than they did with the gloves on. Anne got a note from our doctor saying that the chemicals gave her hives.

She still came into the over-warm changing room with me, watching me pull off the thick plaid smock and then my white socks. She just kept her arms tightly crossed and shivered like she was cold, like she wasn't sweating in the thick humid air.

Anne stood like a golem, hiding me from the rest of the girls when they changed. She had a black sweater on, her hand pulled in so no one could see. "You could pretend to be me," she said. We never pretended to be each other, so I think she was jealous. Looking at her, I just saw the nose and her freckle, and the hand that she had taped in the morning.

I shook my head. In the water, I was Mary. My hair was under a blue cap and my suit was a size too small. I had breasts, the start of them at least, but I was still wearing last year's suit because our dad didn't think of that kind of stuff.

Anne sat on the bleachers with a book in her lap while I swam beside the other girls. They ignored me when I wasn't with Anne, and they were normally faceless to me. But in the water, I could pretend we were tiny silver fish darting around together. I swam in the lead, and they chased after me.

The new school wasn't like our old one. Anne was liked, and I was tolerated as Anne's sister. No one took our gym clothes and put them in the trash. It was better. Mom would have liked for us to have friends. Anne and her girls would go to the very corner of the play yard, where they could see Liberty Avenue and the gelato place Dad took us to after Sunday dinner.

I had my own friend. Jennifer was in sixth grade, a year younger, and we would sit by the door to the gym and watch my sister and her friends. Ants crawled over our legs, and I would spend most of recess picking at my gloves. The stitches were unraveling.

"I think we should try out for hockey," Jennifer said. "You'd be good at it." She had a fruit rollup across her lap. She liked to remove the red sections from the green and yellow. They tasted better separated.

I tried to imagine holding a stick in my hands, how sweaty they'd be under the gloves. My palms itched, and I rubbed them over my knees.

On the weekends, Dad took us to the edge of the Monongahela River to feed the ducks. It was something that Mom had liked. The ducks left bright green smears in the dirty sand, and the

riverboats made the smell worse. We walked the water's edge, and Anne pulled on her braids. Sometimes she would ask me about swimming, what it was like in a pool.

"We had a relay race last week. My team won," I said. She already knew that. When we won, I threw my arms into the air and clapped above my head. She had watched it all from the bleachers. She clapped one hand against her thigh.

"It's not as nice swimming as swimming in the lake, Annie," Dad said. I pushed a rock over with my shoe. "You're not missing anything."

"You can't race like that in the lake," I said. I crossed my arms over my chest and then had to adjust them lower, under my breasts. Dad hadn't said anything yet. He didn't look at me then, either. He was watching one of the blue tourboats.

The entire shore smelled like ducks and rotting fish, but there were no animals. It was too cold for them. I took off my gloves and shoved them into the pocket of my jacket. The side seam was coming undone, the yarn wearing down.

"What are you doing?" Anne asked. She pulled my gloves back out, even though we were alone on the shore.

"They're getting too small, and they itch," I said. Dad made a comment about growing too fast, but I didn't hear it. Anne grabbed my hand and we marched away from Dad, down towards the Glenwood Bridge. There were thick lines of white and blue graffiti on the bridge's towers, painted and repainted until they weren't words or symbols anymore.

Anne climbed the tree on the weekends as early as she could, and she hid there. In September, there was yard work to be done. Dad and I wrapped wire around the tree and stumbled over

apples that were equal parts mushy and frozen, and someone had to help him shove hedge clippings into huge black bags.

“Do you and your sister want to go to Tennessee this Christmas?” he asked. Mom had one sister, and she had moved to Memphis to work at a research hospital. Dad had no one else.

“No,” Anne said from the tree. I mouthed, “Yes,” but Dad had his answer. Dad looked up at the tree. He had a pair of gloves in his back pocket, the normal kind with fingers, wagging out from under his jacket as he moved.

“Annie, you want to help? Mary and I are cleaning.”

Anne shifted, but she didn’t come down. Her hands were exposed, and I could see the extra finger tapping on her jeans. “I’m reading, Daddy,” she said. Her voice sounded small, like a little girl’s.

“If you’re sure,” he said, and he took the gloves from his pocket and passed them to me.

I stepped close to the tree and looked up at her. She looked down at me, and there was a book in her lap, closed. I couldn’t see the spine; Anne didn’t want me to see, her hand pressed against the words.

She shifted, and I held up my own left hand. I put the glove on as slowly as I could. The gloves were too big. I think they were Mom’s. Anne climbed further into the tree. There were no more leaves and the apples were almost gone. Our driveway was plastered with a thick apple paste, and the days were still warm enough sometimes that you could smell it all rotting.

Dad shook out a garbage bag and then took a scraper from the tools he’d thrown on the porch table. “Mary, honey, do you want to help me with these?”

Mom was the one who taught us how to climb trees. Dad was too clumsy to take both feet off the ground. She was the one who showed Anne how to find the good footholds, how to leverage herself up onto higher branches. She showed both of us, but Anne was the one who did it well. We climbed in the darkest parts of Schenley Park, far back enough that we couldn't hear anyone but each other. We had to hide so Anne could take off the gloves and the tape.

She climbed faster than I did. I sat on the lowest branch with Mom, and Mom said, "It's the extra finger." Mom pulled on my ponytail. "And you just like being contrary." Anne knocked a stick loose, and I watched it fall to the ground.

"Mary," Anne called. She was so high up that I couldn't see her. She was higher than even Mom would dare. "Mary, get up here. I think we can get higher."

Mom kissed my forehead. "Go on, kiddo," she whispered and then pointed to the next branch to use.

Anne's hand covered mine when I reached her, to help me up to be next to her. Her palm was sticky from tape and sap. The combination made the itching worse, and I took off the gloves, letting them drop. From the ground Mom told us to be careful.

Anne was the first girl to wear makeup to school, and all the other girls asked for help with theirs when their parents said it was okay. She told them if she held their pencils, they would never know how, and she recorded videos of herself making cat eyes and Cleopatra eyes and contouring her face like Mom used to do.

"I need you to hold the camera," she said, for the video about how to make deep-set eyes really pop. In her first videos, she couldn't figure out how to hold the camera so her hand was a secret. Then the secret was me.

I watched her take out the powder and smear it over her face, so all the freckles were hidden and the red splotch under her chin disappeared. She opened a compact and showed it to the camera. "The problem with deep eyes is they tend to get lost," she said. She held her left hand against her side, cradling her ribs. It looked very naked without the black glove. She smeared makeup over a sponge and began to dot moss colored shadow at the corner of her eye.

"I know dark shadow seems totally strange, like, why would I accentuate the caves in my face, but my mom taught me this trick." I zoomed in and watched her pinch at her eyelid, carefully pulling the lid up away from the eye to get shadow into the very edge.

I tried doing that to my own eyelid. It felt like trying to lift something from nearly set glue, and my eyelid wouldn't sit right afterwards. "Mom showed you that?" I asked.

Anne whirled around. "You have to be quiet," she said. "I have to concentrate." She took my lilac washcloth from the sink and began to scrub at her face with violent strokes. "We have to start again."

"Why?" I put Dad's camera down. "No one wants to see you touch your eyes. It's gross."

"You don't know anything." Anne snatched the camera up in her weird hand and pushed it against my chest. "You have to do this. I want to get another one done. I'll call for Dad if you don't."

She pushed it harder, and it hurt. It hurt a lot, but I didn't let her move me. And I wasn't going to take the camera. She pushed until I grabbed her wrist and she dropped the camera onto the floor.

I forgot about the sleepover. Anne wasn't going to go; it didn't matter. Amy didn't forget, though. It was a gym day, and Anne had already left to go up to the bleachers, when I was taking my gloves off. Anne didn't like to be around for that.

I put the gloves in the locker, and Amy was there.

"Mary," she said, and she grinned at me. "Hi."

"Hi." I shoved my bag into my locker. The air was too thick. I could hear the pool, the thrum of the heater and the steady lapping of the water.

"Hi," she said again. She was too close to me. Her face looked like a doll's. She was taller than I was, and her suit fit her better. I felt naked with her looking at me and my hands, and then she grabbed my arms.

"So you have the normal hands," she said. She touched each of the fingers like she was counting. "And Anne is weird."

I tried to pull my middle finger down, to make the gap in my own hand. My finger wasn't trained. It hurt. "Don't call my sister weird."

Amy made a face. "No, like, Anne's just weird." She held her middle finger against her palm, so she could show me the weird gap, the spot between her fingers. "She's always trying to hide it."

I shook my head. I didn't have anything to say to her. Anne was a better liar than I was; she was funny and she could make something up that would have Amy laughing and then Amy would forget.

"Is that why you won't let her come to the party?" Amy asked, and she had the same soft look on her face that Anne got when she wanted me to give her something, only this wasn't my sister.



“I don’t care if she goes to your party,” I said, because I didn’t. I didn’t care. I didn’t want to hear about it. I didn’t want to think about it.

Amy nodded. “Okay.” She picked up my bathing cap and handed it to me, like I’m the one who needed friends. “I would have invited you, but my mom said only ten girls, and you were number eleven.”

I left Amy in the locker room and ran to the pool, even with the teacher yelling to stop. I jumped in and swam at the end of the line, as far from Amy as I could get. I thought about swimming down to the bottom of the pool and trying to sit there, just so I could forget that I was number eleven. It didn’t feel right. I was always number two; I was the baby sister because Anne was five minutes and some seconds older. Eleven just didn’t seem right. Anne should have been eleven.

I didn’t tell Anne about the party and about Amy knowing until we were in the yard and Anne was taking off her gloves. I watched her unwind the tape and touch the tree. “Do you want to climb?” she said. She began to pull herself up. “Just until Dad gets home.”

I took off my sweater. “You didn’t want to go to Amy’s party without me,” I said.

I couldn’t see Anne, but she didn’t answer right away. She was probably frowning. “I never said I was going.”

I pushed my foot into the spit as I climbed, to hear the wetness against my shoe. There weren’t many leaves left. “Amy knows. She asked me about it.” I climbed a little higher, until I was at the same branch as Anne. She had her face turned away. “I told her.”

“Why did you do that?” she hissed. “Why would you let her think that?”

“She saw me.” I held up my own hands. “You weren’t there. You were already gone.”

“They’re my friends, and you told them that.” There wasn’t enough room in the tree for us to fight, but Anne grabbed at my braid anyway, tugging it hard. “You told her.”

“I would never tell.” I pushed at her, and she had to let me go to catch herself. “She just knew.”

“You told her. I know you did, because you didn’t get invited, and I wouldn’t let you go if you ever did.” Anne pushed me this time, and I moved onto a lower branch. I’d broken my arm once, falling out of a tree. It hurt, and I hated it, but Mom had been there with us when it happened. Dad wasn’t going to be home for two hours. We didn’t know our neighbors.

“I wouldn’t want to go to Amy’s stupid party anyway.” I would have, if I wasn’t eleven, and if Anne was going. I wouldn’t tell Anne that.

“I’m telling Dad,” Anne said. She jumped from the tree. She landed easily, practiced and perfect and turned to look at me. “I’m telling Dad, and he’s going to be so mad at you because you told.” I had to climb down, slow and careful on the wire and footholds. I couldn’t fall again.

She was on the phone with Dad when I came into the house, with her hand on the jack so I couldn’t pull out the wire. I locked myself in our bathroom and waited for Dad to come find me.

I heard Dad come home. He talked to Anne, and their voices seemed distorted through the door. Anne slammed the bedroom door, and she was crying. I could hear her loud sobs, and I could hear Dad saying something to her, soothing her.

He tried the bathroom door once, and then he knocked. “Mary, can I come in?”

I didn't say anything. I sat on the toilet with my legs pulled up. Anne's makeup was messy around the sink. Most of it was so old, Mom's old foundation and lipstick, eyeshadow that Anne never used but wouldn't throw away.

Dad knocked again. "Come on, contrary. Open the door for your old dad."

"You know how to open it," I said. I could still hear Anne crying. "She's faking, you know."

Then Dad was quiet. "I'm going to take your sister for pizza, to see if I can get her to calm down. I think she wants you to apologize."

"She should go to that stupid party with her friends." Anne's crying got quieter. She was probably straining to hear us now. I talked softer. "And I hate pizza, anyway."

"Mary, do you think Annie wants to go to that party without you?" Dad waited for me to answer before he sighed. "Are you hungry at all?"

I turned the shower and the sink on, so I couldn't hear either of them. Dad kept talking, and he was playing with the lock on the door. I watched it turn, and I yelled, "I'm naked." I took off my polo shirt and held it to my breasts.

"Annie wants you to apologize," Dad said, and he had his hand over his eyes when the door opened, the other hand on Anne's shoulder. Her nose was rubbed red. So were her eyes. She gave little shuddering breaths and stared at me. I stared back. I didn't apologize.

"Daddy, make her say it," Anne said, her voice shaking. She sounded too young, and she pulled on his arm.

Dad started to sing my name, almost pleading, "Mary, Mary," and I knew the rest of the rhyme. Mom used to sing it to me.

Anne yanked on his elbow, and his hand slipped so he was looking at me. I could see the fraying edge of her gloves as she twisted her hands together. She stared at me, and I kept the shirt pinned to my chest. “Dad, I really am naked,” I said over the sound of the shower. Anne slammed the bathroom door.

I watched them leave through the bathroom window. Dad had his hand on her back, talking to her soft and tender, like he had at Mom’s funeral. I had just clung to his other hand.

When they were gone, I put my shirt back on and went outside to the garage. It was the only place that didn’t have pictures. The door didn’t lock, and Dad was always afraid of some memory getting ruined. He could always get a new barbeque or toolbox.

I picked up the hedge-cutters and tested them on the spool of wire Dad had left on the desk. The wire wasn’t strong; it wasn’t industrial grade. I pulled out another section and then cut it again. I cut at the wire until I had a neat pile of black worms on Dad’s work bench. I took the cutters with me when I left the garage.

I tried them on the jagger bush Dad had let overgrow into the driveway. It scratched our legs when we crossed through the yard after school and I hated it. I hacked away at it until it was a stub. The needle thin jagers were stuck into my skin, and I rubbed my hand against my jacket. It didn’t do any good. I needed Mom’s gloves, but I refused to wear them.

The tree was almost an afterthought, when the bush was dead. I cut the first few wires, the new wires that Dad and I had just wrapped around the trunk, and then I cut another. The original wire, the oldest one, was the hardest to cut. It was rusted and stretched tight around the trunk. The tree was growing too big to hold.

I expected the tree to fall then, but it didn't. It stood up still and made soft groaning sounds, like it was just beginning to wake up.