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EVERYTHING LOOKS LIKE LOVE: STORIES

by

Hannah Christie Feustle

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

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## Old Souls

Erin Roberts had twenty unsupervised minutes between 4:00 and 4:20 on Monday and Thursday afternoons, between when she walked home from her plant-sitting job around the corner and when her mother—like she ran on a timer—got home from work. On both of those afternoons, her twenty-minute window overlapped perfectly with when Patricia Barnes, her next-door neighbor, was out of the house in her rattling old blue station wagon.

Patricia was gone from 3:50 to 4:30 on the dot, and Erin had kept track. For the last few weeks of her eighth-grade year and the first few weeks of summer, she'd watched out her bedroom window. 3:50: Patricia pulled out of the garage and went off, her bent shoulders and gray head hunched far forward over the wheel. She forgot her house keys, sometimes—she left a spare under the plant pot on the front porch. So from 3:50 to 4:30 on Monday and Thursday afternoons, Patricia Barnes's little brick house stood empty, and Erin Roberts, on her way home, walked up to Patricia's porch, took the key, and let herself in.

The first time, she had hardly been able to believe what she'd done, and hadn't moved from the hall, but by mid-July, the fourth time she'd gone in, she stood just a moment listening to the silence in the house and went straight to the kitchen to pick up where she'd left off. It was dim—outside, the sky was thinking about raining. The window over the sink had a flowered half-curtain that she thought was called a valence, though it seemed funny that it was the same word as electrons—she'd been slogging through a packet that all rising AP Bio students had to do for most of the summer.

But she was trying not to think about that. She loved Patricia's house—the dishes left in the dented metal sink, the garbage she hadn't taken out yet, the dishwasher that was full and

clean and never seemed to change—an adult who didn't rush to get her chores done, who did all kinds of things Erin's parents never did. Last time she'd been going through a shelf of romance books from the grocery store, the ones her mother sometimes pointed to as examples of things that weren't smart enough for Erin to be reading. Patricia had *loads* of them in her pale lavender bedroom. She had romance books and a room full of porcelain dolls—a guest room, it looked like, and the dolls stood on shelves and a desk and today Erin went to look at them, checking the time on her phone, over and over, while she scanned them for a pattern. Groups—they were arranged in groups—first communion dresses, dolls in medieval clothes, some with baby faces, and three randoms who didn't fit anywhere else tucked together.

Her whole body hummed when she was in Patricia's house. She sometimes had a hard time looking at anything, she was so excited about the looking. She turned one of the random dolls a little to face the two others, so it looked like they were talking, and flopped onto the bed, which had a puffy comforter printed with ballet shoes. She liked it here. She liked how the door of this room was always open and there were fish tanks and puzzles and dishes left out in the rest of the house. She wanted to live here. Today she waited until there were only three minutes remaining before she let herself out, putting the key back where it had been. Last time she'd only made it to *four* minutes remaining.

She got back to her own house, which was larger and empty, just before her mom got home. By that time, Erin had resumed the place she was supposed to have been, sitting at the kitchen table with the endless AP Bio packet and a couple study guides her parents wanted her to go through early, to get ahead. As far as her mother knew, she'd popped out plant-sitting and come straight home, and that was all anybody needed to know.

On Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, Erin spent all her time at the vet's office in Jacksonville where her dad worked, the one about ten minutes from their house in the development, down the road from the strip mall with the grocery store, where she sometimes saw girls from her middle school giggling and walking between Safeway and Goodwill, eating snowballs and taking up the entire sidewalk. Not that she went over that far—she only saw them from the car with her dad. The rest of the time, she was cleaning kennels. She spent most of her time cleaning kennels and taking dogs out to pee, because she was by far the youngest sort-of-intern. There were two who were in high school, both girls she didn't know who seemed to take some great pleasure in not being on constant kennel duty, and two who were in college and were home for the summer, one guy and one girl, who were allowed to do more interesting things, actually in the rooms during exams. They were nicer—they both called her father Dr. Roberts, which sounded funny to her, but they showed her a trick for getting the angriest kitten in the world to eat, and one day when it was quiet got Michelle the secretary to show her some scheduling stuff on the computer in the waiting room. She sort of wanted them to get married, but she was pretty sure they both had boyfriends.

Sometimes she saw them go to get snowballs at the lime green stand by the grocery store once they were off work, though no matter how hard she willed her dad to stop there, he never did, and they always went straight home, with NPR playing. By evening, her mom was home and starting dinner, and her sister, Melanie, was home, and Melanie's baby, who was in day care three days a week and was absolutely enraged about it, was screaming like she was trying to make them all aware that she had no interest in being around other babies ever again. Erin usually got sent to see if she could do something about her while Melanie and their mom angry-worked on dinner.

“Maggie, you have to stop,” Erin said, leaning over the playpen crammed in by the sofa, where red-faced Maggie with her platinum fuzz of hair thrashed in her pink onesie. The cat sometimes slunk out to see her, and sometimes Erin grabbed him and held him up as a distraction, but usually the screaming made Mr. Mittens deeply unpleasant, and Maggie was too caught up in her own crying to notice he was there. The house was so loud, this time of night. Maggie thrashed so hard Erin was scared to pick her up. “Maggie, please, you have to stop.”

Her mom and Melanie would argue over everything they did in the kitchen—*what are you doing to that onion, it’s not an art project, just chop it—no, I already put garlic in—this is tomato sauce, not canned tomatoes, go get canned tomatoes—well, it’s already open*—and the pasta water would hiss and splatter over the pan, and her dad would crack the spaghetti in half and send bits of it skittering and dump it in.

“What’s she eaten today?” her mom would ask, nodding at Maggie, looking at Melanie like she was in trouble. That look made Erin sick to her stomach, though Melanie held her ground, said, “She just had a snack, if she’s hungry, she’s not going to die in the next ten minutes, I know how to feed her.” Maggie screamed like she would, in fact, die in the next ten minutes. Melanie, sunshiny, called out to her, “Which goofball likes peas?”

It certainly wasn’t Maggie, who spent all of dinner spitting out the spoonfuls of pea puree that Melanie put into her mouth, pushing the goop out with her tongue and making her best effort to avoid getting any more put in there. Erin had a hard time eating her real peas while Maggie was all but gagging on hers, and she tried swallowing them whole. Her dad carried on a loud, one-sided conversation about a dog he’d seen that day. Her mom stared at Melanie and Maggie. Alone, Melanie would sometimes beg Maggie to eat, drop her head to her hands and choke back tears, but at the table, Melanie smiled so hard that it looked painful and held another spoonful up

to Maggie's mouth. Maggie was six months old. It had been—what, a year ago?—that Melanie had come home from class at CCBC one day and sat their parents down at this table while Erin eavesdropped from the stairs, and said that she was pregnant and had A Plan. Their mother had been rattling off facts about Planned Parenthood and abortion before it became very clear that Melanie wasn't crying, and that her plan ran more towards graduating with her AA, not going to a four-year college, getting a job as an x-ray tech, and keeping the baby. It had been their dad's idea for Melanie to stay here till she was on the schedule full time—their mom had taken it as an opportunity to convince her to transfer to Towson. Maggie spat out more peas.

“Did you check on what signs of intolerance look like?” their mom asked, and Melanie clamped her jaw shut like she was contemplating murder.

“Yes, Mother,” she said, high and tight. She'd worked out this little trick to entertain Maggie, stacking plastic Winnie the Pooh figurines on top of each other—Piglet stood on Pooh, and Kanga balanced on top of Piglet—and she started doing that, busily, which made Maggie stop screaming for a minute. Erin wasn't even sure where you got the idea for that. She wouldn't have come up with it. Maggie shrieked and babbled as Rabbit got stacked on top of Kanga, and reached out and knocked them everywhere. Piglet landed in the spaghetti pot. Melanie plucked him out and Maggie laughed hysterically.

“I need you to be working on getting her to eat,” their mother said, and Melanie made herself busy messing with Maggie, making Piglet soar around in front of her. “This is not how we dealt with you two.”

“Erin’s not even chewing,” Melanie said, and Erin made herself bite into the peas, their weird popping texture, and stared busily out the window. Patricia Barnes had her kitchen light on, and her bedroom light, broken with the lace pattern of her curtain.

“Get working on biology,” her mother said, shooing Erin to the kitchen table when they were cleaning up. Maggie was full of milk and finally quiet. Erin sat at the kitchen table, looking at page 16 of the forty-some page AP Bio packet. She hadn’t done the first sixteen and had no idea what it wanted, but she made herself busy, writing numbers in the margins. 3:50, on Thursday, that was when Patricia would leave, and 4:00, when Erin would get there, and she’d go through the bedroom this time. She didn’t know quite what she’d do, just that she wanted to touch that curtain.

+

On Monday and Thursday, from morning till 3:30 when she left for plant-sitting, Erin watched Maggie. Melanie was at work those days—she was an x-ray tech at Franklin Square and her schedule was still irregular. Maggie slept a lot, and Erin was technically supposed to do her summer work while she was sleeping, but she hadn’t done any of it. Mostly she’d been turning on the baby monitor and then going to do what she wanted—reading *The Secret Garden* eight billion times, and hiding it under her bed because her mom said she needed to get more age-appropriate books, and pulling out the box of old Barbie dolls, dressing them and making up games and shoveling them back into the box when Maggie cried. Her mom technically thought they were in the basement and that Erin had outgrown them.

At 3:30, Melanie got home and grabbed Maggie and took her to the rec center for a walk, and Erin went out to do her little plant sitting jobs—vet interns didn’t get paid, and Erin was

technically just a volunteer—and went into Patricia Barnes’s house, and came home, and their mother got home, and then Melanie got home. On Mondays, Melanie went to her evening class. On Thursdays, she sometimes had a later shift. On weekends she had all kinds of oddly timed shifts, but Erin didn’t watch Maggie then, because weekends were Homework Time: her mother’s knock on her door at 7:00, a plate of frozen waffles, the endless stack of work she was making no progress on during the week but was making a very good show of pretending she was.

It wasn’t that she hated Biology. It was just that if she’d known, when she was eight and said she wanted to be a vet like her dad, that this would be where it landed her—the long talks about how many math classes she needed to take to be in Calculus by junior year, the college tours scheduled to start in September—she might not have said anything. She might have just picked a different job, one that maybe didn’t involve putting her arm inside a cow, which was what the college interns at the office laughed about sometimes. She wasn’t really looking forward to that.

When Melanie first got her X-ray tech job, she’d sometimes tell Erin about the really messed up stuff she saw, bones sticking out of people’s skin and all of that, but since she’d had Maggie in winter, they didn’t stay up after their parents went to bed anymore, not even on weekends. *Not tonight*, Melanie said, taking Maggie and going upstairs, and Erin tried to stay downstairs alone, but her mom would call that it was bedtime, and she’d go up to her room and sit at her desk, looking out at Patricia’s darkening house for a long time before she went to sleep.

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The next time she broke into Patricia’s house, on Thursday, after a particularly long lecture that morning about how she needed to start making a list of colleges so she would know

their requirements early, when she was walking home from watering the hibiscus and shrubs behind Al and Eliza Wilhelm's house, she went straight to the pale lavender bedroom. There was a landscape of a field and some flowers on the wall, a lace doily on the long dresser. The lace curtain in the window, when she touched it, was thicker than she expected, yellowed. The closet had folding doors with slats, and she pulled those open—the knobs were thick with paint that chipped in places. She saw Patricia sometimes in the yard, watering her plants, mowing the lawn. Some tan pants, some flowered blouses, some mid-calf skirts and dresses. She pulled those doors shut—the right one didn't want to close all the way, and she pulled hard, started to panic, but it closed. She hadn't looked at shoes on the floor, but was shaking a little and didn't open it again, and left early, six minutes before anyone would notice her.

When she got to the street, the narrow shoulder, she wasn't sure it *had* been shut all the way, but she kept walking rather than risk going back. She got to the kitchen and flipped to page one of her Bio packet and tried to process it, but her hands were shaking so much it distracted her. The people taking AP Bio with her were idiots—Jeremy Burns, way back on the street furthest back in the development, Maddie, Becca, Conner—the really popular ones, who were all wearing Harvard and Princeton sweatshirts already and who never talked to her when they were in groups together at school. It didn't seem fair that they were all doing this and she had no idea what page one was talking about. As her mom got in, she flipped to page seventeen and pretended she'd been working steadily.

Later, she watched Patricia Barnes across the yard, watched her out at her peach tree. Erin had tracked her for a couple weeks, watching out the window to see what she did—5:00, went out to the garden, 5:20, went back inside, 10:00 AM, mowed the lawn—and she tried to

read her face, to see if she looked like a person whose closet doors had been in a different position than when she left the house, but she wasn't sure what that would have looked like.

Near seven, Al and Eliza Wilhelm got home from vacation and stopped by to give Erin the plant-sitting money, and to talk to her parents in the hall for what felt like a very long time, or that was what Al did—Erin mostly tuned them out, while they talked about property lines and fences and who'd bought a house that had been for sale. Eliza smiled at Erin, asked her about school, and got completely distracted by Maggie, who was an extrovert—Erin knew that already—and turned on all her baby-charms, cooing sweetly and not crying even a little bit.

“You react way too much to her!” their mother said, later, when Maggie was throwing a fit in the middle of the night and Melanie was awake with her. “Sometimes you just need to let her cry!”

“She's not yours!” Melanie said. Erin pulled the pillow over her head and tried to sleep, but she couldn't. When she finally did, she was woken what felt like a second later by her mother's knocking on the door. It was 7:00.

“We need to talk,” she said, and Erin felt a jolt of panic that her mother knew what she'd been doing, but then her mother held up the blank biology packet. “Dining room. Now.”

+

“She hates me,” Erin said, later, when she'd followed Melanie to the living room, where she was playing with Maggie on the floor. She'd watched Patricia's house on the window while her parents lectured—AP Biology, AP Chemistry by sophomore year, AP Physics, AP Environmental Science, it was a chain of events that all had to go like that, and she had to finish

the packet, was she listening? She had been, sort of, but Patricia had been out mowing her lawn on the old green tractor, riding in neat rows, same as she did every Saturday morning.

“She doesn’t hate you,” Melanie said, not at all sounding like she used to, Erin’s sister who used to lament how much she hated school, how she’d sooner die than do four years of college. “She’s keeping you on track, she’s trying to help you succeed—”

“What are you, an adult now?” Erin asked—it popped out meaner than she meant, and Melanie shot her a look, though she didn’t take it back. “I thought you were on my side, you can’t stand her, either—”

“Yeah, well, forgive me, but AP Bio and my daughter are on sort of different levels,” Melanie said, and Erin left her there and ran upstairs. Her parents had gone out for a walk to talk about her, and she dropped onto her bed and tried not to cry, which was embarrassing to do alone. Melanie wanted her own apartment once she had full-time hours, and then she wouldn’t be here, and it would just be Erin and her parents, and she’d be going to the high school, and she still wouldn’t have any friends, and the only person who was close to a friend was zoned for Loch Raven, and her mom was already talking about all kinds of clubs she didn’t care about, where she’d never be able to make friends because no one talked to her, because she got too scared to talk around people, and then she’d be in college and she would have to put her arm in the wrong end of a cow, and then by the time she was out of residency she would be twenty-eight and ancient and she never would have been to a party or on a date, and she didn’t know how to pay rent and she didn’t know how to set up an electric bill and she didn’t know how much groceries cost, and—and how could Melanie want to do all of that, want to leave?

She couldn't deal with this. She went to the window and looked out at Patricia's. She'd finished mowing the over-long grass and was raking and bagging it, which Erin's dad said killed the environment, but did look official. Neat lines appeared on the lawn. She'd be done by 11:30 and she would go inside, and Erin wouldn't see her again till 5:00, when she went out to water her plants. She wanted to go live in Patricia's house where everything was always the same.

Her parents, when they got in, recalled her to the dining room. Melanie, on the floor, was explaining something from one of her summer class readings to Maggie, who didn't care. Erin folded her arms and sat at the table. This was where her parents did taxes and had serious conversations and the table without the cloth looked bare and threatening.

"So we ran into Suzanne Burns on the walk," her mother said, and Erin shrugged a little. Jeremy's mother. Mr. Mittens jumped onto the table and flopped down between them, apparently content that they were all looking at him. "She said her son—"

"You know him, right?" her dad said, like having gone to the same elementary school counted.

"Not really," Erin said, but her mom was still talking.

"Her son and a couple friends are over at her house a few days a week working on the packet," she said, and Erin felt a jolt of panic, trying to guess who—Maddie with her lacrosse team hair ribbons?—"And she said you were more than welcome to go join them."

"I'm not friends with them," Erin said, looking between her parents.

Her mother sort of shrugged. "Even better, won't get distracted."

“But I’m not friends with them,” she said again, not entirely sure they understood the urgency of the situation, or what it meant not to be friends with someone, to have them giggle at you and your Velcro-closure binder—which was on the school supply list, they were *supposed* to have those, but she hadn’t known they were that uncool—to have them ignore you during group work, then turn around and say *Erin, you’re smart*, which meant *do the work*, which she did.

“But what about Maggie, I watch her on—”

“Your job is to do your schoolwork,” her mom said, and Erin bit hard on the inside of her cheek. “Do you understand that, that’s your only job. Mel’s schedule’s going to be different a week from now, anyway. There are a million girls who got offered up to babysit.” That was what every single adult said when they ran into their parents—*my daughter could babysit!*—and Erin felt a surge of jealousy that she couldn’t quite place, at—at what? Kat Kearney who she saw at school with her mess of friends and popular glory coming to her house and holding Maggie?

“But I like watching her,” Erin said. “I was looking at the review books, really.”

But that was done. The babysitter ended up being Serena Parker, who was a college girl home for the summer who sort of had known Melanie in elementary school, and who looked like that girl from *Avatar the Last Airbender*, with the white-blond hair. She came up to get instructions the next day, and Erin was stuck endlessly at the kitchen table, staring at page one of the packet, watching Patricia’s window.

+

Sometimes Erin didn’t think her parents had existed before they were about thirty, before they turned into blustery adults who cared deeply about how far fences needed to be from property lines and how badly behaved other people’s children were. NPR. The nightly news—

NBC and then CBS, 6:30 and 7:00 respectively—and more NPR in the car, and talking all the time to Erin about how when she was grown up, she should never drink a cocktail, because it didn't taste like alcohol and got you drunk too fast, and how she should never go to a party because she was at school to study. Every day was wake up at the crack of dawn, empty the dishwasher, make breakfast, do the dishes, go to work, come home, argue about dinner, make dinner, do the dishes, load the dishwasher, get to bed early. They drank black coffee and had gone on—what, maybe one date night ever in her entire life?—and didn't want her to paint her bedroom pink because it was too bright. It doesn't matter that you aren't friends with them, Erin, you have to get along with everyone, act your age. Like her age was forty-something and not fourteen, like being dropped off at Jeremy Burns's house wasn't the most humiliating thing she'd ever had to do in her life. Her dad dropped her off when he was headed off to work, spent most of the ride over talking about where the line between community association members and associate members was—something about the boundaries of the development and just the houses built next to it—she didn't know. He stopped at the white house and waited for her to get out. Jeremy's mother opened the door and waved—she was thin and blonde and absent-looking. Jeremy And Company were in bathing suits, cannonballing into the pool that she could see through the side yard. A doggy-paddling black lab had jumped in with them.

“Please,” Erin said, but her voice came out very small, and she thought her dad almost felt for her, but then he leaned over and opened her door, and she wrapped her arms around the bio packet that was going soft with her sweaty hands and got out.

“Did you bring a bathing suit?” Jeremy's mom asked, when they were inside the cool tiled kitchen. Apparently she'd had a very different idea of what *working on the biology packet* than Erin's parents had—she wasn't sure her parents had really understood the conversation too

well. Laughing drifted in from outside—Jeremy, Maddie, a couple people who must have gotten dropped off—Brian, Jenna, Ashley. Erin shook her head and tried to make Jeremy’s mother have pity on her through force of will, and she seemed to, sort of smiled, said she was welcome to go outside, or stay in the kitchen, and then went to go do whatever it was that adults did during the day if they weren’t at work—she washed some dishes and went off to make phone calls. Erin sat on the edge of her chair at the table and studied page one of the bio packet. There were others lying around on the table—none of them had started. They had summer reading books, too, the ones they were supposed to do, *Northanger Abbey* and *Of Mice and Men*, which she technically hadn’t told her parents she needed to buy yet. She resumed staring at the packet. Page one was just instructions and she skipped to page two, but it kept referencing page one. Most of these first pages seemed to be a form certifying that she knew she couldn’t take AP Bio till she did this. She skipped to page 3 and studied the Xeroxed dark body of a cell. This seemed very far removed from cleaning kennels, or from putting your arm inside a cow, or anything else.

Jeremy and Company came back inside near lunchtime, when his mother was making grilled cheese and asking Erin about what classes she was taking. They all seemed to have forgotten she was there and got weirdly silent for a minute, and then just resumed talking and laughing like she wasn’t there, talking mostly about how some girl she didn’t know too well had signed up for *marching band*, like, she was spending her *entire* summer training, they were out marching *every day*.

“Marching band goes to Disney World, though,” Ashley said, though everyone else looked at her skeptically and Maddie said, “Yeah, but who wants to go to Disney World bad enough to join *marching band*, they meet like, every day.”

“Hey Erin,” Jeremy said—Erin studied the tabletop—they were always like this, and the rest of them were just barely restraining giggling, and she didn’t know why it was funny just to laugh at whatever she said, but apparently it was. “You joining marching band?”

She managed to shake her head. They were wheezing with silent laughter. After lunch, they all went out to the living room without her and watched a show she didn’t recognize and mocked the first three pages of *Northanger Abbey* and resumed talking about people she didn’t know. Jeremy’s mom looked kind of sorry—she said, at one point, “Hey, let’s find something you can all do,” but Erin shook her head and limped through a few pages of the Bio packet with the shreds of focus she could muster up, and leapt up gratefully when it was 3:30 and she could leave to go water Marianne Hawkins’s plants.

+

Miss Marianne lived right behind Patricia Barnes, and when Erin had done what she was supposed to do and watered the plants outside the glass patio doors, she walked across Patricia’s mown backyard and around the side to the front door, where she let herself in.

Patricia Barnes built puzzles—this one was a picture of *The Little Mermaid*, spread out on half of the kitchen table. She found a couple end pieces in the mess of unsorted center pieces, but she didn’t touch them even though she wanted to. She felt weirdly restless today, went to touch the books, which didn’t feel right in her hands—small and yellow—and went to look at the dolls, who looked vaguely creepy, with their unblinking eyes. She pulled open a kitchen cabinet—little juice glasses with Peanuts characters printed on them, big chips in the rims, still apparently in use. They made her feel better. They were the only glasses she found, and she

moved them around looking at the pictures, pulled one with Snoopy to the front. You would have to use these for company, and she liked that.

Today she stayed until she only had two minutes remaining, and then she left, walked back to her own house. Melanie's schedule had been thrown off today—Serena Parker was still there, Maggie asleep and the dishes washed. She shut off the TV when Erin walked in, but she thought she'd caught a little bit of *Frozen* playing on one of the HBO channels. She almost said something, but then Melanie was there, all business, collecting Maggie and paying Serena, and then everybody was gone. Patricia got home. When Erin turned on the TV, whatever had been playing had ended and *A Few Good Men* was on, which was one of those movies her parents liked where nothing happened the entire time and everyone was angry. She went and found the DVD of *Frozen*, which Melanie used to watch with her, and put it in, but when Melanie got home with Maggie, there were a million bottles to wash and diapers to change and things to do, and she didn't even have the heart to suggest it.

+

She had never imagined herself saying this, but she would have given anything just to stay in middle school. She got an eBook of *Northanger Abbey* and couldn't make any sense of why in the world anyone had kept reading it since the 1800s, and when her mom asked if she wanted to sign up for rec council dance again, the paperwork that came said that surprise!, Ballet One girls fourteen and up could get pointe shoes, but also had to wear black leotards only, no colors and no skirts, which had been the really fun parts, though by that point she'd committed. At Back to School Night in August, the high school gave her a map, and her mom made her practice twice running from Spanish III to English in the four minutes they had between classes. She couldn't do it. It was physically impossible. It took her more than four minutes both times

and she felt like crying, pictured stumbling into English gasping for breath and sweating, and then being quizzed on *Northanger Abbey*—how many siblings does Catherine have? Which is her next-youngest sister? What parts are *funny*? Even Melanie thought it was funny.

Everybody apparently lost their minds after they turned about her age. Jeremy and Company spent every day talking about people who weren't there and lying around in the pool talking about how bored they were. Even Michael and Abigail, the college vet interns, let her down—when they came to clean kennels with her one day, when her dad was in a really bad mood and she was pretty sure they wanted to prove what good team players they were, they spent the *entire* time talking about the curriculums at their respective colleges and how it was that Michael was still taking Art History in senior year and Abigail hadn't taken a gen ed since she was a freshman. Erin was so bored and itchy even thinking about these things interesting her that she reached in to pet the angriest kitten in the world, who clamped down into her wrist with his teeth. Just a couple days before they'd been milky-thin and painless, but today they felt like real teeth, and she yelped and jerked her arm back. Blood beaded on her arm. All night she kept touching it through the bandage.

+

“Hey Erin,” Jeremy said, in the second week of endless time watching the clock in his kitchen. It was mid-afternoon and the whole group had traipsed in from the pool as thunder rumbled in the distance. She looked up, feeling sick with dread, her stomach in knots. She didn't get what was funny, but they were all still giggling. “Where do you go after this?”

“Home,” Erin said, which was somehow funny. Her mouth went dry. She added, sort of in spite of herself, “I water plants sometimes.” They were still giggling.

“For Miss Marianne,” Jeremy said, because apparently they all knew already.

“She’s the one with the demented dog,” Maddie said, for the ones who didn’t live here.

“I like her dog,” Erin said, but it mostly stuck in her throat and didn’t come out. She didn’t like Marianne Hawkins’s dog, who was small and scary, but she felt like she had to say it.

“She lives right behind this woman who never goes outside,” Jeremy said. Erin felt herself going red. “Is that next to you?” Erin nodded. Her stomach knots were becoming extremely painful.

“And Erin’s sister has a baby,” Maddie said. They were all still sort of giggling and she just didn’t get it. “Where did it come from, do you have like a brother-in-law?”

“Are you going to be in a wedding?” Ashley asked, and Erin shook her head. Melanie when she said she was pregnant, when their mom said *but you don’t even have a boyfriend*, and she said *can we talk about the pressing part for a minute?* And yet she tried to picture herself saying *I don’t know* and couldn’t do it.

“Yeah,” Erin said, and they all lost interest and wandered off, talking about Serena Parker, and how all the girls wanted to look like her. Her stomach hurt so much that she couldn’t focus on the AP Bio packet.

It was raining, too hard to water Marianne’s plants, and Jeremy’s mother drove her home—past Patricia’s house, straight to her own, where Serena’s car was in the driveway since all adults ever did was look at the weather and she must have known this was coming. Jeremy’s mom waited until she went in, and one of her days going into Patricia’s melted away, but her stomach hurt so much that she didn’t care as much as she thought she would have. She let herself

in and watched Jeremy's mom pull away. Maggie was awake from the thunder, but not screaming, babbling in Serena's arms. Serena left when Melanie got in not much later, and Erin snuck upstairs and into the bathroom and doubled over the counter. Please don't let it be what she thought it was. Please God not yet.

But it was, the blood in her underwear. Darker than she'd thought.

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Her mom said *I'm so proud of you* like she'd *done* something. She gave her Tylenol and pulled her off to the bathroom to show her the crinkling wings of a pad, and Erin was pretty sure her dad knew, because he made mac and cheese exclusively because it was her favorite. Maggie spat out stewed pumpkin during dinner and absolutely no one commented.

When she was in bed later, she tried to read a little bit of *Northanger Abbey* before anyone remembered she had summer reading and she got in trouble for being on page one. It wasn't exactly as bad as she'd thought at first, and she hated herself for that—she just wanted to read *Ella Enchanted*, was it really that much to ask?—but it was a girl near her age who was apparently going to be some kind of heroine. That was how the book put it. Catherine, as a child, Jane Austen said, was *noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house*.

And then there was the rest of the page. *At fifteen, appearances were mending; she began to curl her hair and long for balls and her love of dirt gave way to an inclination for finery*. Erin tossed her phone with the eBook to the end of the bed at that, and got up to look out the window at Patricia's house. Quiet, dark, the same as it always, always was. Patricia Barnes still did whatever she wanted.

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On Thursday, though, when she'd let herself into Patricia's house, something was decidedly wrong. The second bedroom was stripped—all the blankets pulled from the bed and gone, half the dolls missing. Erin poked around in the mail basket for seven of her fifteen minutes, but didn't find anything, and opened doors till she found the basement door and went down the concrete steps. It was dark, but when she pulled on a cord from a bare lightbulb, nothing happened. She turned on her phone flashlight and cast the white light around. An ancient washer and dryer, all the big basement things—furnace or boiler or whatever they were—hulking by a deep sink. Some opaque plastic boxes. The puzzle table, leaning against the wall. She went over and touched it, ran one finger along it. It started to fall—she grabbed it and leaned it back against the wall, dropping her phone and muffling the light. Something scabbled on the concrete and brushed her foot and she shrieked in spite of herself and jumped back, fell out of one flip-flop, tripped, and hit the concrete with a jolt that radiated up her hip and into her ribs. The table fell all the way and hit her ankle. Whatever was scabbled kept doing it, disappearing into the boxes. She grabbed her phone and shoe and ran upstairs and out, slamming the door after her.

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“She doesn't take care of that place,” her mom said, looking out the kitchen window later that night, when they were all home, getting ready for the community association meeting. She'd forgotten it was happening—her dad didn't usually host—but her mom was making artichoke dip, and her dad had vacuumed when he got in and was setting out drinks. Melanie changed the tablecloth in the dining room. Maggie was cranky. Erin was putting chips in a bowl, and glanced over her shoulder—her mom was looking at Patricia's across the darkening yard. “What do you figure it's like inside?”

That was for Erin's dad, who said, "Probably a good thing Diane's moving in."

"She's moving?" Erin asked, hearing her voice high and too curious. Nobody seemed to notice, but her bruised ankle pulsed.

"No," her father said—her mother added, sticking the dip in the oven, "Though she honestly should, that's what I'd do." Then the doorbell rang, and that was all that was said about that, though Erin's heart was in her throat, and stayed in her throat while Marianne Hawkins was let in through the front door even though she lived across their back yard. She paid Erin, who barely even noticed—safely upstairs, she dropped the money and looked out the window. Patricia's house was normal, quiet.

It used to be that when her dad went to community association meetings at Mr. John's house down the street, Erin and her mom and Melanie would have a girls' night and eat ice cream on the floor in Erin's room, but they didn't do that anymore. When Melanie started college, she always had homework, and Erin would end up studying, too, and now she didn't even dare suggest it—her mom had put the biology packet on her bed, and a copy of *Northanger Abbey* from the basement, which said very clearly that she remembered summer reading. Once she'd gotten past that part about Catherine growing up and not finding any joy in anything ever again, which was about what it had sounded like, it had stopped being quite so bad—Catherine was going on vacation, or something, she was about half understanding it—but she didn't want to enjoy it. She just wanted to play with dolls and not have to be responsible all the time, sitting here thinking about all the stuff she should be doing and feeling bad about not doing it. If this was what being good felt like, she wanted to go be a hermit in the mountains. She wanted to break into Patricia's house and never leave.

Speaking of Patricia—when the house was quiet and the meeting starting downstairs, Erin went as far as the stairs and crept down halfway, out of sight but able to lean forward to look into the dining room if she wanted to. Her dad, John Szarka, Kim Bergman, Mark McClellan, Marianne Hawkins, and a handful of other people mostly hidden from sight by the wall. Marianne sounded like she was reading some rule about cutting the grass, though Erin didn't think she had anything in front of her. She apparently just knew how long grass was allowed to be.

“She is maintaining it,” someone said, maybe Mark McClellan. “So whether it gets too long between cutting it or not, it doesn't matter, since she is cutting it.”

“And this daughter?” said Ruth O'Conner, whose cat had tried to murder two vet techs the last time she was at the office. “I don't think I realized she had one.”

“Lives out west somewhere,” John Szarka said. “I never met her, I don't think, Diane.”

“All kinds of fences and sheds,” Al Wilhelm said. “It's going to be a mess.”

“What are you doing?” Melanie said, at a whisper behind her. Erin jumped and looked back. “Erin, if Jane Austen was boring you to tears, I wouldn't try this, at least Jane's *funny*.”

Erin scrambled up and went up the stairs to her. “I was just listening, I thought we were going to get new neighbors, or something.”

“No,” Melanie said. Erin followed her back to her room—Maggie was asleep and Melanie gave her a look that said *silence*. Erin sat on the floor where she used to, Melanie on the bed. “No, I already heard this—you know Alex Lapinski who's really obnoxious?”

He lived in the development but was about two years ahead of her so she didn't, really, but she nodded, because Melanie was on this sometimes—she'd been in AP Bio with him once—and because Erin didn't want her to stop.

“Well, his grandmother lives in their house, and I see her sometimes when I take Maggie over to the rec center,” Melanie said. “She's over there power walking, and she told me that Miss Patricia—” She sounded funny saying it—they talked to her so rarely that they never really called her anything—“She has a daughter who's like, I don't know—thirty-something, late thirties? I don't know. She's moving in there.”

“Why?”

“I don't think she knew,” Melanie said. Maggie moved in her sleep. “But she's moving in there. Mom thinks Miss Patricia's kind of senile, she says she doesn't take care of the house, like, the one gutter's falling off, the grass gets way too long, there's this big puddle in the yard by the basement stairs. You could see it out your window, it looks like a lake.”

She was buzzing with a sudden defensiveness, though wasn't sure how to put it. “But she lives there and mows the grass and stuff.”

“Yeah, but you have to take care of the house,” Melanie said. “Which is why Mom's like *no, don't move, stay here*, like, the maintenance stuff you have to do at an apartment—Erin—” She sat up—“Tell her I hate school, right, tell her how much you love it, you're like, *yeah, twelve years till residency, let's go, I can't*, I can't do two more years at Towson, I'll take classes and get the BS eventually, but I can't.” It was ending. Erin's heart went back to a normal place in her chest. “I'm not an idiot, I have an AA degree, I know what I want to do, I have a job, tell her, you tell her, it doesn't make any difference when I do it.”

“But why would you want to leave?” Erin asked—it came out small, and Melanie looked at her like she was crazy.

“I want my own life,” Melanie said. “Don’t you?”

In her own room, she looked out the window and saw the sideways gutter on Patricia’s house, and then she shut the blinds. She was supposed to try on Melanie’s old black leotards—she dropped out of dance classes early in high school—and she did, one with a crew neck and cap sleeves that she hated, one that was too small, and one with a sweetheart neckline with a little scoop cut out of the neck. Some part of her hated it but another part liked it a lot, liked that little part of her breastbone showing.

She felt like a traitor to herself, somehow. She dumped the leotards on the floor and tried to play with Barbies, but the stiff plastic bodies didn’t mean anything, and she heard such silence from them.

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Summer was ending. When she was at the vet’s office with her dad the next week, they said goodbye to the college interns, and Serena Parker went back to her campus in Pennsylvania—two more times when Erin was at Jeremy’s house, trying to get through more of the packet, Megan Nolan, who was maybe sixteen, watched Maggie, and talked to Erin a lot when she got home, asking her about what movies she liked and whether or not she was worried about high school. She was—Jeremy and all of them had started coming into the kitchen with their packets, saying *Erin, you’re smart*—but when she went into Patricia’s house, she just felt panic. The puzzles, packed up. The dolls, put away. A huge bug, shivering on the unwashed dishes. The whole house was getting rearranged and everything was going. Jeremy’s mom told

her on the last summer Monday that they were going to the beach for a weekend before school started, and that they wouldn't be there on Thursday—she offered her ten dollars to water the plants, and Erin said yes, but it barely mattered. It was raining on Monday, and Jeremy's mom drove her home. And on Thursday, there was a moving van in Patricia's driveway. The door open, and two men in moving company t-shirts were carrying boxes in.

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“Look, Erin, we need to talk,” her mom said, on Thursday when she got home, after Melanie had taken Maggie to the rec center. Erin nodded and tried to tear her eyes away from the window. “Honey, this taking three months to do a little bit of biology and read two books, that's not going to cut it when the school year starts. You're in two AP classes.” AP Government didn't give you a packet. Biology just liked suffering. “And you have band, and you have dance class, and you've still got to be trying to make some time to get over there with your dad—did you look at all at the books I put in your room? The volunteer hours you need to log? Because once you see that number you're going to need before senior year of college, when all your applications go out—”

Diane Barnes was short and boxy, dyed blonde, and she wandered outside in flip flops. She had a turquoise necklace. Patricia was small and gray next to her.

“—those two college interns, Erin, I talked to his parents when I saw them at Shop-Rite, this is an *every single day* thing, I'm trying to help you, but you need to be putting the work in *every day*, I can't do it for you.”

“I wish I had friends,” Erin said, watching Patricia and Diane talking.

Her mom stopped, sighed, sort of patted her head. The moving van was leaving.

“You,” she said, and she paused like she was thinking about it. “You are—you’re an old soul, Erin.” Erin’s eyes welled up. She felt like crying. “You’re responsible and you’re smart, and everybody’s going to catch up eventually.”

“But I want them now,” Erin said. “Why can everybody make friends and not me?”

“Erin,” her mom said, and there was a long pause. “Look, it’s a better use of time to get your work done now and make friends when you aren’t around people a lot more immature than you are.” She looked sorry, though, even while she said it. Erin blinked and her eyes welled over. She wanted to go to prom in a pink dress like Melanie had, with all her friends, taking pictures in the yard. She wanted somebody to sit with at lunch and talk to at the beginning of class, and she wanted to decorate her graduation cap and take pictures with everyone she knew outside the auditorium, and she wanted to study with people and slowly fall out of touch with someone when she went to college, and she wanted the girls in her dance class to like her even if she wasn’t very good, and if she couldn’t have any of that, she just wanted to be a kid forever, because what was the point—homework and going to bed and never speaking and more homework and cleaning kennels and watering plants until she was an adult and all she ever got to do was wash the dishes and complain about people not cutting their lawns?

“But I want them now,” she said, and her mom lost patience, stepped back and said, “Pull it together, Erin, we’ll talk about a study schedule to get you back on track once you’ve looked at those books. Because your sister? She does not have a plan. Go get those plants watered.”

“She has an entire baby,” Erin said, but her mom had already walked out. “Maggie loves her, Maggie doesn’t care, she’s not any fun, either!”

No answer. Just silence.

She was supposed to go water Jeremy's mom's plants, but when she was walking along the edge of the lawn, she reached Patricia's driveway at the same time Diane's car was pulling out. Diane was driving, Patricia in the passenger's seat. Diane waved when Erin stopped to let her pass. She turned out towards the grocery store and disappeared. The house was empty. She went up almost without thinking about it, checked under the plant pot. There was the key. She let herself in.

Boxes. The hall was piled with boxes. She picked her way through them, to the doorway of the second bedroom, where the furniture had been replaced by other furniture, lighter wood—the frilled dolls were gone, the shelf along the ceiling empty. There were boxes in the living room, where a new TV sat on the floor by the old one, and in the kitchen, where the boxes were piled up. A Keurig on the counter by the old coffee pot. A French press. Blue plates, crystal glasses. A coffee plaque. Canvas grocery bags.

She pulled out a chair at the bare table and sat, looking around at it. Patricia's door was shut, and the rest of the house was a mess, all different than it had been. She was crying and not even aware of starting. It had been the same for so long.

She rubbed her eyes, hard, trying to pull it back together. She got quiet. The house was quiet around her. She didn't move, not as it passed time for her to have reached Jeremy's house, picked up the hose, not as it got urgent that she leave. Two minutes remaining. One. She had to leave, she heard a car in the driveway, but she couldn't make herself go, and she stayed.

## The Ordinary World

Jessica McConnell, the author, had left the end of book nine—*To Bear False Witness*—at a cliffhanger that had managed to create a total disaster, as far as book ten was concerned. The captain on the merchant ship had double-crossed Jonquil de Berry—the sometimes lady-in-waiting, sometimes spy, overthrower of two governments—and the ship wasn't, in fact, headed for Princess Inge's castle in the far north. Jonquil was, instead, deposited on a beach with warm shallow waves, where two cloaked figures waited for her on the sand. And a familiar voice spoke, and Jonquil was, unfortunately, back in the original kingdom from Book One, *No Other Gods*, which she had been exiled from in no uncertain terms. It had made sense as Jess was writing, but now she really wasn't sure what to do and sort of wished the final book in the series would be in Inge's kingdom. She'd been working on what was supposed to happen for weeks, and still didn't know.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be landing in Baltimore in about twenty minutes,” the voice over the airline speaker said, and the humid air of the beach dissipated, and the sand, and the waves, and Jess was sitting in a middle seat in the back row of a Southwest flight from Atlanta to BWI. “It's about ninety-five degrees, humidity about ninety-five percent, we're currently—”

She tried to call Jonquil up again, but it didn't work—a kid in front of her, who reminded her of her sister Ella's children, was thrashing and didn't want to fasten his seatbelt. She got a flash of Baltimore through the clouds out the window. Airport. Car rental. Forty-five minutes to her parents' house. Then one weekend putting up with her sister. And then she could leave.

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In principle, Jess McConnell avoided spending any time with Ella, because spending time with Ella meant spending time with Ella's husband, and Jess could be in a room with Jack O'Day for seven minutes before she began contemplating committing crimes. When she pulled up to her parents' yellow-sided house in the development where she'd grown up, Jack and Ella were already there—Jack was standing outside on the front porch. He was vaping, sending out clouds of white. The front door hung open behind him, and Jess hit the brakes, hard, when she saw the gray flash of the cat crouched low to the driveway—she cranked on the emergency brake and left the door open when she followed the cat across the driveway. Princess, this was, not a cat she'd grown up with, or one she knew that well. Princess started running faster from the stranger in pursuit, and dove into the garden bed full of liriopse and lavender. It was always like this. Jess braced herself, then stepped into the garden after her, careful as she could manage, and hauled the hissing, spitting cat out of the plants, her arms covered in thick streaks of pollen, the cat scratching wildly, an enraged bee buzzing up in Jess's face. She staggered back. Jack laughed.

Jonquil de Berry would have said *nice to see you, too*, unflustered and cool, but Jess just went red and shifted the cat. She wasn't Jonquil, much as she would have liked to be. She was just the author, and no one even knew that. She'd used a fake name, and the books were self-published, anyway. She was just about to be thirty and she worked in a museum, giving tours of seventeenth century art, and no one would have guessed she wrote anything except reports.

There was little to be done about the still-running car with the door open, not with the cat still trying to escape—Jess took her up the stairs, past Jack and his cloud of smoke, pushed the door open, and went straight down the familiar tiled hall, into the kitchen—empty—through the dining room, empty, and into the living room, hushed, dim, where her mom, thin and gray, was

lying asleep but restless on the sofa. Princess remembered that she was a domestic half-Persian cat and not a wild animal and when Jess put her down, she leapt neatly to the end of the sofa, the empty space, turned around, and curled up licking her paws. Jess's mother didn't wake. She looked at her another moment in silence, and then went back to turn off the car.

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When Jess had first started writing the Jonquil books, she'd been twenty-one and just out of college and she'd promised ten of them, and she'd made the horrible mistake of naming them after ten commandments. She wasn't religious, but her pseudo-medieval world was, and back then she'd been trying to motivate herself to get to ten, though now she wished she'd just given them regular titles and could write as many as she wanted. But she'd reached the last one. The title had to have *covet* in it, most likely, or *neighbor*, or something like that. She wasn't sure. The series was ending and it was stopping her from thinking about little details like that.

There were about eighty-six ladies on Goodreads who loved the books, and they had spent the weeks since number nine came out speculating wildly on what was going to happen in number ten after that twist ending took Jonquil back to the shores of the kingdom she'd been exiled from in the first three chapters of book one. Jess had not actually planned far enough ahead to know. The ending of number nine had sort of gotten away from her, and now she'd committed to it—Jonquil was back in the original kingdom, with Queen Elisabeth and King Whatever-His-Name-Was and Princess Marie, the royal family that had raised her. She didn't know what she was going to do without Jonquil, but the Goodreads ladies all seemed really excited for the grand finale. She'd thought her life was going to be really different by the time she finished, but here she was. Ella was still with Jack, who was still a dick, who had just left her

car running mid-driveway without stopping from his nicotine break, and she hadn't really expected more, but here they were.

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Her dad was in the yard with Ella and Ella's children. The twins were seven, and there were two girls, six and five. Ella was a twenty-nine, less than a year younger than Jess. The children seemed to be attempting to murder each other with a Nerf football, which they continued doing as they went inside, crashing around like they were trying to make as much noise and do as much damage to the walls as they could. Ella didn't seem bothered. Jess's dad looked strained and worried, but he always did, always had, though she was annoyed.

"Mom's sleeping," Jess said, looking mostly at Ella, who had been talking about the drive down from New Jersey, but shifted immediately to a look of severe, extreme annoyance.

"I can't tell them to be quiet every second of every day," Ella said.

"They're okay," their dad said, still looking strained and worried. Their mother either woke or started coughing in her sleep. The kids yanked open the front door and crashed out into the front yard. The house was quiet except the coughing. Their dad went to check on their mom.

"It freaks them out," Ella said, folding her arms. "We've been here a couple days longer than you have, she's not really resting when she's sleeping, Jess, she's so drugged she's never really awake." Jack opened the front door and said, loudly, "Hey, El, kids are looking for you!"

"Coming!" Ella went right away. Jack needed to be babysat like the kids. Their dad came back from the living room.

“She loves having the grandkids here,” he said. This was the same father who used to shout at them to shut up when they were kids and their mom was sick. Jess and Ella had played in the yard or played that game where they had to be silent because the evil wizard was hunting them. He half-hugged Jess. “She’s not eating too much, what are you thinking for dinner?”

“Do Ella’s kids eat anything other than boxed mac and cheese?” He didn’t laugh. That didn’t make it less true, but Jess cowed under it.

“Be nice to your sister,” he said. “I don’t want a repeat of last time.”

They had stolen an entire cake from the Thanksgiving table and run off with it. Jess tried to figure out how to make him understand that, but he’d been there, and he still didn’t seem to get it. He was walking off, and she couldn’t help herself—she pulled open the fridge to see what options there were, already feeling herself lapsing exactly into how she used to be. She went to get an apron, and called up around her the storm-tossed beach, the warm waves, Jonquil’s soaked skirts, the cloaked figures on the beach, the familiar voice saying, *Jonquil?*

Option one, what she really wanted to do, when Jonquil washed up on that beach, was have Lady Amethyst and Peter the Stable-hand there to say *congratulations, Jonquil, your exile is over!* Everyone realized she’d been right when she said the prince that Princess Marie was supposed to marry was a jerk—they were so sorry they’d exiled her for that. She was restored to her rightful place as lady-in-waiting. They took her back to her place and she put on one of those lovely dresses and there she was, reinstated at the table.

Though that wasn’t going to work. That prince was king now, she’d said that in book six, and he had children with Marie. And Jonquil hadn’t really wanted to be a lady-in-waiting—at the

end of book one she got offered a position at another place, she said no. She'd wanted to marry Peter the Stable-hand and be a botanist and grow roses. Sending her home in a blaze of glory just felt wrong, even if Jess wanted it so badly that she could see it, gold-colored and glowing.

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It was hot and humid, but it was always hot and humid in the summer, and Jess's father lit the mosquito torches and they ate on the raised deck looking over the yard. Ella's children were, in fact, eating boxed mac and cheese, or two of them were—the youngest girl ate just plain macaroni with butter, and Ella had washed off a marinated chicken breast for one of the boys. The adults ate tacos with chicken and pickled onion and sour cream. Or Jess's mother couldn't keep anything down, poked listlessly at some crackers, and Ella's children needed something every second she almost took a bite, so she didn't really eat. Jack didn't seem to notice.

“So Jess,” he said. He was still the smirking boy he'd been in high school Geometry, the one who said *so Jess, you aren't going to prom, cool, cool*, the one he'd been before Ella looked twice at him, when Ella dumped boys because they didn't care about the right things—what color roses to buy for her mother, how she and Jess saved their babysitting money to buy her a piano. Ella was cutting up the piece of chicken. “Jess, how's that dating scene going?”

She hated him, she hated him, she hated him. She tried to recite his good qualities to herself when she wanted to kill him, but there were so few. Once, when she'd been invited to their house in New Jersey for a baptism, he'd taken Ella out for drinks and carried her up the stairs when she was trashed, her arms around his neck, but she couldn't think when he talked to her—her mind went blank, scrambled for something safe, lit on Jonquil, sitting at a carved

mahogany table, dressed in velvet, saying, coolly, *if you're asking for a date, I think you'd better reconsider who you're talking to.*

“It’s,” Jess said, “I’m, or I mean—” Jonquil said *I have high standards*, looked pointedly at Jack. She couldn’t say that. Jack was already sort of smirking. Her parents didn’t notice—her father was helping her mother pour a glass of water. When Ella met Jack in college, after they’d missed each other in high school, came home swearing she was in love, their mother said to Jess, *she’s just young, it’s just exciting, think how exciting an eight-hour date must be, you start at Starbucks and end on a boat...*

Jess had never even been on a one-hour date at that point. She had been on a few since then. Just—just nothing like Jonquil, making men fall in love with her, falling down in fields of flowers for secret meetings. Nothing like Jack carrying Ella up the stairs.

“We should get a cat,” Ella’s older daughter said in the pause that followed. “We should get a cat like Princess.”

“She’s the perfect lap cat,” their mother said, and Jess’s heart ached. Some geraniums on the porch were wilted and dying. “She’s very good, she’ll lie next to me for a long time.” The kids all looked at her uneasily—her waxy hands, how thin she was. “I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

When dinner ended, the kids ran into the yard while Ella and Jess cleaned up, quiet in the kitchen while their father helped their mother to bed. Jack was on the phone—work, Ella said—his uncle did something on the business side of building houses, and Jack worked for him. Though through the glass, he looked like he was smiling too much, speaking too softly. Jess

filled with something hot and angry. Ella was seeing this and didn't react, and Jess wanted to force her inside and have her smack the phone out of his hands and make her leave him. Princess mewed on the floor.

"I know you hate him," Ella said, when Jess was with her on the deck later. Jack had gone upstairs, and the kids were inside, or tearing between the front and back yard, racing through the house and slamming doors. "But it's just what marriage is like, Jess."

"In what way?" Jess said, and Ella didn't answer—slam of a door—and Ella said, "How *is* the dating going? Weren't you going to start trying harder?"

Ella started talking about Jack's good qualities, but Jess couldn't stand it again. She looked out at the yard and called up everything she remembered from the end of book nine. The grass turned to a dark beach at night. The waves. It stormed. The ship creaked. Marie's castle glowed on the bank. Two cloaked figures stood on the stone jetty. Lady Amethyst—worn, caretaker of the Ladies in Waiting—and Peter the Stable-hand, stubble on his chin. They were both exhausted—she had the sense things were going badly in the kingdom. She pictured it with sort of a vibe of the stone castle, once pale stone and gardens and fountains, now dark and creepy with the fountains shut off. Maybe it was overkill, but the eighty-six ladies on Goodreads hadn't signed up to read professionally published books. They'd gone nuts for the borderline-erotica scenes, which were tossed in there because Jonquil was cooler than Jess. The Goodreads ladies couldn't tell if the author had—well. The author's embarrassingly-late-interpersonal-milestones were irrelevant, because Jess didn't matter. Just Jonquil, storm-tossed on the beach.

She didn't think anybody other than her remembered Peter the Stable-hand, because she hadn't been terribly clear that he was the endgame, so that had to get set up early in book ten, because all the Goodreads ladies were in love with the Earl. She'd thought she made it really clear he was gay, but apparently she hadn't. Jonquil needed to be hidden—she was exiled—so she went back to wherever the stable-hands slept, she was with Peter, that solved that problem. Then there was just the problem of why they'd brought Jonquil back. If they were going to put her in danger, then clearly it was important. They needed her to do something, which was straightforward enough—she'd been casting around solving crimes sometimes, in books three, six, seven, and half of eight—and they'd heard of her and they needed her to find something or fix something. It was just a matter of what they needed Jonquil to do, and what in the world Jess was supposed to do with herself when she wasn't calling up Jonquil's world around her.

The image of the beach collapsed. She was looking at her parents' dark yard. The neighbors were sitting out at their fire pit, a bright spot of orange, playing Van Morrison and laughing at something. Ella had stopped talking. If Jess had been supposed to answer, she'd missed the moment. The front door slammed open and shut a few more times before they went inside to bed.

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“Have you seen the cat?” Jess's father asked, upstairs. Ella was putting her kids to bed—Jack didn't seem to be helping. “Your mom asked where she was, usually she sleeps with us.”

“Haven't seen her since we were cleaning up dinner,” Jess said. “Can I help look?”

“She’ll turn up.” Her father looked worried anyway. Ella’s kids were near-shouting while she read to them—he glanced at the door of the guest room where they were. Ella’s old bedroom had been made over with a big bed.

“They’re bothering Mom,” Jess said. “All the noise, aren’t they?”

He shrugged a little. “It’s harder with grandkids.”

“To be bothered?”

“To tell them to behave,” he said. They used to play in near-silence when she was sick, whispering *what’s your name going to be in the game?* Ella was a princess, always, *Katerina* or *Ruby* or *Marie* or *Lillian*. Jess whispered then: *I’m going to keep my name*. She carried Ella’s dolls while the evil wizard hunted Ella, had a tracker set to hear her voice if she spoke. They hid behind the sofa. That was the game. “They’re just being kids, they’re just having fun.” He patted Jess’s arm. “Night.”

She crept back to her twin bed, while Jack didn’t help Ella read to the kids, bathe them, put them to bed. Jonquil’s world rose around her, that first palace that had stolen her heart. The pale stone of the floor and walls, the high windows with the arched tops. Occasional suits of armor. Once Jonquil, first lady-in-waiting to Princess Marie, had a lovely bedroom and trunks full of dresses. She slept in the stables now, and she was going to need to go undercover. Obviously it had to be a Marie-related problem, whatever it was they’d called her back for. The prince Marie married had been a jackass, she knew that, so that was probably part of it, though what they wanted her to do about it was the problem. She made Marie walk down a stone hall

gone dark. She looked so real Jess could have touched her, watching her draped in heavy gowns, flanked by ladies. Heavy guard.

Things flickered. Marie looked briefly and violently like Ella. Jess blinked and cleared it all before she had to look at it. God help her, she did not want these books to end. She wanted to keep writing them and writing them. She would freeze time, Jonquil would stop getting older. Why in the world had she ever said just ten? She was lying awake, alone, in the twin bed in her childhood bedroom. Jess did not feel older, and she did not feel wiser. She did not feel like Jonquil, dumped in the shallow sea near Marie's palace, Jonquil who was bone-tired and on her feet, pulling the knife she carried from under her skirt and facing the anonymous cloaked figures. She didn't feel like that at all. She felt like exactly what she was, which was thirty, and so tired that it ached down her neck and through her teeth, like she couldn't stand another day of this being her life. She rolled over in the hard twin bed and couldn't call up Jonquil's world, just heard the settling of the house, hated Jack O'Day. It was quieter here than it was at home. A fox yipped and cried somewhere in the night.

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"The cat never turned up," Jess's father said, the next morning when Jess went downstairs. "I've been looking all over, I can't find her, I've been up for two hours, I searched everywhere in the house, she's not here."

"She can't have gone that far," Jess said, though the sinking in her stomach was already trying to calculate how far a cat could go. Her father was shaking his head as they went out into the backyard, checked the deck and under the grill. She went to the side yard and scanned the

main road—smooth, bare, empty. The neighbors were out gardening, Sherry and Ben, and waved—her dad went to talk to them. They’d made Jess and Ella call them by their first names when they went to babysit some of their kids sometimes, a long time ago—she couldn’t remember how old they would be by now. She remembered Sherry paying her for one of those nights, giving her the last of the money she and Ella needed to buy that piano their mom had almost always been too sick to play.

“We’ll keep an eye out,” Sherry said, dirt-smudged, when Jess joined her father. The cat was nowhere, Ella coming out to join them. Their father went to walk the main road and see if she was smashed there—he didn’t say it, but he meant it—and Jess, one more time, checked the deck, the grill, the table, the chairs, and turned to Ella.

“I can go walk the development here,” she said. “She missed Ella talking all the time and coming up with ideas—she got sidetracked with the kids running outside, and Jess couldn’t chalk it all up to motherhood—they wanted breakfast and Jack was there, leaning in the doorway and not searching for the cat, not busy.

“El, he’s a cat,” Jack said. “He’s an animal, right, he’ll show up when he feels like it.”

“She,” Jess said, though Jack wasn’t listening, and Ella was thinking about it, looking at the ground, down the street that seemed suddenly so endless. “Ella, please—”

Ella shot her a look that was angry, first, and then nothing, just—nothing.

“Maybe we should give him a minute,” she said, and she went inside, left Jess alone.

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There was no way she could send Jonquil back to the original kingdom—that was what she was thinking as she walked around the neighborhood, not really with a great plan, but at least moving, looking, shouting to neighbors that there was a missing cat. They were either the same people she'd once known or people who could have been the same—gardening, washing cars, walking dogs. She looked under some bushes and looked at John and Liz Szarka's double lot, where they had that little stream, trying to make the cat appear.

She couldn't make Jonquil go back. Solution one was to have had the end of book nine be a dream. Solution two was to have Amethyst and Peter prepared to take Jonquil somewhere—anywhere—else. There was a reason she hadn't begged to stay. The queen had given her a chance to stay, apologize or go, and she'd left, though the royal family had raised her and she had no options besides just walking away with what she could carry. Marie had been angry when they parted. Jonquil hadn't been angry, unless she had been. Sometimes she thought Jonquil might have been really, really angry—blindingly, unable-to-process-it angry. Those people had raised her and all it took was one prince following her into a hedge maze to turn them on her. But what she liked best about Jonquil was her cool, balanced, logical-ness. The ladies on Goodreads were constantly speculating on when that was going to break down, or focusing in on those embarrassing moments where Jess felt like she had to put some tears or something in or Jonquil came across too much a robot and not enough a person. She was pretty sure they would have loved it if Jonquil spent all of book ten in a raging, incoherent fury, but she loved Jonquil's cool impartiality. She was always about eight steps ahead, and she liked being where no one knew her, where no one expected anything of her, where no one could think they knew her.

There was a reason Jess didn't live in a place like this. She went and talked to a couple people, told them the cat was missing, asked if they'd seen her, walked away almost able to hear them thinking: there's poor Jess, I wonder what her deal is. And she still knew they would have been shocked if she'd done anything other than exactly what she was doing now, still unmarried, still very, very much alone.

Suppose Marie had called her back—that was the surprise—Marie wanted her restored to her old place. Jonquil reclaimed her old room, her things all reserved for her—though that was never going to work. Jess had been over the first three chapters of book one a hundred times. Jonquil was close to Marie, but the other ladies in waiting saw her as a threat, too smart, never really liked her. And Marie was Jonquil's friend and princess since childhood, but she was an idiot. No. Jonquil was going to need to sneak in.

Marie rose in all her princess-glory: her fair hair, her jeweled tiara, her pale blue dress. That was Marie at nineteen, same age as Jonquil. Marie, three chapters. They'd been raised together; they were friends; at nineteen they were still sneaking around the palace eavesdropping. Marie was raised to be a queen. Jonquil was only ever going to be a lady. The prince came; he tried to get Jonquil alone; the Queen turned on her; Marie was angry; she set off walking. That was before she learned to carry a knife and wear sensible shoes. When she washed up on the beach at the end of book nine, she wasn't just older, her life wasn't just passing aimlessly, but she was decidedly better. And she was going to need to face Marie, who couldn't possibly be the same princess anymore. She was Queen Marie—they'd heard that in book five—she had at least one kid, book seven, it hadn't been clear if it was a boy or a girl—maybe there'd be a whole roving pack of them—

Marie hadn't called her back, Marie would sooner die than ask for her help, she'd hated Jonquil when they parted. She didn't quite feel like the villain, but since it hurt more to think of her that way than to have the Prince-King be the evil one, she was probably on to something.

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"No luck?" Jess's father looked scared when she met him in the front yard, like he was starting to panic. "I can't tell your mother that damn cat's missing, it'll kill her."

"We're going to find her," Jess said, trying to channel Jonquil, sounding more like a child who hadn't understood death yet. "She has to be somewhere."

"She doesn't have to be anywhere," Jess's father said, shortly. "She might be smashed under a car, she might have gotten eaten by a fox, she might be at the animal shelter already, we can't just keep wandering in circles—"

"Do you have another idea, Dad?" He put his hands up to his head and turned away from her. "Because I don't, either we can look for her or we can yell at each other."

"Your mom's going to be beside herself," he said, and they both jumped as the door opened, but it was—

Marie. There she was. As she had been, the stupid teenaged girl in her blue satin dress, giggling all around the palace, enchanted with the prince come to marry her, unwilling to listen to Jonquil about him, angry at her, sending her away. Queen Marie, now, in velvet gowns trimmed in ermine, heavy crown in her hair. She'd been angry when they parted. Jonquil slunk off betrayed. Admittedly Marie had probably felt it, too, hadn't she, thinking that Jonquil had

tried to take the prince from her, when he was everything Marie had thought she always wanted, he'd been glorious then, she'd thought, and Jonquil hadn't seen it. Maybe she'd slip into Marie's point of view, but what was true was that she was pretty sure the romance with the stable-hand was going to be secondary, because she had nothing that rivaled how much Jonquil loved Marie.

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Ella, when she came to join them, set a cardboard box and Princess's food dish in the driveway.

"I don't know if it's real or not, but I heard she might come sit in a box," Ella said. "Cats, I mean, I heard it online." She rattled the food dish, and a bluebird took off, but there was otherwise no noise.

When their dad went to get in the car and head to the animal shelter, Jess and Ella went out to the edge of the driveway, looking both ways down the unlined road. The early morning cool was clearing—it was getting hot and unpleasant, almost steamy.

"She can't have gone that far, can she?" Ella looked hopeful still, and it made Jess hopeful, too. "Let's check the yards right down here, we'll scan under the bushes, or something." At the property line, Jess bent down and checked under a thick flowered shrub, looking into the mulched dark and waiting, as though the cat would appear. She didn't. She stood and moved down to the next one—Ella went a couple ahead of her and leaned under to look.

"Milky used to go hide under the pine trees," she said, when they were heading another yard down. "That's what I'm thinking, when they were still along the back of the house?"

It was an empty sightline onto another backyard now. Jess bent to look under some kind of hedge and added, “You remember when we lost Ms. O’Conner’s cat? When we were babysitting?”

“And it was raining,” Ella said. “Don’t even remind me, that was the angriest cat in the world, when we found her—she’s still alive, that cat, I ran into her the other day, Ms. O’Conner. Ruth.” She grinned while she moved down to the next yard, calling back over the distance, “Her daughter’s twenty-five already, I picture her younger than that.”

They used to have a monopoly on babysitting—Jess jogged ahead across the empty stretch of yard to catch up with her. They’d replaced Angie Hawkins and Diane Barnes, when they’d both gone off to college—they’d been in the old original houses, the brick ones, before theirs got built out towards the edge of the development. Jess and Ella had blown all the money they ever made on the piano. It had been worth it. That look on their mother’s face when they brought it in.

“College,” Jess said, gesturing up at the Palmquist-Wagner house—they used to watch the son. “College, and Rachel Wilhelm’s working at a museum in DC, she did turn out to be a paleontologist, or something like that—”

“All the dinosaur facts she used to recite, she should have, we suffered for that—” Ella pointed back at Sherry and Ben’s house next to their dad’s. “Older ones are gone, younger ones there—and Roberts, Melanie has a whole baby, you remember her?”

Something moved and Jess jumped, but it was a dog, a lumbering Golden Retriever, unaccompanied and beaming. She caught his collar as he came up to them—Ella ruffled his ears, though pulled her hand away, and Jess saw it, too—blood, caked in the fur around his mouth.

“The Roberts dad was a vet, right, you don’t think he’s going to have ideas on how to catch a cat?” Jess felt a little sick. Ella bent down and checked the collar.

“Nolan,” she said—she added, to Jess, “The semi-hoarder, you remember that, there were magazines everywhere?” She wasn’t sure she remembered. Ella was untying the sash from her dress, looping it through the collar. “Let’s go call them, Dad’ll have the number.” A pause. Politely—“Unless you have an idea?”

“No,” Jess said—she wished Ella hadn’t asked. She was and always had been so absolutely sure of everything. That was why Jess always picked to be the servant, when they played—she would have followed Ella into Hell and been sure that she knew what she was doing. A long time ago they used to go out walking, counting up their piano money and figuring out babysitting jobs, and Ella would talk about how she’d dumped a boy for not caring enough whether the piano was rosewood or black—and then there was Jack. And stuff was different.

Ella looked around, ruffled the dog’s ears again. “Or not. I have no idea. We’re never going to find this cat, Jess, she’s dead.” A pause. “Can Dad afford to retire, do you know, I know they’re blowing all their money on treatments—I’m not ready to have to deal with that.” Whether she meant their mom dying or their dad being out of money—if he was, and Jess didn’t know, either—she wasn’t sure, but it hung there.

Their mom had been really sick when Ella re-met Jack in college—that time they’d been sure had been the end. Jess had almost dropped out that semester to come home—they’d forbidden it, but that time they’d felt the strain of money. Jess cried in her room every night, and when she came home for winter break, Ella was all joyous, brought Jack with her. She came to Jess’s room and said she was in love. She laid on the bed and talked, all the things she’d done with him, how they snuck onto his uncle’s boat one night at the end of a date that wound all through Newark, they had sex on the boat under the stars, and Jess had been so angry at her, her refusal to acknowledge their mother’s condition, how their mom kept saying Ella was young, she could be excited. And they argued, Jess and Ella. Badly.

And she’d started dreaming that night, hadn’t she, she’d been daydreaming about a princess who left a place where everyone hated her and misunderstood something about a prince, and she’d started writing, just when she was bored, when she got off the phone with Ella hating her, hating Ella who had dumped Jason Hunt in high school because he didn’t get why she’d drive around to florists looking for flowers to bring their mom. And when she finished college, when Ella was still finishing and still with Jack—Jess had been twenty-one. She promised ten books. Here they were.

“I don’t know,” Jess said, and Ella sighed, sort of squeezed her arm.

When they got back to the house, Ella holding the panting dog, Jack opened the door and walked out to meet them. They stopped. Jess folded her arms.

“El, he’s a cat,” Jack said. “He’ll come back, c’mon, kids are going nuts, you aren’t going to find him just wandering around.”

“*She’s* a cat,” Jess said, and Jack looked about to laugh at her, though she couldn’t stop herself—“It’s been the same cat for nine years, Jack, there’s only been one cat you’ve ever met here, it’s been the same one, she’s a girl cat.”

Jack almost sort of smirked at her. The dog strained at the leash and Jess took him before Ella let him go any further—she was sort of looking at Jack, almost puzzled.

“Go watch the kids,” Ella said, after a moment. Jack didn’t even seem to hear, and she said it, louder—“Go watch your kids, Jack, I’m looking for the cat, I’m sure not finding her staying here—Jess, new plan, we’re walking the dog over to the Nolans, we’ll deal with this cat in a minute—Jack, stop letting all the air out, I’m going with Jess.”

Silence. Jess patted the dog. Then Ella grabbed the makeshift leash from her and turned around and started walking, and Jess followed. Ella flashed a brief grin at her. *I’m going with Jess*, she’d said, and it sat warm but somehow sour inside of Jess. It wasn’t at all how she would have written it.

They didn’t say anything—not till Ella handed the dog over to frantic Mrs. Nolan, and they were headed home, back up the gentle hill they’d walked a million times. Sherry and Ben, were coming outside—she was carrying something, they were laughing—Ella said, “How does everybody look so happy all the time?”

“No idea,” Jess said. Sherry waved at them—she was holding Princess.

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The cat, unscathed after a night under Sherry and Ben's grill, was returned to their mother, who was bad today, listless and half-awake, lying quiet in the dim bedroom that smelled of something chemical, almost sweet. They were leaving that night—Ella and Jack loaded up their car and their kids, and Ella hugged Jess goodbye, then their dad, and they left, looking much the same as usual—though Ella and Jack maybe talked less, and she got in, leaving one kid still out of the car that Jack doubled back to get. Jess's flight was later—she left after they did, her dad squeezing her cat-scratched hand and letting her go. She got in the rental car and left the radio off.

Book ten. The final one. Jonquil called back to the original kingdom, and Jonquil couldn't be there to force Marie to leave the prince-king, because you couldn't force a person to do that. But Jonquil was there to fix something. She was still thinking about it as she went into the airport, through security, out to the terminal with the windows over the landing strips. Jonquil was there to save the kingdom. Maybe the prince—the king—maybe he was redeemable, maybe he wasn't—maybe she was there to overthrow him, maybe just to shake some sense into him, or into Marie. And what—what? Jonquil fixed Marie's kingdom the way she did all the rest of them and that was that? Jonquil just went back off questing again, never really with a life of her own, just dropping into other lives?

Or no—she'd forgotten—the stable-hand—she'd planned a whole future for Jonquil—she'd had all kinds of notes on this, trying to figure out how to make it happen faster—she married him, that had been the end game even if all the Goodreads ladies wanted her to marry that Earl. She married the stable-hand, and they had a nice life not on the palace grounds but near it. They had a daughter named Renée, or maybe it had been two daughters. Things worked out

okay. It was just that the whole book had to happen before they did, and Jonquil, whose travels really had all listed towards Marie—Jess wrote pages of Jonquil eavesdropping on stories about her kingdom—Jonquil who was always part angry, part betrayed, part pretending she was above anything so human as emotion, pretending she was made of cold rationality, she was going to need to—

“Attention passengers, boarding for flight 953 nonstop from BWI to Atlanta—”

The airport shimmered up around her. The high gleaming windows over the tarmac, the deep blue of the plane humming to rest. A tear in a faux-leather seat, fuzzed with whatever stuffing was inside. Three girls with backpacks went sprinting past down the wide tiled hall, shrieking with laughter even while they were running—a group of three suited men went walking towards the exit—one caught another, they waited for him to tie his shoe. Three tourist children, looking sunburned and tired, protested a flight delay in the terminal facing her. She saw herself, too, a flash of herself in the glass, her hair falling over her shoulder. It felt uncomfortably close, this other self, and she looked away, this utterly ordinary woman who looked just like her mother, and had no power to save her, no matter how badly she wanted to, and who sat alone just with herself.

## The Newlywed Game

Sherry and Ben are supposed to go to marriage counseling on Monday. It's been a long time coming but she's still angry that he was the one who suggested it, even if out loud she agreed that yeah, sure, it sounds like a good idea. For the past two weeks while they've been waiting, she's been taking notes on what she'll say, but when his extended family's all up at their house on Saturday, while they're playing that game, she feels something crack inside her that makes her want to scrap all her restrained notes, all her commentary on quality time and sex. They've been playing the game for ages, an hour of explaining, Sherry moderating because Ben's out in the kitchen helping get the food ready. She's reading endless cards of *what's cousin Sara's favorite movie, what did her husband guess it was, oh, ha-ha-ha*. By the end, there's a bet going, crumpled one-dollar bills being tossed onto the table. Will Sherry's stepdaughter Lorraine's husband get more correct-answer points, or will cousin Emily's husband? Lorraine's has won, but only Sherry has seen the card yet.

The house is restless and loud. Sherry's daughter Gemma is beating cream with a whisk in a metal bowl in the kitchen and outside it's pouring. Already she can foresee the fight with Ben. She can hear him saying *all you had to do was just read the card, Sherry, all you had to do was just read the card like a regular-goddamn-person*. Already she can picture a marriage counselor's office, already she sees the office where she went with her first husband when they were splitting up twelve years ago.

She hears Ben saying *why did you do that, Sherry*, but she's doing it anyway. She just makes stuff up, all wrong answers. Ben's family laughs and laughs. Money hits the table. It's raining and there's laughing and that whisk keeps hitting the bowl, over and over and over.

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Here's what she'll say to Ben. Never mind that the therapist is going to tell her to use polite words and I-Statements. Maybe she'll even say it tonight when everyone leaves: *you* try it, Ben, you try being me. Let's see how you like it.

Twelve years ago. Imagine this. You aren't you, Ben, you aren't Ben O'Rourke, the good boy who went to Loyola and got married at twenty-four and had your nice children baptized Catholic. You're Sherry Carson, the girl from Delaware whose father said she could go to college if there was money left when her brothers were done. You scraped through in six years working sixty hours a week, you're the girl from Delaware who didn't have time to have sex until she was twenty-two, whose roommate said then that she was worse than a virgin, she was an elderly one. Twelve years ago. You're thirty-four, just divorced, when you sign up to take that non-credit class about *Ulysses*. Your kids, Meredith and Gemma, are four and two, they both have ear infections, their father's off living his second childhood in California after you spent those endless years trying for kids. That's who you are when you walk into that grimy yellow-lit classroom twelve years ago. You aren't you, not the lawyer in the sweater sitting in the back laughing so easily, talking to everyone, your copy of the book yellow and dog-eared, marked with sticky notes at every place you stopped where you tried to get through.

You're me, Ben, she'll say. You're me, walking in almost late. You're me hearing you talk about your kids, twelve-thirteen-fourteen, thanking God that mine aren't so old. You're me reading over the papers on how to get a refund as soon as the half-asleep old professor starts to lecture. You're me outside talking to you after class. January. Black sky, frozen puffs of breath. You're me loving how you look at me. You're me in February crying in the parking garage

because you told me that you finished the book but keep coming to class anyway. To see me. You're me, Ben, and no one's ever loved you that much before.

You're me knowing it's been years since you loved your wife but knowing that I'm still hurting her. You're me when you leave her, when you tell her it's over, you're me at our victory dinner in the Afghan restaurant downtown trying to smile, you're me on my back in bed later pretending to finish because I can't stop wondering if she cried.

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Then try this, Ben, see how you like this: you try being the homewrecker. You're me, Sherry-Ben, you're the reason your kids get the worst of all worlds: their mother and their private Catholic school during the week, twenty minutes from their friends and anything to do every weekend. You didn't hold them when they were born. You get them when they're twelve-thirteen-fourteen, Lorraine-Thomas-Grace Ellen. See how much fun it is to try to win them over. Try spending every evening after work messing with the IKEA bedrooms, hoping to make them more like home, moving things around, unpacking, tidying, painting those craft store letters to label their doors with their names. Try having Thomas and Grace Ellen slink around like scolded cats, disappear to their rooms, and try listening to *you*, Ben, standing in the kitchen like everything's fine, saying they're just warming up when anybody with eyes can see it's not true.

And Lorraine, little smart-ass getting dropped off in the middle of the night, past curfew, by friends who drive off in a blare of headlights and screech of tires, Lorraine vomiting peach alcohol in the powder room and smoking out her bedroom window, almost flunking out of English class because she flat-out refused to do assignments when she didn't see the point, getting dress-coded every day, hacking her skirt shorter with safety scissors in a bathroom stall

and throwing a fit in the office. You try being her stepmother in the office, trying to take her side—*yes, yes, it's not right at all that the teacher made you kneel like that to measure your skirt, but please stop screaming, the nuns are getting upset*—and you try having her ignore it.

In therapy, Sherry will say: do you remember how we screamed at each other that night, you and me, us? We used to fight about her. I said I didn't want her to be expelled, you said you didn't, either, but that I should have taken her side. Do you remember later, when she'd gotten into UMD, when we were all three at Bed Bath and Beyond for XL twin sheets and a shower caddy, do you remember how difficult she was, kept needing to touch everything and we both wanted to throttle her? Even though we shouted about her later, about all the stuff to do and how she just wasn't getting any of it done? And when she was gone, when she'd gone to school, do you remember how quiet it was?

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She'll tell him this, too, that when it comes to this whole business of Lorraine just needing to be married right now, twenty-four, *twenty-four*, Sherry's not the crazy one. That fight she had with Lorraine a month ago, that wasn't on purpose. All she tried to do was make a point, just one little counter point to make sure Lorraine was thinking. She just tried to say what everyone says, when she walks the dog and the neighbors ask how the kids are doing. Sherry says: Grace Ellen's moved to California to study astrophysics, Thomas is at grad school in College Park for Chemical Physics, Lorraine's at Hopkins studying RNA function and oh also she's getting married. They all say *hey, that's great!*, and then she sees them think for a minute, whoever she's talking to—John Szarka, Kim Bergman, Jim Wagner, all the neighbors with dogs, without blended families, who can't possibly understand the gulf between her and this stepdaughter—and they say, *hey, she's young, isn't she, she's what, twenty-five?* When

corrected, they all say *ah*, and they all sort of nod and smile knowingly. John Szarka says, *hey, you never know, I met my wife in college*. Jim Wagner was somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty-seven when he and his wife had their son and looks at her like Lorraine is doing something foreign and dangerous.

And she knows it's a fine line. That sure, when you google it, there are all these articles about Millennials and average age and whatever. Which is twenty-eight, for women, around here. Though when you get just a couple years past that, Jen Knowles at *thirty-four*, all anybody can talk about is what her *deal* is, if she wants kids, if she doesn't want kids, what exactly she's *doing*. Whatever age Lorraine was, nobody would ever think it was right. They don't say any of that to you, Ben. When you're on walks with us, it's all different, it's like a different conversation entirely, a clap on your arm about how great that is, so of course you have no idea.

So be me again, Ben. You be Sherry-Ben. You're me, and you try pointing out to Lorraine that there's no cheap way out of a marriage. That she's just twenty-four. That she doesn't *need* to be married. That she could just *live* with the guy. That she did meet him when she was—what, eighteen? That she could, you know, play the field a bit. Not tie herself down too early. You try having Lorraine said, terse, *okay, thank you, but I'm happy*. You try pointing out well, maybe you don't *know* if you're happy yet, there's something to be said for keeping your freedom for a while. Then Lorraine goes *look, can't you just be happy*, and you try pointing out *there's no easy way out of it, why do you need to get married*, and Lorraine say *okay, why did you need to marry my dad*.

*You try it, Ben, what would you say? Wouldn't you say look, I'm just asking what's going to happen if you wake up when you're fifty and wish you'd done something different. You try having Lorraine say what if you wake up when you're fifty and wish you'd done something*

*different?* You try getting off the phone *knowing* that your husband is on your side, that he agrees, that she's too young, but still having him blow up about the *principle* of the thing. The *principle*. Was that the *opportune moment*. Was the *tone* appropriate to convey the *sentiment* in a way that would *motivate anyone to listen*. Like he always gets his *tone* spot on, suggesting marriage counseling halfway down the bean aisle at the grocery store, like he didn't used to pretend not to be there while you argued the importance of the SAT at dinner with his children.

You try going to City Hall with Lorraine and her almost-husband and his parents—and to lunch with them after—remembering this. Back when Lorraine started at University of Maryland, you, Sherry-Ben, you tried to check Find My Friends to see if she'd gotten home safe every night, because how else were you supposed to know the truth, the for-sure truth? And every night she was *never* back in her own room with her IKEA polar bear and paisley bedspread. You try keeping that quiet, this unspoken thing you aren't supposed to know. You try remembering her junior year, the car ride home for Thanksgiving, with Lorraine saying *so suppose you're friends with a guy, but you never thought of him like that, because you could never tell if he liked you, but maybe he did like you, but then you start liking him and you find out he does like you, and then like, what do you do?* That's the boy Lorraine's just married. He's fine. Quiet and shy. Lorraine's out of his league appearance-wise, but his whole being radiates *I'm genuine and well-intentioned*, and Lorraine seems to like him. She gives him a bite of her pasta from her fork at the restaurant after their wedding.

But it's the principle of the thing. Sherry-Ben. You lie awake thinking of everything she's just given up, trying to guess at what happened in those dorms when you took her back to school, how she was so sure, how she's so certain she's right.

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You try this, too, Sherry-Ben, you try sounding happy about the family party that started the whole mess with the game. Months before Lorraine popped into City Hall, her cousin Emily got married in a fit of expensive splendor at a rented hall in Silver Spring, and Emily and her parents all take Lorraine getting married within the same year to be an insult. You try getting home a couple days after Lorraine's wedding to your husband on the phone with his family all suggesting that to prove there's no bad blood, everyone should get together. You try hearing them pity Lorraine's *sad little wedding* like she didn't pick what she wanted, you try thinking about seeing them when they still think of you as The Homewrecker. You think about how much fun that's going to be.

Did you not go to any of the old holidays, Ben? Did you never see how cliquey they were? The cousins running upstairs giggling with their daring at leaving Lorraine behind? Did you forget how their mothers never commented? Did you forget that you used to tell your girls when they complained that they didn't even like the cousins, anyway, that it didn't matter, chin up? Did you forget how we used to scream at each other later about how it was the principle of the thing, Ben, that it doesn't matter if Lorraine likes them or not, why wouldn't you defend her?

*I am defending her*, you used to shout, Ben, you'd be in my face shouting back at me about how you couldn't stand them laughing at her, and you knew they would, and I'd be in your face shouting at you, Jesus Christ, Ben, if you think she's having that much trouble with people, don't you think you should get her tested or something, take her to somebody, and we'd go like this, back and forth for ages, every time we saw your goddamn family?

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Sherry-Ben, let's see what fun *you* would have had today. You're the homewrecker, and no matter how many veggie platters and appetizers you make, that's all you're ever going to be. You try tying balloons to the mailbox, you have a rousing fight with Gemma about her blue eyeshadow. You be me when Lorraine gets there with her beaming eager husband. You're a woman now, Sherry-Ben, and you notice, she has this one dress she wears when she needs to wear a dress. She's had it for six years. It's a joke. You can tell it's from Forever 21. The stripes don't line up. She always looks rumpled even when you know it's clean, and it makes you want to grab her and shake her and ask why she won't just buy a dress that looks different, why she won't just go to New York and Company one time, not anything expensive, just nicer, just a step up, but it also makes you want to put your arm in front of her and fight everyone, because she's put the dress on even though you know she hates dresses, you've been in enough fitting rooms with her to know that, she's trying so hard as all your family arrives and laughs about the dress. They want to see her ring, she offers her hand, her unpainted nails, this little silver band that looks like a man's ring, thin and plain. They ask her if it's a promise ring, if they're waiting for a better time, financially-speaking. She says no, it's just her ring, she picked it, it won't get caught in her hair, and they say *oh*, and she laughs, but you see her twist it, you see her look at it like she was excited, like they're stepping on her.

And Sherry-Ben, you know this, that she's glorious in her unpainted nails and cheap little dress—once they start jostling her husband, your brother-in-law just remembering he's a teacher, saying *those who can't*, Lorraine's glorious in her hard-headed fury and you love her for intervening like she does, even if all it does is put everyone on edge.

Ben, we never fight after these things anymore—that's what she'll say in therapy. We never debrief, they just end, I wait and wait to hear you say something but you never do, but I'm

sure you can hear it, when it's happening. And if you don't, then be me, Sherry-Ben, I'm sure you can hear it when I'm stuck with Lorraine and a handful of the cousins her age, four married and two more engaged, all with their mothers, all giggling and telling stories about weddings and parties. They're showing each other pictures and keep forgetting to pass the phone around. They keep asking Lorraine why she didn't get married for real. They keep asking when she's going to have a party.

"I don't want a party," Lorraine says, "I don't really see the point, it kind of seems like a waste of money."

Do you like that sour silence, Sherry-Ben? How they take it as an attack on Emily, on their character? When you pull her aside you have to do something with her, you have to tell her look, Lorraine, *just please be nice, Lorraine*. You're not a horrible person, Sherry-Ben, you just want everyone to leave, you just want her to play by the rules.

*I don't want to be nice*, Lorraine says. And Lorraine has always been like this. You want to hug her until she cries and tells you something to explain herself. You want to smash her dark head into the wall. Lorraine says *stop telling me to be nice, I'm so tired of being nice, aren't you tired of being nice?*

Sherry-Ben, of course you say, *you've never been nice for a single day of your life, Lorraine*, and of course she walks away without you and leaves you standing in the hall alone. Are you having fun, Sherry-Ben? Do you hate yourself for still being angry at Lorraine, for still remembering that Thanksgiving car ride home, her junior year of college, when you said, *Lorraine, look, you're at school to study, you know that, right*, and she said, looking out the window, *I think I'm in love with him*, and you fought all the way home about what love means?

Do you remember we used to fight about whether she'd done things to spite us, whether all her hard-headedness was character or just an act for us? Lorraine is twenty-four and married and has her whole life she could have been free, Ben, and I just want to fight with you about what it means.

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*You try keeping on through this mess, Sherry-Ben, you try speeding Meredith and Gemma along in the kitchen, you get your help rejected in favor of Lorraine's cheerfully overeager husband, who hovers waiting to be given kitchen tasks like this is some mark of great honor. You try remembering that Thanksgiving you argued with Lorraine about him, when you took her back to school, and he was in the snowy parking lot the same time they were, and Lorraine said, *oh God that's him*. Sherry-Ben, you said *you know you don't owe a boy anything just because he likes you*, and Lorraine was already getting out of the car when she said *do you listen when I talk at all?**

You, Sherry-Ben, see how you like it when one of your sisters-in-law pulls out this quiz she found on the internet called something to the effect of *things Boomers will know but kids these days just won't understand*, and she holds it up to the cousins in the living room, the younger ones, and shows them a picture of a calculator and says, *what's this?*, smirking like they won't know. Gemma whispers under her breath *okay Boomer*. In therapy Sherry will say okay, Ben, you laughed, but you try being me, getting reeled out to watch. You try having you laughing in the background. Your sister-in-law holds up a picture of a taxi and says, *what's that?* She holds up a picture of a record and says, *what's that?* The younger cousins look about to mutiny but keep their mouths shut. Lorraine says, *Aunt Bea, obviously everybody knows what these are, nobody's having fun with this, are you trying to prove something, or what?*

Ben, did you hear that silence? Did you hear that silence, did you just want to scream at her and ask why she can't just let it go, why she can't let everyone get through this and eat ranch dip and leave in peace? And do you not want to grab her and squeeze her and tell her that she's got her heart in the right place and that you just want her to be happy? And do you not hate her for how happy she is? But silence, silence, silence. Rain. Emily says, *I brought a game!* Obviously we all had to play.

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Emily brought *The Newlywed Game*, cards in a sea-green box, from her engagement party, a game you would need to be drunk to enjoy. It's a lot of watching other people write, and the setup involves so many little pieces of paper, so much time of a cousin cutting up typing paper with fabric scissors retrieved from some room with a shut door. Everyone gets a piece, no, two pieces of paper. Everyone, okay, so there are five questions, right, so write down, no, God, wait, let me get the instructions again, okay, so—

Okay. So the first time you all sit quietly, you write on your paper—what is *your* favorite movie, what did *you* wear on your first date, what do *you* love most about your partner. All those little pieces of paper go to Sherry, since Ben's still in the kitchen and she doesn't have her other half to play. She's going to say, what would you have written, Ben?

Then everyone gets a new paper. Answer now what is your *partner's* favorite movie, what *they* wore on your first date, what *they* love most about *you*. Ben's brother asks how they'll score the love question, says that no one's going to get it right to the letter. There's some laughing about how he's trying to hedge his bets for when he doesn't do too well. Ha-ha-ha. Isn't

it funny how he says to his new son-in-law, Emily's husband, that he'd better do pretty well. Ha-ha-ha. Lorraine says, *they're kind of pointless questions, though.*

And they are kind of pointless questions, aren't they, there's no question in these cards that says *do you remember what it felt like in that parking garage where we used to talk, Ben, do you remember how we used to be, where are we going to be a month from now, a year, five?* Of course they're pointless trivia questions that prove nothing, but it's a game, Lorraine. Doesn't she make you crazy, Sherry-Ben, don't you want to tell her that it's just a game, and that all running her mouth does is get them laughing about how badly she and her husband must have done for her to be so defensive?

This is why the bets start. Will Emily's husband or Lorraine's do better. One dollar bills flutter onto the coffee table. Almost everyone bets on Emily's husband—only Great-Grandpa Pete bets for Lorraine, but that's because he likes her husband better, because he isn't wearing shorts like Emily's, and Great-Grandpa Pete doesn't like how people dress now. He puts a five down on the table, alone in its little pile. Lorraine still hasn't shut up. But literally how could anyone answer the love question, she wants to know, how can you decide what one thing you love most, why would you write it down for a bunch of people you barely know? Sherry, she wants to know, Sherry, what would you write down, quick, take ten seconds to narrow down *I love you* to one thing, one thing expressed in an adjective that you can write down, what are you going to say you love *most* about my dad. And you, Sherry-Ben, you're sitting there as they hand completed cards to you, thinking that you do not know, that you would have to leave it blank, that you'd run out of time. Lorraine's looking at you.

*He's a good father*—that's what you say, Sherry-Ben, and there's a general, appreciative *aw*, but Lorraine knows—she hears you thinking you're so glad you aren't playing—she's there

replaying everything you remember, every screaming fight when you disagreed over the children. She knows you almost had nothing to say.

Sherry-Ben, you read the answers, the comparisons of what all the couples said. Gemma's beating cream in a bowl with a thwack of metal whisk on metal bowl. Lorraine's husband gets called back to help once he's written his answers. You do the scoring. Ones, twos, threes out of five. It's raining so hard. Emily's husband gets a three out of five and a handshake from her father.

Then the restless silence, the anticipation. You look at the cards. Lorraine's husband has gotten a four out of five. He has neat handwriting. Hers is the chicken scratch mess it always has been, you remember all the fights over her homework when she was a kid, through freshman year of college when she barely scraped the C- to pass in Comp—and Sherry-Ben, do you remember, do you remember how we screamed then about what it would do to her future?

The rain, the whisk, the pile of dollar bills, the shifting. You look at the answers, Sherry-Ben, Lorraine's scribbled answers—she likes some movie you've never heard of, she went on her first date with this man wearing the dress she's wearing now. Her husband guesses that she likes some other movie you've never heard of, but he remembers the dress, he knows what kind of ice cream she likes and what her favorite color is, and he's gotten the love question right—he's guessed *kindness?* with a question mark for what she loves about him, and she's written, first, *I protest this question on principle, but,* and she's added *but he's stupidly kind.*

He's got the highest score of anyone except Lorraine. She's gotten a perfect five out of five, his movie and clothes and ice cream and color and what he loves about her, *outspoken—*

she's written that with no question mark. She knows without question he loves that about her. His answer key says *hard to pick but outspoken*. They've gotten the love questions.

God in heaven, Sherry-Ben, this hurts you, watching Lorraine watching her husband in the kitchen. And he loves her. It radiates like it did when you saw her go to him in that dorm parking lot—you watched, back then, Sherry-Ben, sitting in the car, watched her take a shortcut across a pile of frozen slush in her sweatpants and old Converse, watched that look on his face, how he brightened when she talked.

All you want is for everyone to leave, so you can sleep till it's Monday and go to marriage counseling and tell the therapist that you don't know what to do with yourself most of the time. You're jealous of a twenty-four year old girl. You're jealous of her correct answers and of all the freedom that could have been hers, or is it more that it bothers you that he loves her bull-headedness, that he loves exactly what you love but what most makes you want to kill her, what makes her so sure everywhere that you're not. Everything that makes you remember yourself before you were you, before you were nice, you were good—though that's a lie, Sherry-Ben, you lie to yourself, you've always been nice, always been good, but once you used to dream about not being good, only once did you break it, once when you kissed a married lawyer in a parking garage and he left his wife for you. You know this, Sherry-Ben, that when people do not behave, when they aren't nice, aren't good, the world collapses. People get hurt. You just want her to be quiet and play the game sometimes, because aren't you playing the game? You're nice, you play, you're *always* nice. You, Sherry-Ben, of course you try to be nice, you say *we have a new record*, and—

And then you can't. You say *we have a new record low*. The laughter is outrageous and you hate yourself because you love her and because it feels so good to punish her. She's quiet.

She smiles, very neutrally. She motions her husband to be quiet. She keeps her mouth shut as Great-Grandpa Pete's five is handed over to the victory pile—though returned to his pocket when he's not paying attention. Lorraine keeps her mouth shut until they're all called out for food. She smiles very nicely.

What did she whisper to you, Ben? What did she say? Sherry's going to ask this in therapy. Surely it couldn't have been just *Dad, we have to head out*, even if that's what she did after she said it. From Lorraine? Sherry thought they would keep fighting. She thought she'd set her up for another fight, but Lorraine didn't fight with her, hardly looked at her, gave a little half smile and patted Ben's arm when she passed, as he looked at Sherry.

She'll ask: when you followed me into the office after she left, while the party went on around us, when you looked at me like that, what were you thinking? When you kissed me and the whole world was just the sound of a whisk and rain and a car starting, I felt that you loved me, Ben, but I still felt so alone. I felt you but not how I once did, your frosted breath when we stood alone on the roof of the parking garage, when you kissed me for the first time and everything disappeared, it was so quiet, and it was only us in the whole world.

## Everything Looks Like Love

Ruth's daughter, Amber, is bringing her girlfriend home for Thanksgiving. The girlfriend's real name is *Katie*, though Ruth, when she thinks about her, has just been calling her *The Girl*. This isn't something she would share with anyone—people would take it the wrong way. She doesn't have a problem with The Girl being *A Girl*. It's that Amber cheated, again. To think of her cheating on just *The Girl* is easier to deal with. Ruth wishes she didn't know anything about her.

"Is something wrong?" Ruth's mother asks. It's the day before Thanksgiving. She has invited herself over to help Ruth with dinner preparations, to show off how liberal and forward-thinking she is compared to Ruth's ex-husband's parents. Her mother is in the kitchen, making Jell-O for tomorrow. The blender whizzes: canned pears and cream cheese turn murky white.

"Just worried about the cat," Ruth says—in the living room, out of sight, Ruth's old cat, Rio, sixteen and rickety, yowls loudly. Ruth had to put the other cat, Rio's brother, down a few months ago—since then, Rio's started imitating his yowling, though her version is quavery and off-key. It's been tinged with irritation, too, since she's seen Ruth getting part of the upstairs ready for Amber's new kitten, who is en route from Boston with Amber and The Girl. "Should I put Rio in the basement when they get here?"

Her mother shuts off the blender and looks at her sideways. "Why would you do that?"

"She's going to lose her mind," Ruth says, but her mother keeps on giving her that puzzled look. The sky out the windows is white and blank. Ruth adds, "The kitten."

"The kitten," her mother repeats. A moment passes.

“Amber’s new kitten,” Ruth says.

“Ah!” Ruth’s mother goes from surprise to vaguely irritated—“Ah, see, I just didn’t think—I didn’t see what you meant, of course I know that she has foster kittens—”

“She adopted this one,” Ruth says, and her mother says, irritated now, “Yes, I know.”

Amber’s twenty-five, and she’s been taking litters of foster kittens since she was in senior year at Boston University—taking them in, telling Ruth how much she loves them, getting hysterical when she has to give them away, as distraught as though it had just been broken to her, a surprise. Ruth would be glad she just kept one and called it a day, but she finds it hard to believe that Amber can afford it, and she wishes Amber hadn’t burned all bridges with the fostering agency to keep it. The kitten’s name is Portia. She’s so small that it makes Ruth angry.

“Would it help to keep Rio out of the way?” Ruth asks, looking at her mother, who has always known what to do—and even if she’s been wrong, at least had something to say. Ruth had Amber when she was twenty, broke up with her husband when Amber was in third grade, and her mother has always been the one she conferred with when it came to Amber-related things—going to Boston, the hair dye she used to do in high school, the little boyfriend when she was twelve, the kittens when she was seven and Ruth and her husband had just divorced.

Her mother dumps the second can of pears into the blender, still lips-pursed upset with her. “I know she adopted the kitten.” Ruth’s phone lights up with a text from Amber. Rio gives a raspy imitation of her brother’s meow from the top of the stairs.

Amber’s message says they’re almost there. She’s been dating The Girl for a few months now, not as long as some people she’s seen, but long enough that this visit has been planned for a while, since before the night Amber cheated. The Girl is still a senior in college, with a late

birthday, not even twenty-one yet, and she works part-time at the coffee shop near campus where Amber has worked since graduation. That's also where a girl Ruth has called The Crush works, the one Amber slept with a month ago. She's pretty sure that Amber's cheated on girls before—she's been sent screenshots of texts with Amber wanting to hear that she's in the right and that everyone's awful to her, texts that suggest cheating—but this is the first time she's heard about it in such detail, with such a graphic play-by-play. The Crush being hired. Amber talking to her, liking her, telling Ruth about her, describing in such detail how she and The Crush went back to her apartment one night when The Girl had an exam to study for.

Ruth never asked Amber to be so bluntly honest about her personal life. She's not sure anymore if it's preferable to the alternative, radio silence. She used to think so. But to hear Amber describe it so—so—so neutrally. To describe taking The Crush to her apartment and having sex with her as confidently as though there would be no consequences, as though Amber wasn't exclusive with someone, as though it didn't matter to her. The Girl still doesn't know. Ruth's been rethinking her parenting. She's been going back over everything she's ever said and done. If she'd had a messy and dramatic divorce, maybe she'd understand, but she didn't. Everything's okay. Everything's normal. Calm and regular. And then there's Amber, with that self-assurance. It didn't appear in *any* text from Amber that she felt even a flicker of discomfort at keeping this from The Girl. At their still being together. Just one sentence—just a phrase—it's all Ruth needs. And it hasn't come.

“Are you going to answer her?” Ruth's mother asks, over the whirring of the blender, pointing at Ruth's phone, lit up on the counter.

“Yeah,” Ruth says. Amber’s picture says she has let the kitten out of the carrier. It’s on Amber’s knees in the front seat, small and thin. The fragile point of its tail, its overlarge ears. Its quivering smallness makes her angry.

She says *where are you?* She puts a heart after the question mark. It’s stupid to be angry. It’s not her life. And yet she still spent half the night rehearsing how she would greet The Girl without sounding guilty, complicit. She wishes Amber would give even a flicker of an indication that she knows this is awkward. She wishes Amber would *ask* her to keep it quiet. Ruth hasn’t even told her mother, just to be safe. She wants to, more than almost anything, but as her mother turns the blender back on, she says to Ruth, “And I know they were going to do tests on Rio.”

It’s been a week since they last talked about that, when Ruth got home from the vet’s office near the grocery store with the hissing-mad cat—Rio’s been losing weight, and Ruth declined when John Roberts from down the street, the vet, asked if they should put her under to do tests. The comment comes out of nowhere. Her mother shows no sign that she remembers Ruth asking her to keep it quiet.

“Right,” Ruth says, spreading recipes over the counter and bracing her arms on the edge of it. “I haven’t told Amber. Don’t mention it.”

“Of course I wouldn’t,” her mother says, like there’s no reason at all that Ruth would be concerned. Her mother’s name is Dolores, though Ruth has that buried at the back of her mind.

The blender is still whirring. Ruth looks up from the phone in time to see her mother give it a vaguely puzzled look. She takes the lid from it before Ruth can say anything, ask what she’s doing, stop her. The cream cheese and pear mixture splatters both of them, the counter, the wall, the ceiling. Ruth jumps and shuts it off.

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The Girl drives a red sedan—she pulls up by the mailbox on the unlined street through the development a few minutes after Ruth has changed into old yard-work clothes from the laundry room and made her mother change, but before she’s started cleaning up the kitchen. Her mother is still trying to explain what happened. She keeps saying that the lid popped off in her hand, but Ruth saw: Ruth saw her take the lid from the blender as it ran, as the blades spun and glinted metallic through the murky liquid. She leaves her inside and goes down the driveway with blended pear in her hair and sticky streaks still on her arms. Tomorrow’s supposed to be the coldest Thanksgiving on record—the air bites through her old sweatshirt. She waves.

Amber, opening the back door to get the kitten’s carrier out, waves—The Girl, getting out from the driver’s side, waves, too, all excited, like they’ve known each other for ages. She’s brown-haired and wearing skinny jeans and a sweater printed with letters of the alphabet. She’s beaming. Her parents flew to California to see her brother and his wife and their new baby twins—with the shortness of the Thanksgiving break, it didn’t make sense for her to go.

“Hi!” she says. She is a hugger. She hugs Ruth. She’s dancing around with how cold it is, beaming, silly, looking back for Amber, who gets the kitten’s carrier out and brings it around to the driveway. Portia is a little ball of gray fuzz through the slats of a Craigslist cat carrier with someone else’s last name on the top in Sharpie.

“Hi!” Ruth says, like her voice comes from someone else. She says, to explain the overwhelming pear smell, “We had a little blender mishap,” because everything is okay. She says, “Come on it!” She says, looking into the cat carrier, “So this is Portia.” This is as The Girl goes back to the car and the trunk, when she’s almost-alone with Amber, who beams like

everything is perfect. The kitten, standing unsteadily in the carrier, looks at her curiously from far back. There's a towel folded on the floor of it, a fluffy hand towel.

"She was *very* good in the car," Amber says, mostly addressing the cat, looking through the door. "Weren't you?" Amber is taller than Ruth and her hair is short and almost black, cut in an asymmetric bob that she did herself, which shows.

"Take her inside before she freezes," Ruth says, and then she has a sudden vision of Amber letting the kitten loose and Rio hissing and spitting, and says, "Don't let her out yet. Okay? Show her to Grandma but don't let her out yet."

Amber goes inside. Ruth goes to help The Girl, who has an overnight bag and a pillow and says what people always say, which is *you live in the middle of nowhere*.

"We do," Ruth says. Once it didn't feel like it—her huge house, her big yard, almost an acre of land, were the pinnacle of success, and when she was married, they drank beer sitting on the floor and high-fived, but now she's single and it's the middle of nowhere, where everyone knows her but doesn't really know her at all, and she goes days without seeing the neighbors. She picks up Amber's bag and puts it over her shoulder. There's a litter box wrapped in a garbage bag. She picks that up, too—empty, though there's a raspy sound of leftover litter sliding to the far corner.

Inside, naturally, the kitten is out of her carrier, though Amber is holding her, showing her to Ruth's mother, who is still repeating that the lid of the blender just popped right off, looking at Amber around the kitten like she's not even sure what it is.

"I've never had a problem making it before," Ruth's mother is saying. "The lid just popped right off. It's exactly the same as my blender at home. The lid's never done that before."

“Blender mishap,” Ruth repeats, setting The Girl’s bag down and intercepting Rio as she comes down the stairs. Slowly. She knows. She pokes her head around the corner and Ruth scoops her up. Rio struggles briefly, then stops, looking towards the kitten.

“Hi, Rio!” Amber says, starting to come towards them. Ruth holds Rio harder—Rio doesn’t take it, hisses and clamps her teeth into Ruth’s arm—Ruth almost drops her but stops, sets her down. Rio tears off into the house and runs an irritated lap around the first floor. The kitten struggles briefly and Amber shifts her hands and holds her against her chest. “Rio!” she says, all sweetly. Rio doesn’t appear.

“I’d try to see her without holding Portia,” Ruth says.

“She’s not doing well, the cat,” Ruth’s mother says to Amber, who looks at Ruth.

“She’s sixteen,” Ruth says. Now isn’t the time. She wishes she hadn’t told her mother. “She’s just getting old.”

“She lost ten percent of her body weight,” Ruth’s mother says, and there’s a silent moment. Rio keeps clattering around the house. Ruth wishes that she could take it back, though part of her—a large part—is glad that she isn’t the one who had to say it.

“What?” Amber says, looking at Ruth.

“I wasn’t going to say it right away,” Ruth says. “I was going to talk to you later—let’s have you go upstairs to get settled.”

“Can I help at all down here?” The Girl asks. The kitchen is still splattered with pear and cream cheese. “Do you need a Band-Aid, or anything?” Under her sleeve, she feels her arm pulse, bleeding.

“No,” Ruth says, trying to sound light, giving the kitten a cursory pat on the head as Amber pushes it at her. It’s so soft and downy that it makes Rio feel wiry. Amber puts it gently back into the crate. She wishes there were something glaringly wrong with The Girl. “No, she just got my sleeve, and you can get settled—”

Amber’s bedroom is just how it was when she redecorated in junior year of high school—a huge IKEA world map hangs on one wall, a little too close to the ceiling, and the thick glass bottles with fairy lights wound into them and strung between them litter every surface. She remembers all the hours spent in IKEA in White Marsh, Amber showing her the pictures of sleek minimalist bedrooms, how clean and perfect they were, and how Ruth knew she’d leave her clothes on the floor, but they lived in the daydream anyway, and she bought the map and bottles. Amber has three roommates and a bedroom the size of a pantry in Boston, and Ruth is holding the furniture until some unspecified date in the future.

“Keep Portia here,” she says, as Amber lets the kitten out onto the bed. “Until Rio calms down a little. I don’t want them to hurt each other. There’s litter in the bathroom.” She brought up a half-carton of it and left it in the bathroom that this room connects to.

“What’s that?” Amber says to the kitten, as it pokes tentatively at a patch of weak sun falling through the blinds onto the bedspread. She grins at The Girl, who coos over the kitten, pets her and gets a little mew in response. Amber smiles at Ruth, too. Rio appears in the hall, rubs Ruth’s ankle. She watches the kitten. Her shrunken body starts to tremble with growling.

“You want to come see Portia, Rio?” Amber says, but Rio turns and slinks off.

“I’ll leave you two to unpack,” Ruth says. She tries to be nice. “You *three*—” The Girl giggles like this is a lot funnier than it is. Amber shrugs off her jacket and hangs it on the narrow

clothes rack by the door. The Girl does, too. Up the insides of her arms are thin old scars like Amber has. The Girl has a semicolon tattoo on the inside of one wrist, too. The Girl is an entire person who has gone to a tattoo parlor and has a mother who has worried about letting her go to Boston, back before the scabs scarred over. Ruth looks at Amber, who is so at ease, who seems to feel no discomfort, no remorse, who isn't even a little concerned that Ruth will say anything. They are lying to this girl, as though Amber does not learn, all the times she's flung herself at people and been the one to pull away, the way she punishes herself making them angry at her. Ruth tells her she's doing it and she doesn't listen.

"I forgot the pie recipe," Amber says, "Did I send it to you?" She did—Amber doesn't cook much and sends Ruth details of almost everything she makes.

"It's really good," The Girl says, brightly, beaming at Amber.

"Come make sure I have it," Ruth says, and Amber follows her out and down the stairs.

"Does she know?" Ruth asks, when they reach the front hall, out of earshot.

"Know what?" Amber asks—a moment passes before she realizes what Ruth is talking about. "Oh. No." Ruth hasn't planned what to say past this, and for a moment they look at each other. Amber shifts in place. "Mom, it's not that big of a deal. It was one time, it didn't even mean anything, it was like when I got back together with Jaz that time and it was *just* sex—"

"Am, that's not right," Ruth says, wishing she'd stop talking, and Amber starts to go red and folds her arms.

"God, I shouldn't tell you *anything*," she says. "She would break up with me."

“Why would you do it, if you didn’t want—” Amber starts to brush past her towards the stairs again, and Ruth turns around to face her. “Amber, I—”

“Why do you always have to be so *noble*?” Rio, puffed up to twice her usual size, comes slinking downstairs, growling low in her chest—she skitters away when Ruth reaches for her and tears off into the house. “And when were you going to tell me about the cat?” She goes upstairs before Ruth can consider answering, either honestly or with something about keeping secrets, though the thought is only half-formed and has *hypocrite* in it.

Her mother has started wiping blended pear from the counter with a dishtowel, like it’s a little spill that can be mopped up, not like a block of cream cheese and two cans of pears slopped all over the kitchen.

“The lid just popped right off,” she says again. Rio sprints around the house and lands on the dining room table. She starts to knock turkey-shaped nametag holders off the table. Thump. Thump. Thump. There’s an outburst of giggling upstairs.

“I saw it,” Ruth agrees, because she wants her mother to stop saying it.

Her mother puts the towel down on the counter and looks at her. “What’s wrong?”

Relief floods her, a loosening through her whole body. Everything is okay. It sounds like her mother, who always knows the answer, the same mother she’s always been able to talk to.

“Amber told me something,” Ruth says. She rips off a wad of paper towels and wets them in the sink, then glances at the hall, where the wall mirror shows in the reflection that no one is coming downstairs. She repeats the story to her mother, who sighs and shakes her head a little.

“You’d think she would learn,” her mother says. “Cause and effect just seems beyond her, sometimes.” Amber freaking out in front of a customer at work and getting demoted. Amber drinking and kissing strangers in clubs and getting dumped. Amber’s last relationship, which Ruth has seen screenshots of—twenty-five increasingly hysterical texts and twelve calls, all missed because that girl was on her shift at work and didn’t have her phone. Amber crying on the phone to Ruth and asking why everyone left her. It’s like these things don’t add up for her.

“What am I supposed to do?” Ruth asks.

“Nothing,” her mother says, taking the paper towels from her and starting to wipe down the counter with sure, heavy strokes of her arm. “It’s her life.”

“I don’t like lying,” Ruth says, and her mother gives her a brief, sideways look, fond and almost amused. She looks like herself, like her mother who said, a long time ago, *Ruthie, you are attracted to men who lack the capacity for intimacy*, and Ruth raged, but it was true, even if she hadn’t wanted to admit it. She learned, didn’t she? She came to understand.

“I’ve noticed,” her mother says. “It took two minutes to tell her about the cat.”

“You—” Ruth starts to catch it, say *you told her about the cat*, but her mother has already moved on, and is talking now about when Amber was in elementary school, repeating stories so exactly perfect that Ruth shoves that last comment from her mind and tries to focus on her mother’s faultless memories, tries to reassure herself that it’s all okay.

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Ruth’s mother insists on being the one to go to the store for more pears and more cream cheese. Ruth isn’t sure how she feels about this, but her mother drove out from Towson this

morning, a twenty-minute ride, and was fine, and regularly makes the longer drive to Ruth's brother's house in Catonsville, so she walks her out to her car and lets her go. It's an eight-minute drive to the Safeway, closer to ten if you get the red light at Manor and Sweet Air—easy back roads, past the elementary school, two churches, the community center, houses, the cluster of stores in Jacksonville. It'll be okay.

There's extra movement around the neighborhood—she looks while she checks the mail. John Szarka and his daughter take screens from the windows—every so often, she appears when a window swings outward, and slides a screen out to him in the yard. Kathy Palmquist and her son, Amber's age, wrap craft-store leaves around two wicker wreaths that hang on either side of their front door. Gemma Carson tells her mother about something she's reading at school while they rake leaves, their voices indistinct. Ruth closes the mailbox. She waves. It's the day before Thanksgiving, and everything is okay.

Inside, she cleans up the splattered kitchen. She puts the contents of the drying rack into the dishwasher or into the sink, wipes down the cabinets, and pulls out the old green stepladder from the laundry room to reach the ceiling. Rio thumps up onto the island and meows, loudly, then jumps down and tears off before Ruth can touch her. The Girl comes running down the stairs as Ruth comes back from putting the ladder away, beaming, blushing, offering a cellophane-wrapped and ribbon-tied stack of cookies, decorated like turkeys, tails studded with candy corn in an arch.

“I can cook,” she says, eagerly, hovering at the island while Ruth puts the washed-and-dried blender jar back on its stand and spreads out recipes. “I can help, if you need anything. My mom and I always make way too much food for Thanksgiving. That's what she's doing in California. She keeps sending me pictures.” She shows Ruth the pictures: prepped ingredients, a

mountain of chopped onion, some kind of soup, and The Girl's beaming family: the checked-shirt-wearing father, her brother the doctor, a sister-in-law, who looks exhausted, holding one baby, reaching to the other in a carrier.

Amber. What was Amber thinking? What is The Girl doing here?

Ruth's phone rings.

"The car won't start," her mother says.

She makes the drive to Jacksonville. The parking lot is mobbed, and a car honks at her when she hesitates, trying to figure out where to go to get anywhere near her mother, who's parked near the main road. She pulls past and parks out at the end of the strip mall near the Goodwill and the sidewalk to the lime-green shed of the closed snowball stand. She collects the give-yourself-a-jumpstart battery that was her ex-husband's Christmas present to her three years ago—they try to stay friendly, but it's been labored since he remarried. She walks back across the lot, and almost flips off a car that honks briefly, but realizes that it was a friendly honk, Al and Eliza Wilhelm from down the street driving out. She waves to them and goes to her mother's powder blue car. It's cold and her mother gets irritably out of the front seat in the narrow spot between it and the minivan parked almost on the yellow line.

"Won't go," she says, which is different than *won't start*. Ruth gets in the driver's seat, turns the key. The car comes to life and hums. "See, put it in reverse, it won't go—"

"The parking brake is on," Ruth says. "Stand back." Her mother does. Ruth shuts the door. She takes the brake off and taps the gas, just a little—the car starts to back up. Her mother's face is startled, uncertain, through the window.

“Follow me home,” Ruth says, when she’s gotten out. “Would you rather not drive?”

“I can drive,” her mother snaps at her. She follows Ruth home like there was no problem. Ruth gets the bag of groceries from the back. Cream cheese. Canned pears. Butter and cream—her mother knows she’s never once had enough of either on a holiday. A singular can of cat food.

“There was something about a cat,” her mother says, setting to work on the Jell-O again.

Not for the first time, Ruth texts her brother. Not for the first time, James says *I just think it’s funny that you notice these things and I don’t. I think it would be consistent.*

“Why can’t I let her come downstairs?” Amber says of the kitten, when Ruth finds her trying to coax her Portia the stairs—the kitten has never seen them before and stays uncertainly at the top.

“Because I said so,” Ruth says. “She’ll fall asleep upstairs. It’s freaking Rio out. Come start on pie.”

She wins. Sort of. Amber puts the kitten back in her room and comes downstairs to start the pie. She brings The Girl with her. They turn on music and start talking to Ruth’s mother as she pours the lime Jell-O and pear mixture into the old plastic mold. The Girl is sweetly attentive, wide-eyed. She tries to wash the blender jar, though Ruth stops her and does that herself. The Girl has brought a family recipe and the special ingredients to make it, and Ruth turns over the staples to her. The Girl chops onion fast and expertly.

Ruth hears Amber say, “Are you good?” The Girl says, beaming, “I’m having a great time!” She pecks Amber’s cheek.

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As it gets dark, heads towards dinnertime, Amber puts her pie in the oven and, at Ruth's mother's instruction, turns on the TV and finds the Charlie Brown special—her mother can't remember the emergency brake or how blenders work, but she has the times for TV specials down. Rio yowls in the basement. The kitten meows pathetically upstairs, but Ruth pretends not to hear it, even when Amber shoots her an irritated look.

“Rio's downstairs,” Amber says.

“Please,” Ruth says.

The Girl chops fennel bulb for stuffing, fennel and celery and more onion, putting them in plastic containers labeled with tape. She talks cheerfully about the differences between chopping garlic, putting it through a press, and grating it on a microplane.

“Rio isn't even up here,” Amber says, while Ruth stirs pasta sauce for dinner tonight in a skillet—onion, canned whole tomatoes, garlic, basil.

“I read about introducing cats to each other,” Ruth says, snapping the spaghetti in half and dropping it into the boiling water. “That's not what anything says. You can go upstairs and play with Portia. I'll call you. But you aren't setting her loose down here.” Amber gives a frustrated little sigh.

“Rio's lonely,” she says, arms folded.

“Rio misses her brother,” Ruth says, stabbing the spaghetti down into the water with the tongs. “She doesn't want a new kitten. She wants her brother.”

“You can't know what she's thinking.”

“Neither can you,” Ruth says. She isn’t sure how Amber expected any other answer, but she doesn’t have anything else to say, and goes back to Ruth’s mother, who motions for her from where she leans against the arm of the sofa. She puts one arm fondly around her waist. The Girl, who had gone quiet, pretending not to hear, picks up again, chattering about garlic scapes. Ruth doesn’t know what those are, but they’ve passed the point where she can ask.

They set out dinner in the dining room, no new tablecloth spread out, just the heat-resistant mats that top the shiny, dark table. Rio comes upstairs and jumps up onto the counter as they carry things out, and meows loudly. Ruth gives her some cheese, on the corner of the island. Rio ignores it, still puffed and irritated.

“Do you say prayers?” The Girl asks, sitting next to Ruth. Ruth says, “Moment of silence,” which she still does because otherwise it feels like she’s sneaking food before prayers, even if she doesn’t pray, hasn’t for a long time.

They’re silent for a moment—three, four seconds—and Ruth’s mother says, abruptly, “Bless O Lord—” Amber looks at her briefly, concerned. Ruth puts her forehead down on her hands. The Girl jumps in obediently, knows this one—“This food to our use, and us to Thy service, and make us ever mindful of the needs of others. In His name we pray.”

“Amen,” Ruth echoes. Rio jumps down from the kitchen counter.

“I’m not saying *dump Rio and Portia in the same room*,” Amber says, while they take food. Ruth puts spaghetti on The Girl’s plate. “I’m saying *bring Portia down here while Rio’s in another room*.”

“And I’m saying keep them in their separate space,” Ruth says. She puts spaghetti on her mother’s plate, then holds out a hand for Amber’s. Amber slides it slightly closer to her.

“Okay?” Rio meows loudly down the hall. “She’s upset. Leave her alone.”

She gives Amber’s plate back, puts spaghetti on own. Rio appears and rubs against her leg. Her spine shows, all the fat melting off of it. The hair above one of her yellow eyes has thinned and is almost gone. She looks old. She doesn’t move as easily anymore—she jumps to the island stools to get down, not straight to the floor anymore. In cat-years, the cat is older than Ruth’s mother. Rio’s eighty. Ruth’s mother is seventy-seven.

“Rio does seem kind of upset,” The Girl says to Amber, who still looks about to fight with Ruth and turns on her, cat-fast and hissing mad.

“Come *on*,” Amber says. “Can you take my side, like, one time?”

The Girl grits her teeth, looks at her plate. Ruth is almost embarrassed, watching this between them, like the reprise of some other fight. “I *always* do, I’m just making an observation.”

“The training meeting at work?” Whatever happened at the training meeting, Amber seems to have made a point, or maybe The Girl is just too angry to answer—she folds her arms with her lips pressed tight together, though she forces her face into a tight smile for Ruth.

“This is delicious,” she says. Amber stabs at her pasta, looking at the table. Ruth is as uncomfortable as The Girl looked watching Ruth and Amber argue—she wants to melt into the floor, do anything except watch Amber as she is with other people.

Dinner is too quiet. The Girl makes a few polite stabs at conversation, and Ruth and her mother try to help, but Amber won't participate and that hangs heavy and awkward over everything, and after a while, they all give up, and it recedes into quiet, just chewing and the *tink* of silverware on plates. As soon as Ruth's plate is empty, she leaps up and The Girl jumps up, too, looking wildly relieved. Ruth dumps the leftovers into plastic containers—she'll need more for storage tomorrow and isn't sure about fridge space, but can't stop herself from being mostly concerned with getting everyone away from each other.

Her mother finishes next and stands up at the table. Amber isn't even close to done eating, though Ruth has known her long enough to know that she'll bang her plate onto the counter untouched and disappear—the surest way to get back into her good graces is to take her a snack a few hours later, and the surest way to make her upset is to let her make the first move and reappear tearful and hungry. Ruth, when Amber brings the plate out, puts a plastic container on the counter near it, a little too hard. The lid flies into the spaghetti.

Ruth's mother pats Amber's arm as she starts to transfer the leftovers. She seems to have lost track of what's going on, and puts her arm around Amber's waist, humming a little to herself. Amber shoots The Girl a punishing look, apparently as angry at her as she is with Ruth, who she doesn't acknowledge. The Girl grimaces.

“Don't be like that, Ammie,” Ruth's mother says, still with her arm around Amber's waist. “Everybody has their little problems. This isn't one of the big ones.” Amber gives a faked smile. “And you two got past the big one already.”

There's a silence. The Girl has stacked the plastic containers but has stopped moving, looking at Amber and Ruth's mother. Amber pulls away, looking at Ruth's mother uncertainly.

“Oh, come on,” Ruth’s mother says, with a little laugh. “One little bickering thing about the cat, that doesn’t have anything on the other thing I heard about—”

“What other thing?” The Girl asks. Amber gives her a sideways look, a panicked *I have no idea what’s going on* expression, though her face gives away that she does.

“Mom,” Ruth says, and that time Amber looks at her.

“What’s the other thing, Amber?” The Girl asks.

“I have no idea,” Amber says, loudly and tightly, looking at Ruth, then giving her grandmother a hurt look.

“Because it sounds like something happened,” The Girl says, getting red and angry. Amber is silent. “It’s kind of starting to sound like you did a thing with Monica. And like I should have listened to what everybody said about—”

She chokes up there and stands blinking back tears, red and working hard to swallow and not burst out crying. A moment. She turns and runs upstairs.

“Why would you say that?” Amber asks Ruth’s mother when The Girl has gone. Her voice is loud and tearful, and Ruth’s mother struggles for a long and frozen moment, maybe not even knowing what she said, surely not knowing that it’s the reason Amber’s upset.

“It’s not her fault, Am,” Ruth says, and Amber turns from Ruth’s mother and for a moment seems about to relent. But her face turns cold and angry again as she looks at Ruth.

“I guess it’s not,” she says, “Since *you’re* the only one who knew.” Ruth sighs, which just makes Amber redder and angrier. “Oh, don’t give me that. You were *dying* to say it and you know Grandma’s filter’s gone.”

“Amber!” Ruth says, as her mother goes red and open-mouthed behind her, opening and closing like a fish.

Amber folds her arms. “It’s true.”

“Don’t make this about me,” Ruth says. Her heart thumps fast and furious—she knows she’s going red. She wants to say *you’re way off base*, but somehow can’t make the words come.

“You aren’t denying it,” Amber says. “You’re happy. You wanted to punish me because we aren’t all as perfect as you are—”

“It’s not right to do that to someone—”

“You wouldn’t care if she wasn’t here,” Amber says. “The only part you care about is what everyone thinks about *you*, you’d die if she knew you knew, you’d just die if Grandma knew you were texting Uncle James that you think she’s losing it.”

Ruth tries to find something to say. Amber even gives her a moment, waiting with some satisfaction. The words won’t come.

“Thought so,” Amber says. She starts to walk out.

“Apologize to your grandmother,” Ruth says.

Amber turns back in the hall. “You’re the one who used her as a weapon. Not me.” She bangs up the stairs and there’s an outburst of loud voices there. Ruth turns back to her mother, who is red and pursed-lips furious.

“I don’t see any reason to stay here and take this from you,” she says, brushing past Ruth to the coat closet and wrenching it open. She pulls her coat from a hanger that falls to the floor

and pulls it on. “Using me as a *weapon*, I’m not *losing it*, I don’t see where that nonsense comes from—whatever you’re telling your brother—didn’t I tell you to keep your nose out of it?”

“Mom, please don’t go,” Ruth says, as her mother picks up her purse and stalks off towards the hall. “Mom, please, it’s so dark, it’s supposed to snow—”

“I’ll tell you again to stay out of it,” her mother says, yanking open the front door and banging out. Her car starts in the driveway and drives off with a flash of metal lit by the floodlights, then a glare of headlights blotting out what Ruth can see.

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Alone, she prepares for tomorrow. She puts out the clean tablecloths, red ones, and gets the crystal glasses from the cabinet and wipes away the water spots with a damp towel and sets them out. She sets out plates and silverware and picks up the nametag holders from where Rio knocked them onto the floor. Candy corn goes into dishes—she covers these with napkins, though it was Rio’s brother who loved to investigate candy left uncovered. She stands in front of the fridge and runs over the pre-prepared ingredients again. She chops a few more things. She measures some spices into little bowls.

There’s a pathetic little mew from the direction of the hallway, too small and high and thin to be Rio. Ruth puts down a jar of cinnamon and goes through the living room. Rio has heard it, too, and freezes in the dining room, making a low growling noise that Ruth can feel in her own chest. Rio starts moving to the hall, slowly, hunkered low to the ground and slinking.

Ruth imagines letting her go—letting her have the kitten, do what she wants with it—though she finds herself moving almost without thinking, getting to the hall as Rio stalls in the doorway, growling, and grabbing Portia under her downy stomach, lifting her. She’s so light that

she's almost not there. Her thin claws splay but don't hurt. Her fur is so soft that it doesn't feel real. She mews pathetically between Ruth's hands. Rio, puffed and growling, slinks off into the house. She feels like a traitor. She almost wishes she'd let Rio do what she wanted.

"You're making her very upset," she tells Portia, who mews thinly and squirms. Ruth shifts her hands to keep her held there. "Do you know that? You're making everyone very upset." The kitten's barely even warm, she's so small. Ruth feels kitten-thin bones through her sides, like toothpicks. She's so cute that it hurts and Ruth wants to hurt her. One of her hands clamps tighter. The kitten squirms. Ruth is squeezing her. The kitten mews and squirms, and her hand gets tighter. The little milky-thin claws stretch out. The voices shift and get louder upstairs. The kitten squeaks, an unfamiliar noise that Ruth hasn't heard from a cat before.

That's as The Girl appears on the stairs, looking over the rail like she's doing a cursory check on the kitten to get away from Amber, then freezes, then comes down fast. Ruth loosens her hands. The kitten squirms frantically and makes a thin noise, and The Girl comes around the corner and holds out her hands and takes it, scratching the tiny neck with her fingertips, holding it against her chest. She looks at Ruth with something like horror, or maybe fear. Ruth wants to say something, though she's not sure there's any way to explain it away, make it something other than what it was. The Girl starts to say something, then closes her mouth and shakes her head and darts back upstairs. A door opens and clicks shut.

She's shaking a little. She looks down at her hands, which look unchanged, just the same as they were. She brushes pale cat hair from her sleeves and folds her arms tight to her chest. *I was just*, she wants to say, but she can't think of anything that she could have been doing. She knows what she was doing, hurting that fragile thing, like she needed to crush reality into her.

She prepares the turkey for tomorrow. In the name of oven space, she's spatchcocking it, cutting out the spine and cracking the breastbone flat. It doesn't look as good, but it cooks faster and more evenly, so the breast isn't cooked while the thighs are still raw. She wipes down the counter and puts out the cutting board she reserves for raw meat and takes the turkey from the fridge and sets it out. She cuts off the plastic and takes out the giblets and the neck. The shears crunch dully through the ribs along the backbone. She's not tall enough to get good leverage. She stands on her toes to cram the blades through.

Halfway through, when her arm is sore and her fingers cramped, her phone buzzes on the counter and she stops and scrubs her hands and arms to check it. A text from her mother says *I'm lost*. Her first reaction—the first thing that rushes through her—is satisfaction, that she's right, though it's followed fast by shame, which she always feels when that comes first, which it does, often, and then by worry, what she's supposed to feel. She opens the Find My Friends app—she used her mother's phone to add her to the page, just in case, just so she can be sure—for some inexplicable reason, she's up in Harford County, near the pool where she used to take Amber in the summers, like she turned right onto the main road and not left like she should have.

She texts—*I'm on my way*. This time she won't let her mother drive. She'll leave the car in a parking lot and figure out how to get it later.

She glances around the house, once, as she covers the turkey enough to put it away. The windows are dark and the house is warm and yellow lit. The upstairs is quiet. The table is set—the glasses catch the light. Everything is warm and nice. Everything looks like love. She yanks open the refrigerator and sets on the shelf the stained roasting pan and splayed-open turkey. She shuts the door on the pale skin of the bird, with the ugly red gash and crushed bits of bone that run up the back.

## About the Bergmans

Liz Szarka, sitting on a metal bench in the garage, works every night for the month of December assembling kits for luminaries, the white paper lanterns that line most yards in the development on Christmas Eve.

Usually this is a one-day event. Usually they throw open the garage and make tables out of sawhorses and plywood. People from the community association come, and they make an assembly line—someone counts white paper bags into sets of twenty-five, and someone rolls the top edge of each down. Someone counts and packs votive candles, someone measures sand into brown paper bags to be divided between each white one. Half the crew goes home—half the crew delivers them to houses and puts instructions in the mailboxes.

But this year their garage is full of boxes, her brother's boxes. Half-brother. His landlord kicked him out almost a year ago—since then, he's coasted between their siblings, a month here, a month there. There are six of them—he's the oldest and Liz is the youngest. Of her four other siblings, Mary June and Peter and Catherine all took their turns, and only Simon refused point-blank, no way, not a chance. Liz is the only one still speaking to Simon and she's the only one still speaking to their half-brother, who has now been with her longer than with the other three put together.

Her turn came in July. He's still here. He lost the storage locker in September and since then his boxes have been here, too, filling the garage so that now her husband's car, John's, sits in the driveway—he gives the single space left in the double garage to Liz, though this doesn't strike her as about her comfort getting in and out in the relative warmth—this is because he wants her to see the boxes, every day before she leaves and every night when she gets home. *It's*

*time*, John's voice says, *this can't go forever*. They're only delaying the inevitable. One of these days, she'll have to call another relative and pass her brother off to them. And one of these days, he'll be gone and they'll be alone again, Liz and John, as they were, back to the phone numbers of marriage counselors and his insistence that Liz *see someone*. He's stopped insisting. Her brother, of course, is a major stress, understandable.

So she's been putting it off for ages, the asking him to go. She meant to do it on the first day of December. And the first of November, and October. She's meant to do it since July. She'd meant to give him a month. He's fifteen years older than the rest of them. He was almost grown by the five of them were born—their mother always hated him. He'd stop by sometimes, but not often, usually high and light-fingered, leaving the house messier and emptier than it had been. They were afraid of him, but are adults now and say they don't like him. Their mother, not his mother, told them that it was their job to love him—she sighed, heavily, every time she said this, like she was obligated to say it.

“Of course we are,” her sister Mary June says, “But he's not exactly making it easy to like him. He can't be your job forever, Liz. What does he have all those kids for?”

Their mother lives now with Mary June, who accepts this mildly—the dishes in her kitchen put away in their mother's idea of correct, the criticism of her cleaning. She kicked their brother out within a month, after she realized he never planned to leave. She says their mother is different—their mother is their *mother*, old and retired and getting fragile—but he, this stranger, who none of them can remember fondly in what few memories there are? They can remember a broken window, a shattered plate—a few shattered plates—doors flying open to scare them, no laughter, no teasing, just flying open. How they used to dread his knock at the door, which always came when their parents weren't home, how they were never sure if he counted as a

stranger not to be let in. When Liz was seven, he said every time he saw her, for almost a year, that she was possessed by demons. She was never sure how to take it, if he meant it to be funny or to frighten her—it did frighten her, or what did was her mother’s reaction, her shouting that it wasn’t funny, her forcing Liz to her knees by the side of her bed, later, to make her pray. She doesn’t pray anymore, not in a strict sense, though what’s never left is the vague uneasiness of whispering into nothingness, the way the hairs on her neck stood up like something was happening in the silence that followed.

He is no kinder, though he doesn’t break things now, and doesn’t jump out to scare her. They’ve given him what was once a spillover front room, with a stiff, formal sofa and chair, the piano loaded with family pictures. There is her brother’s sofa in that room now, and his gray box TV. John has reinstalled the doors they took off when they wanted a more open floor plan, but her brother leaves them open and he’s always there, in his boxers and gray t-shirts, flopped on the sofa, barefoot with his gnarled toes needing the nails cut.

Liz has gotten used to him, or she’s rerouted her nights so maybe she just avoids him more. She spends her time sitting in rooms where she never used to go—the home office where her kids never do their homework, the half-finished basement. Her two kids, high school aged, slink around the house—they don’t invite friends over anymore, though now when they want to go to friends’ houses, she always lets them go. John keeps asking her to let him end this.

She can do that. She fills the evening with the luminary kits. She goes to the garage that smells faintly of gasoline and works by herself. There is no space for people to come do it all in a rush one day. John told the community association that they’re just going to handle it themselves this year—he’s the president and no one loves the event, so no one objected. John hoped, she thinks, that this would somehow hurry her along, make her realize that they have stopped doing

things they used to do. They have given the community winter party to the Marzonis because they don't want a repeat of the August cookout, where her brother jumped out from behind their trees and scared a group of kids, without seeming to think that they would think it was funny, just doing it to scare them and send them screaming and crying away. Or maybe John doesn't want a repeat of what came after, Liz grabbing her brother's arm, sinewy and hard, hitting him in the chest with a metal spatula from the grill, leaving oil on his shirt.

It hasn't hurried her along, cancelling events. She works on the luminaries herself. She can do two sets a night—each with twenty-five white paper bags with the edges rolled, sand to weight them, candles to nestle inside. She puts these things in a large paper bag, carry-out sized. She staples a sheet of instructions to the top. She's always wanted the instructions stapled and not placed in the mailbox. She tries to take some pleasure in how she finally has her way.

"Everything okay?" people have started to ask. They say this when she walks the dog, who does not care for her brother and has started to antagonize the other dogs, so that Marianne Hawkins turns around and walks her small yappy thing off when she sees Liz coming, and Liz can't blame her for fear of the little thing crushed in powerful jaws, but she resents her anyway for thinking Liz would let it happen. Marianne doesn't ask if everything is okay, but she hardly talks to anyone.

Everyone else asks. They say this as she gets the mail, like they're watching her in this place she and John once picked because they liked the privacy of their double lot. They say this when they see her in the Shop-Rite down the street. They say it when she drops the kids off at school, their private high school down closer to Baltimore. A handful of other people here have children who go there and they ask her when they see her in the pickup and drop-off lines.

When she gets in bed next to John, he says, “I’ll tell him to go.” She says no. He says, “After Christmas. If you won’t tell him after Christmas, I will.” They’re quiet. John reaches over to touch her and she doesn’t react. He rolls away in silence. He doesn’t try again.

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The luminaries started after the business with the Bergmans, which she hasn’t told John about. She doesn’t think he’d get it, is convinced he would think that she’s stringing together a series of random events that have no connection, but she’s not, she knows she’s not.

That starts like this. On the second Tuesday of November—the community association meets the second Tuesday of the month—they don’t host the meeting for the fourth month in a row. John has been on the community association board since they moved here twenty years ago, pre-children. He has been an officer for fifteen of those years—they have held more meetings than anyone else. But after July, John starts to pass it off to other people, which confuses everyone—no one checks their email, and people show up at Liz and John’s house to Liz in her pajamas at the front door. They say *where is everyone*, laughing, as though they think they’re the first ones there. In August and September, she sends four people off to the proper houses for the meetings and says that everything is great. In October, she suggests to the exhausted man from one of the two rental properties that he just go home, since it will take him too long to walk over a street and all the way to the end. In November, Kim Bergman from next door arrives at past-meeting-time and says, “It’s not here, is it?”, as though this has occurred to her because there are no cars but as though she hasn’t yet tried checking her email to see where else it could be.

“No,” Liz says. Kim gave up her officer position at the elections in September, so she makes no effort to get out of the house in a hurry. She stops to talk to Liz about how things are,

how her kids are, if her brother's still staying with her. Liz hasn't started to make dinner. Her brother stays in his room with the TV making sound through the wall. The kids don't come downstairs. She's let the white stovetop get splattered without cleaning it. Kim sees that things are not okay—the loose dustballs and bits of grated cheese, dry and curled, on the kitchen floor. At first John picked up the slack, covered for her. Now he's trying to hurry her along.

She invites Kim to stay and chat and she throws together a plate of light snacks, mostly olives, and they both have wine. Kim's got one son already in college in Pennsylvania, and the twin girls in senior year, one accepted already to a different school in Pennsylvania, one with applications still out. Liz asks detailed questions about the drive times and routes to get to those schools, though she doesn't really care. She asks detailed questions about what they want to study. Kim says that her husband the Shakespeare professor has been offered a job at a university in Minnesota, but she does not phrase this as *we are moving to Minnesota*. Liz asks, while they eat olives, if Kim would move there. Kim says, "No, that would just be him. It might be good for a while." They finish the bottle. Kim says, "I mean, you might call it separating. We're waiting till the girls are out of the house." Kim smiles as she says this. She says, "We've been married a long time. We're both difficult people to be married to. We've tossed this idea around before."

Her brother wanders out in his t-shirt and shorts. He walks through to the bathroom, though he could have gone the other way, like he's making a power move, like he's proving something. She hates the slap of his feet on the floor. They keep eating olives. Kim asks if her brother is much older. Liz says yes, he is, and Kim asks her about him, and she answers without asking what she wants to say, which is how they've stayed married so long if Kim is difficult, too, what she did to keep him so long, what would happen if she fought back.

Kim leaves relatively sober. Kim hugs her goodbye like they are friends and says, “I know John was saying something about you two doing the luminary kits yourselves this year, but Ralph and the girls and I can do them if that’s easier for you.” Liz untangles herself and tries to be friendly, though she’s seething, all at once, at Kim who seems to find everything easy enough that she can take on more and more. She makes herself laugh and says, “I wonder what they decided at the meeting.” Kim laughs. Kim leaves.

Liz keeps drinking by herself. It’s unlike her—she doesn’t lose control like this—she wipes down the stove so it’s an island of bright-white-clean in the kitchen and she goes upstairs to the master bathroom and throws up two bottles of wine. The dog runs in circles and the kids ask through the door if she’s okay. She hears them run downstairs when John gets home a few minutes later, and hears them talking to him, and she hears him coming upstairs.

There’s a half-wall that blocks the toilet from direct view of the door—he must see about half of her. She has her head resting on the wall and she doesn’t look at him, doesn’t want to see if he’s angry. He sighs. He doesn’t say anything. He makes her stand up to wash out her mouth. She starts crying, or maybe she has been crying. He ends up carrying her from the bathroom to bed. They’ve been married a long time, too. They’ve been married longer than the Bergmans. She met him at a tailgate sophomore year of college, when he was a junior, when she shimmied over the side of a truck bed to stand in the grass with him, when she’d had too much to drink and threw up outside his apartment. He drove her back to hers, left her with her roommates at the front door. She tells him that Ralph Bergman is going to move to Minnesota.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he says, one hand on her hair. He thinks maybe he hasn’t heard her right. He bends down and tries to understand what she’s saying, but even once he has the words, they don’t make a question he can understand.

She wakes up to a glass of water on the nightstand and the room dark and John asleep next to her. She rolls over next to him and curls up against his solid back and feels him wake, a little, but not much. She hates Kim Bergman for hugging her, for offering to assemble the luminary kits, for putting out into the world that people can leave each other and smile about it and not feel agony as the gulf grows and grows. Liz hates her. To imagine her suffering—Kim with her life in pieces, Kim sobbing—makes her feel something like relief, and then she hates herself for that. She tries to take it back, unthink it, but she’s just crying again because she still feels it flaring with pleasure. John rolls over, and she falls asleep against his chest, but she might as well sleep against a log, for all the warmth she feels.

He tells her to call in sick in the morning and she says she doesn’t have to, that she can go to work like an adult, though she says this from bed when he’s dressed and telling the kids to hurry up and finish getting ready. She calls in. He takes their daughter and her unfortunate eyeliner and their son and his rumpled shirt to school.

It’s a few days later that something weird happens with the Bergmans. This is a weekend in the middle of November, a few days after Kim and the olives. The dog wakes them when he hears any car besides the trash and recycling, and he wakes John sometime before midnight and shows him Ralph and Kim Bergman leaving their driveway in the car.

“You’re a good watchdog,” John tells the dog, as he comes back to bed. In the morning, he takes the dog for a walk. When John walks the dog, Marianne Hawkins and her yappy thing don’t turn around and head for home, and when John comes home and says he ran into her, Liz starts to hate Marianne, too. John, changing clothes to go work in the yard, repeats what Marianne said: one of the Bergman twins fell from a car coming home from a dance at the public high school, apparently a door that wasn’t latched or locked. Marianne heard from someone else

who heard from someone else who heard from someone else—John is unclear on these points—there’s something about a fireman headed home pulling over after them, who is somehow connected to how everyone knows. It’s Claire, the dark-haired girl, the one with applications still out—apparently not seriously injured, broken arm and some scratches and bruises. He goes to rake leaves. She calls her sister Catherine and tells her that she imagined Kim in pain, that she wouldn’t have hurt her but almost wished for her to be hurt. She asks if God works like that, if she’s somehow done this.

“I think you really should try to get back to your life,” Catherine says, after she has said—sounding weary as their mother—that only *God* makes things happen, though Catherine regularly prays novenas, asking for things to happen, and doesn’t tell Liz the difference. She says that hating people is bad and that she should go to church sometime to get that checked. “Liz, I really think if you had your house nice and clean, and you had your children having dinner just with you and John, things would be a lot better, if you understand what I mean.”

She does, she understands it’s time for her brother to go. Liz wishes he would and doesn’t want to tell him so. She doesn’t want his assorted children, all half-siblings, results of women who somehow haven’t objected to his acid-trip slurred voice and delusions, all looking at her when she calls them to say that they can decide among themselves whose life will be tanked next, that she won’t take it another moment. She doesn’t want John to stop offering to help her, wants to keep him as he is, bringing her crackers when she sits out of the way in the half-finished basement. Catherine asks if she has been thinking about the dark arts, if she has practiced voodoo or witchcraft. Catherine believes in these things. Liz hangs up on her.

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She's too afraid to tell John that she broke Claire Bergman's arm with her mind and she's too afraid to tell him that she's happy to have the luminary kit materials come to their garage the weekend after they hear about the car accident. No offer has come from Kim.

John does not look happy as he unloads materials with one of the other Johns in the neighborhood, with John Roberts. John Roberts has picked up the materials at Home Depot and turns in his receipts to John for the community association to deal with. John Roberts was the first one to take a meeting back in August when they stopped hosting. He does not comment on the boxes in their garage, does not joke about them, pretends not to see them. She starts to hate him for this, but he has a baby granddaughter and she starts to become afraid that she will hurt the baby. She tries not to think about anything. She holds the dog's collar and then she lets him go to bark over the electric fence. Kathy Palmquist walks by with her high-strung Border Collie, who howls and strains at his leash. Kathy waves at them. She hates that Kathy has seen the boxes and re-devotes herself to trying not to think.

The Johns bring up the Bergmans. They talk while she hovers on the steps between the garage and the house. Her John says, "Claire has to be home by now, right?" He says it kindly, but with a hint of concern—it would be unusual to miss someone like Marianne Hawkins for a week running, but it's not unusual to get on a schedule where they miss the Bergmans this long.

John Roberts says, "Last we heard from their neighbors on the other side, she's at Sheppard Pratt, or something like that." He says it softly—this is more from politeness at not spreading the story too far than from fear over what people will think. Her John says *what?* even more softly, barely audible, all shock. This is the mental hospital outside of Baltimore. One does not go to Sheppard Pratt for a broken arm or for a car door that falls open by accident. Liz's heart races—she barely feels it picking up until it's going so fast she can hear it. They discuss the

Bergmans. John Roberts says, “Don’t quote me on that, because I was hearing it from the Bennetts and I don’t know where they’d gotten it—I don’t know if that’s related, I don’t know if that had been coming, I don’t know, but...” There are soft *wows*, a shaking of heads.

Later, John, her John, asks her about Thanksgiving, asks her about his parents, if they should fly up from Florida or if he should offer them to his brother in South Carolina for the holiday. She doesn’t know. They don’t make a decision at all and so his parents arrive on Tuesday to the kitchen John has cleaned and to a menu they haven’t shopped for yet, that she copied over from their plan from a few years before. They give their room to his parents—the kids both have twin beds—and take the air mattress on the floor in the living room. His parents believe that they will like her brother, but they become uncomfortable when he answers in sounds and monosyllables and tells them that he has worked for the CIA in Syria, when he hasn’t, when he tells them in detail about how his delusional unit assaulted a woman. He says they had to do it, that this was what would prevent a bomb from detonating, though he doesn’t explain how that makes sense. Liz, in the kitchen, has the water turned so hot that it steams while she watches the Bergman house out the window. The hot water stops her thinking, which doesn’t make sense, and she laughs, she can’t help it. A silence falls. John’s mother puts one hand on Liz’s daughter’s arm, squeezes her. Liz has a sudden impulse to rip her mother-in-law’s hair out by handfuls and she sticks her hands back under the water.

Liz takes the dog for a walk on Wednesday and finds Kim Bergman just getting out of her car in the driveway. She looks tired, but blank, doesn’t know what Liz has done to them, doesn’t know how much Liz resented her for nothing she had done wrong. They cover the weather, the crowds at the grocery store, the traffic on the way to and from the son’s school in Pennsylvania. Liz can’t tell if Kim is thinking about the night they were friends.

“I heard Claire’s in the hospital,” she says. Kim sighs, heavily, and puts her hands over her face, shaking her head. She starts talking like they’re friends. There was a dance, a group of girls coming home, including both of hers—they can’t tell if Claire’s door fell open or if she opened it herself. Miranda, the other girl, didn’t see it, just the door open and Claire gone, and Claire doesn’t want to talk to them about it. She has a concussion. There’s a metal plate in her arm. She got hysterical—there was a psych consult—she spent a few days in-patient.

Kim says, “I just don’t understand what went wrong.” They’ve already been taking Claire to doctors, but not even for anything any of them would term an anxiety disorder, just nervous temperament, just hesitancy to talk to people at school. Not like this. Not like that would happen. Kim says, “Not really how we thought stuff was going to go.” She sounds frustrated past the point of being frustrated, angry. The college acceptances have to be coming. Kids with worse grades and scores get in places. Kids more nervous than Claire make it at school. Family meetings with psychiatrists have been unable to tell them anything else. She and Ralph do nothing except sit in the car together in parking lots asking each other how these people graduated medical school if no one can help at all, if no one can explain to them how in any possible world it would make sense to open a car door. Kim and Ralph tell each other the same joke, over and over: *what do you call a doctor who graduates last in his class?* She gives Liz a moment and answers it herself: *Doctor*.

On Thursday, John pulls most of the weight making dinner. His parents ask how much longer they will let Liz’s brother stay with them, and John says, “Not much longer,” though when he looks at her, she doesn’t back him up. Liz can’t focus. She cuts herself slicing bread for stuffing. His mother says, “It’s always better to tear it.” She rips the bread into pieces while Liz holds paper towels to her bleeding fingers. She doesn’t let John look at it. During dinner, she

holds a paper towel still crumpled in her hand as they eat, as his parents resume attempts at polite conversation with her brother, who tells them that Liz, as a child, once tried to stab their sister Mary June with a kitchen knife. Liz doesn't remember this and doubts it's true, or fully true, but John watches her across the table and his parents look at each other—her brother, gesturing with his dinner knife, feints at Liz, jerks it at her. She doesn't move. She takes hers from the side of her plate and spins it on the table, flicks it to point at him.

“That's nice,” John's mother says, getting up a little nervously. Fear brings it on. Liz's brother stands in the dimmed hallway later, when John's mother is leaving the kitchen, steps behind her and grabs her arm, and she screams and can't calm down, holding her chest and gasping. John's parents spend the night at the closest hotel, a Red Roof Inn by the Beltway, twenty minutes away.

She calls Mary June on Saturday, when John takes the kids to go see his parents at a restaurant near the hotel for lunch. Mary June believes that ill-will towards others can only hurt the person doing the ill-wishing, and she sounds just like their mother, lecturing on sin and punishment, how her God visited back on you what harm you did to others—like karma, but crueler, somehow, with no cosmic jury. Mary June says that Liz didn't hurt the Bergman girl, but she says, too, that she thinks it's time to tell their brother to go.

A few days later, Liz starts assembling luminary kits instead. It's slow and repetitive and hard to focus on anything else over the crinkling of the white paper bags as she folds the top edges down and they become lanterns in her hands. John follows her out a few times. He folds some bags, too, and says he'll help her, they'll do it some weekend together. She says she's okay. She wants to be alone where she can't hurt anyone. She can handle them alone.

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On the second Tuesday of December, the Wilhelms host the community association meeting. Three separate people come to Liz's door. Two of them say *where is everyone?*, laughing. The third is the exasperated renter who has brought his car this time, apologizes, says he doesn't get the emails, doesn't know where the Wilhelms live, and repeats the address when she gives it to him. All of them interrupt her when she's in the garage, which she's started to do before dinner, too, and not just after. A fourth doorbell sounds at well past meeting time.

It's Kim Bergman. She knows they aren't hosting the meeting. She's brought over a snowflake-patterned tin of Christmas cookies, something like gingersnaps, says her mother-in-law's recipe made so many she thought they might like some, and she returns a plastic container that John took them full of chili. Liz thanks her and studies the floor and invites her in, listening to the rundown of the spices in the recipe for the cookies. John has stopped trying to hurry her along by letting the kitchen go—he's taken up intense cleaning and it sparkles. Clipped to the fridge are Christmas cards full of families at Disney World and the Grand Canyon. Kim looks at the cards and Liz pries open the tin, insisting on trying the not-ingersnaps while Kim is there, because she knows the fridge is full of condiments and tinfoil-wrapped pizza and an ambitious head of broccoli that has started to slip past its prime.

They eat a few cookies, which have a metallic-tinged aftertaste from the container. Kim asks how things are. Liz asks her how things are with her, instead of really answering. Kim starts to cry like they're friends. "I don't know what I did," she says, and she starts to run through a list of things she might have done: did she treat the twins differently? Too much alike? Should she have let them hold Claire back in first grade? Should she have left Claire home on the tours of small liberal arts schools in Pennsylvania for the other kids? Did she repeat too many times *when*

*the girls are off to school*, put too much pressure on them, somehow do this to Claire? There's an abysmal math grade, a *might not graduate* math grade—what did she do wrong so that Claire wouldn't tell her? Liz asks her about Ralph and Minnesota and Kim gives a watery laugh.

“He can't go,” Kim says, “No, God, we need to figure her out first, we agreed.”

Liz keeps herself in her chair. She gets the cookie down. She makes sympathetic noises. She imagines Claire under pressure, unable to keep everything going according to plan—failed quizzes piling up, no acceptances, unsure if she could go if she got one—how impossible to say so to anyone when everything seems to rest on her holding it together. The room feels so close, Kim crying at the table with napkins to her eyes, all the cards on the fridge. She doesn't know what to say. She says, “Things like that make sense to people when they do them. The car door.”

She's pretty sure this makes Kim uncomfortable. She leaves after a few more minutes, not crying anymore, no awkward hug. Liz wants to disappear to the garage or drink again, but she doesn't move, and she's still there when John gets in and tells her that it's time for bed. She wants his hand on her shoulder like that forever, and somehow she's not sure the cost is worth it to keep it there.

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Usually the luminary kits are delivered at least a week before Christmas Eve, but this year Liz finishes them off five days before and doesn't know what to do with herself. She checks John's old hand-drawn map of the development a few times, double checking, triple checking, that there are enough. There are, actually, too many—three families have called John and told them that they'll be away. Usually she never takes any part in delivering them. She helps in the garage at the assembly line—sometimes she makes hot chocolate.

But this year John puts the kits she's made into the back of the truck without her, three days before Christmas Eve, and comes upstairs to get her. The kids have made themselves scarce, though her brother is passing through when they're putting on their coats to go.

"Come help," John says, and so they take her brother. He and Liz walk behind the truck, putting out the kits by mailboxes. John drives slowly, very slowly. Between cross streets, Liz and her brother ride on the back, the open tailgate. She moves faster. They don't speak. A few people wave to them, look curiously at her brother, who doesn't wave.

Down the long stretch of the slight hill the dog hates, back up towards their house, she sits on the tailgate, traces the grooves in the plastic liner with her fingers, traces the route from here to the public high school in her head—nothing over thirty-five miles an hour, all tree-lined and narrow-shouldered. The asphalt moves like a treadmill belt under her, a blur. She wonders what would happen if she fell off, what it would feel like. She looks at her brother and tries to picture him gone: the house restored to how it was, the garage back, all the old problems coming back from where they've been clamped down. She touches his back, the ridge of bone. The truck bumps. She barely even has to move her hand to push.

For a frozen moment, he's falling. He looks at her, makes eye contact, he knows she's pushed on purpose, and when he grabs for her, it's less to catch himself than it is to pull her out with him. His waxy hand on her wrist, the ground rising up to meet her, the jolt of her body on the asphalt.

Time resumes. The truck's moving slowly and John slams the brakes, apparently watching out the mirror. Her brother hits the ground on one knee and one elbow and rolls just from his side to his back, and sits up, swearing under his breath, shaking his head, stumbling up.

John gets out and comes around the side and looks at Liz, grabs her arm and pulls her up, drops her leaning on the open tailgate. He touches her head, not gentle, but there, looks to see if she's been hurt, lets go of her and says, "What did you do that for?" He says that quietly, and his face changes, looks now like he's afraid of her, not for her. John pushes her towards the truck.

"Please get in the car," he says. Her brother moves like he'll push one of them, but she knows his feints and he doesn't mean that one, though John doesn't know, raises an arm to block him, and all three of them are frozen like that for what feels like an eternity.

"You need to leave," John says to her brother, and in the silence, the white sky starts to drop pinpricks of snow. John looks over the side of the truck and takes out a bag, puts it out by the Bergman mailbox and closes the tailgate.

"Get in the car, Liz," he says, and Liz goes around the side and gets in the truck. Her brother shakes his head like he's trying to clear it, starts off walking towards their house. John gets back in. He locks the doors and pulls off, just their kit sliding around in the back. Her brother, in the mirror, walks after them, limping, trying to shake out his leg.

John pulls into the driveway. Their house looks utterly ordinary, the yard neat, the garage door shut.

"Liz," John says, and he puts his head down to the wheel. She watches out the window as her brother stumbles up to the house, and she plays over all of it again, from the summer: John's distance, her brother, her silence and her relief. That's what she would pay for half a life. She touches John's arm and he doesn't react. "What are you doing, Liz?"

Her brother will go, and will it be like this, her hand on his unyielding elbow? She can't answer. She looks around out the windows, the Bergman house and all down the street, where everywhere, just like her house, the garage doors are shut and all is quiet.

## If That's How You Have To Be

Kat Kearney is in love with Alex Lapinski, who lives three houses back in the development. When she googles it, Google says that she can't be in love, because they've never had a conversation besides passing forced interactions in class (*hi—what page is it on*), and because she doesn't know a single real fact about him, besides the fact that he's good at school and plays the French Horn. It also says that she can't be in love because on the bus, she lets the other kids call him Minnie Mouse, because his voice isn't very deep.

Google says she wouldn't let them do this if she were in love but she is, she really is—she doesn't mean to stay silent. When she takes the bus home from school, a high school twenty minutes from the far-flung subdivision where she lives, she spends the whole time trying to work up the nerve to defend him. She only takes the bus home August to December, before lacrosse season starts, and when they get off at the entrance to their street with a handful of others, she imagines herself saying something to him, but her knees go weak and her stomach goes to Jell-O. His brother's in sixth grade and rides the same bus, and he and Alex walk back to their house talking about *Lord of the Rings*, which his brother carries around all the time. The handful of others who get off don't know each other and head off to their houses in silence.

She goes home and daydreams. In her imagination she says that at the high school where she went for half of ninth grade, they called her Roach Girl. That started in middle school, one day in the girls' locker room before gym, when everybody started shrieking and jumping over the bench, but she didn't know what they were going on about and she stopped and looked at the floor where they were pointing. It was a brown pellet of a bug with legs as thin and delicate as hairs. On the way out to the field, a cold day in November of seventh grade, all of them shivering in their mesh shorts, the other girls were laughing. They said *why were you looking at it?* And

they called her Roach Girl—in the halls, at lunch, in the endless locker room when she bent down to tie her shoes. It followed her to high school. When she moved here, she started playing lacrosse. Far out in deep suburbia in Maryland, lacrosse puts you at the elite of the elite, as popular as they come. The girls with their hair ribbons and the boys in their boat shoes are in all AP classes, Ivy Bound. The teachers love them. It's only on the bus with old Miss Betty twelve rows up that they move into anything that could ever get registered as bullying. Minnie Mouse.

*I used to be Roach Girl*, she wants to say to Alex Lapinski. She wants to make him understand this and yet she doesn't ever want to talk to him. They're in most of the same classes and she wants to be put in every group with him, assigned to sit next to him, but at the same time she thinks she might die if she is. In Spanish class, Señora McCullough puts the idiots next to him so they can ask him what's going on. Once she almost died when they were in a group together and Ashley said *Alex, you're smart, can you check these*, and she pushed their answers across the desk at him, hers and Kat's, and he did, he added one tilde to hers and nothing else, it was dark and perfect, and when she got her paper back, she kept it, even when Ashley threw her own in the recycling bin.

She's ridiculous and she's aware of that. But in the sleepy history classroom, where the seats are in rows, alphabetical by last name, she's only separated from him by Sophie Kurtz and when everyone has their head down on their arms while Mr. Lang tells them about early European feudalism, writing on the board in his square letters, she can't take her eyes off of Alex Lapinski. He's not even that cute. Sometimes it's even annoying that he keeps asking questions about things that weren't in the textbook, which it's clear he read. She's the only one of her friends who opens the book. Her dad teaches history at another school—he'd die of shame if she didn't. At dinner every night, he asks what they're doing in class, so she has to read it, or she

tells herself that in the sleepy history classroom. At home she gets excited talking about the causes of the 30 Years' War, how the book breaks down how all the pieces go together.

Even if Alex's questions can be annoying, she still loves him, loves that he asks because he cares about the answers. Once in gym class, when she made accidental eye contact with him, she was so surprised that she didn't hear that Maribeth had served the volleyball across the net to her, and the ball hit her in the face and she didn't even care. When Alex Lapinski gets hit in the face, people laugh. When Kat got hit in the face, Maribeth shrieked *ohmygod Kat I'm so sorry!*, and ducked under the net to see if she was okay.

Once she almost went to a band concert just because he'd be playing in it. She tried twelve separate times to buy a ticket during the week they were on sale, at a table outside the cafeteria before and after school and during lunch. She chickened out, but she still saw him in her imagination, far across the dark theatre among the band kids cleaned up in white shirts and dark pants. Alex Lapinski is one of those kids so good at band that the French horn is silver, a step up from gold. There's no room for it on the bus, but he has to bring it home. One day she had to sit next to him—high schoolers are assigned to the back seats. Everyone thought it was funny. She felt like she might melt into the floor, from being so close to him and from the giggling around them. Alex, silhouetted against the window, watching raindrops trickle down, barely even seemed to notice, and she was dazed with love for him while her heart sped with all the giggling that close to her. Cory two seats back, he asked why Kat was being so quiet, and she knows she said something as an answer, but she blotted out what it was. The hard case of the French Horn rested on her arm and she still felt where it had been when she went home.

And once in English, when they went to the library to find articles in the databases and journals for their research papers, she went to the shelves of books looking for one and he was

there, they were the only ones on that half of the room. Without speaking, he offered her the book he'd just taken down, one of the two copies of the encyclopedia they all needed to find. She took it. If she'd taken it at another angle, their fingers might have touched.

When she got off the bus for one of the last times in December of senior year, with practices for lacrosse starting in January after Christmas, she went home and cried, and couldn't explain to anyone why she was crying—she wasn't even sure she understood. She had never said anything to defend him on the bus, not once since ninth grade when she heard his nickname for the first time and lost her heart. And she knows she should have said something. Doesn't she remember, *Roach Girl, Roach Girl*, the knees in her back through the sticky green seats?

In therapy she tries to explain it, but it's impossible to explain her life to anyone, to make anyone understand what it's like to not be Roach Girl anymore. The therapist doesn't know that she's in love with him, but suggests that she try something to make the teasing stop if it bothers her. She never does. Her friends don't know she goes to therapy. She says she has a college prep class and blames her parents. They're all waiting on their acceptances. Or she's already been accepted to the one she wants, Gettysburg, the liberal arts school in Pennsylvania where her parents met, but she can't say anything yet because Mr. Lang writes your last name and accepted school on the back board of his classroom, for all the AP Euro students, and she doesn't want to be the first to go up. Her friends are all waiting on Harvard or Princeton or Brown, along with UMD and Towson, the state schools where they know they'll probably go.

No. It's Roach Girl who goes to therapy. When they moved here she felt so guilty crashing into a world where she suddenly had friends, more than she knew what to do with, where she watched the pale softness of herself fade into something hard and tanned. Roach Girl goes to therapy. Kat Kearney goes to college prep classes. Nothing's followed her here.

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Not to school, anyway. When she's alone, really alone, when she's not with her parents at dinner, when she's not with her friends, when she's told everyone that her phone gets taken in the evenings so they won't text her or send Snapchats, but when it's really plugged into her headphones playing the *Frozen* album and she's in her room, she thinks she's still the same person she used to be. She feels like the same person, wears the same old pajamas, does the same things. In therapy they talk about writing letters to her past or future selves, but she doesn't want to do that. She has this paint-by-number kit and she did all the big boring parts first, and works with a hair-thin brush at the tiny flecks of color that make it look real. She stares into space and daydreams about coffee shops when she's in college, how she'll meet people and go places and be another version of herself. And her ant farm—it's called a formicarium. It's new. The ants are just starting to branch out on their initial trenches, dig out new tunnels connecting them. She loves their busy little bodies, how they work as a unit, though sometimes their scabbling at the plastic sides hurts her in some deep part of herself and she can't make herself look.

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Technically she has a boyfriend, sort of, but Brian has mono and he's never at school, and if he does come, he ends up missing about a week after that. She's not allowed over to his house, because all the parents are worried they're going to make out and she'll get mono, or something like that, and they never really had that much to talk about in the first place besides people at school, but she tries to remember that he exists and to text him, but she doesn't think they'll make it until the end of the year. Really she's just sort of waiting to see if he ends it after Valentine's Day, if maybe he thinks he's being nice and not doing it right before. She's not in

love with Brian, but it seems like it would be a nice way to end it, calmly, after Valentine's Day, so no one says he's a jerk and no one thinks she's sad about him.

At lunch in the week before Valentine's Day, she and her friends make the guys they hang out with sit further down the long table, and they plan out who they're going to send Flower Grams to, the carnations on sale for a dollar each at the fundraiser table in the hall. The school is so big that there are two cafeterias and four lunch shifts—they're on C lunch, the best one, 12:00 – 12:30, and sit in the huge cafeteria that serves food and smells like old pizza and something burned. The other one is called the Satellite, but it's overflow, quiet, a repurposed lab stripped bare, where you sit to do homework. Alex Lapinski sits there with the band kids. Even they get hall passes to come buy flowers, but she doesn't see him while Maribeth and Ashley and the rest of them, six or eight of them who hang out together most often, laugh and block their lists with their hands, writing each other down to send flowers to, adding boyfriends and guys they flirt with, trying to decide what Becca should do about Sebastian, who keeps tossing napkins at her from the opposite end of the table saying that it's not a life or death decision. Should she send him one or not, and what kind of joke should she make it into?

They don't end up buying them till after school on Wednesday the 12<sup>th</sup>, all of the girls descending on the Student Government teacher-sponsor, Mrs. B, in their twenty minutes before practice. They're still laughing, bent down leaning on their knees while they fill out all their endless slips. They're an extra fifty cents if you want someone else to copy out the message for you so it isn't your handwriting, and Mrs. B, who thinks it's pretty funny, writes out Becca's message to Sebastian, *From: Future You, URGENT, must pass to whoever you like before 12:00 PM!!! Lives are at stake!!!* Mrs. B. wants to leave off the extra exclamations, but they all tell her that they're important, because that's how Becca and Sebastian talk to each other.

Kat sends Flower Grams to all the girls there with her and three others they hang out with. They all send one to Julian because the girl he was dating from Notre Dame Prep just dumped him and they're all sure he's sad about it. She sends one to Brian even if he won't be at school because it's the performance that counts. They send them to a couple of the best-liked teachers, History and Economics and English, and their lacrosse coach. Student Government makes a fortune off of them, but it all goes to their prom, which is Great Gatsby themed and at a hotel downtown by the Inner Harbor, so it's worth it.

She takes one extra slip and she tells herself that it's by accident, but it's not. She sticks it in her pocket blank and takes it home, sets it on her dresser by her ants when she's in her room alone, on top of her stack of papers from Gettysburg. Alex Lapinski toured there, too, and she knows that because they were there on the same day, at that last Prospective Students' Day before applications were due. She hadn't known he was going to be there—their parents were surprised to see each other, her mom and his dad, joking that they should have arranged a carpool. She almost died right there on the floor of the admissions building, a stuffy remodeled little house, but she didn't have to speak to him. She saw him looking through his folder, but she'd been chosen by one of the current students who was hanging around waiting to give a tour, a girl with a canvas tote bag and name tag who asked her about herself and what she wanted to major in and what her college essay was about.

It stuck in her throat—she'd written an essay about her ants that she turned in to the English teacher and guidance counselor, that her father looked over, but she'd slopped out three-quarters of a page for English class peer review, one about lacrosse, which Becca read—she could hardly turn in a paper about ants to Becca, not Becca who would shriek with disgust if she saw a loose hair on the floor near her desk. At Gettysburg she he wanted Alex Lapinski to hear

her talking about her ants, she did, wanted him to hear that she'd written a paper that wasn't the one he'd heard Becca talking about, wanted him to realize there was some other part of her he didn't see, but she felt sick thinking that he might not understand the way she thought he would. But she didn't think he was listening, not really, not deep down—he was busy talking to his father about comparisons to another school, one he'd really liked. She told the girl from Gettysburg about the ants, and she knew she was going red, but this girl started talking about how her science class had made terrariums in plastic jars to watch the decay of apple cores, and all the rest of that tour Kat floated and hardly heard a word of the professor-to-student ratio statistics and all the other things they talked about, lost in daydreams of how she could be once she was here, which lasted her all the way home in a light gray drizzle, until her mom parked outside their house and she started to worry about what she'd do if her roommate didn't like her or if the tour guide had been some kind of miraculous one-off.

She takes the slip back to school, still blank, the next morning, but the line at the table is longer and most of the guys in their group are there, awkward-laughing and red and all elbowing each other. Valentine's Day is Friday. This is the last day. She can't get away at lunch. There's practice again after school and she won't make it then.

The class she goes to after lunch is Health, a half-semester class all her friends took in ninth grade but she didn't because her schedule was messed up by moving here. D-Shift lunch lasts from the beginning to about halfway through and she hears the series of bells ringing and people moving around from class to lunch. They're filling out the fifth identical worksheet about caloric intake and eating disorders, but it's better than what they did all of last week, watching the birth video and looking at slides with pictures of syphilis lesions. She can't focus. She's supposed to be matching words and descriptions and guessing how many calories light

housework burns, but she keeps playing with the slip in her pocket. The corners are going soft. They're allowed to work with partners, but she doesn't know anyone in this class and never does.

Mr. Drake is really a gym teacher and he's about twenty-one and puts on music for them. She waits until there are ten minutes left in D-Lunch and asks for a bathroom pass, holding out the page of the school-provided agenda that offers one column of passes per-quarter. Somehow she expects him to say no, but he's picking another song and scrawls *Abraham Lincoln* on the signature line and lets her fill out *destination* and *time departed* and *time returned*.

And she does stop in the bathroom, the gross one, thick yellow paint and grimy tiles. She goes into a graffitied stall and takes the slip from her pocket and looks at it for a minute, standing, then holds it against the inside of the door. She's going to do it. No one will know it's from her, but she'll know and in her imagination Alex Lapinski somehow will also know—she's thought through twenty or thirty scenarios where something will give it away but in some way that only he can understand. In some it's eye contact. In some, the bus is crowded and she has to sit next to him again at the end of the day and something happens. In some it's a turn of phrase in some note she writes and repeats out loud like in *Silver Linings Playbook*, which her parents love, with that *if it's me reading the signs* line. There are a lot of others.

In the bathroom, she loses the nerve to write a note after she writes his name. Everything sounds too conspicuous, like it could be narrowed down to being her, and there's not enough space. She only has a few minutes left and how to sign it is the more pressing matter. She can't leave it blank, she can't, she needs to leave some hint, or give some sign. For a minute it gets almost too embarrassing, but she has to write something, and when she's done it, she folds the slip triple so it holds itself shut and darts out of the bathroom.

She takes it to the table outside the cafeteria, which is loud and crowded as it always is, but packed with people she doesn't know, distant through the open doors. There are two girls in line at the table now, counting out nickels and dimes from a change purse and giggling. It's an eleventh-grade math teacher at the table now, who looks suspiciously at Kat's agenda and says, "You really aren't supposed to leave class to do these."

"I just had to come down from the Satellite," Kat says, and she smiles and offers her dollar and triple-folded slip, and she's pretty sure she's being much less annoying than the girls paying in pennies, because the teacher just sticks the slip in the box and takes the dollar and smiles a little at her and tells her to go back to class.

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Friday is Valentine's Day and in homeroom, AP Euro, she sits breathless in her spot and waits for the rattling cart to come down the hall with Student Government volunteers handing out flowers. They're moving slow. The announcements come over the TVs mounted in the high corners of all the classrooms, two girls at a desk reading out birthdays and changes to after school clubs, and she hears the carts stopping at doorways down the locker-lined hall. No one uses their locker—she doesn't even know where hers is. People carry their flowers all day. There's nowhere to put them down. Her heart races till she can feel it against her arm.

Alex Lapinski is talking to Mr. Lang about some tiny detail in the book that she must have missed because she couldn't focus the night before and only flipped through pages long enough to come up with a summary for her dad and to take down the notes that Mr. Lang checks for at the beginning of every class. Sophie Kurtz isn't there and there's an aisle and an empty desk between her and Alex Lapinski, who's grating on Julian and Sebastian and Maribeth, who

keep looking at each other and at her and occasionally miming putting their hands over their ears. Julian says, “Alex, dude, it’s so early, it’s so early, class hasn’t started yet.” Everyone laughs. Mr. Lang thinks this is a friendly joke and laughs. Alex Lapinski knows it isn’t a friendly joke. That’s how things work here. He’s only Minnie Mouse on the bus.

The cart arrives at the classroom with a stack of flowers, pushed by Lindsey from Student Government, who used to hang out with them but is in most different classes this year because she takes Dance and Yearbook instead of Euro and Spanish. Kat smiles at her, or tries to, but she’s having a hard time controlling her face. Lindsey starts passing out flowers—she knows most of them but calls names from the list anyway. There’s laughing and *ooohs* after every name and Lindsey brings flowers to the desk in the close-packed room. Maribeth and Ashley a few rows back have piles of them. Kat has a pile of them and they feel about as real as her college acceptance, like she can’t process that they’re hers. Sebastian feigns wild indignation over his cryptic Future Self note, there among others, and Maribeth and Ashley almost die laughing. Julian has a mountain of them—he goes the color of a carnation and starts pushing flowers at the people around him.

A handful of other people get a couple each, mostly girls sending them to each other. Lindsey gives Brian’s to Kat like she’ll know what to do with them. Sophie Kurtz has one from someone, which is odd for her, and Mr. Lang tells Lindsey to leave it on her desk in case she comes in late. Then he laughs as Lindsey presents him a huge armful of flowers from most of the AP students who love him for coming in an hour early before exams to lead review sessions for them. Student Government has added a card. He looks pretty touched, actually, thanks them generally, turns busily away to write the first heading on the board.

Lindsey checks the list, the cart, and then produces the last one. Kat bites on the inside of her cheek and it feels like she's chewing her own heart. Lindsey even looks a little surprised and says, as an afterthought, "Alex Lapinski, here."

She gives it to him to lots of *oohs* and incredulous laughs. It suddenly seems that it would have been a much better idea not to sign it the way she did. Alex doesn't know anything about her through any secret events she's missed—she imagined a couple situations where through luck he met someone from her old high school that's three hours away, or talked to her mother at the community Christmas party his parents hosted, or has some inexplicable secret knowledge that she was different in her past life. The note is crumpled and soft at the edges and bent in three places. He looks at it and doesn't make any face at all—totally neutral, not interest or bemusement, maybe something bordering on disgust or just a sort of vague exasperation, but she isn't sure, and maybe she imagines that there.

Julian and Maribeth can't believe it and want to see it. They keep saying, "Who's it *from*, what's it say?" Mr. Lang is on hall duty as the bell rings to make sure everyone's in their first period classroom, and they're all left unattended, sort of—he's right there in the hall, but the teachers are talking out there. Sebastian is busy talking to everyone they know about what that Future Self note is supposed to mean, *it's Valentine's Day, no pressure*, though he's violently red and Ashley a couple rows back is laughing and telling him that if lives are at stake, he should get it over with during next period, his first class that day with Becca.

Alex Lapinski gets tired of Julian and Maribeth's disbelief and lets them take it, grab the flower from him and smooth out the crumpled note and dissolve into a fit of muffled laughing.

“Damn, Alex,” Julian says. “You have a *secret admirer*, Jeez, like, like some kind of—” He’s trying not to laugh—“Like some kind of anti-superhero thing going on—”

“I would change schools,” Maribeth said, through laughing. She’s also kind of allergic to the flowers and it’s hard to hear her voice anyway. “I would—like—I would think about that...”

“Stick it in the trash,” Alex says, after Julian tosses it back, and does it bad and fast and unexpected so Alex misses it and it hits the floor. He leans over and gets it. “I don’t have any idea what that’s supposed to mean.”

“Roach Girl,” Julian repeats, still laughing, almost like this is the greatest distraction he can think of from the reality of Valentine’s Day, sounding very much like the note is a joke and their idea. Maribeth wheezes onto her arms on the desk. Most of the room is sort of laughing into their hands. “With a brown cape—shoots roaches out of her hands—”

“Very funny,” Alex says, apparently thinking all of them did it. He tosses the flower at the trash and it bounces off the rim and hits the floor, and that almost kills everyone laughing. She’s never in her life been so happy to see Sophie Kurtz squeezing down the narrow aisle between the desks and distracting everyone as they all ask who her flower’s from.

“You can’t get rid of Roach Girl’s Flower Gram,” Maribeth says, grabbing it from the floor and tossing it back to Alex. He pulls off the card and gives the flower to Sophie Kurtz, says, “Here.” Kat bites down through her heart.

When Mr. Lang asks if anyone’s going to be first on the college declaration board, Kat blurts out that she’s going to Gettysburg, and all her friends burst out in surprised and excited shrieking. No one brings up Roach Girl again until somebody finds the note crumpled on the

floor in the hall between third and fourth period. She liked him better when he didn't care enough to toss it away like that.

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In every class they share with Alex after that, fourth to seventh, it's Roach Girl this and Roach Girl that. The teachers all hear that Alex has a secret admirer and that was how she signed the card, and they mostly think it's a joke or that it's just silly. Señora McCullough, when Ashley tries to make her teach them how to say *Roach Girl* in Spanish, breaks and speaks in English for the first time since August and says, trying not to laugh, "Where do you guys get this stuff?" They all start shrieking because she spoke English, and she lapses back to Spanish, but she's brought them cookies and they watch a telenovela and don't have to do any work. Ashley and Garrett draw an elaborate Roach Girl, like a superhero, with a cape studded sharply with antennae, a big RG on her chest, bugs pouring out of her hands and mouth.

"That's who we're looking for, Alex," Ashley says at the end of Spanish, "See, that's like, her alter-ego, so just picture it a little less roachy and that's who you're looking for, what a catch."

"Ha," Alex says, looking like he'd like to tell them to leave him alone but knows that's just going to make it worse, "Really funny, glad everybody thought this through so well."

Everybody laughs like they did. In English, Mrs. B. lets them watch *Much Ado About Nothing*, the Keanu Reeves one, rather than doing any work, and Becca has the drawing now, along with the Future Self Flower from Sebastian. He didn't ask her out or say he liked her. He didn't even play along with the joke when he gave it to her. She sits next to Kat and puts the

drawing on the desk between their notebooks, and she pokes Alex ahead of them with her pencil while Mrs. B tries to get the movie started.

“Don’t worry, we’ll keep working on it,” Becca says, “Once we add the spiders, you’ll definitely be able to track her down, that’s another one of her powers.” One of Ashley’s roaches looks a little like a spider and Becca adds another one and elbows Kat, adding at a whisper, “I don’t know who made this up, but it’s just about the only good thing that’s happened all day.”

“You’re welcome to stop,” Alex says. “If you need a scapegoat for something—”

*Scapegoat*, Becca mouths behind his back. Kat doesn’t think she knows the word.

“—then you can blame Kat, she almost ruined your little joke in Euro and made everyone think about something else.”

Becca rolls her eyes and Kat asks Mrs. B. for a bathroom pass, but Mrs. B. tells her to hold it until she’s seen the intro to the movie and they’ve talked about it. She adds a roach to the drawing while Becca adds spiders. It’s slightly too large and out of scale, her roach, and it’s too detailed. She doesn’t remember quite what it looked like besides those hair-thin legs. When she’s done, Becca adds little barbs to them. She doesn’t know that much about roaches and gives up and puts her head down on her arms. Mrs. B. comes over and apologizes to her after about fifteen minutes and asks if she needs the bathroom or the nurse, but she says she’s okay and just watches the stupid movie.

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Not many people she knows live out as far as she does, pretty much everyone closer to school in Timonium, where things are, sidewalks and Target and stores. It makes her feel special

to be on the bus with Alex, to watch him going back to the same place she goes, makes her think of her parents on long car rides home with her mom's hand on her dad's arm on the center console. She feels grown up, different, wants to say things to him at school about yard sale signs or old community picnics.

But on the bus, she sort of knows Maddie, who's in mostly different classes—she lives out in a development a little further on with Abby, who she hardly knows at all because she plays field hockey and not lacrosse. It's raining and gray, the bus crowded and humid. There's one middle schooler too many and three sixth grade girls have to ride three across in a seat.

“Hey Minnie Mouse,” says Cory, who annoys everyone and gets laughed at behind his back, and who knows it. Cory at least doesn't play the French Horn and that gives him some power, even if he still has braces. “Minnie Mouse, who the fuck is Roach Girl?”

The intercom crackles on, and Miss Betty breathes at the front, but she just says, “Sixth graders, you can't be in the aisle.”

“But there's not enough room!” says a tiny sixth grader.

“Nobody,” Alex says, as Miss Betty keeps telling them all the reasons they have to press tighter together. “She's made up.”

“This is what she looks like,” Maddie says, holding up the drawing to a burst of laughing from the back of the bus.

“I'm glad you all have something to distract you from the fact that you've peaked in high school,” Alex says, not looking at them, and everyone laughs except Abby, who doesn't have a sense of humor and protests indistinctly about how these are the best years of their lives—Kat

can't quite hear. She's a row or two back squeezed in randomly next to Erin Roberts, who's in ninth grade and who she doesn't know even though she lives a couple house down, who never talks and is staring at a science worksheet, labelling the fine-drawn muscles of a human hand. She fixes a badly Xeroxed line. Kat looks at her own hands.

"Maybe it's somebody who meant well," Kat says, and there's a brief awkward silence that falls when no one knows how to respond, can't tell if she meant it genuinely. She feels herself go red. She's pretty sure that Alex Lapinski looks at her with disgust, takes it as part of the joke.

"Man, I think you're out of her league, Minnie Mouse," Cory says. "Jesus Christ, what do you have to do to get called *Roach Girl*?" The bus dissolves in laughing. Kat wraps her arms around her backpack. Alex pulls at a seam on his and some thread rips away.

When they get off the bus—herself, Alex, his brother, Erin, a couple middle schoolers—Erin says, when Alex and his brother have started away, "If it makes you feel any better, my sister who graduated was in AP Bio with him a couple years ago and she said he was really pretentious."

That doesn't really make her feel any better at all, and she's not sure how Erin means it, if she means that maybe he deserves it, or if she's somehow understood something about what Kat tried to say, but she doesn't elaborate, and Kat wants to say something about all the muscles she labelled in that hand, but Erin turns and starts home, bent a little under her giant backpack.

It's drizzling lightly and Kat hesitates and says after Alex, "Who do you think sent it?"

He gives a heavy, exasperated sigh, and turns around. “I mean, it was obviously your writing. I don’t know if it was your *idea*, but if the only way that you can get through the day is trying to bother other people as much as you can, sure.”

“You’re never bothered,” Kat says, and she sees herself as she used to be, as Roach Girl, and when Alex looks at her, he looks at her so oddly that she almost believes he can see it, too.

But when he speaks, shaking himself a little, what he says is, “I toured Gettysburg, too, and you’re going to have a miserable time if that’s what you have to be like.”

“Did you hear me when we were there?” Kat asks. Part of her is in agony, part so happy that she’s almost afraid to feel it. Alex Lapinski looks at her and she sees in his face that he didn’t.

“What is there to hear?” Alex says, and then he turns and starts home, too, his brother bouncing along next to him, asking once, getting brushed off, starting to talk about Gandalf the White, though she doesn’t see Alex respond.

All the houses down the gray street could be the same one, just in different colors, different garden organizations outside. She walks very slowly to hers and uncoils her keys and pretends to be busy unlocking the door until she’s watched him go into his. She’s in so much pain that she wishes she was back in the middle of the street with him letting her have it. She’s full of so much joy that she wishes she was back telling him that soon, very soon, she’d be free.

## What You Want to Remember

When they got to the memory ward—Kathy, her husband, their son, and the dog—her mother-in-law was lying in her narrow bed, in one of her twitchy, restless sleeps. The room was dim, the lace curtains from her old house drawn over the shut blinds. The nurse smiled apologetically and said she'd been asleep for over an hour.

“Let's give it a while,” Kathy's husband, Jim, said, and Kathy—who didn't really think Millie would be wide awake again today—agreed, and they went to wait in the rec room at the end of the hall, empty, just the long pale table and mismatched chairs. Jim looked out the tall windows over the parking lot. Kathy watched their son, Andrew, nineteen and home for spring break, who was attempting to read what looked like a JSTOR article on his phone without looking like he was looking at his phone. It wasn't as though this was a particularly riveting way to spend the afternoon—she considered telling him to just read it and stop snatching a sentence at a time. Someone was screaming down the hall, Miss Clara who never stopped screaming. It was odd here—a strange mix of boredom and the feeling that you should be contemplating death. The dog paced the room, smelling things, his tail wagging. She checked her email.

“We could reserve this room for Easter,” Kathy said, gesturing around, pretending she'd just seen the email that said so. There was a counter with a sink and microwave on the far wall. “Might be better for your mom. Jim.” She wasn't sure he'd been listening, though he glanced away from the window, started to say something, looked around instead. A railing ran waist-high around the walls. A TV stood in the corner. Miss Clara screamed somewhere in the distance. Kathy looked at Andrew for backup. “We can bring decorations, right, we can bring the dog, we can bring dinner, it would be fun.” *Fun* was maybe an overstatement, but she got Andrew to nod a little bit. The dog was the only one who had fun here. He beamed at them, panting a little.

“Cynthia’s supposed to be hosting,” Jim said. His sister would never in a million years go for hosting *here*. A pause. A nurse down the hall said, cheerfully, “Miss Dolly, how about some ice cream, let’s take a break from watching that elevator.”

“How are we going to get your mom to Cynthia’s?” Kathy asked, and Jim nodded, a little—he knew very well that she was right, and looked out the window again. She found their car in the lot past his arm. “It’s an idea.” An elevator dinged, and Miss Dolly shouted—the dog jumped and skittered to Andrew—“Help me!” Her husband came to see her every day—Kathy had been here enough times to know that, had said hello to him, a sweated man who lived in the independent living apartments—but the nurse said something, and she heard, all too clearly, Cynthia’s voice. Cynthia was here every day.

“Your brother’s here,” she heard Beth-the-Activities-Coordinator say, and Kathy glanced at Jim, who had torn his eyes from the windows and waved down the hall to Cynthia, who had her twins with her—Andrew’s age—and was starting to get into what looked like a heated debate with a nurse, who looked extremely glad to hand her over to Beth, who marched her down the hall to where they were in the rec room.

“Why’s she asleep?” Cynthia asked, looking at Jim—Kathy had the urge to stand up and say *hi, Cynthia, so nice to see you, too*, but she choked it down. “It’s the middle of the day, why’s she asleep?”

“I think she’s just resting for a while,” Jim said. He tried—he did sometimes try—to distract his sister, said hello over her shoulder to Beth and the twins.

Beth added, “She had a hard time with that last fall, I think it’s a good idea for her to have a nap.” She had a giant crate in her arms full of craft supplies—little picture frames,

stickers, glue. She was Kathy's favorite of the people who worked here—she slid it very gently onto the table and bent to pet the dog, who loved her.

“It's the middle of the day,” Cynthia said.

“She's just taking a nap,” Kathy said. Sometimes she almost felt bad for Cynthia, almost. “Let's chat about something while we're waiting for her to wake up, Beth, we saw that email about reserving rec rooms.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Beth said, though Cynthia was already saying, “No, absolutely not,” and turning and marching down the hall, into Millie's room. A nurse in dark magenta scrubs went jogging after her. Miss Dolly went to go stand by the elevator again.

*Grotesque*—that was the word Kathy thought when she watched Cynthia with Millie, when she saw Millie roused and moved to her wheelchair, saw Cynthia hauling her to her feet, Millie leaning hard on the wide plastic walker, frozen, making that thin sound in her throat she'd been making since she stopped talking, jolting, almost falling, not sure how to move. Sometimes Kathy felt bad for Cynthia, and then Cynthia did things like this, and all she felt was something low and simmering that felt a lot like hatred. She looked at Jim, who didn't intervene.

“Cynthia, don't make her go on a walk,” Kathy said, as Cynthia inched Millie along towards the door, the nurse hanging next to her. “Don't make her go for a walk, she's barely moving, put her in the wheelchair if you want to take her for a walk—”

“She's not walking well because she's always in the wheelchair,” Cynthia said. Tyler and Elise, the twins, were here all the time—they were barely reacting. Andrew had become abruptly busy lining up the little painted rocks on the windowsill, one hand petting the dog.

“Jim,” Kathy said, and Cynthia said, a little louder, “Jim agrees with me, he knows it, they have her in the wheelchair all the time, she’s just parked out there watching Jeopardy—”

“I’m so sorry,” Kathy said—a little louder than that—to the nurse who was still there. Cynthia limped Millie along—nudging, reminding, almost pushing—as far down as the common room at the end of the hall where a few old women were sitting and watching a TV, which was playing hits of the 1940s while brightly colored circles bounced across the screen. One woman played aimlessly with some puzzle pieces, picking them up and dropping them back into the box. A few nurses at the station by the dining tables looked nervously at Millie—one, who was in blue scrubs, said, firmly, “Miss Millie, are you coming out to listen to some music?” She came and took Millie’s free arm, the one Cynthia wasn’t holding, and looped one arm around Millie, moved her to a red armchair, helped her arrange her legs to sit. The nurse in magenta brought her a heavy-bodied baby doll. Millie’s hands reacted to it—one slipped under it and patted its little back. Her eyes were on the screen, absent. Jim put a hand on her bony shoulder, the other briefly over hers on the doll.

“I’m going to go talk to Beth about that doll,” Cynthia said, already starting to walk off. “I don’t want her playing with that anymore, she’s not that far gone.” Jim was bent down by Millie’s chair now, narrating softly—*hey, I remember you singing this song, Mom, you know this one?* Millie made a thin humming sound. Miss Dolly sat at a table looking, a bit bewildered, at a bowl of ice cream in front of her—she glanced up at Kathy and said, “This what’s for lunch?”

“Ice cream for lunch sounds good to me,” Kathy said, and Miss Dolly started giggling like a child. When Millie still talked, she would ask that, sometimes, forgetting whatever she’d eaten before. She used to point at whatever foods she didn’t like and ask if Kathy had made them. But she was silent now. Kathy left Jim talking to her, and went after Cynthia, who was

near tears, having a one-sided argument with Beth, who looked tired, like she was used to this. In Millie's room, the grandkids hung forgotten—Tyler was sort of generally talking about a fraternity. There were cousins who were close and then there was their family—Andrew had been afraid of the twins since they were eight and remained afraid of them, quiet, sort of nodding. Cynthia went to go argue with the head nurse this shift. Kathy stood in the hall, looking at the bios hung on all the doors—Millie Wagner loves bowling, her grandchildren, and cooking—that was just a lie—Millie had hated cooking—Cynthia had written this—

A hand on her arm. Beth's dark tired eyes.

“I think it would be a really good idea to reserve a rec room for Easter,” she said. Down the hall, a nurse offered Jim and Millie a puzzle. Millie picked at the pieces—Jim sifted through them, narrating—*there's a pretty pink one. Hey, those two don't look like they go together. That's a nice purple one.*

“She built a puzzle with the twins yesterday,” Cynthia said, when Beth had gone to start moving residents to the rec room for craft time. “And we were talking about Elise's piano concert. And today she can't even walk.” Millie's eyes drifted off towards the wall.

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They drove Andrew back up to Syracuse on a Sunday. He was such a timid driver that neither of them could stand giving him a shift on the six hours up, so Jim drove, then Kathy, then Jim, and then they said goodbye and that they'd see him at Easter. Last year, his freshman year, they'd gone up to see him and not seen the family, but this year his Monday class was cancelled and since it was, most likely, the last big holiday Jim's mother would be alive—Thanksgiving was a long way off—they were going to get him. She worried about him a lot—soft-spoken, the

phrase assigned to him by every teacher since kindergarten, was one thing, though she wasn't sure that did it justice. This was Andrew who couldn't walk past his own roommate to the kitchen in their apartment, though Jim didn't seem to get it when she said it, was just going to let it go. Jim let everything go.

"We need to reserve that rec room," Kathy said, when they were home, eating soup from the freezer and watching *Antiques Roadshow*. "Jim, we can take dinner to her, we can take the dog, it'll be okay." On screen, a woman found out that the desk all her houseplants sat on was worth \$20,000 on a 1997 episode.

"I'm afraid we'll kill her getting her in and out of cars," Jim said, and Kathy nodded. They worked out a list of talking points for him to present to Cynthia on the phone the next evening. They would take decorations within reason, and ham and scalloped potatoes and sauerkraut and pie. They would wheel Millie down the hall from her room. There would be no rush to get her back before pill time, no loading her in and out of a car.

The call, from the first minute, didn't go to plan—Cynthia opened talking about how the twins, still on break, had taken a great long walk with Millie, down to the piano in the far lobby of the retirement home, and Kathy couldn't stand to listen and paced while she watched Jim fizzle out, watched him flounder through suggesting the rec room.

"That's what *she* wants Mom's last holiday to be?" Cynthia said, not even on speakerphone, but talking so loudly that Kathy could hear her—"She wants it to be in that ugly rec room and not even be like Easter?"

She had to leave the room. Jim came downstairs forty-five minutes later, and, sheepishly, said that it seemed as though Cynthia would be hosting *and* picking up Millie. And taking her to

the memory unit's Easter service. And that she had suggested they bring most of dinner to her house, since she'd be with Millie.

“So we have all of the *bringing the dinner somewhere else*,” Kathy said, when they started arguing, “*And we have all of the let's move your mother around?* She can't have both! There's no value added for your poor mom, Jim!”

She could hardly believe those words coming out of her mouth. Millie, who had greeted her when they first met with *here you are* and no smile—Millie who said, when they broke Kathy down and she baptized Andrew, “I'm glad you did this even if you won't get married,” as though City Hall were not the legal definition of marriage. But Millie was so fragile now.

“What do you want me to do?” Jim asked, and Kathy groaned into her hands. “How do you want this to go, Kathy, do you want to have a fight with her in the memory ward on Easter morning when we're all there trying to take her different places?”

“Tell her that the answer's no.”

But Jim didn't say no. Jim broke down, always did. He broke down when they moved Millie from her house to the independent living apartment instead of straight to assisted living. He broke down keeping her in assisted living for months longer than she should have safely been there. He broke down when Cynthia wanted to give her that medication in the hospital, when the doctor said that if it was his mother, he wouldn't give it to her, would just let her slip away. Jim took Andrew to see her in the hospital when she was screaming in agony, when Kathy begged him not to and Cynthia said that she'd taken the twins, that it was heartless not to bring him. Jim broke down about Easter.

“And I don’t want your mom’s last holiday to be in some ugly room,” Kathy said. Silence. “I just don’t want your mom to break her pelvis again getting hauled in and out of Cynthia’s house.”

“I know,” Jim said, but he still hadn’t said it on the phone.

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It wasn’t that Kathy never broke down. She cooked too much for every holiday, always had, and it embarrassed her, but she did it anyway. She always said to herself that it was for the joy of cooking, but part of her did know that that wasn’t quite it, just from the way her stomach sank when Cynthia always said *well, it’s not like dinner used to be*, that defeat she felt before she was angry again. Kathy was the one who kept tacking on to their menus every year, until there were so many dishes that it was reasonable for she and Andrew both to say that though Millie’s Jell-O—the Jell-O Cynthia had made for so many years now—looked just *delicious*, all those layers of cottage cheese, it was going to have to fit on the plate on a second trip to the kitchen, one that usually never came.

She tried to restrain herself, she did—scalloped potatoes, sauerkraut, green beans, and a pie. Cynthia would throw the ham in the oven and make Millie’s special Jell-O mold the night before. But Cynthia kept calling them. Elise had decided to go vegetarian last week, and all of a sudden, Kathy was on the phone telling her that the slab of tofu was not needed, reciting their last Easter menu, telling her that it would be okay for Elise to make a meal from scalloped potatoes and glazed carrots and green beans and pasta salad and sauerkraut and a beet and goat cheese salad. She wanted Jim to stop her, but he didn’t, and they went most of the way to Syracuse to get Andrew in dead silence. She was pretty sure his Art History professor hadn’t

actually cancelled class on Monday, that he was just saying that because they'd suggested him coming home and it made getting him back easier. There was good breaking down, she wanted to say to Jim, and bad breaking down, and did he see the difference between blowing off Art History and taking Millie to Cynthia's house?

Church at the memory unit ran 10:00 to 11:00—Cynthia would be back at her house by 11:45 with Millie, after all the sign-outs and loading her into the car, and they were supposed to be there around the same time.

“What value is there in this for your mom?” Kathy asked, at least twice, while they were in the kitchen at home. She tried not to rail against Jim's family too much in front of Andrew, so once was when she'd sent Andrew to rouse the dog—who had gone back to sleep on Kathy's pillows once he realized there was no walk in the picture for him till later—and once when it was Andrew's turn to run upstairs and get dressed, when Jim in a jacket tossed pasta salad and Kathy still in a sweatshirt older than Andrew glazed carrots. “Why is she doing this, Jim?”

“I have absolutely no idea, Kathy,” Jim said, whacking pasta off the spoon against the edge of the bowl with such a metallic clanging that she felt it in her chest, dropping that into the sink, clattering the lid from the sauerkraut crock pot onto the counter—“So help me God, Cynthia says one word about there not being any pork in the sauerkraut this year—” Clapping the lid back on.

In the car, Kathy held the crock pot of sauerkraut on her lap and Andrew held the pie, with his arm holding the crate of food still on the backseat. Jim drove like he had forgotten everything they had to hold down.

“Sorry,” he said, after every abrupt jolt of the brakes on the way there. Every time he tried to pass the little sedan that hung in his blind spot most of the way, Andrew said, “Dad, food,” and Jim said, sharp and loud, “Jesus Christ, don’t you think I know that?” He had insulted the sedan’s driver so thoroughly by the time they took the exit to Cynthia’s house that Kathy felt bad for them.

“Never again,” Jim said, hefting the box out of the car with a clink of dishes. But Jim rang the doorbell and Cynthia came down the hall to get the door and opened it on her heavily-rabbit-decorated house, he shoved the bitterness out of his face. “Happy Easter! It looks like we’re moving in, we have so many dishes out here!”

There was the Food Lion pie, there the quivering, opaque, deep pink Jell-O, layered with cottage cheese that sweated under the island lights. There was the ham, cooked to death—*ten more minutes, just to be sure*, Jim and Cynthia always said about meat, same as Millie used to. There was Millie, sitting in her wheelchair, head tipped to the side, dozing with one leg twitching.

“She was so wide awake in the car,” Cynthia said, as they unpacked food onto the island. “She was talking about the cows out the window.”

Millie woke with a start, a trembly shake, looking around at them, and making a wordless sound. Jim went and kissed the top of her white head. Millie made some creaky sounds, made a move like she would try to get up and Jim stopped her, gently.

Jim made sauce for the ham at Cynthia’s stove. Kathy sat for a while at the kitchen table by Millie, holding her wrinkly hands, talking to her when she made sounds—wasn’t Jim’s sauce always good, wasn’t it so nice that she had on that rabbit-appliqued sweater. Cynthia looked

around the buffet telling Elise that she could eat carrots and potatoes and Grandma’s Jell-O.

Kathy said, several times, that gelatin was not vegetarian, though Cynthia—standing next to her, lifting the lid of the sauerkraut crock pot—somehow seemed not to hear her.

“Cynthia, she can eat everything we brought,” Jim said, loudly and clearly, from his place at the stove, “A *vegan* could not eat everything we brought, but a vegetarian who eats dairy can.”

“Except the sauerkraut,” Cynthia said.

“You have any idea how long that pork takes to cook?” Jim asked, and Cynthia started to break off into *oh* and *it’s just not how Mom used to make it*. And Jim said, instead, bright and cheerful, to Elise, something about dairy and had-he-heard-right-her-mother-said-she-still-ate-that and good-for-her-Aunt-Kathy-had-been-vegetarian-for-what-was-it-Kathy-close-to-fifteen-years? Cynthia trailed off about the sauerkraut, tearfully put a jar of horseradish and one of mustard on the counter. Elise went into a long and out-of-register-passionate speech about her philosophy class that said very little about her motivations but seemed somehow related to them. Andrew put the salad together. Lon, Cynthia’s husband, sat with Millie. Kathy took the can opener from Tyler, who was holding it backwards over a can of beets as though unsure of how to use it, and opened it for him.

Millie made a noise—Jim jumped out of his skin seeing her movement out of the corner of his eye, but Cynthia said *she’s fine* and asked Millie, four times, loud and slow, if she was having a good Easter. Millie didn’t say anything.

Forgive Millie. It had been Cynthia, after Andrew was born, after Kathy gave up being total vegetarian, who said, “Oh, I bet you feel silly now,” smirking at her. Cynthia with her, “I’m so glad you didn’t make him one of *those* kids who can’t eat anything.” And when Andrew was a

baby eating formula, Cynthia with her, “Oh, well, that’s because you’re working, I guess, but aren’t you worried about how smart he’ll be later?” Kathy on bed rest for five months because the baby didn’t want to stay in there. Kathy making no milk. Kathy with the month-early-baby losing weight. Kathy with the goddamn Easter ’99 dinner on the table and the month-old baby crying in the bassinet.

“And wasn’t she lucid when she got here?” Cynthia said to the twins, as Lon sliced the ham and as Kathy distributed serving spoons to all the bowls. Cynthia pulled a quivering slice of tofu from the microwave and tipped it onto a plate for Elise. “She’s just tired now—Mom? Mom, what would you like to eat for Easter dinner?” She looked at Jim, standing by Millie, who looked absently around, frowning a little. “I want to get her to stand up so she can see it.”

“I think she can see okay,” Jim said, but there was Millie, mostly held up, at the island, looking to the side as Cynthia kept pointing to what was in front of her, struggling weakly.

At the table, they sat with Millie in her wheelchair at the end, Cynthia and Jim on either side to feed her—Cynthia trying to put the spoon in her hand, Jim putting forkfuls of potato to her mouth and telling her that she was eating Kathy’s scalloped potatoes with cheese and did-she-taste-that-wasn’t-that-nice. Lon sat next to Kathy, talking about how he still ate meat. No one had managed to get Elise to hear that gelatin was not vegetarian before she took a big bite, still talking about how she would be so disappointed if she ever ate a meat-product again that it would probably ruin her entire week just with the grief. Kathy didn’t say it again.

“What should we do before dessert?” Cynthia asked, when they had finished. “Maybe we could still take her for a little walk like we always do.”

“Cynthia,” Jim said. Lon gave a non-committal *eh* and looked over his shoulder out the window, as though there were some answer there. “Cynthia, the porch steps, the hill—”

Cynthia started to tear up. “Well, what do you want us to do? We can’t play Pictionary, we can’t play dominoes, we can’t go for a walk—it might as well not even be a holiday.”

Millie made a sound, a little shift in the chair. She frowned around at them and Jim reached out to her arm with one hand.

“Oh, she’s fine,” Cynthia said, looking at Millie and saying, “Are you having a good Easter, Mom?” She tried to give Millie the spoon again. “Mom, look. Here’s your special Jell-O. Hold the spoon. You can hold a spoon.” It hit the table.

“Cynthia, she can’t hold it,” Jim said, as Millie said something, all hoarse and disconnected, shifting restlessly, agitated. He dropped the sharpness. “You’re okay, Mom.”

“She did yesterday,” Cynthia said. “She’d have such a good time on a walk.”

“Where’s that doll they give her?” Jim held one of Millie’s arms.

“I hate that thing,” Cynthia said. “She’d calm down on a walk.”

There was a silence. Was Jim considering it? Kathy looked sideways at him. He wasn’t saying anything, trying to hold Millie’s hands affectionately rather than with a clear move to restrain her, trying to keep from agitating her more.

“No,” Kathy said. “Cynthia, no. We’ve moved her around enough today. We pushed our luck enough. She’s exhausted.” She was nice. She was civil. She controlled herself. “We could take her outside on the deck. We could go turn a movie on.”

“She wouldn’t get this exhausted if they still had her using the walker,” Cynthia said. “You’d rather see her playing with that doll and sitting in that common room with Jeopardy on than you would see her walking.”

“I really would,” Kathy said. “I’d rather see her comfortable.”

Tyler had his phone out with some lacrosse scores pulled up under the table but wasn’t looking at it. Elise was mashing her slab of mostly uneaten tofu. Millie went mostly quiet, patting Jim’s arm repeatedly. Lon tapped the table. Andrew fidgeted next to Kathy.

“Well, *fine!*” Cynthia said, standing up, knocking her chair back against the wall. “Fine! You just want Mom to die!”

Kathy looked at Jim, who looked down.

“Cynthia, no one’s saying that,” Jim said. “Let’s just do something else. Or go get the doll. Or any doll. Aren’t there any dolls around? Or stuffed animals, or anything? The rabbits? She’d like a rabbit.” There was one on every stair going up.

Cynthia was still standing, arms folded. “We can’t just let her sit around like that. She did a puzzle with the twins yesterday.” Kathy rubbed her forehead. “Mom, do you want to do a puzzle with your grandkids?” Millie didn’t look at her and didn’t make any sound, fidgeting, tapping at Jim’s hand. There was a silence.

“She used to bring puzzles and do them with the kids after dinner,” Cynthia said. She looked at Tyler. “Remember?”

“Yeah,” Tyler said, looking around for backup that didn’t come. “Yeah, definitely.”

“They could do a puzzle with her,” Jim said. “But if she keeps getting agitated—”  
Cynthia was already headed out to the kitchen. Millie made a faint little humming noise.

“You singing, Mom?” Jim asked, smiling at her. They all started to get up.

At the kitchen table, Cynthia parked Millie’s chair beside Elise, Tyler on the end, Andrew—looking at Kathy—on the other side. Cynthia hovered over Millie’s shoulder, flipping puzzle pieces around. It was a kid’s puzzle, a rabbit with a basket of eggs, maybe twenty pieces. Jim stood by the corner. Lon wandered out to turn on the college lacrosse game that was apparently playing. Kathy started cleaning up dinner, Jim coming back and forth to help her.

“Mom, you know how puzzles go,” Cynthia said. She moved Millie’s hand with a piece in it and took it from her fingers and set it on the table. “Like this. And then we take this—” She put a corner piece in Millie’s hand and moved it to the top row. Millie fidgeted.

“I can’t watch this,” Kathy hissed to Jim. Cynthia could keep the pasta salad and the carrots and half the sauerkraut—those went into her snowflake-patterned plastic containers. She put the dishes in the sink to rinse out. Andrew was, obediently, turning pieces over at the table.

“Would you rather us be taking her down the stairs out front?” Jim whispered back, winding plastic wrap over the ham.

“Those aren’t the only two options,” Kathy said. She left Cynthia a scoop of the potatoes that Cynthia had always said were weird, and clapped the aluminum foil back over the rest of it. “Why can’t she sit on the deck, Jim, or sit in the other room, do you like watching this?”

“Of course I don’t like watching this,” Jim said, and Kathy gestured generally at the kitchen table. Millie, her hand left on the table, patted at the pile of pieces with her face blank.

“Doesn’t she look happy,” Cynthia said. Tyler reaching up to slide one out and put it in Millie’s hand. It fell. “I told them on Friday, I told them it’s not time to move her to hospice—”

Kathy looked at Jim, who made an uncertain sound that leaned towards *maybe, sort of, I guess she looks happy, a little*. Jim stuck the plastic mold back over the sweating Jell-O, the secret recipe that in-laws weren’t allowed to have, not that Kathy wanted it. She grabbed Jim’s arm and pushed him out to the hall, by the stairs and the rabbits.

“Your mom is in agony,” she said. “Please, Jim, she’s so confused, she’s so uncomfortable, I can’t watch this—”

“I don’t like this either, Kathy—”

“I don’t want her to be in pain, why do you let her talk like she does, I don’t want her to die like I’m trying to kill her, I don’t want to see her suffering.”

“Grandma, this goes over here,” Tyler said down the hall, moving Millie’s arm to put a piece she gave up reluctantly on the left edge. Her hand drifted back to the pile of pieces. Andrew looked over Millie’s head at Jim, who didn’t look at him.

“She isn’t building a puzzle,” Kathy said. “She’s not having a good time.”

“I know,” Jim said. Cynthia bent foil from around the plastic lid of her pie and lifted it off, and maneuvered the pie out onto a raised plate. “I think it hurts Cynthia less. This way.”

“We’re supposed to get her to do it,” Tyler said, looking mostly at Andrew, who looked at them again.

“We’re all in pain,” Kathy said, and Jim didn’t say anything.

Cynthia picked up the plate and carried it over to the table and set it down, picking up Millie's hand and moving it with a piece in it while Millie fidgeted and turned her head away. "We do this all the time. She knows how to do it when I'm there. The aides just don't know how to do it." Millie's arm jerked away and Cynthia stuck another piece in it. "Andrew, that's the next one on the top, get her to put that there—" Millie twitched and dropped the piece and squirmed where she was. Andrew looked again at Kathy and at Jim—Kathy looked at Jim, too.

"She knows where it has to go," Cynthia said.

"Dad?" Andrew said, while Millie squirmed. "I—" *Don't want to* hung unspoken. Millie struggled like a child, made a thin noise. This felt obscene.

"Andrew," Jim said. He looked again at Kathy, and at Cynthia, and he looked back at Andrew. "Just—" He stopped, struggled in silence for a moment, looked at Kathy. He grabbed the pink rabbit off the closest stair, a doll-sized one. "Here." He brushed past Kathy.

"She doesn't need a doll," Cynthia said. Lon made a sound at the game in the living room, and Tyler looked back and stood to go to the doorway there. Elise got up. Andrew did, too, let Jim have his place, offering Millie the rabbit. "She's fine—"

"We have to calm her down," Jim said. Millie patted the rabbit's head. "Cynthia, she's miserable. Look at her. We can't keep doing this to her."

"You want her to spend the rest of her life in the hospital!" Cynthia started to cry, angry tears. Andrew came around the far side of the island to Kathy. The house was all silent—even the lacrosse was suddenly muted, and Lon reappeared in the doorway. "And I just wanted all the grandkids to be here with her one more time, and have memories with Grandma—"

“This is what you want them to remember?” Jim gestured at the table, the puzzle, twitching Millie. “I don’t even want to remember Mom like this—at least she doesn’t do *this* when they give her the doll and the music channel. She doesn’t understand what you’re asking her.” Millie, squirming, tapping the table. “There’s no—” He looked at Kathy. “There’s no value added for her if you make her build a puzzle than if you let her play with the pieces. She’s not getting better.”

Millie, moving to get up. A fluttering half second when everything hung suspended, Millie teetering over the glass pie plate, the serrated edge of the server, the wheelchair squeaking backwards. Was this what it would take, Millie’s face shattered in the glass, would this make clear something that the falls hadn’t made clear already? Was this what would make it make sense to Cynthia, finally, Millie’s face shattered mid-holiday at the table where they used to eat dessert?

Kathy jumped, grabbed for her, and Jim turned, caught her before she tipped, kept her upright, Millie limp as a ragdoll. Kathy pushed the wheelchair forward, put the brake on—he lowered her, gently, picked up the rabbit from the tabletop.

“Would you like this, Mom?” he asked. He sounded tired, tired in a trying-to-be-cheerful way. Millie looked around, still restless, and then one hand twitched for it. Jim let her have it. She rested it on her lap in the crook of her arm, and patted the pink-gingham stomach, lightly, repeatedly, her face still blank. Jim reached down and squeezed one of her hands. Kathy patted her shoulder and stepped back, heart racing.

Cynthia was still crying. The house was still, otherwise, silent.

“She doesn’t need to go back to the hospital,” Cynthia said, in the silent kitchen. “I don’t *want* her to go back to the hospital!” Millie stared towards the living room and the bright green lacrosse field on TV, patting the rabbit’s little head. “I don’t want her to hold the rabbit like a baby, it’s not fair—”

There was another silence, Cynthia’s sobbing, a little humming sound from Millie. Jim looked at Kathy, as though to say *this is what I meant*. Millie settled, humming to herself. Cynthia cried. Kathy felt as though she grew a hundred years older, as she felt when she left the memory ward—hollow inside, emotions all spent, like she could fall down and sleep.

Kathy was closest to Cynthia. There was a long silence, and then she reached out and patted Cynthia’s shoulder, lightly. Cynthia didn’t shake her off, though didn’t accept it more than that. They had half an hour till it was time to load Millie into the car and return her to the memory unit. And how much longer till they sent her to hospice, gave her morphine, let her go?

“Well,” Kathy said. Cynthia’s tears had trailed off. “We have pie to eat.”

“Hope everyone saved room for dessert,” Jim said. “Someone turn the Bluejays back on. She’s looking at the screen.” Lon, in the living room, hit the sound and turned the wall-mounted TV a little more towards the kitchen. Millie’s face stayed blank. Cynthia sat on her other side and wrapped one arm around her, rested her head on Millie’s bony shoulder.

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It was early afternoon when they left, though it felt much later, and the still-bright sky felt wrong. Lon and Jim got Millie into Cynthia’s car—her family went to take Millie back, and left Jim coming back to Kathy and Andrew to get into the car. She’d asked the dog-sitter in the neighborhood to pop by and let the dog out—Jen, that was—she texted to say that he’d been

good and was back inside. Kathy read the message a few times in the silence of the car as Jim pulled off Cynthia's court.

"That wasn't so bad," Jim said. Kathy looked sideways at him—no laughter, no irony. He really seemed to believe it. He looked almost surprised at her looking at him.

Her mouth felt dry, and it was something between fear and anger—she wasn't sure which it was. "Jim, did we go to the same dinner?" He looked away, kept his eyes on the road. "Did you see her almost fall, did you see how confused she was, were you watching them pull puzzle pieces out of her hands—Jim, can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," Jim said, but somehow it felt hollow.

"Because I'm telling you that your mother looked miserable," Kathy said, "And she looks like she's in pain, and are you going to listen to me, or are you going to go along with Cynthia, you've always gone along with her, and with your mother, we baptized the baby and everything, Jim, when are you going to listen to me?"

A world of more hurts roared up, all the times he'd asked her to get along, the times he'd sided with them, the times she had taken it and taken it. She waited, and waited, and Jim was quiet, and she was still waiting when they got on the Beltway headed home.

## It Looked Like It Was Supposed To

For the first year she lived in the development—the first eleven months—Jen was the dog-sitter. This was after her job got migrated to remote-only, while she was still trying to decide if she should find another one. It only took her about three weeks to realize that never seeing another person got old fast, but she couldn't argue with the salary, especially since as soon as her job went remote, she bought the house. She figured she'd stick with it till the expenses that had piled up hurt a little less—the down payment, ripping up the dirt-worn shag carpeting, fixing the leak in the basement.

And then she fell in love with her neighbors. Tori and Mark McClellan and their three children and their little yappy dog and their house, which towered two stories and an attic over her brick bungalow—their house, their life, it was so unbearably perfect that it took everything she had not to dissolve into excessive compliments every time she spoke to them—the way their children's white playset creaked when they were on the swings, the way their stainless steel grill gleamed in the light, how the arched window over their front door looked like home.

She saw them first when the movers had departed. Jen was thirty-four, past paying her friends with pizza and beer, though the real trouble was that she didn't have anyone close enough to ask for help. When she was alone in her house, she'd gone into her yard and seen them next door. They had people over—a couple she would know later to be Mark McClellan's brother and sister-in-law—and the four adults stood around by the glass patio table and the grill, while the six children they had between them played on the violently white swing set in the yard. She could smell whatever they were cooking while she was looking at her heavy maple trees like she knew what she was looking for, poking at the patchy grass, almost bare dirt in the deepest shade.

One heavy horizontal bough had two rusted old hooks drilled into it, like a swing had been there once. The yard next door made her suddenly extremely sad, how alive it was.

Only Pippa noticed her at first—Pippa the little cat-sized dog, who ran over the property line to see her, yapping like she thought she was being intimidating. The kids started running after the dog and then jolted to a stop when they remembered they'd just crossed into the yard. And *then* their parents came over, Tori and Mark. She looked like a lifestyle blogger, the fair hair and perfect makeup and athleisure clothes. He looked like anybody's young suburban father, still holding the tongs from the grill while he was apologizing for the dog. The brother and sister-in-law followed them over to say hello.

She daydreamed while they were talking that they would invite her over, but they didn't. *We'll let you get back to it*, Mark said. She wandered back to the house and went inside to avoid making it awkward, though she still watched them through the sliding patio doors. She watched them sitting at the glass table, watched them laughing until it was late and dark, and the children had gotten tired of running after fireflies, and it was just the smoldering low light of the mosquito torches dotting the yard. Her house was all strange unfamiliar noises—the little click and hum of the refrigerator, the whirl of the air conditioning, the slight creaking and shifting as it settled. The silence was so loud that music and the TV seemed somehow to make it louder.

The next day, though, when she was out in the yard putting up a birdfeeder, and eyeing the elaborate little mid-yard garden behind the house on her right, with tall coneflowers and two posts with birdfeeders and suet cakes, Tori approached from the yard on her left, where she had no competition in the birdfeeder department. Tori was one of those people who hung around her own house wearing jeans, apparently, who made Jen feel ruffled and ridiculous, but Tori smiled and asked if she wanted to come for dinner that night.

And so she did—outside, again, at their glass-topped table, their three children running in the yard, two girls and one boy who was chasing the smaller girl with a stick. Tori gave her a giant margarita and she drank too much of it too fast to try to loosen herself up. Their house was so suburban that it made her think of her sister-in-law, who spent all her time—as far as Jen could tell—framing her children’s artwork and picking up their toys and putting them in baskets and throwing themed birthday parties to post on Instagram. Half the chicken was unseasoned for the kids—the other half was so lightly seasoned that she thought *fajita seasoning* was a generous word for it. There was a bowl of ruffle-cut potato chips on the table. When she wrote SEO articles for the local companies, with all her taglines—make a breakfast nook in your kitchen! Set up a homework station for your kids! Make a pick-your-own-snack-bar!—she laughed at the people who would ever do things like that, but she had the sense that the McClellans were her audience and she didn’t dislike them anywhere near as much as she’d anticipated she would. There was something fascinating in it, some physical reaction she hadn’t anticipated in her body—yes, it felt like some part of her was saying, crying out with relief, *yes, yes, look, look how it looks like a daydream of a house*. The granite countertop inside, she saw through the class, was absolutely bare, uncluttered.

“What brought you out here?” Mark asked, when the three of them were still at the table and the boy and older girl had run off looking for bugs, and the younger one was sulking.

Jen ran one nail down the stem of the glass. They probably all thought she was newly divorced, or something to that effect, something dramatic and exciting. She even thought about lying, but wasn’t sure she’d be able to keep it up. In her first apartment building out of college, she’d told all the neighbors she ever spoke to that she had a boyfriend who was doing vet school in Iowa, long-distance relationship and all, and didn’t have the faintest idea why—it had just

popped out—but she'd kept it up for the building manager, the only person she'd known there, for three solid years.

“Got tired of living in an apartment,” she said. “I had a dog, I wanted a yard for her, but she died right when I'd first toured this place.” The little sounds of *sorry*. Her dog's sideways-tilted walk, towards the end, lunging and scrabbling like the tumor in her brain had weighed heavily to one side. They were still looking at her, like they were waiting for something. She felt her bare hands.

“Is it just you?” Tori asked, after a moment.

“Yeah,” Jen said. She hadn't gotten past a second date in three years, and even then she'd only gotten to the third or fourth, and for the life of her she didn't know what she was doing wrong. “Yeah, just me.”

“Any pets now?” Tori asked.

“Too soon,” Jen said, thinking with a brief flash of her dog, the only one she wanted, flopped on the bed with her, taking herself back for a nap on Sunday mornings, who took it upon herself to make their walks look busy and purposeful with how she ran the length of the leash back and forth. Her life, summed up, sounded so sad that it embarrassed her a little, and she said, “I had a couple neighbors, I'd watch their dogs, sometimes, not full-time, but if they needed somebody to let them out for a while, I'd thought about looking to do that again.” There had been a woman in her neighborhood growing up who did that.

Nothing happened that night, not with that. Mark said that if she ever wanted to do it again, Pippa would love it, that her neighbors on the other side had a dog, too, but from there it moved on into the kids shrieking because someone had a splinter, and Jen went back home, to

her house full of boxes, yellow-lit and quiet. Across the yard, she saw the McClellans headed inside and she loved how their inside lights bled onto the lawn, cut with the pattern of the panes.

When she went out running the next morning, around the unlined streets through the development, past the occasional car headed off to work, she ran into Tori, who was out running, too, and who asked if she'd been serious about watching dogs. Tori said that she worked from home and usually Pippa was fine, but on Saturdays there was an awkward stretch of time when the kids were all in sports, and what did she charge, to let the dog out and whatever she did?

And that was how Jen ended up being the neighborhood dog-sitter.

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“So you're an employee,” her mother said on the phone, from where she lived during the fall and winter in Florida. “You've moved to the middle of nowhere, everybody's married, they all think of you as an employee, *and* you work on the internet.” Her mother had a blurry concept of remote jobs and had asked all three of Jen's siblings if *working online* meant selling pictures of feet on Craigslist. “Jen, tell me this right now, do you want to be alone forever?”

“It wouldn't kill you to say something encouraging,” Jen said, but her mother never did, and she added, “I'd have to drive somewhere for a date anyway.” Her house was twenty minutes outside of Towson, forty-some outside of Baltimore. And it was true that there wasn't much around. A corn field, some churches, a strip of stores with Shop-Rite and a hairdresser. A rec center for seniors and elementary school dance classes. She was on an unlined street that ran back from the main road into a development made up entirely of married couples, with the exception of two widows. Her mother wasn't wrong—if you were looking for a place to meet single, thirty-something men, this wasn't even close to it. But then again, Jen had lived closer to

downtown before she moved here, and she hadn't had much luck there, either. She was pretty sure it was a personal problem, not a problem with the location. She had limited luck even making friends.

"You do this to yourself, Jen," her mother said, and then she had to go—she had a standing dominoes game with three other women.

She hated herself for it, but it was so easy to be the dog-sitter. She asked where the key was, where the food was, for a schedule, and the other person did all the rest. The conversations were easy, scripted, predictable. For having totally made up the fact that she used to watch dogs, she wasn't bad at it—it wasn't really a hard thing to have decided to do. Most everyone with a dog already had their arrangements worked out—doggy day care, a stay-at-home parent—and what Jen did was fill in the gaps. Evenings when everyone was getting home late and the dog needed to get out. Weekend day trips with the kids too long for the dog to hold it. A day when someone had to visit their parents in the memory ward and hit Sam's Club on the way home. People found Jen's name in the newly-printed neighborhood directory, which got sent out a month after she moved in, after hearing about her around the neighborhood. Apparently she'd named a reasonable price—no one complained. Or she heard that one man at a community association meeting complained about how she shouldn't be running a business, but John Szarka around the corner was the president, and had kids to take on college tours, and a very friendly German-Shepherd-mix that Jen watched, so nothing came of that.

Within a couple months, she had twelve families she had watched dogs for at least a couple times. They would leave keys under a plant pot or a mat, and Jen would go get the dog and take it on a walk. Sometimes she took the dogs to hang out in her yard, once she started working on her gardens, though as it turned into fall and winter, she mostly let herself in and

played with the dogs and let them out and went home, either back to work or to one of her endless house projects—repainting, working on the floors, installing crown molding or new blinds. The mail lady, who saw it over her shoulder, said it looked nice.

When she went to the houses to let dogs out, she pretended they were hers. In the Marzoni house with the violently orange kitchen, she pretended she had a family that was always debating whether it was worth replacing the cabinets in the tight square of the kitchen. In the Kearney house with the sunroom full of ferns, she pretended they were hers, that she taught her daughter how much water a fern needed and they made their rounds talking about school. In the Lapinski house with newspapers left open on the table, she imagined having family conversations at breakfast about—she checked the papers—local politics.

But the McClellan house on Saturday mornings—that one was her favorite. The brick steps. The white windowed door with a wreath, the word *family* in loopy letters suspended in the middle. The light wood floor. The pristine white cubbies where the children’s backpacks and shoes sat. The windowed cabinets in the kitchen, the pale granite island. The children’s pictures on the walls of the stairs, their school calendar clipped to the fridge. The walls signs with *Coffee* and *Family* and *John 3:16*. The bins on the counter with calligraphy labels that instructed the children how to pick an item from each bin for their lunches.

She pretended that one was hers the most often, that she was just getting home between dropping off all the kids, that she was coming inside to see her own handiwork in keeping everything beautiful and organized. It was absurd—she couldn’t keep her own house that neat and there was only one of her. She wasn’t even religious. But sometimes she would go up the stairs to the hall where the doors stood open. The bathroom the kids shared was violently sea creature themed—in the half-light that came through the blinds, the walls were all fish decals,

the countertops flecked blue and green and purple. The children's bedrooms were decorated with either ballerinas or cars, violently pink or blue. Tori and Mark's was a soft light green. A slip of a silky bathrobe was tossed off-handedly onto the bed. She would stand in the hall as the dog wandered out to meet her. In this light cleanness, in this perfectly ordered world, her family got ready for the day like a well-oiled machine, which left them excessive amounts of time to be together, to make muffins at the granite countertop, to pretend they were at a movie theatre in the darkened living room with bowls of popcorn, to play board games and talk about their days.

She pretended the houses were hers, and she pretended the people she watched dogs for were her friends. People confessed things to her, which felt to her almost the same as having friends. They overshared. She heard about children's ballet recitals and sporting events and had to work hard not to laugh as they just kept talking. Then she started to hear the less-funny things, like whose mother was in which memory unit and how many times a week the siblings visited, and how they all hated each other, and then she got into the seriously less-funny things, like how long it took to get to Syracuse when you thought your kid was going to kill himself, or Mary Marzoni's pre-marriage baby who thought he was her brother. They told her things, she nodded, she listened, she felt close to them. She walked through their houses and walked their dogs.

But then she had to leave. She would be paid and she would leave and when she passed people whose dogs she watched, they would say to the dogs *look, it's Miss Jen!* It was like the dogs were small children, like she was a stranger. She would go back to her house at the end of the day. She liked her garden, her kitchen, her framed old maps on the walls, her books with the mismatched covers uneven on the shelves. Part of her was proud of being independent enough to be the only never-married person in the entire development. Part of her watched the McClellans

taking Christmas card pictures in a pile of leaves in the backyard and had the impulse to go and tell them how much she loved them for doing that, how beautiful their world was.

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Once it got to the new year, her resolution was to try to get more involved. She didn't specify. When her coworkers were going out for Happy Hour after one of the rare days she was in the too-small office, she accepted the off-handed invitation and went with them, but ended up sitting at the end of the counter in a dark sticky bar, nursing one glass of wine and occasionally managing to say something, though somehow she kept killing the conversation and she drove home wishing she hadn't gone at all. She tried going to the gym in the dead-empty strip mall near the grocery store, the one with the scars of an old Blockbuster sign over the door, but she just hurt her knee and didn't see anybody for two of the three times she went, not a single person. Once in desperation she went to get a pizza, at the place in the facing strip mall, but she didn't recognize anyone in line, though a fair number of them recognized each other from their children's schools, and those children's schools had some arrangement with this place—a third grade art class's paper fish were framed and hung down the narrow hall. She put a dating app on her phone, but felt so weird screening through the pictures that she took it off and felt worse. She Facetimed the one friend she'd maintained since college, but Isabelle had just started a PhD and seemed really eager to get her off the phone. In absolute abject desperation, she went to a community association meeting, but they spent the whole time talking about whether some woman named Diane Barnes who she'd only ever seen at a distance was allowed to build a shed. She left unnoticed, but with a flyer advertising a community yard sale—McClellan-organized.

It was a Saturday, one of the first warm days in March. She'd given away most stuff she wanted to get rid of when she moved, but she gathered up a couple bits and pieces—a cookbook

someone had given her when she was in college that she'd never used, a plastic piggy bank that PNC had given her when she started an account, a random blank journal. There were tarps spread out on the McClellan's lawn already, and a couple other families already joined them, setting things out on folding tables. There were some kids out playing in the backyard. She lost the nerve to take her random bits over and dropped everything except *The College Student's Cookbook*, which she put a post-it note labeled *free to a good home* on before she went across the yard. The McClellan section, she saw at a distance, was all old toys, which was at once disappointing and a relief—she'd vaguely wanted something of theirs, but probably would have been too embarrassed to buy it.

“Jen, come break up the excruciating boredom,” Tori said—she was slouched in a canvas folding chair, slightly separate from the other families that had joined in, who were still setting up. Jen knew them by sight, had watched one or two dogs before. She went behind the tables and Tori, when the book was explained, put it near the front as though it were something of great value, and motioned Jen to take what had to be Mark's empty chair—she'd seen him around the back supervising the kids. She perched on the edge of the chair with her hands pressed between her knees. Tori said, “Guess how many decks of SAT flashcards there are.”

“Four,” Jen said, and Tori gave a little snort of a laugh and held up five fingers, said, “Want to hazard a guess about toy Barbie cars?”

There were, in fact—Jen saw it when she went to look around—ten separate Barbie-sized cars parked under a table, ranging from Jeeps that looked like what used to have, with car phones in the consoles, to a convertible that looked brand new. There were porcelain dolls—Diane Barnes was selling some, but it seemed that everyone else had at least a couple. There were probably five or six SAT review books in addition to the cards—Sandra Roberts, who had a cat

but who Jen saw around sometimes, was piling them into her daughter Erin's arms—and what looked like enough beginner band practice books to start an entire orchestra, French horn and clarinet and flute and trumpet. Books—four copies of *The Da Vinci Code*—lots of cookbooks—some jumbled jewelry. She circled back to Tori and took the empty chair next to her again.

“Doesn't even matter what house it came out of,” Tori said, making no effort to talk to anyone else, not even really looking at Jen. Joanne Parker who lived across the street found the college cookbook and motioned with it to her white-blond daughter, who looked about as jazzed about it as Jen had been—it had a recipe for how to put butter on macaroni—and jerked her head at Kat Kearney, who looked so deliriously happy about going to college that she took it when Joanne offered it to her like it was made of gold. Marianne Hawkins, whose yappy, angry little dog Jen hadn't watched yet, picked through what looked to be about a hundred Barbie dolls in a box of naked bodies and matted hair, picking out two Black ones—apparently all there were—and setting them gently into a little Jeep that she went to pay for. Jen felt a gush of affection for all these people, their lives, their houses and dogs, even for Tori, who said, as though half-interested, not looking where Jen was looking, “Every yard sale that's ever been out here has looked exactly like this.”

It was radiantly beautiful. Jen watched Kat Kearney holding her cookbook, skimming through it mid-yard with people weaving around her.

“I've never seen a yard sale that *didn't* look like this,” Jen said, and Tori sort of laughed, and said, “We should know each other better.”

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Everyone said that, though when she went out running the next day, she ran into Tori, who was more a jogger than a runner, and who asked if she would be free at lunch. Tori worked for some kind of social media something—she didn't know, but was so taken aback that she said yes.

The McClellan house in noon daylight was lovely, light pouring through the windows and making that pale kitchen gleam, even if she hated open shelving and didactic, generic plaques. Tori made some kind of salad with nuts and apples and Jen ate it without thinking about it—they were in the kitchen and Tori was chatting generally, like they were friends.

“I never wanted to live out here,” Tori said, sometime later that month—they'd had lunch together a couple times, met each other running, and Jen had decided that though she had no idea what she'd done to make her a friend candidate, she was going to go with it. She'd told her mother she'd made a friend and her mother had said it was weird to be at somebody else's house in the middle of the workday, which had taken some of the shine off the miracle of someone being interested in her. It was a little weird, but she had missed seeing other people. “And you moved *willingly*, we've been here nine years and I think I'm about to crack up.”

“Where did you want to live?” Jen asked, stabbing at a crouton that wouldn't break under her fork.

“Anywhere,” Tori said. “Anywhere that's close to *anything*, there's nothing here, just people, and everyone's exactly the same.”

She didn't quite think everyone was the same, but she didn't say that. She had a couple stops for dogs in the afternoon, and she took her time in the quiet houses. The Marzonis had painted half their orange cabinets white, but it hadn't helped make the kitchen look newer—they

were still dimpled metal. Kathy and Jim on her right, the Palmquist-Wagners, she went to their upstairs hall with the bewildered dog following her, walked down the long patterned carpet, studied their old framed maps, found—abrupt as could be—a seafoam-green bathroom at the end of the hall, never renovated. She wandered through the Lapinski house, with the grandmother’s stuffy bedroom, the gleaming silver French Horn left on a stand by a hard lonely chair in the front room. Once she even got to Marianne Hawkins’s house, when she was out somewhere and her deeply suspicious little dog peed on the kitchen floor rather than go outside with Jen, and then, while Jen cleaned and wrote an apology note, went and settled on a bed in what looked like a guest room, where there were the dolls and car Marianne had bought, with Legos and a few other dolls, tucked safely in a laundry basket.

She didn’t think everybody was the same. If she’d had to guess, she would have said Tori—who had painted her son’s room blue and given him a bed shaped like a car, and painted her girls’ rooms pink and stenciled them with pointe shoes—was more the same than everyone else. But Tori McClellan—with her attorney husband, her red washer and dryer, her second-floor laundry room—she never shut up about how she would have lived anyone else. They’d almost moved to Cincinnati, she said, and somehow that made Jen sad for her in a way she didn’t like.

At home, alone, she watched houses light up and go dark around hers, and she loved the erratic lights of the full houses, watched the Kearney house—light flicked on upstairs, off, one in the hall, off, downstairs, tracking someone moving through the house—watched the McClellans, lights flicking on and off as people went to get something in another room. She tried sometimes to turn her lights on and off erratically, leaving them on in parts of the house she usually didn’t, like she was so busy, her life so endlessly exciting in those little ways that other people’s were.

“Do you think he cheats on me?” Tori asked, six or seven times over the course of their lunch chats, but in particular one time Jen had gone with her to Nalley Fresh in Timonium, driven twenty minutes for another fancy salad. It was pretty good, but it was still a salad, and the restaurant was crowded, a flyer on the table advertising some big zoo event on Memorial Day weekend. Tori stabbed restlessly at her plate. “I’d love it if he cheated on me, at least I’d have some reason—you know what I mean?”

The last time Jen had been on a date, it had been with a grim banker eight years older than she was who had kissed her cheek in the car. She hadn’t gotten as far as taking her clothes off in two years. She wasn’t really sure she knew what Tori meant at all, but she nodded, looking at her plate, worried that somehow it radiated off of her, that she didn’t know at all, that she was some kind of imposter, that they weren’t the same.

Tori and Mark hosted the community spring party—Jen waited until midway through the party to go over, when she’d seen what felt like a safe number of couples arrive. It was crowded when she got there, and she squeezed through to the kitchen with her paper plate of buckeyes, which looked small and unimpressive amid everything else on the island. Tori was laughing and tipsy and having a great time. Mark’s brother and his wife—who didn’t live here, were over in Owings Mills somewhere—they were there, which was weird, and she saw a few people glancing at them, but they were nice enough, seemed like, the brother following Tori around while she made rounds reminding people about food, the sister-in-law finding a group of the younger mothers who had kids in elementary school. Jen drank too much wine too fast and found a group of the older parents, with kids in college or out, and hung by Kathy Palmquist from next door, feeling silly and relieved at the same time. Kathy asked her a lot of questions about her job,

and then there was a long period where Kathy and Ruth O’Conner talked in excruciating detail about the best routes to Syracuse or Boston, where their respective children lived.

She slipped out when they were talking about snow and left the party. It was cool and dark on the porch. She felt like crying and felt stupid about it—what was worse was that Mark was there, sitting in one of the white wicker chairs, raised a hand briefly to her, and she barely managed to cram down tears long enough to wave a brief goodbye and leave.

She felt stupid for thinking anything would be different here than it had been in her apartment building—at least that place had a bottleneck where doors in and out met the mailboxes. She considered for a moment getting a new dog, just doing it, but she didn’t know she if she could face it, another limp body in the vet’s office. She looked up the banker she’d gone out with once, ages ago—either he was still single or he’d just never updated his rather bare Facebook if he did get married. Maybe she should have gone on another date with him. Maybe she would have liked him. But in the middle of the restaurant where they’d been, she’d felt such rushing silence falling between them, and had felt like that was all the future that could ever be, just her own tongue thick and stupid in her mouth trying to find something to say, as tingling and awkward as though she was sitting there alone.

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As it crept towards May—as she planted the garden, watched dogs, had lunches fewer and further between with Tori McClellan—it occurred to her that some secret part of herself had hoped for some dramatic change in her life by Memorial Day, which was the next time she was set to see her family. She tried giving herself a hard shake, a lecture, while she drove to Valley View Nursery or hauled shrubs into her yard or vacuumed dirt from the trunk of her car, but

nothing she said about feminism or being single or learning to like herself made any difference at all as the neighborhood warmed and all there was to see were people sitting in their yards, children riding bikes, an ambitious teenaged girl with a bottle of Sun-In and a lawn chair, whose hair stayed exactly the same stubborn brown that it had been when Jen passed her the first time. Mark and Tori's kids were out on the swing set, playing in the yard, the older girl and boy tossing a lacrosse ball between their sticks while the younger girl hung around like she was hoping to get hit and get some attention that way.

She watched their dog one weekend when they went to a museum, another when the National Aquarium downtown had a promotion giving a free ticket to any student with an A on their report card. She wandered through their house—Pippa had gotten tired of supervising her and went back to monitoring the front door for any sign that Mark and Tori were back. The bedroom looked different, though she couldn't pin down how. Less used, though that hardly made sense. There was a pile of lacrosse bags in the entry hall. There was leftover pizza in the fridge. She looked out at her own house through the window in the living room, trying to picture what they saw. She had the sense someone had slept in the living room—a watch on the coffee table, a phone cord plugged into an outlet under the sofa. If this had been her house, if this had been her family, and they could look each other in the eye when the art on the bathroom walls said *did you wash your hands? Did you flush? Did you floss?*, then she wouldn't have let that happen. They would have been happy here, she'd never be so lonely that she was poking around a house that wasn't hers, not even sure if she was hoping they'd be like her or if that was the last thing she wanted.

A knock at the door. She froze where she was—Pippa barked, but she ignored it. Silence. Another knock. Pippa came trotting down the hall to look at her, tipped her head to one side, as

though asking *what are you doing?* She wasn't sure what to do—she had a reason to be here, letting the dog out, though she still wasn't sure about answering their door, but then, a moment after the knock, the key turned in the lock, and Pippa ran back down the hall, barking, though she stopped—whoever it was, a man, said *hi, Pip, did you miss me?* Pippa licked his hands and he jumped when he saw Jen. Mark's brother, this was—she recognized him from that party.

“I'm supposed to be here,” he said, when she'd told him who she was. She didn't think he remembered her at all, but he'd laughed, nice enough, said he was glad she wasn't a burglar. Pippa looked pleased with this arrangement and went back to her little bed in the corner. “I'm—” His eyes darted as though looking around for anything he could be here doing. She saw that. “Picking something up. Tori's on her way back. You're good to head out.”

She didn't like him here, in their house. She didn't like being here with some man she didn't know, but what came out of her mouth was, “I'll wait.” She smiled, though it hadn't come out as light and sunshiny as it had in her head. He sort of winced, and after that, they didn't really speak. He paced a bit. She stayed by the glass doors in the kitchen, felt behind her for the lock, made sure it was undone, played out disaster scenarios and escape routes, though he seemed content waiting, looking down the rows of family pictures in the halls. And sure enough, it was ten minutes later that there was a car in the driveway—the door opened and at an angle, down the hall, she saw Tori come in, throw her arms around his neck, kiss him, or go to kiss him, though he deflected, said something, and she dropped her arms and saw Jen.

“I was supposed to let Pippa out at seven,” Jen said, and Tori scrambled for a moment, blank and panicked, said, “Right, right, I—I, yeah, had a headache, came home early, we met each other there, had two cars—he's here to...”

“Pick something up,” the brother-in-law supplied, and Tori sort of smiled. It felt like a knife in her chest, though Jen felt herself nodding, reaching back for the door, saying she’d get out of the way. Tori followed her, though, out a few steps into the yard.

“We’re friends, right, Jen?” she said. Jen’s heart squeezed hard. “It’s just—we’ve known each other since college—” That *we* meant *him*—“Mark was later, it’s just—you know, over time...?”

It crushed something in her, that back in college, she’d only made friends with Isabelle, eating together in the cafeteria and heading off to their separate evenings, Isabelle to a coffee shop and Jen to her room, too awkward to make friends, studying and telling herself she just didn’t have time for anything else. And Tori had been—what had Tori’s college been like? Like she used to dream hers would be, like she would be among the noisy laughter in the hall that passed Jen’s door?

“Right,” Jen said, and Tori looked so relieved, though she’d somehow never felt so far from her. “Right, we’re friends.”

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Her family came up at Memorial Day weekend—she had one sister who lived in Catonsville and another who lived in Annapolis, but her brother’s family lived a couple hours north in Pennsylvania and his family was staying overnight. She cleaned the baseboards and the corners of the windows. She floundered around with the extra bedroom that it was barely worth pretending she used as an office—she did all her work in the kitchen—and in the end, a week before the holiday, panicked and went to IKEA and dropped four hundred dollars she should have saved on a bed frame and mattress she had delivered but put together herself. Mark

McClellan asked if she needed help while she was standing on the porch holding the door for the IKEA guys—she was wracked with guilt, all at once, at how normal he was. He didn't know, hadn't seen how Tori's arms went around his brother's neck. Part of her felt like he should know. The other part—the larger part—wished she had been late going to get Pippa and had seen Tori go in before she left her house.

She wasn't really sure she liked her office better as a guest room/office combo. All she could really see herself doing was lying down while she worked, which seemed like a slippery slope to sleeping and eating and working in this room and never leaving and being completely alone for the entire rest of her life. She abandoned the bed unmade and decided that yes, this had decided it for her, she needed a new job. She spent twenty minutes looking for her LinkedIn password and then gave up and took an old air mattress out to the living room, where she had sheets stacked the sofa. Her niece and nephew could fight it out. They were little and she sort of figured they were both going to want the air mattress, but she didn't know for sure.

Her brother's family usually stayed with one sister or the other, but since Jen had a house now, and one sister had no extra bedroom and the other had their mom staying with her, it was Jen's turn. She cleaned the tops of her picture frames and pulled out the pastel yellow Kitchen-Aid mixer and parked it on the counter. She'd bought it for herself a couple years ago. She hadn't gotten it as a wedding present like the rest of the siblings. She wanted to feel proud. Mostly she felt sad. Across the yard, the three McClellan kids were out catching early evening fireflies. Mark and Tori were nowhere that she saw, and she tried, looking at the impenetrable glare of their windows to see what they did inside, if they fought, if they sat side by side at that lovely bare island like nothing was wrong in the world.

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It was one of those weekends that she could feel her sister Melissa organizing, with a lot of driving around and meeting each other places. On Friday, they all met at Melissa and Steve's in Catonsville for a drive to Ellicott City and a long, hot walk around the shops there, and then back to Melissa's for dinner, and then her brother and his family followed Jen home, out to the middle of nowhere. Her house held up nicely—she was proud of it, in a weird sort of way—the bathroom water stayed hot and pressurized, nothing embarrassing broke or malfunctioned, she set out muffins on the counter and even her sister-in-law Vanessa liked them. Her mother—when she came out to see the house on Saturday—liked it, or said she liked it. She patted Jen's arm and said, "Who lived here before you?"

A couple who had lived there since it was built, she'd heard, had their children and raised their children and watched their grandchildren before they retired in comfort to Mays Chapel and she moved in alone, probably as quiet as it had ever been here, but she didn't want to say that, and said, instead, "I don't know."

She and her mother were alone in the house—the other siblings had taken their kids to the Science Center, and they'd passed—and she left her mother inside when she went out to water her new shrubs and flowers. Next door, Tori's car left—the back door opened and Mark walked out, waved. She waved—he was watering things, too, and she kept her eyes busily on the grass, the mulch, wishing him away, so she wouldn't have to talk to him, stand facing him while she knew how Tori had thrown open that front door. She slopped water on a hanging basket in a hurry, turned the hose on a patch of grass seed in the center of the lawn—she'd started thinning some grass to make a birdfeeder garden like the Palmquist-Wagners, but she'd seen a hawk swoop down and get a tiny little brown bird from their garden, and she'd changed her mind. The shadows shifted on the grass.

“Jen,” Mark said, just over the property line, and she swallowed hard and made herself look up. Water started puddling and she shut the hose off. “Has Tori said anything to you, about anything, about moving or a new job or—or anything, really?”

Jen messed with the hose a moment longer, playing over that hesitation on *or*. She said, after a moment, “Why?”

“Long story,” Mark said, almost automatically—he added, after a moment, carefully picking a dead petunia from a flower, “She’s done things like this before, wanting to move, arguing, leaving stuff early when we’re with the kids, I thought I’d ask. It’s always, before it’s always been—” He didn’t say what it had always been, this time waited her out to see what she’d say, and she picked at the plastic of the hose and thought of Tori in the house, how quickly she’d come in. *Jen, we’re friends, right?*

“No,” Jen said, after a moment.

“She gets bored,” Mark said, not sounding surprised, not like he was trying to convince her. More like he already knew. “That’s not new, always has, one of those things that’s different when you’re first together and when it’s been a while.” She wished he would stop talking. She wasn’t sure she wanted to dog-sit anymore, not for anyone. Anything to stop more confessions. A moment passed—he sort of smiled. “Well. Enjoy the long weekend.”

Of course she’d known their life wasn’t any kind of perfection, but still, she had—she did—she wanted it so badly, even if it wouldn’t be any used to her, even if she never could have kept an island so clean. It looked like it was supposed to, really, so neat, so much like what would come up if you searched online for a picture of home.

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On Sunday, she was alone with Zach's family for dinner—her sisters weren't up for distracting their kids from school on Monday, but Zach and Vanessa weren't driving back till the next day, letting theirs miss a day and whatever happened then, like their parents used to let them skip a couple days for cheaper vacations—she'd missed, in kindergarten, the letters R and S, and presumably how to make friends. Zach's kids went to play in the yard, making up a game that involved a lot of throwing grass at each other while Vanessa supervised and issued dire warnings about what would happen to them if they got too close to the gardens.

Zach came to help her with dinner. She was making pasta puttanesca, sort of, a recipe that had a few very complicated steps for when to reserve half of the tomato sauce for children and add capers and hot peppers to the rest. She'd never used that part of the recipe before but was sort of pleased she remembered it was there. The kids didn't really like it, when they ate—her niece, Celia, cried about onions for a while—but she'd tried, even got up to help Vanessa microwave-softening some butter to put on Celia's plain pasta.

“You don't think you can tell him that I'm going crazy shut up in the house all the time?” Vanessa said, while the microwave spun and hummed. “I keep saying we need to go on double dates like we used to, and we go, but his heart's not in it. I just keep wishing it was different.”

“I can try,” Jen said, though she didn't think she would, or could, and she was relieved when dinner was over. The kids went back into the yard, the three of them following—the McClellan kids were out now, and the boy waved a little, uncertainly. Mark and Tori were at their glass-topped table, both looking out into the yard, apparently lost in their own private worlds—they both looked over and waved, though, and Jen waved and felt proud of herself, though Zach and Vanessa seemed to find *knowing the neighbors* to be entirely unremarkable.

“You should come for dessert,” Jen said, when they’d met at the property line and introductions were done, and the kids had gotten permission and were over at the white playset. “I made pie, two kinds.” One Vanessa’s recipe, with a peach Jell-O packet and Cool Whip, and one just a regular-person pie, apple. They declined, everyone insisted, they accepted. She only had indoor seating and everyone was worried about how muddy the kids might be, so she carried her pies to their glass table, and Mark brought out plates and the kids devoured Vanessa’s strange pie like they hadn’t eaten all day. The chattering washed over her—about nothing, really. They weren’t talking about much of anything at all, just what grades their kids were in and what roads Zach had taken to get here from Pennsylvania.

There was a moment when a silence fell—they sat back, full of pie and out of things to say, when Vanessa looked out at the yard and Zach stacked a few plates. Mark was looking out at his kids in the yard. Tori studied the table, a drop of condensation from a glass.

After a few moments, Mark stood up and took the plates. Tori reached back like she’d help him, though when she touched his arm, there was nothing, like strangers touching—he went in without her, and she folded her arms again and stayed quiet, and Zach and Vanessa resumed talking generally about absolutely nothing in particular.

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At home, inside, Vanessa went to put the kids to bed and Zach stayed with Jen in the kitchen, cleaning up and drinking more wine. Down the hall, Zach’s son was having a temper tantrum about it being bedtime. Celia was crying because she had to take off her wire butterfly wings to go to sleep. Vanessa sounded frustrated, under a cracking layer of put-on patience, like she was just choking back total fury. Zach sort of looked at the hall, but stayed still.

“Should you go?” Jen asked, but he shrugged a little and shook his head.

“I make it worse,” he said. “I think they know I don’t mind when they stay up.”

She’d finished her wine and swirled the last bead of it around in the glass. “She said she wants to go on dates with you again.”

Zach sort of laughed, a little, humorlessly. “She says that to me, too. Like every night’s not bad enough. I’ll ask what we need at the grocery store, and she’ll tell me that if we want them to get into a good college, they need to be in SAT-prep classes by middle school, and I’ll say we should just bite and do the addition on the house, and she’ll say she doesn’t understand why we never go out anymore.” The muffled arguing continued down the hall. He sighed a little. “I know they all pick on you, Jen, Mom does, but I think you’re lucky, honestly. Most of the time it feels like I’m talking to myself. At least you actually are.”

Across the yard, she saw the McClellans cleaning up—Tori at the table, Mark packing up the grill from whatever they had eaten earlier in the day. The kids were gone. They didn’t look at each other or talk to each other, not that she could see, caught in their own worlds, orbiting each other without coming close. All around the neighborhood maybe everyone was like this, and it didn’t matter what you did, not even a little bit, nothing could make the orbits come close as maybe they wanted to, and Jen, Jen orbited no one, spun by herself uninterrupted, not trying to spin away, not caught by gravity and pulled inward—just spinning, steadily, entirely, entirely by herself.

## Let's Not Talk About It

Serena Parker, whose pre-company task is to put plastic silverware in the three-compartment basket on the kitchen island, is getting a lecture from her mother, Joanne, who is making potato salad while rain beats the windows and the time ticks closer to when Joanne's family is arriving. *Our* family, Joanne said, when Serena said *yours*. And that had landed her the lecture, for the eight-thousandth time in the days leading up to the Fourth of July, one of those few occasions when the family all gets together, from habit more than anything else.

Sorting forks from spoons and knives, Serena tunes it out and imagines herself back at college. No more banging on her door when she sleeps past ten. No more comments on her clothes. No lectures on what she already knows. She tunes back in, briefly, though she's been nodding along from reflex. Joanne's saying it again: we aren't going to talk about it. That's what the family as a whole has decided. They aren't going to talk about it.

Tim. They aren't going to talk about Tim, Joanne's brother. This is the first full-family holiday since he was arrested in March, just before Easter. Back then, his wife—now on her way to being his ex-wife—said she had no interest in seeing them. But she's agreed to come today and bring her kids. Full-family without Tim. He's still in federal prison for possession of Those Pictures. The police raid. The hard drives, flash drives, folders shoved into the attic insulation. Those Pictures included Tim's children, all five. And since this is going to be the first full-family holiday—with *our* family, which *you* are a *part* of, Serena—they aren't going to mess it up.

Serena, privately, thinks it's a stupid idea, that maybe acknowledging it for a second, and not trying to pretend it isn't happening, would be easier. But she knows Joanne better than that—she thinks Joanne would die before she sat down to have a deep conversation with someone,

which is why they've never talked about the year in high school when Serena only ate broccoli and black coffee. She can't imagine Joanne didn't notice.

She tries to picture herself saying something about Tim, but she gets that uneasy prickle in her stomach. Her sorority house, right before the end of the semester, when she insisted to Lauren that she was crying because Jonah, who she'd been with that night, hit a turtle in the road. It's not that she's exactly like Joanne—she tells herself that. But maybe she has a point and it's better not to say anything, especially about Tim, especially with all those things that come easily to mind in hindsight: all those times on the Fourth of July when he would ask which cousin wanted to come with him to set up fireworks on the driveway, and all those times when, after she had followed him outside, he would give her ten dollars, a crumpled bill that felt somehow dirty, though all they had done was set out fire crackers and talk about school, how it was impossible that someone as pretty as her didn't have a boyfriend.

All of them are going to keep their mouths shut.

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And so when Joanne's sister, Barbara, and Paula, their mother, arrive at 12:17, thirteen minutes early—Joanne just as unprepared as she always is—they don't talk about it.

Joanne, putting potato salad in the fridge, thinks of when they moved her mother Paula to the retirement home, and she and Tim dealt with the paperwork, and she grabbed a flash drive on his desk to save a file. He'd almost knocked her out of her chair to rip it from the computer. Barbara, the oldest of the three siblings, remembers all the times Tim annoyed her, acting like the overgrown child, joining the cousins playing games, sitting at the kids' table at dinner.

Alyssa, one half of Joanne's twins, reviews for the ten-thousandth time her video, the Year In Review that she made one year at video editing camp and is now expected to make every year on the Fourth of July, an arbitrary, middle-of-the-year time that doesn't make sense—as though she would be caught dead making a family video at camp now that she's in high school. They aren't going to talk about Tim, and so he's been left out of the video—the second version—which, without him, lasts 37 seconds.

And Paula never talks about anything. They are—after all—a family very good at not talking about it. Joanne and Barbara and Paula have all spoken to Tim since the arrest, and heard from him that the night of the raid, Kathleen was screaming because she'd taken sleeping pills and was too dazed to process what was going on. They never repeated this to each other. Does it ever come up, how Barbara's son died, with Granddad's hunting rifle in his mouth? Does it come up how Granddad's predecessor, Paula's first husband, used to hit her? None of it ever comes up.

Serena zones back in on reality as Alyssa appears in the kitchen, comes back from remembering Jonah's car in the campus lot, sprawled on the backseat, lit by the hazy floodlights over the union building. Out the fogged window, she watched the stragglers leaving night class—it had been a Thursday, a school night, though she had promised her roommate the room and Jonah had done the same for his, and they had run into each other in the union building, with the refrigerated shelves of grab-and-go salads and the line that cranked out sandwiches and fries. Jonah subsisted on chicken fingers and onion rings—Serena could never bring herself to get the hot food, not when everything had the calories on it, and she got a wilted salad with no dressing and picked off the croutons. Then they were in his car. His breath tasted like ketchup.

She's still thinking about him—what he told her about himself, his parents' divorce, the painkillers he stole—while Joanne tells her to take the folder of activity sheets that Barbara

brought for the millionth year in a row out to the coffee table. They're paper-clipped together—  
anagrams, word searches, crosswords, blurred from years and years of being photocopied.

Outside, the windows are white with rain. The grill is covered, and the black cover flaps  
lightly at the edges. They're all thinking of Tim, while it rains, Tim who would have insisted on  
grilling out, under an umbrella, flipping burgers, even when there was lightning and everyone  
wanted him to stop, Tim cooking burgers and hot dogs to an almost inedible toughness.

Ray, Joanne's husband, while puts burgers on the grill pan on the stove, keeps thinking of  
how Tim would flip the raw burgers and the cooked ones with the same scarred old spatula.  
Joanne, setting out flag-printed paper plates by the silverware basket keeps thinking of him, too,  
while she watches Paula uncover the quivering red and blue Jell-O cake, thinking of Tim  
grabbing the can of Reddi-Whip that stands by to frost it, of Tim squirting it into his mouth, and  
how upset Paula would get, though never so upset that he stopped doing it. Barbara, collecting  
pens from Joanne's junk drawer for the activity sheets, thinks of how Tim used to start shouting  
out answers before everyone was sitting down to play.

They talk about the weather. They talk about when they most recently heard where  
Kathleen was, though the doorbell rings before Joanne and Barbara have figured out how to  
check what time a text came in. Tim was the last to get married—his oldest is sixteen, three years  
younger than Serena, and his youngest is eight. They all have Kathleen's red hair except Mary,  
the youngest, who looks like Tim, brown haired. She's holding an off-brand American Girl doll,  
stripped naked, which she introduces as Princess Caroline Jane, before lapsing into silence.

Because they're all trying so hard not to talk about Tim, the greetings come out loud and  
overeager. Joanne takes the bowl of potato salad from Kathleen, and Ray puts on a loud show of

offering drinks. Barbara collects all the cousins and shuffles them off to the living room, while Paula asks Mary if her doll doesn't want to put some clothes on. Mary's supposedly having the hardest time with all of this. She frowns at the floor and wraps her arms around the doll.

And Kathleen gets quiet, very quiet, dropping the polite smile. Kathleen's never liked them. Maybe the fact that Paula cried when Tim converted for her had something to do with it, but Kathleen's never liked them and seems to like them even less now, though how could she like them better if they all walked right in and started talking about Tim, all her kids right there? Pissy as she is, they know she was screaming that night of the raid. They know she couldn't stop crying when she talked to him through the prison glass. They know. How can they bring it up?

Kathleen lets the oldest son have beer, like Tim used to—Ray digs through a cooler full of ice and drinks too energetically and cracks open cans, while Joanne pulls apart a stack of plastic cups. Even Serena isn't allowed to drink, not when she's under twenty-one, not on Joanne's watch. Joanne shoots her a look that says *get to hosting a little better*. Serena does a half-assed job of pulling a folding chair closer to the coffee table. Barbara distributes copies of the games. In her hands, they look like worksheets. None of the cousins like them, but her son is dead, so they all have to sit to do their worksheets. Alyssa worries about her video. Carson, the other half of the twins, wishes to be back downstairs, safely in another world of video games, not here listening to the adults debating his future and talking about AP classes in the kitchen.

Serena's back to thinking about Jonah, the fogged window, the raindrop running down it, that girl leaving class at almost a run, alone in the dark, how Serena tracked her through the window until she was out of sight, hoped she got home safe. Jonah was looking at the window but he didn't see it.

They're awkward with Kathleen's kids, who seem just the same as they always have, cool and athletic and not sure what to do with these strangers they're related to. Except Mary. Mary thinks Serena is the coolest person she's ever met, and parks herself and the naked doll on the ottoman next to her. Mary smells sweetly of cotton candy perfume, which was her Christmas present from Paula. It's glittery on her arms.

In the kitchen, Joanne arranges appetizers on the island while Ray prods at the burgers, which hiss and spit grease. Kathleen washes strawberries and Paula sprays whipped cream onto the Jell-O cake, covering it in a thick layer of white. Barbara sets a timer to give the cousins five minutes to find all the words they can in *FOURTH OF JULY*. Silence falls except their pens scratching lightly. A great horrible pause yawns open, where Tim should be talking, booming out how he can't find any words, pretending to sneak a peek at other people's papers. Joanne says, loudly, "Alyssa made the video at camp again!" Alyssa, who made the video at two in the morning the day before, stares at her paper and tries to figure out if *loy* is a word. Barbara prods Serena to keep writing—Mary is looking at Serena's paper with an air of vague bemusement, and starts to color in the clip art figures in the bottom of her own with hard strokes of blue pen.

When the timer rings, after Barbara explains the rules for elimination, she points to Carson to read his list first. He says, without looking at his paper, "*Fourth, of, and July.*" Alyssa dissolves into a fit of giggling—Serena almost smiles, though Joanne looks out at her and she shuts up. Joanne studies the counter and hears Tim, Tim playing this game, wants to shake Carson until he understands that sometimes it's not funny, that you have to take things seriously.

Barbara waits in silence, until Carson looks again at his letters and says, "Juul." This time all the cousins laugh, even Mary, who either knows what it means or just wants to be included. Barbara looks sternly at her list and says, as though to a younger child, "I don't see an 'e' there. I

don't think you can spell 'jewel' with that, now can you?" When she looks out at the other adults, Kathleen's oldest son briefly produces the vape from his pocket and they all laugh harder, and harder when he puts it back before anyone sees it.

But rules are rules. Barbara's games must be taken seriously, these worksheets she's had since before her son Kyle died. Joanne says, "Knock it off, Carson." A silence falls, the rest of them uncomfortable, watching him be disciplined. Joanne says, "What else do you have?"

Carson looks at his letters, wanting to spell *fuck* or *shit* or *cum*, but all he finds is *yurt*, which is a disappointingly good word. Barbara gets out the Scrabble dictionary on her phone to check that it's allowed. It is. Carson says, "Juul is a word." He spells it.

"That's not a word," Barbara says, and Scrabble agrees with her. Carson says, "It is a word, even if it's not on there."

Joanne snaps and say, "Can you stop it? Kathleen's kids are being better sports about playing this than you are, and." And she stops herself. There's a silence, except Ray, who messes energetically with the drinks in the cooler, burying them in ice. Kathleen's kids shift and look like they want to melt into the floor. Mary keeps coloring, harder.

Barbara says, "Everyone loves this game." She means it, thinking of her golden-haired son here all those years ago, how good he was at finding hidden words. The parents start a loud chorus of agreement, and Joanne looks at Serena, who had found *Juul*, too. Once she'd seen Jonah vape in class, that puff of vanishing white. He'd seen that she noticed. She'd almost cried trying not to laugh.

It's still raining hard by 1:30, when it's time to eat, and they sit at the dining room table like any other holiday. The cousins are placed at the folding card tables set up at the far end. There's a chair missing between Barbara and Mary. That was where Tim would go.

Tim doesn't steal fries from anyone's plate. Doesn't reach close behind anyone's back to pull quarters from behind the next person's ear, give a side hug when the trick is done, doesn't start talking about fireworks, picking volunteers to come help set up—*who wants to get out of cleanup with me*. The twins are both thinking of those crumpled \$10 bills the years they went out to help him with fireworks. No car ride home in the dark with the bill crumpled in a pocket and secret, though it didn't seem like it needed to be, because what had been wrong? But it was, anyway. Secret. The children's table is quiet and none of them miss Tim or wish he were there.

There are mountains of potato salad, because Joanne made everyone bring some, because Kathleen's is notoriously bad but she didn't want to offend her. The burgers are passed on a stacked-high platter. The bag of potato rolls. The bag of split-grain-whole-wheat rolls, which no one takes except Serena, who tries to count up calories and match her plate to Joanne's, though after a while she just gets tired, lets Ray push a burger with cheese at her.

They eat. When one kind of potato salad threatens to run out, they bring out appetizers from the kitchen. There are two kinds of fruit salad, dressed in something thick and creamy. Barbara's peanut noodles, which no one likes. French fries, crinkle cut from a bag. Whenever silence falls, Ray leaps up to pass plates around. They eat until almost everything is gone.

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After dinner, it's still raining, too hard for fireworks, so hard that a swale in the backyard fills with water deep enough that beads of it splash upward against the falling rain. Joanne sets to

cleaning up and sends Alyssa to turn on her video. Paula tries to make Mary's naked doll a dress from two handkerchiefs produced from her purse, knotted together at the shoulders. Ray takes over Paula's Jell-O cake, or tries to—after he pokes a few strawberries into awkward rows on top, he stops Barbara from shooping all the cousins out of the kitchen and catches Serena, giving her the bowl. Barbara hustles the rest of them out—Carson goes gratefully, Alyssa less so, plugging the HDMI cord into her laptop and trying to think positively about how she's done the right thing, leaving Tim out of the video.

Barbara, perched on the sofa, regards Kathleen nervously. She's followed her pack of children out to the living room, nursing the same beer she's been working on since dinner, when she went strangely quiet halfway through. She's looking at them. She's looking at them like she's thinking about what they aren't saying, like she's imagining last year, Tim and Kathleen's house, Tim trying to set up the cables, that crack in the fun façade while he started to bicker with his kids about what connects where and which input the TV should be on. In the kitchen, Joanne and Ray have a whispered argument about whether or not he should clean the grill pan now.

Serena pokes strawberries into rows in the whipped cream that frosts the cake, which she hates. She feels full and sick as they all settle in the living room, after the cake has been put away again to keep the whipped cream from melting. The idea of dessert makes her want to throw up. She's not a dessert person, or she is—it's just one of those things she says from reflex, to explain why she always turns it down, though she is, really is, has had three separate sorority sisters walk in on her when she slipped and binged ice cream and Oreos at night, and one of them—Lauren—stay long enough to realize that she wasn't having fun. She'd said it enough times to Jonah that on that night in the car, when they'd seen security coming, when they'd gone to McDonald's

later, he'd bought her a hash brown in greasy paper when he got ice cream. She kept nibbling at it so he wouldn't think she didn't like it, though she only ate down to the level of the paper.

That had been the night he killed the turtle—when they left the school lot, when they were driving around, there had been a turtle in the road. It had been in the other lane, far out of their way, but he'd swerved and he'd hit it. He'd swerved *to* hit it, and it had crunched and clunked against the underside of the car. And she'd screamed and he'd jumped and said *Jesus Fuck, what happened*, as though it could have been anything else. She started crying. Jonah tried to laugh, tried to tell her it didn't matter, and when that didn't help, he got irritated with her, told her to stop being so sensitive, pulled into the McDonald's parking lot and shut the door on her when he went in. She pulled herself together. She ate her hash brown, half of it.

Watching Alyssa fussing around with the video, she remembers the car, her eyes on the greasy paper when they passed the dead turtle again, how she swallowed her tears. He'd seen the turtle said she ate like a chipmunk, trying to get her to laugh, not sorry for the turtle, not at all, but she'd taken it, laughed, protested, said *I just eat slow*. And he'd changed the subject, said *so what's your family like*, probably since he'd told her so much about his that he felt uncomfortable with it, though in her head, they had connected, the hash brown and the question—Joanne, when she left dinner out on the counter for them to grab, with her calorie-sheets left out with the measuring cup to measure servings. She wanted to tell him that, but she'd said *I don't know*, like she sometimes set him up for things to tease her about, eventually laughed and said, *I don't know. Repressed*. He'd laughed. He'd said *ooh, surprise*. He'd said it, grinning, like it proved a point, like somehow he knew everything, and she wondered if he did, if he would have been surprised by all these people tensed and nervous in the living room, if he would have been surprised by her when she was with them.

Alyssa turns away from her laptop. She's too scared to play anything but the short version, and though she starts to make a disclaimer, she chickens out and changes her mind.

"Yeah," she says, and she clicks *full-screen*, then *play*. There is last Fourth of July, at Barbara's house. A quick flash of the small yard, playing horseshoes, Joanne and Ray arguing about where you're supposed to stand. A flash of Thanksgiving—the kitchen at Joanne's, buzz of white noise, someone coughing—then it's Christmas at Tim's, the tree, a still image, and then the living room just after the gift exchange, scraps of wrapping paper and a few cousins on their phones.

The End. 37 seconds. It's quiet for long enough that Alyssa knows she's about to get yelled at, and she looks around helplessly—first Carson, then Serena, who looks away.

"What was that?" Paula says. "Did you do that this morning?"

Joanne sees what she's done, though. "It was a little short, but very nice," she says, starting to stand up. Alyssa tries to close the window, but her screen, projected to the TV, shows all the videos she's made in the program, and there it is, *fourthofjuly\_v1*, in a line of videos next to this one.

"What's that?" Paula says.

"A draft," Alyssa says, though it's a few minutes long and everyone has seen that it exists.

"Play it," Paula says, and Alyssa looks first at her Joanne and then at Kathleen.

Kathleen adds, "Play it." She's not looking at Alyssa.

So there it is again. Barbara's house, last Fourth of July. The patio table loaded with dessert and paper plates, a Graul's cake in its plastic box, printed with the American flag. Tim is cutting the cake, laughing and mid-conversation with someone off screen, barely paying attention to what he's doing. The pieces come out uneven and mashed around the edges. The sun is very bright and the grass very green and there are a few still images of the younger cousins being forced to do a scavenger hunt, Tim holding a hula hoop high over his head—they have to toss beanbags through it. A brief clip of some fireworks in the driveway.

Then Thanksgiving at Joanne's. The same clip, the kitchen, coughing, but longer—it moves to Tim making gravy. Ray's exasperated face, taking the whisk from him, his on-screen *Alyssa, find something else to do*. Barbara's Thanksgiving games, the cousins at the table, Tim leaning over between two of his kids and suggesting *Thanks and giving* for the anagrams, which gets a fit of snickering from the cousins. The table of food. Afterwards, that game when Joanne has them all writing down things to be thankful for on paper leaves to hang on the stick in a vase on the center of the island, giving Tim that look when he won't take it seriously.

"Couldn't you find any clips where everyone looked happy?" Paula asks.

Christmas. They're playing charades. Tim appears to be imitating sex. A Snapchat caption in a bar across the screen reads, *my weird uncle doing 'shoveling snow'*. Then dinner. Dinner looks nice, spread down the table. Everyone is in their normal spots. They all seem to be laughing. After dinner, in the kitchen, there are Tim and Kathleen putting blobs of peppermint ice cream onto paper plates alongside pieces of cake. Their elbows bump together.

And Easter. The holiday without Kathleen. As far as everyone remembers, it was miserable—Paula was mad and crying for most of it, and everyone was angry, but on screen,

they're having an almost obscenely good time. A picture of dessert, little cakes shaped like deviled eggs. Everyone sitting around in the living room playing Pictionary.

The End. It isn't one of Alyssa's top-quality videos, but it's played and hangs heavy over the living room while the rain pounds outside. There's a general shifting, and a long silence, and it's all anyone can think about, so obviously that they might as well be talking about it: Tim. Kathleen and her children all look remarkably unaffected by seeing him on screen, but of course, it hasn't been new news to Tim's children, those pictures.

Joanne, for a split second, thinks that maybe it would have been better to talk about him—to clear the air, say something—but she pushes this away. Because if she could talk about Tim, she would say that he would make a joke right now, break the silence. Barbara would say that Tim would have patted her shoulder, sat between her and Paula, understood in silence that it killed her, every video that her son hadn't been in. Love remains a remarkably hard thing to shake. It would feel so good not to remember anything nice. The earnestness. How when their father, that blurred image of long-distant memory, the one they don't tell the kids about, slapped Paula, it was Tim who intervened and took a hook punch to the side of the head. And Tim who hosted the first holiday after their stepfather died, when Paula stopped hosting, in his tiny apartment in Cockeysville. And when Barbara's son died, before they knew, it had been Tim she asked to pop by and check on him, and Tim who called the police and, outside, stopped Barbara from going in. At Tim and Kathleen's wedding reception, when she was pregnant and went to throw up, he made all those relatives draw icebreaker bingo on their napkins and play.

And now there's this, the adults sitting alone with their grief and Joanne's kids on the floor, at once feeling this awkward emptiness and relief, finding that they don't miss him. Tim's family, his children and Kathleen, they wait it out. They're very quiet, unreadable.

Serena tries to picture herself back at school, tries to picture the version of herself that isn't like this, that's not like Joanne and the rest of them. *I'm not repressed*, she said to Jonah.

Paula starts to cry and the cousins, Kathleen's kids included, look at her with that fear of adults showing emotion. Barbara and Joanne feel it, too, rising panic. They don't know what to say, and after a long, awful moment, what Joanne says is, "Time for dessert!" And it's just hate that flicks across Kathleen's face, as though she would prefer to talk about it, as though she somehow wants to reconcile all of these pieces.

Serena, when Joanne pulls her up to help pull out dessert, tells herself again that she's different than this, that she's changed. She thinks of Jonah, still laughing at her, while she protested that she wasn't repressed. He said, *then tell me something about yourself*. She'd said, *I used to want to be a dancer*. He took it wrong on purpose, laughed, and she let him, but before he could ask again, she told him something else. Freshman year. Right before finals. She'd gone to a party. She had one drink. She hadn't known what it was, just that it hadn't been enough to knock her out like something had. She didn't remember a single thing until time restarted again at four in the morning in the Delta house, with two scared sisters sitting on the floor with her. They kept asking her what had happened, but she didn't know. They said they had found her at the party, blacked out sitting on the landing of the stairs, her head on the railing, alone, but she had never gone upstairs, not that she remembered. It hurt. When she undressed later, there were streaky spots of blood in her underwear. She left out, for Jonah, that she hadn't been able to stop crying. But she said the rest of it.

And Jonah had said *oh*. And he had been quiet for so long. And an awful silence had existed like this, with just the steady, increasing drone of rain.

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They move to the kitchen. The thunder starts outside as Joanne pushes platters at Serena to set out, and Serena puts them on the counter. There's the sweating, quivering Jell-O cake, the whipped cream running, stained red and dark purple from the berries plunked down to make a flag on top. Alyssa, burning bright red, scrambles to set out smaller paper plates printed with American flags, anything to avoid the turn of Joanne's temper on her for not helping.

Tim. It's like he's here—they're all thinking about him and they all feel it, and Joanne, for a moment, taking a tub of fruity sorbet from the freezer, that it would be best if he could just be magicked up and plopped down in the living room, where she could hit him and shout at him and ask him what he was thinking. But Barbara—clearing activity sheets from the coffee table—Barbara has imagined it, too, if Tim were somehow here, and it seems as though it would be worse. A million times she's imagined her son, even briefly back from the dead, put down in front of him with his golden hair intact, his skull put back together. Just once she wants to ask what he was thinking, but with every answer she's imagined, it's never made her feel any better, not even a little bit, because every imagined answer makes her want to scream louder—*that's not a good enough reason!*—and she can't bear to let herself think that. Not about Kyle with his skull blown apart. And she can't imagine anything that Tim would say that wouldn't hurt.

Paula watches Kathleen—who might as well not have come, for as much as she seems to want to be here—how was it possible, how was it even remotely possible, that with all those *children*, she had never noticed?

They're quiet, keeping it to themselves, because this is what they do and have always done and have always been so good at. Joanne and Barbara learned how to cover bruises with

makeup before they knew eyeliner or lipstick, back when they were little, sitting on the edge of the bathtub watching Paula, who, when she was remarried, was proud of how she made the past go away, how she made everyone forget. She deleted her first husband. Joanne learned to be quiet. Barbara did, too. And what did Tim learn? To be quiet? How not to get caught?

When it shivers up to the surface, it brings with it everything else. It's all just going to come pouring right out of them, all the awful things they've thought about each other. Surely Kathleen feels it, too. Surely she's thought awful things about them, is afraid of herself.

And so they start to serve dessert. Joanne gives Serena a knife for the lemon bars, because they are having a nice time and Serena is her daughter, not just this strange person standing near her, whose private thoughts terrify her when she lies awake at night. And Paula, when Barbara herds her to the island to collect a dish to go out to the table, says, "We didn't get to do fireworks."

"No one likes fireworks," Kathleen says. Serena picks up the lemon bars. Kathleen herself picks up the quivery Jell-O cake, and Paula, watching her, looks at her with such loathing that everyone feels it. Maybe Paula's seeing a memory like Alyssa's video, some happy old holiday, and clearly she needs it. She needs it. Everyone lowers their head except Kathleen.

"Tim does," Paula says, and Kathleen stands holding that quivery cake and looking at her, and then looks around at them and says, "Why did no one ever tell me anything?"

Joanne says, "No one knew anything." But she thinks of how she never liked it, Tim sitting at the kids' table, how once she almost let Tim take Serena, when she was very little, on a pumpkin-picking day out but some part of her felt that it was wrong and she said no. Part of her

felt that she should have told Kathleen, back then, when she was a stranger with her emerald engagement ring.

Kathleen says, this time, “If you had known—” And she’s looking at everyone—“Would you have said anything? Or would you have just let it go forever?”

“But we didn’t know,” Joanne says, which is not the answer to the question Kathleen is asking, and Joanne wants the answer to be *God, yes, of course we would have done something*, but she somehow has nothing to prove that.

Paula’s looking at Kathleen, and she says, “How could *you* not have known?” There’s a silence. “What would you have done?”

“We’re getting a divorce,” Kathleen says, and Paula says, “He’s my son.”

And she drops the cake, just lets go with a pulling-back of her hands. It falls face-down on the tiled floor with a spluttering sound and shatters in slow-motion, broken pieces of Jell-O shooting off under the counters and towards the hall, becoming miraculously bright shades of red and blue. Whipped cream sprays up the side of the island. There are a few started yelps and then just silence, except the rain outside and a knife that rattles in the lemon bar pan when Serena sets it on the counter.

“Okay,” Kathleen says, matter-of-factly, briskly, brushing off her dry hands as though there’s something there. “Okay. Kids, get in the car.” Kathleen’s kids seem as startled as everyone else by the shattered cake, and they don’t hesitate, don’t protest, just do what she says in petrified silence. Joanne picks her way over the shattered cake to see them to the door. It shouldn’t be so dark so early, but the clouds have blackened the sky and the street is too empty for the Fourth, when people are usually out waving sparklers. There’s no snap of poppers-on-

asphalt tonight, no kids outside with chalk. Kathleen doesn't say another word, though Joanne stays in the doorway and watches until she sees them in the car, the headlights bleary in the rain.

Serena looks at her mother's bony back in the doorway, from a few steps away, a little away from everyone. And she tries to think of something to say, something to answer that tired slump, something like *Mom, it's not your fault that Uncle Tim's a creep*, or *Mom, I believe that if you had found that stuff on his computer, you would have said something*, but somehow she can't make herself say anything, can't bear the idea of making it worse.

In Jonah's car, when she'd told him about freshman year, he'd said *oh*. He'd said *oh*, and he'd looked at his steering wheel like he wished she hadn't told him, like he was embarrassed, like she was different somehow, and she'd looked at her lap and pinched her thighs and hated herself. He stopped touching her across the center console and it didn't feel like respectful distance. It felt like he didn't want to, like the *oh*, the *oh*, the awful fullness of it, was filling all the space between and around them and she thought she'd crack, or shatter, or burst.

He left her at the Delta house, and she watched him leave, watched him take a speed bump at full speed before she went in. It had been very quiet—that close to finals, everyone was at the library or in the union building. She'd stopped in the hallway because she couldn't stop crying, and there had been a long moment when she thought that she was alone, and then Lauren had come to the hall and asked her what it was, and she'd started talking about the turtle—how it hadn't been bothering him, had been in the other lane, how it had crunched, how her dad got out of cars to move turtles across roads on rainy days. It could have been a hundred years old. Maybe it had a family. It had little eggs in a nest somewhere that were waiting for it and it was all squished on the road, it hadn't asked to be in pain.

By the time she'd been fairly confident that Lauren had gotten the main point—Jonah—she couldn't catch her breath and she'd known very well that it was clear enough that it wasn't about a turtle. She'd known that but she still thought that she might die if she had to talk about anything else. That clunk, how he had steered into it—*oh*, that silence—and how it jolted under the car—*oh*—and in the glare of the McDonald's lights she saw something dark and smashed on the road, *oh*. And Lauren didn't try to force it, but hugged her, sat next to her on the sofa while she kept hearing was *oh, oh, oh*, and when Lauren hugged her again, it felt like she knew that.

She's gone and ended up exactly like Joanne. Just like her. Never in her life is she going to be free of these people, no matter how far she goes. And when she listens to the kitchen—to Paula crying, and Barbara ranting about how Kathleen could *do* that, how she could waste food like that—part of her can't keep from wondering if Kathleen knew it would give them something else to talk about, some relief, if she knew they couldn't stand it, like Lauren knew she couldn't stand being there with her own memories a second longer, how she turned on the TV and told her to pick, *Rick and Morty* or *Bob's Burgers*, like it was the most important thing in the world.

It's all right there between them, when Joanne turns around. Kathleen. Tim. Crumpled ten-dollar bills. The broccoli and black coffee and measuring cups and how she didn't call home for weeks after that party at the Delta house and how she used to mention Jonah sometimes and never does anymore. And what she says is, "I'll go get some paper towels."

And what Joanne says is, "Get something for the floor, too, or it'll be all sticky. The all-purpose stuff."

## The Ice Queen

Every time Lynn Nolan comes back from college on breaks, it feels like she's coming back to a different place: speed bumps laid into the main road outside the development where her parents live, houses with additions or new play sets, the slow creep of *stuff* in their house. Her mother's a self-described pack-rat, but that's not quite it, not the word Lynn would use. When her dad says that Lynn needs to watch herself and throw stuff out, she says that her friends at school mock her for being so opposite of her mom, for throwing everything away, but the truth is that she doesn't have any friends—she has lots of loose class acquaintances, people she talks to when she sees them but doesn't seek out, but other than that, she's alone.

She wishes her dad had done this *watch yourself* bit every time her mom's made a comment on not letting people get too close to you, keeping everybody at a distance—*why did you say that to your little friend, Linnie, she doesn't need to know that much*—but he didn't, so here she is. Sometimes she feels like she's making those memories up, the ones where her mother lectured on not telling anyone too much. Her sister Megan is almost-sixteen and doesn't seem to have the same problem at all—she's got more friends than she knows what to do with. Though Lynn notices. Megan never invites anyone over. Every time she's come back from school expecting Megan's room to be different, it's stayed the same, craft-store letters on the door, pink-painted walls and lofted twin bed with the desk underneath. The only thing that changes is the steady accumulation of bits on the dresser-top and in the closet—no old things ever leave, and the new ones only ever join them.

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They aren't close, the sisters, though when their parents are at work and Megan's out of school for the summer, Megan asks for rides like Lynn's a private taxi service. Lynn gets why Megan never has anyone over—at home, Lynn sticks to the patio, because the outside of the house isn't the heavily-shelved and cluttered mess that the rest of it is. It's still annoying, the ride requests, but she also can't really say no. Most of Megan's friends live about fifteen minutes away, down closer to the high school she goes to, and it's not a bad drive, though what really wears on her is the *I need a ride home*. Almost all of Megan's friends are in the same boat, not quite old enough to get their licenses—one or two have them, but not most—and you'd think it wouldn't kill the parents collecting them to give Megan a ride back every once in a while, though they don't, so Lynn goes to get her, sometimes at houses, more often where she's been left waiting outside movie theatres or nail salons or Starbucks. Megan pretends that she's busy on her phone, but Lynn sometimes sees her folded arms and the anxious way she looks around like she's sure all the strangers passing are looking at her.

“Tell them to wait with you,” Lynn said, that time she got Megan from outside a frozen yogurt place, “If you don't like waiting by yourself—”

“It's not like you would get it,” Megan said, and it crossed Lynn's mind to say that even when she regularly spent the day in high school not talking to anyone, the other kids in Spoken Latin Quiz Bowl didn't leave her waiting outside at 5:00 on Thursdays by herself, and she only ever counted them as acquaintances. But she didn't say it.

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Sometimes at night she hears her parents fighting. Her father trips over boxes and teetering stacks of things, catches his sleeve on the shelves that are now filling up the office,

arranging it into aisles like the basement, and when she and Megan are upstairs, she hears their father shouting that he'll get a dumpster, their mother shouting that she's just getting everything organized. One night he tries to make their mom throw out old baby things, bottles and cloth diapers, and she cries and protests until he throws the box on the floor with a horrible plastic clattering. He storms out—his car starts, headlights cut through the blinds. She hears Megan crying, and downstairs their mother keeps crying, but Lynn pretends to be asleep. Her mother comes up and opens her door like she knows, looks at her lying there dry-eyed, and says, "Don't you ever feel anything?" Her mother's name for her is *Ice Queen*, as in *don't you feel human emotion*, but Lynn specializes in keeping things to herself and she doesn't say anything even if it makes her feel so guilty, so bad for her mother crying, that she almost breaks her streak when she's been left alone, two years now without hurting herself. It used to be that she'd grab whatever she could get her hands on—tubs of lotion, books, deodorant bottles—and whack them down her legs until they left dark spots of bruises. She didn't bother covering them, since no one knew what they were, and no one ever asked, and she remembers like it was some other life that she liked that, that she loved how no one had any idea.

She doesn't do it again. Their dad comes back. Lynn goes out to walk the dog with him the next morning and he acts like nothing happened, has her hold the leash while he fixes the red flag on the mailbox, which hangs limply at the side before he tightens it in place.

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Megan's friends all think Lynn's funny, not in a good way. At school people think she's funny and say *we should hang out more*, and she says yes, but it never happens. Megan's friends giggle about her when she drops Megan off, and she can tell, and Megan looks like she wants to die when she gets out of the car. Lynn's a little bit afraid of them—they all look older than she

does and it's weird and she's not sure how they do it. Just before she left school, she dyed her hair black and then she dyed part of it pink, but somehow it made her look younger. A couple of the friends tell her that it looks nice, but they're giggling like how people used to ask her questions at school, innocent *how are yous* that she knew were traps, though she never quite knew how. She hates coming home. She wants to be back at college, but she doesn't, really. Her life is going and going and nothing ever changes and she doesn't know what she's doing wrong, just that nothing makes sense—she wants to sit at dinner with the big group of girls from her dorm, but whenever she's been invited, she feels sick and falls silent. She sits alone at her little table and feels safe, even if she's lonely. She's afraid the rest of her life is going to be like this.

When the friends' parents are home, wherever she's dropping Megan off, the giggling is more muted, and the parents are nice to Lynn, ask her major and where she goes to school. One mother, a very tanned woman just back from yoga, catches her wrist as she's leaving and asks if Megan's okay, says it looks like she's losing weight. Lynn says she doesn't know—later, in the car on the way home, she brings it up, but Megan freaks and tells Lynn to leave her alone, and at home storms upstairs so loudly that their mom, just home from work, knows they argued and asks what it was. Megan shouts *nothing* down the stairs, like she's new here, like she hasn't learned the surest way to push their mother into a raging fury, or maybe like she somehow wants to do that. Either way, their mom starts shouting at her about respect, how she's not to yell down the stairs like that, not to slam doors, not to be embarrassed of her family, her house, how she's grounded—Lynn hears how her mother blurts these things out, how she works herself up, getting angrier the longer she goes on. When Megan goes crying upstairs, their mother turns on Lynn, says, “Jesus Christ, Ice Queen, go find something to do besides looking at me like that.”

Oh, how she wants to say something. Upstairs, Megan's still sobbing, and their mother looks at Lynn like she wants a fight, like she'd love nothing more than to have Lynn shout back at her, but when she thinks about it, she sees the mess of the house and it hurts her inside. What garbage her mother keeps—not anything worth anything, but junk mail and catalogs, empty plastic containers with their lids snapped neatly on, but tossed randomly into reused banker's boxes. Peanuts long since gone rancid, every scribble she or Megan ever made on a piece of typing paper, their schoolwork, her mother's schoolwork, her lopsided writing from when she was a child, her Sunday school worksheets, her French class notes. It kills her that her mother's in pain, and she must be in pain, because she's kept a cardboard box full of old plastic jars, and why else would you do that?

Lynn turns to go. She kicks that box as she goes, and it clatters and the dog yelps and skitters away, and she runs upstairs. Megan cries and Lynn almost goes to her door, but she doesn't know what to say, doesn't think she can stand it, can't go in there with Megan's saved things, goes into her own room, which has started to fill already with her mother's stuff since she's been gone—fabric their mother made costumes for them from when they were little, a mass of snipped-off pieces of thread compressed into a pompom, magnets they bought her once—Mom, I love Mom, Best Mom, #1 Mom, we love you Mom—endless bits and pieces, edging her out, all the time. One day she won't be able to come home, and she sits on the edge of the bed and doubles over her folded arms, rocking where she sits, silent, where she can't hurt anyone. It's better to be alone.

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Their parents fight again, that night and for the four nights that her mother holds out with Megan grounded. Their father says that of course she doesn't want to have anyone over, look

around, their mother cries and says it hurts that they're all ashamed of her, she can tell, they all are. Lynn pretends not to hear it when her father storms to bed and her mother cries downstairs and tries and fails to throw things out.

She rolls onto her side and looks at the secret tattoo on her hip that her parents would hate and focuses on the dark lines. There's this ice mummy that was found in Siberia, the Urok Princess, the Ice Maiden, so close in terms of words, all her clothes and hair still on, 2,400 years old and all, all the tattoos still there. Lynn loves her. It's the Ice Maiden's tattoo, a reindeer with fluted antlers and back legs twisted into a little vortex. She couldn't shut up the whole time she was having it tattooed on her—the tattoo artist seemed interested.

The therapist she went to that handful of times at school, she wasn't really as interested, and Lynn couldn't shut up then, either. The therapist looked exhausted, overworked, and she probably was, one of two counselors at a school with 2,500 students, but Lynn was exhausted, too, hadn't done very well explaining her parents, just wanted the hour to end so she could go home. That therapist kept asking if she'd gotten the tattoo because she wanted to be in pain, if she had used blades, if she wanted to use blades, did she have access to blades, and if not, then it would probably be a good idea to come back if those thoughts started to cross her mind. She didn't go back. They do all the time, the thoughts. She wishes she had scars like Jenn at school. Lynn got so excited when she saw them, someone like her, and then she just felt like a lunatic, because if anyone else out there was looking at everyone's arms and thighs all the time, they'd never pin Lynn as *like me*. She wanted to say something, she did—they were sitting near each other in class—and she wanted to say something to explain how her heart leapt, but all that happened was that Jenn saw her looking and gave a cursory, irritable tug at her flannel sleeve without covering anything, as though to prove she wouldn't cover them, and asked something

about the homework. Lynn froze, then, didn't say anything. That therapist always kept asking her if she hadn't wanted an emotion that was easier to handle, which was true, it was, but it had always been more than that—it was an off-switch, a way to turn off everything, get herself under control. Maybe she was the only one who felt that way. Maybe Jenn wouldn't have understood at all and it was better she hadn't said anything—maybe she is as absolutely alone as she sometimes thinks she is.

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Megan, when she gets ungrounded, sulks for another couple days without wanting to go anywhere, and then resumes asking for rides, though her friends are all full of ideas now, pushy when Lynn picks a few of them up and takes them over to the mall.

“You should have just had us up,” one of them says, after she's told Lynn, sounding proud of herself, that she has her license and can drive, but she doesn't have a car yet. “Your parents are at work, your sister wouldn't have ratted us out.” The yoga woman's daughter agrees, though she seems quieter, glancing awkwardly at Lynn. Megan says *maybe, yeah*. Later, when Lynn brings her home, Megan starts trying to deal with her bedroom, stacking boxes of stuff she hasn't touched in ages in the hall. She still has an American Girl doll in a box up there, and she falls apart crying because she's sad about putting it in the basement. Their dad swears about *the mountains of crap in this house* once he's figured out that she isn't injured, but their mom turns all sweet, hugging her. They all have memories of her crying when their father threw out empty plastic containers en masse once, her crying over the recycling bins because someone could have used them.

Later, when Megan's old stuff has been taken to the basement but her room looks just about the same, Lynn catches their mother and tells her what the yoga woman said about Megan looking different, but their mother makes that same face she makes when Lynn gets home from school and says the house looks worse, like she's getting boiled alive and can't tell. Lynn goes upstairs and tries to talk to Megan again, stands in her open doorway and surveys her room, which looks almost unchanged—the boxes taken out must have come from the closet, because Lynn doesn't see a difference, just that Megan in her desk chair is sitting and wringing her hands, which is what their mother does when their father tries to throw things out, looking at the mess that's left like she's been stripped of something infinitely valuable.

"It's just a doll," Lynn says, "Megan, right, it's just stuff." Megan claps her hands up over her mouth and shakes her head, muffling her crying, and they stand there like that in silence for a few moments until prickling unease creeps through Lynn and she has to leave.

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A girl from school, Courtney, who Lynn's sort of friend-acquaintances with, lives in the general area and asks her to hang out and go somewhere one day, and Lynn doesn't really want to, but she agrees out of reflex because she doesn't have a good excuse to say no. They meet at R-House for lunch, this a high-end food court, a converted garage in an extremely gentrified place in Baltimore. She never has a good answer when asked about what she does at school, who she hangs out with, and while they're eating tacos, she tries to laugh and flip the questions back so she doesn't sound sad, and Courtney tells her about how the art students go out to a bar in town every weekend and hang out. At some point they start quoting tweets they've seen, and they're both laughing, pulling them up on their phones to send each other—goofy pictures of cats, stuff about bullshitting papers last minute. Courtney's on Facebook all the time, and Lynn's

seen everything she pulls up, but she pretends she hasn't. A couple jokes about therapy, one Tumblr post that says anxiety feels like thinking you're secretly a murderer whenever the news plays reports on unsolved cases.

"Yes," Lynn says—she's laughing, her tacos forgotten, and Courtney laughs, says, "Oh, God, you too," and shows her a couple more—getting places too early, asking people if they're mad, one she can't see because of the glare but laughs at rather than asking again. Courtney says, "I have a crazy story about that, when that happened—what do you have, can I ask?"

And Lynn's voice sticks and she looks down and she says *I don't*. And she wants to add *don't know*, or *don't know yet*, but it's done. Courtney's screen goes dark.

"It's kind of hard to explain if you don't," she says, and she doesn't tell whatever the story was going to be.

It's pouring rain and Courtney's all full of ideas and suggests heading off somewhere else to do something else, but Lynn starts getting antsy about where the car's going to be and how she'll get back to it and rush hour on the Beltway and she says no, but then she goes back to her car and feels bad, not sure if that was a weird interaction or not. In times like this she thinks she should go back to the school therapist, or anyone. But she spent so much time monologuing about ice mummies, and she felt so weird that it had been so effortless to pull one over on the therapist, that part of her would rather not try.

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When she gets home in the late afternoon, there's a car in the driveway, one she doesn't know, with stickers on the back for Megan's high school and a middle school. Inside, two of Megan's friends are around the corner, asking why there are shelving units in the dining room.

There are two empty Starbucks cups on the cluttered island, one with the melted dregs of something pink.

“It’s just my mom,” Megan says—when Lynn looks, she’s very red, shifting in place, wearing pajama pants and an old, stretched-out tank top and a sweater Lynn left lying on the back of the sofa that morning, inside out, like she grabbed it in a hurry. She’s pulling at it. “She’s just like that.”

“I would literally never leave my room,” one of them says, this the girl who said that Lynn wouldn’t rat them out, who can drive—she looks around as though unsure if she should laugh. The yoga woman’s daughter is there, too, and she is laughing a little, though a polite, nervous little laugh. The house is worse if you’re new here—when Lynn looks around, at all the empty jars packed along the tops of the kitchen cabinets, the drifts of newspapers and magazines, the endless shelves, it looks so different than the outside that it seems almost unreal. “Where’s your room?”

“It’s a mess,” Megan said, as though on reflex, though she adds, “Not like this, it’s just like, yeah, I was like, getting rid of clothes and stuff, it’s upstairs, hang on, I think my dog has to go out.” The dog flops unhelpfully onto his side and receives *out* with a long-suffering tilt of his head. Megan shoots Lynn a look and she goes upstairs while Megan keeps talking about the dog.

It’s not really like there’s much that can be done about Megan’s bedroom, and Lynn knows that and is sure that Megan knows it—some princess stickers, ten years old, peel on the wall, the bedsheets are printed with ladybugs, and on the dresser there’s a jumbled mess of makeup and cheap old snow globes with the water evaporating, half-full and sluggish. The scale that used to be in the bathroom is under the dresser. Really the best she can think of to do is to

open the slat-doored closet and take an armload of clothes out and drape them sort of generally around—some up over her head on the bed, some over the desk chair, some on the floor—but she doesn't really think it's going to help and it doesn't, because when she's retreated to her room and Megan comes upstairs, she hears the friends saying *oh, it's cute*, but they're still sort of giggling, and it turns into questions. Haven't you ever redone it, they want to know, doesn't it make you crazy, how can you stand it, is your sister's room bigger or smaller, which of these clothes are you getting rid of. It doesn't sound like there are any options for right answer. There's giggling, then a hard crack in the metal trash can, a breaking snow globe and a gasp that Megan lets out genuinely, then silence.

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"I wish I was like you," Megan says, when the friends have gone and their parents are home but in the basement arguing, and Lynn's in the kitchen by herself, stirring a packet of some kind of off-brand herb-sauce pasta for dinner. Megan's still wearing Lynn's sweater when she leans on the island, where the Starbucks cups still are. It looks like she's been crying and like she's only just choking it back. "I wish I didn't care about anything." She sort of looks like it's meant as a compliment.

Lynn wants to say that she does, all the time, of course she cares about everything all the time, that she just doesn't know what to do with it or where to put it when she does, just knows that she doesn't want to spread it all over the house, but she doesn't say that.

"Do you want some of this," she says, after a moment, and Megan shakes her head. "You have to eat something—"

"Get off my back about what I'm eating."

Silence falls. The dog wanders over to them, panting nervously at the raised voices downstairs, and rubs his head against Lynn's knee until she ruffles his ears.

"I can help you clean up," Lynn says, after a moment. "Your room, whatever broke—"

"Mom brought it back," Megan says, picking at her nails. "She used to—Lynn, are you listening to me?" She's looking at Lynn, moving a little like she might even catch at her—Lynn steps back, almost involuntarily, lets go of the pasta spoon. She meets Megan's eyes briefly and looks at the floor. "Are you listening—"

"I'm here," Lynn says, and Megan says, urgently, as though they're talking about something much bigger than a snow globe, "She used to go on business trips, she got that at an airport and brought it back—"

She feels like she'll die if she has to keep hearing this. "Meg, it's a piece of plastic."

"Do you have any feelings, Ice Queen?" Megan tries to sound angry, but what slips out is half a shaky sob. "Mom brought it back, that was the time Dad threw out all the old beach toys, she was crying—"

"Stop—"

"Didn't you keep yours?"

"The water all evaporated."

"She brought them back for us—"

She almost has to put her hands over her ears. "Shut up, Meg, please—"

“And she’s sad all the time, she’s always disappointed, and I don’t know what to do, I feel so bad and I can’t stop—” She stops like she’s expecting Lynn to jump in, but Lynn can’t say anything. “I just want to stop feeling bad, don’t you ever hate yourself, I can’t stand it when I make her upset like I do, and I hate that I’m going to lose it about a snow globe, I want to be hollow inside, sometimes it’s like you don’t have any idea—”

“Of course I do,” Lynn says, and this time Megan stops and looks at her, like she’s really looking at her. Lynn with her blotchy-dyed hair, Lynn brushing her teeth in dorm bathrooms watching other people get ready to go out and wishing that she was with them, just missing that part that lets her get close to people—or maybe Lynn with an extra part, her ice castle. Or maybe Megan’s not seeing that, she’s just seeing Lynn stirring pasta on the stove, and for a moment she hesitates, and then lifts her shirt and pulls the waist of her pants low enough to show Megan the reindeer on her hip. The AC bites at her. She almost feels the alcohol wetness from when her bare skin was first cleaned. “Do you really think I never feel anything?”

Megan looks at her. She’s out of breath and struggling to catch it, her arms folded over her chest, which is so thin it looks almost concave, like she’s shriveling into herself, like she’s freezing.

“I just want to feel hollow,” Megan says, after a moment, her eyes on the deer when Lynn pulls her pants back up. “I just like it, Lynn. I can’t eat that.”

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That night their parents fight again. Lynn eats her pasta in her room but she hears it, from a distance. Megan’s told their dad about her friends and he’s mad, he’s shouting about how it’s not fair to anyone in the family for the house to be like this, and their mother’s shouting that

she's getting it under control. Her father storms out again—headlights briefly light the room as he leaves. Her mother comes upstairs. She opens Lynn's door and stands there without saying anything.

“We need to talk about Megan tomorrow,” Lynn says, half to her pillow, without moving.

“You love to drop in and tell us what's wrong,” her mother says. “Why do you keep coming back?”

“Because I love you,” Lynn says, “Don't be stupid.” Her mother laughs, a little scoff of a laugh that hurts her inside, and her mother leaves and shuts the door after her.

Lynn stays still. She's a classics major and she's still studying Latin and she declines *deer* in her head, running down the chart of noun endings—*cervus, cervi, cervo*. In high school they never learned grammar, just messed around studying gods and how to introduce themselves, but they dominated in Quiz Bowl, when the teams from other schools could only answer the questions on the proper declination of nouns and their team could answer the questions posed to them in Latin. Though she never really felt much like part of her team. Once, she remembers this, once the moderator was giving directions in Latin and the answer was to follow them, and Lynn did very well for the first few—hold a pen in your right hand in the air, stand up, sit down—though the one she remembers was *hug the person sitting next to you*. The moderator looked at her expectantly, everyone did, but she shrugged and pretended not to understand it and somehow sort of liked that she understood and no one else there did, and there was a long moment that stretched out in silence where she felt almost power-dazed with her distance.

## You Never Knew

It was the eighteenth anniversary of Lila Griffin's murder, and Marianne Hawkins couldn't take her eyes off the news all week while they played the old clips. Technically she was supposed to be thinking seriously about whether or not she was moving to a retirement home, but every night when she faced her pro-con lists, she let herself be distracted by anything—by the motion sensor lights in the yard facing hers, by Lila's ninth-grade picture on the TV screen. If things had gone differently, Marianne might have been Lila's grandmother.

Or sort of. Everything would have been different, but when Marianne was in high school, she'd gone out for a while with Al Griffin, dead Lila's grandfather. But she'd dumped him and married Richard, and so things were as they were. They fell out of touch, she and Al, and she didn't think of him again until years later, when the news started playing stories about Lila.

Eighteen years ago. Marianne had been about sixty. This had been when her kids were out of the house, but Richard hadn't died yet. But she had been alone, the night she heard the local news say to be on the lookout for Lila Griffin of Timonium, who hadn't come home from school the day before. It was February. She'd been fourteen, wearing a purple sweater and blue jeans, gold earrings shaped like butterflies, pink coat, blue backpack. Brown hair, brown eyes. She had vanished on a ten-minute walk between school and her house. The last name was familiar but common enough that it didn't strike Marianne right away, but then the parents came on the news. The father was Al Griffin Jr.

She saw Al—Al Griffin Senior—on the news a couple days later, when they were still looking for Lila. He was older, all thin gray hair and liquid dark eyes, standing in a raincoat on the side of the road near Loch Raven Reservoir, all those dense trees filmy gray in the rain. There

were searchers, volunteers, clambering down the leaf-slicked hill behind him. A fisherman out at the bridge had found Lila's backpack tossed on the side of the road—when they opened it, all of her clothes were balled up inside and bloody. Her coat was twenty yards further down the road.

Marianne wanted to go help them look for her. When her kids were little, she'd taken them down to the woods near the reservoir sometimes, not really hiking, but exploring the trees and game trails and ruins of the old paper mill that had been flooded out in the 1850s, the stone foundations. With Richard alive, it hadn't been worth bringing up going to get involved. But in the evenings before he got home, every night, she was glued to the TV watching to see if Lila had been found yet. Al Griffin appealed to the abductor. *Please, he said, please, if you know where Lila is, we urge you to come forward.* He had a crumpled little piece of paper in his hands but didn't consult it. *She wants to be an entomologist, she wants to study bugs. Her favorite piece of music is Nocturne in C# Minor. Every year for her birthday, her grandmother gives her a porcelain doll and you never saw a child be so gentle—*

He was still talking when there came that shout up the hill. The camera jolted, the mother's scream in the background, the camera caught Al's eyes close, his chin drop. Sometimes on anniversaries, they played this news clip. It cut to the police sliding down the hill, then to the covered stretcher bringing her up. Lila Griffin, every unholy thing done to her, stabbed and strangled and rope-gouged, glass in all kinds of places it shouldn't have been, bloody, unclothed. No DNA recovered, not from anywhere. They never found who did it, but knew that whoever he was held her alive for three days before he killed her. They never found her butterfly earrings.

When Richard died a couple years later, the first thing Marianne did when the funeral was over, when she woke up the first day of being alone, was drive the fifteen minutes down to the reservoir and park in that sketchy shoulder off the bridge where they had filmed Al's face as

it registered that Lila was dead. She went down the hill and wandered around for hours, around the graffiti-splotched ruins, around the game trails and rocks and creeks. She found some mutated daffodils, the edges frilly like she'd never seen before. She daydreamed about finding Lila's earrings, but of course she didn't. They were two little gold specks in an entire forest.

Her daughter, Angie, said it was creepy that she'd done that. Marianne had just been getting back to her car in the falling dark and fog when a car passing had screeched off to the other side of the road and Angie had gotten out with her hands up in a gesture of *what are you doing?* There were flowers in Angie's car—she'd been bringing them to Marianne's to surprise her. It had been so odd to see her there that it almost hadn't felt real, not until Angie ran across the empty road asking what Marianne was doing there. She hadn't been able to answer, hadn't know what to say. *Taking a walk*, she kept saying, and Angie kept saying *it's dark, it's going to be dark, what if you fell*.

*I just wanted to see*, Marianne said, and Angie looked at her then and said *see what?* She forgot that not everyone had followed the case like she had. Angie didn't drive by here always tracking landmarks—backpack, Al Griffin, police. She blew through the scenic bypass and saw something else completely. Marianne said, *I don't know, just if the ruins were still there*.

At night, even now, she asks herself the same question, though. *See what?* What had she wanted to see? When she watched the news clips, what was it she was looking for?

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Marianne liked order. She liked order and routine and structure and so she went religiously to the community association meetings, 7:00 on the second Tuesday of every month, because back when Richard was alive, they used to go to board meetings for a private school

where he'd been an alumni trustee on the second Tuesday of every month, and when he died, she didn't like not having anywhere to be. So she went to the community association meetings, where she knew very well she was considered to be a bit of a walking rule book because she knew the covenants better than anybody else. They weren't hard to memorize, but no one seemed to believe that.

Really she didn't care about the bubblegum pink door on some new family's house, or the three violently white playsets that had sprung up in recent years, but she knew that they were against the rules. The only covenant violation she cared about even a little bit was the shed in Patricia Barnes's yard, which was right across from hers, backyards facing each other, but that had gone up almost a year ago, right against the property line, even though Marianne's fence was the ten feet back that it was supposed to be. Patricia's adult daughter had moved back home and built it and maybe that was what bugged her. Patricia had been here as long as Marianne had, since back when they were first building out here in the late '60s, before it was all full of houses, when suburbs crept out into what she remembered as rural land. She remembered this area from before there were houses at all, from those drives to see her aunt out in Harford County when she was a kid—her parents had driven many times past where she would live, where she would move after she met and married Richard. Patricia had been here a long time and knew very well where things were supposed to go. And Diane Barnes had grown up out here and she'd still installed motion sensor lights on every corner and door of her mother's house, like she expected something other than a squirrel or a deer might set them off, like there was anything more frightening than a fox out in the dark.

The meeting the week of Lila's anniversary was at the Roberts house, which was catty-corner across Marianne's backyard. John Szarka, community association president, used to host

them, but it had been a long time since he did, and they'd been bouncing around the neighborhood for a while. Marianne walked over before it started, setting off all of Diane's motion sensing lights, and circled around the side yard to the front door, as she always did, though she saw people through the glass doors at the back, lit up against the falling light outside.

She rapped on the front door, surveying the quiet road, striped with speedbumps. Diane's lights shone across part of it. Of all the kids she remembered growing up out here, Diane Barnes, who had been near the same age as her kids, smoking all the time, never home, would have been low on the list of people she expected to have come back.

Sandra Roberts opened the door, smiled, said, "I figured you'd come around the back," as she always did. She stepped back to let Marianne in, looking out past her. "Hey, are you seeing those lights on all night, too? We were going to go over there and talk to her sometime, but I wanted to ask you."

"All day and all night," Marianne said, scanning the gathered group over Sandra's shoulder. Somebody in the development, and she didn't know who, kept calling the police when her son-in-law, Aaron, Sam's husband, dropped her grandkids off. Aaron had been around for fifteen years. He was the only black man who had ever driven out here before, as far as she could tell, and he was always in the same car, the same SUV, and it wasn't *every* time, but every couple weeks they sent a red-headed police officer who looked all of about twelve to ask her if she was okay. She'd ruled out most working adults as the caller, which ruled out most of the board, but it was odd knowing that it was someone who might be here, who lived near her. Back when she was first here, everybody kept their mouth shut and their eyes on their own business.

Or not everyone. Once Patricia Barnes had called the police on a fight Richard and Marianne had, but besides that, Patricia kept to herself better than anyone else except maybe Marianne.

“Do you know her?” Sandra asked, and Marianne looked away. Sandra’s daughter was in the upstairs hall, peeking down like she was waiting to see if the hall was empty. “Patricia.”

“Not really,” Marianne said.

“Ah,” Sandra said. “I didn’t know when people moved in, thought I’d ask.”

She didn’t quite know how to correct it. She’d been here all this time, but Richard had never been crazy about her going to see people during the day, and she’d had the kids, and Patricia’s daughter had been a little too old for them, but saying all of that didn’t seem quite right. She followed Sandra down the hall, glancing back once—Erin Roberts who was, what, fifteen, settling on the stairs with an AP Chemistry book, like there was much of anything interesting to hear at a community association meeting.

Then again, Marianne had all of the covenants committed to memory without being interested in them, and wasn’t even really sure why she bothered coming to these anymore. She didn’t think she’d miss them, if she moved. Mostly she’d just meant to be quiet—there hadn’t been any police incidents since last time to rag on—but she couldn’t help herself, so she brought it up again, *stop calling the goddamn police*, though just got the usual wow, that’s crazy, who would do that.

At the end, they let her out the back, and Marianne started across the yard to her house, past the shed, over the property line. Her dog scabbled at the glass door, tail wagging. She had a flash of an unpleasantly clear memory. Sam, at maybe ten, our playing catch in the yard with

Richard. They'd started arguing about something—she'd been inside, remembered hearing the shouting from Richard, remembered the baseball thrown past Sam's head and how it hit the glass doors and a for a fraction of a second it seemed it had just struck them before they shattered and sprayed glass all over the floor. Richard had never hit them, never would have thrown the baseball *at* Sam—though there had been something more terrifying about not knowing where he was aiming when he threw it. You never knew what was happening in other people's lives. She found herself thinking that a lot.

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The news played a bit on Lila every night in the anniversary week. By the time Marianne had settled in the living room and the dog was curled up next to her, Lila's picture was up on the screen, that school picture of her with her puffy brown hair and head tipped to the side. The usual series of clips: a shot of the high school and sidewalk, the busy road. The old shot of Lila's mother appealing to the public at a press conference, slump-shouldered, Al Griffin Jr. with his arm around her shoulders. There were three younger children. One shot of their grandmother with them—this the clip of the investigation of Lila's house, when the police had been sure that she must have gotten home and something happened to her there, before they found the footage of her in an ice cream place down the street, and nobody had any idea why she was there. The cashier swore she'd seemed calm, read a book and ate her ice cream and then set out in the wrong direction, away from home.

Marianne had this all worked out. Lila's parents weren't Richard, didn't expect a call when she got home. She got out of school at 2:15. She could take herself for ice cream and whatever else—there had been a bookstore there back then—and be home in plenty of time to meet the younger siblings when they got off the bus at 4:15 from elementary school. She had two

hours free. She'd done something she always did. Either she'd met a man on earlier visits and gotten willingly into his car, or she'd been grabbed by someone who had noticed her before. Sometimes she was so sure of it that she wanted to call the tip number to ask if they'd checked.

Marianne was pretty sure Lila had gotten willingly into the car. She'd been fourteen. Thought she knew everything. He offered her a ride home, and she got in the car. No one had noticed. If he had a car, he'd been sixteen and young enough to pass for her brother or boyfriend, or a grown man who looked like her father. No one would have noticed, which was why no one had seen anything.

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"You're making progress," said Aaron, the next day, looking at her pro-con lists, when he came over to drop off the granddaughters as he did twice a week in the summers. She would have thought that he was patronizing her, because the lists were almost blank, but he was a psychiatrist and so she felt oddly proud of herself.

Angie was also dropping off grandchildren, though hers were a bit older and looked like they were regarding this as a punishment, which it was, because they'd had a party without Angie being there, middle of the afternoon and everything, and were now back to spending days between camps with Marianne. Angie was putting groceries into the fridge. If Marianne had wanted a zucchini, she would have *purchased* a zucchini. She had done her time cooking meals.

"Cons are winning," Angie said, though—when Marianne looked—by a very slim margin, four to three. Pro: no more motion sensor lights in the back yard. Con: what if she had loud neighbors in a retirement home. Pro: Kathy Palmquist down the street said her mother-in-law was in their memory unit, so if you started to die, they had facilities for that. Con: suppose

that cost extra. Pro: no more spending money to get the grass cut. Con: what if there wasn't anywhere to walk the dog. Con: where's the car going to go. They'd seemed like pretty good lists the night before.

"I wonder if there's a difference in the level of specificity," Aaron said, and Marianne tried not to wince. "I notice that the cons seem to be phrased as *what-ifs*."

"Yeah," Angie said, now putting a spaghetti squash on the counter. "Because she doesn't know anything about what living in that place is going to be like."

"I wonder if making a separate sheet for questions could be productive."

"I wonder," Angie said, now leaning with both hands on the counter, talking through her teeth, "If noting that all of Mom's questions are concerns about things outside of her control means she should stay here, if it's like some kind of, you know, I don't know, a cry for help?"

"Or I wonder if they're relevant fears and questions that we can ask about," Aaron said, picking up the big pad of paper Angie had brought over and labelling the top sheet *Questions*, then starting a list—neighbors, dog, space, car. Angie buried her hands in her hair and tipped her head back to the recessed lights in the kitchen. Aaron knew very well that this bothered Angie, but refused to stop doing it—he hadn't liked Angie for a long time, not since the argument she and Sam had seven years ago about whether or not their father had been abusive. Angie said fear wasn't abuse. Sam disagreed. It hadn't gone well.

Richard had been—

Look, she would have known if she'd been abused for a couple decades.

Sometimes Aaron and Angie got into these little contests about who was going to leave first, but he had an appointment to get to and just put up the question sheet, leaving the con page as it was and giving the marker back to her. When he had gone, Angie started going through the freezer.

“You used to make such nice meals,” she said, picking through power bowls and frozen trays. “That’s why Sam has this idea you need to move, you don’t cook anymore.”

“I don’t like cooking,” Marianne said, and Angie gave her a pained look, like she thought it was a lie. “Angie, take the zucchini home with you, I don’t want it.”

“But haven’t you always liked it here?” Angie asked, looking around, and Marianne looked around, too, trying to look at what Angie was seeing. The yellow-wood cabinets, the flowered valance over the window, the white tile on the floor. She remembered once burning her arm on the oven door and upsetting a casserole into the bottom. She remembered Richard in her face and shouting, her back against the counter, him shattering a plate in the sink on her left. It wouldn’t come back, what he’d been yelling about. She heard his voice but either the memory wasn’t there or it was somehow crammed down as far as it would go, but either way, some piece of it was gone.

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Once on the news, five years after Lila died, she’d seen a clip of Al Griffin in the kitchen when they did a catch-up with the family, cooking something. Apparently the newscasters had found it homey, but it jolted her and she’d almost been able to picture herself in that house on the screen, like that was her house, her husband, like she had been the one who married Al Griffin. It had been Dolly Mitchell who married him, also from their high school. Dolly, with a cloud of

frizzy red hair and a desperate love of pink clothes. She'd started going out with Al near the end of senior year. She must have had their first baby that same year—Marianne had done the math. Dolly Mitchell and Al Griffin had a son, who at eighteen accidentally got his girlfriend pregnant, married her, and became Lila's father.

And fourteen years after that, Lila was abducted somewhere between school and home, held alive for three days, and dumped in the woods off Loch Raven. Al on the news had talked about Dolly, those last words before the shout came that someone had found Lila's body. Dolly gave her a porcelain doll every year and Lila was gentle with them.

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The good news was that no police came this time. Pros of moving—she added this to the list after the grandchildren had been taken home at the end of the day—not seeing the grandchildren looking at her after that happened anymore. That would be nice. Pro of moving—dining options. Pro: classes, art classes, watercolors, book clubs, right there, she could take the dog and everything. Con: moving. Con: what if she didn't have anyone to sit with.

She took the dog out for a walk in the setting sun while she thought about it. Con: she had lived here for a long time. Though, then again, Marianne didn't know that many people anymore. Hadn't known that many people, ever. She got a wave from Tori McClellan as she went out running, waved to Liz Szarka as she drove home, passed a few kids out on bikes who coasted politely out of the way and waited for her to go by. There were only a handful of people who would regularly stop to talk past pleasantries with her, and she knew very well that Ruth O'Conner had only warmed up to her because her daughter was always bringing girls home and she'd thought Marianne would have some words of advice on that, though Marianne and Sam

had never actually had any kind of conversation. In the last few years that Richard was alive, he and Sam had barely been speaking, which meant that Marianne had never seen him—then Richard had died and the next thing she knew, Aaron had been there at Christmas. Marianne kept her mouth shut when it wasn't her business. She didn't have any questions—everything seemed clear enough to her, or clear in the way that that sort of thing had always been sort of clear. She'd never quite understood the whole deal movies made about sex, all the fizzing people seemed to feel, and she didn't want to get into it with her children. She had broken up with Al Griffin because she didn't fizz when they touched, and married Richard two years later in a panic over hitting twenty and being unmarried, no fizzing at all.

But. If she had married Al Griffin, her granddaughter could have been left butchered in the woods. Perspective.

She passed a house where she was *sure* the caller lived, the Prizzi couple—she loathed them—they'd been out here as long as she had, always used to be coming to her house leaving flyers about their church. Frances used to grip Marianne's wrists when she made the mistake of opening the door, insisting that thought the church was downtown, it was safe, in a safe area, safe. She'd said what she meant a couple times, *people like us*. Her mother had said the same thing, nearly the same thing, a long time ago when Marianne and Richard picked this house over one near Baltimore. How safe, how safe. Kids could ride their bikes down the middle of the road, and leave them outside unchained. It was supposed to have been safe here and somehow still she remembered that spray of glass coming into the house. There was no getting away from that.

She'd sort of wanted to run into Kathy Palmquist, to hear what she'd said again about the retirement place—that if her mother-in-law had moved there before she needed memory care, she might really have enjoyed it—but she was just turning back towards her house as the

Palmquist-Wagners took their dog out, and her dog was already straining for the house, where the news was playing as she'd left it. Through the glass doors, she saw Patricia Barnes out by her old peach tree.

Marianne watched her for a moment, and then went out the back doors and out towards her. Patricia looked up and, after a moment, when Marianne was leaving her fence, waved a little as Marianne went across the yard to her. The motion sensor lights were all on, though just spots of pointless bright white in the daylight.

"Is something wrong with the lights?" Patricia asked. She had a quivery sort of voice. Marianne hadn't talked to her in a long time. "They were out in their side yard, I think they were looking at them, but they were by their garden, I couldn't tell." She sort of indicated the Roberts house with her head.

"They're shining straight out," Marianne said. "I think they're supposed to be at an angle, aren't they? Pointing sort of down?"

"She had them on her house in Colorado," Patricia said, looking at the house with a little wrinkle of concern on her forehead. She seemed barely competent, teetery and unstable. "Before she moved back here, she said they were right. And she gets nervous, in the dark." She looked back at Marianne for that. "She'd had this man, you know, following her around, before she came back. It's safe here, you know, nothing like that. I told her to come back."

Patricia said that like it was a conclusion. Marianne wanted to ask. She wanted to ask and that was what stopped her from asking, realizing that she was about to plow right ahead demanding details until the lights and everything else were explained, though she made herself

stop. She didn't want to hear any more or think about it anymore, not Diane Barnes who used to sunbathe in the backyard moving back and ringing the house in lights and still not free.

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There was a new clip on the news that night, which Marianne watched on the sofa with the dog. Al and Dolly, present-day. Dolly white-haired, wheelchair-bound, looking absently to the side, one hand working in her lap. A neutral room somewhere. Al was being interviewed. He still had hope that they would find Lila's killer—those were the words that came out of his mouth. His eyes said that hope had died a long time ago.

The camera cut. There was the retirement home, a quick, two-second shot of Al pushing Dolly's wheelchair along a sidewalk with rosebushes, and then back to the newscasters, who were sharing the tip number and contact information for the charity projects the Griffin family worked on. She shut it off and looked down at the dog, who looked expectantly at her, head tipped to one side.

"Why do I keep watching this?" Marianne asked him. The dog wagged his tail, rested his head briefly on her arm, but didn't have an answer better than she did.

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She met Sam and Angie at the retirement home— a sprawling complex forty minutes away, south of Baltimore—to tour the apartments on Saturday.

"I don't know," Angie said, looking around 3607, a third-floor apartment, arms folded, after they'd done the interview with the woman who had Marianne draw a clock—she'd heard it was a dementia test—and answer some questions. She only lied a couple times. A happy

marriage. When asked what she'd done the night before, she said she'd read a mystery novel. The same woman was showing them around. Angie was sulking, arms folded, actively trying to talk Marianne out of it.

"I'm sorry about her," Marianne said, quietly, to the retirement home woman, who smiled a brilliant white smile like she got this all the time. 3607 was sort of unimpressive, builder-beige walls—they said they would paint them if she wanted—and a window facing the neatly maintained sidewalks and trees and gardens. A little white gazebo. Some glass skywalks between buildings.

"I'm just saying that I can't believe you want her to die here," Angie said to Sam, on the way to 1010. Con: the elevators were gurney-sized. Pro: the elevators were gurney-sized. She cracked herself up. It took some effort not to laugh.

"No one's talking about Mom dying anywhere," Sam said, while the retirement home woman politely pretended not to be there, fidgeting with a rose-gold watch. "Unless you'd like to talk about what happens if Mom falls and dies in that house, is that what you're planning on?"

"So you'd rather Mom die in a white room."

"They have a memory unit you die in," Marianne said. Sam and Angie looked at her, Sam like he was trying not to laugh, Angie hopeful, like she thought Marianne wanted to leave.

"We do have what's called *stages*," the retirement home woman said. "Independent living, then two stages of assisted living, and then fully on-site nursing—"

"Please," Angie said, her voice all up in her mouth, and the woman smiled and stopped.

Apartment 1010 was a ground floor one, which faced a courtyard. It had a little patio and a living room plus dining space. Laundry right there, kitchen absolutely bare of memories of crying over things that were burned or didn't turn out. This apartment put her closer to Sam than to Angie—maybe there wouldn't be any more zucchini.

“You can't live here,” Angie said, when she cranked open the blinds.

“The apartments on this side don't have the best view,” the woman said. “We do have a first floor on the other side opening up when the renovations are done—”

Marianne looked. Grass. Courtyard. Gazebo. Rose garden. Balconies. She saw someone out standing on his, a man, facing her and a floor up. There was Al Griffin, drinking something from a mug, thinking about something, looking around without really seeming to see anything.

“Mom,” Angie said. Off to the left there was a hill, probably a different property, because it was a sloping graveyard. “Mom, you can't live here, *Sam*, she can't live here—”

“The will says you're going to cremate me,” Marianne said.

It got very quiet. That had been a bit cold. She tried her best, she really did, but sometimes things just popped out, like all those arguments they'd had when Angie was in high school and she wore things that were low cut or short, just put some goddamn clothes on before your father tells you to do it. She'd just tried to protect her, and sometimes it was like Angie didn't understand that at all. She had to move. It wasn't like there were a whole lot of happy memories to leave. The sink here was so smooth and undented by shattering glass, the walls so bare and white, the glass so clean it looked like it almost wasn't there.

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It was mid-afternoon by the time they'd been left to eat in a restaurant-looking setup on the first floor, and it was quiet and slow, and late in the afternoon when they all walked out to the lot—both kids walked her out as far as her car, and she watched them walking out to where theirs were, hands moving like they were still bickering. She sat in the car for a moment, scanning the neat gardens and glassed walkways. Al leaving the sliding doors of the building. She glanced over her shoulder—the kids were out of sight now. He was heading for another building at a good clip, lucid, mobile, hands in pockets, passing her car. She sat for a moment, almost a moment too long, and then opened the door and got out again.

“Al Griffin,” Marianne said, and Al, who had almost passed her, stopped and looked back. He looked blank for a moment, then blinked and smiled, took the few steps back.

“Marianne,” he said, cheerful, shaking her hand with the other hand covering it, “I wasn't sure I'd recognized you for a minute, I saw you on the news back when your husband died—” She had a strange out-of-body moment when things were reversed, and Richard-Hawkins-who-she-had-almost-married was saying he had seen her on the news when Lila-her-granddaughter died, but she blinked and things righted themselves—Richard on an alumni board at that school. Her face had been blank and pale in the background of the clip on the news.

“Yeah,” Marianne said—she'd forgotten that. “And you, of course—” Al's brief sad smile, just like on camera. “I'm sorry, really am—” Nodding. She stopped, and asked, as though she hadn't seen him on his balcony. Yes, he lived here. He was just heading off to collect Dolly and take her for a walk, which he did every day, did she remember Dolly Mitchell—she was in memory care and he was still in the apartment.

“You’re welcome to join,” Al said, gesturing towards where it was—“For the real tour. She doesn’t talk much anymore, but it might be a nice change.”

Most of her felt as though she should say no, though another part wanted very badly to go, and he did seem sincere—he repeated that he meant it, and she locked the car and went with him. He alternately pointed things out—this where a shuttle picked up, that a nature trail—and asked her about her life. She felt as though she was someone else answering about herself—got married when she was twenty, once had a brief stint as a secretary but it didn’t last, two children, four grandchildren, all of those born after her husband died. Sometimes she said Richard would have loved them, because people liked that, sometimes even supplied it themselves, though she left it off and Al looked briefly at her but didn’t ask. If Richard had still been alive—

“Things would be very different, if he was alive,” Marianne said, and she turned the questions on him before they reached the memory ward.

This was a different kind of wing of the building, more hospital than apartment. The door opened with a keypad that sounded an alarm when Al opened it—apparently he knew the code from being here. Past that, it was doors—they were single rooms, narrow beds, and someone was screaming. Down a hall to an elevator, then up a floor to a common room and dining tables and another hall of rooms. Jeopardy was playing—a handful of mostly women in wheelchairs watched it, two holding baby dolls. A few were at the tables. There were a couple grandchildren visiting, teenagers performing awkward nervous solicitousness, one trying to refuse a quarter of a sandwich his grandmother was trying to force on him, saying, “Nana, you haven’t eaten anything yet,” though the father was giving a cease-and-desist gesture as Nana got irritated.

The nurses in dark blue scrubs all knew Al, sent him down a wide hall with railings. Rooms down either side—they had little pictures and bios hanging on each, hobbies, how many grandchildren, 8 ½ by 11 paper, wide margins, large font, very neat, condensed, orderly. Names in big type at the top—Edith Gompf, Ella Brazis, Millie Wagner. Dolly Griffin. She had purple butterfly stickers ringing the printed bio on the door, and pictures of grandchildren up, too—Lila’s old picture, the one they always showed on the news. *She has seven grandchildren*, the bio said, *Lila (deceased), Bianca, Nicholas, Sadie, Olivia, and Rory*. So clean, to say it like that. There was so much order in things being decisive.

“Hello, my dear,” Al said, very brightly. Dolly, white-haired, absent, dressed, slow to look from the window to them. The dresser and armchair seemed to be from their own furniture. There were porcelain dolls standing on the dresser top, in fluffy dresses trimmed in lace.

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Al’s daily walk with Dolly was a long circuit through three buildings if it was raining or too hot, outside if it wasn’t, destination the non-denominational church, which was a Catholic church pretending that it was a Protestant church and a synagogue, too—someone had put a sign with a variety of service times on the front. People knew him—he stopped and chatted, people said hello to Marianne, asked which apartments she’d looked at. The glass walks between buildings were very wide, lined with benches and railings, with views of courtyards and gardens. A couple times Al stopped and interrupted talking with Marianne to narrate to Dolly, pointing to people walking, guiding her to look at a high-strung poodle that was passing with her owners. Marianne lost track of how much time was passing—it only struck her when Angie and Sam both texted to ask if she’d gotten home safe.

The ceiling in the church seemed higher than it should have been, the windows all stained glass bleeding onto the floor in puddles of red and blue. The walls looked like they were marble, and it seemed oddly bare. It was empty. Dolly said something Marianne couldn't quite understand and Al answered like he had, clearly, about where they were, put the brakes on the chair at the end of a pew, sat. Marianne did, too, looking around at the high empty space.

“Things would have been very different, you said,” Al said. “If your husband was alive.”

“I'd be in that house till I died,” Marianne said, turning back to the front. She had a clear flash of a memory of a bottle of painkillers she kept turning in her hands in the bathroom, this a long time ago, over and over, turning the cap half loose, closing it, looking at a glass of water on the edge of the sink, watching how her slight movement made the surface of the water shiver. They used to have just the one car, and he would take it to work and all day she'd be home with the kids with nowhere to go and no way to get there. “Your granddaughter...”

“She'd be thirty-two,” Al said. Dolly twitched restlessly and moved one hand, and it almost looked like she was following—Al interrupted himself to narrate something about the stained glass to her, and stopped, and it was quiet again.

“Are they ever going to figure it out?” Marianne asked, and Al sighed a little.

“They've never been sure if the ice cream shop video was from the right day or not,” he said. “The cashier swore it was, but two other cashiers said it wasn't. She has her coat on, it's hard to tell, but I don't think it's the right day. She had this boyfriend, he was eighteen, didn't have any business messing with her, his parents had him lawyer up before we found her. I think she got in his car in the school lot. He probably drove her home a lot and we just didn't know.

But then the only thing is, where was she?” He looked at her like he was asking her. “Those three days she was alive, where did he have her? So maybe it wasn’t.”

It was very quiet in the church. She traced back through the news story, back from the bookstore she half remembered, the grainy tape, the sidewalk outside the school, back to Lila with her butterfly earrings standing inside as the last bell rang, with two hours before anyone expected her to be anywhere, Lila with no idea that she was about to die. Such a cruel and random thing to happen, though when you looked back you could see how it had happened—though that didn’t make it less awful. The news would play a last clip of Lila tonight, the last for this year, and Marianne would be there with her eyes on it, listening to the recitation of the violence, which was made so neat, so orderly, all forced into line and made to make some sense.

She would see the news, see Lila back in school. And back further. Marianne was sixteen again, sitting in English class at another school, elsewhere, that badly lit room, being lectured on Shakespeare’s sonnets, bored, picking at the edge of her paper. Dolly Mitchell sat one chair ahead of her, taking notes so earnestly that Marianne almost hated her, though had never really been able to, she was so well-intentioned. And Al Griffin was across the room, also taking notes. That hot yellow room. *Their granddaughter*, she told her younger self, trying to gauge what she might have thought, or done, *their granddaughter is going to be murdered and dumped in the woods, and you, Marianne, you—*

Aaron and Angie and the grandkids in her house, the pro-con lists, that holiday seven years ago when Angie and Sam shouted at each other and a plate shattered on the floor and Marianne flinched and couldn’t sleep that night, that time Richard threw the baseball and shattered the glass doors, that night Patricia Barnes called the police when she heard Richard shouting and they came and woke the babies and Marianne had been so angry at Patricia.

Richard when he first drove her out to that house twenty minutes from Towson, so far from home that it might as well have been the moon, and when she snuck into the boys' dorm at college with him before she dropped out, when she broke up with Al Griffin outside her parents' house, when Al played Nocturne in C# minor on a record in his parents' living room, when they went bowling on their first date with a mess of friends. Back to this moment, before that, the yellow classroom, the droning lecture, the beads of sweat running down her back, the before.