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### **I'm Still Here**

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I'M STILL HERE

by

Rosalind Denise Thompson Guy

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing (English Department)

The University of Memphis

May 2021

I'm Still Here  
By Rosalind Guy

“Memory knows before knowing remembers.”  
--William Faulkner

“The definition of love is not this, and all of this anyway.”  
-Patricia Smith, “Incendiary Art: Tulsa, 1921”

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## How to Manage Silence

It's strange the things you focus on when you receive the news that your mother is going to die. You focus on the way the doctor's pale white hands contrast with the olive-green patient folder. You wonder if you'd known before now that white people get ashy too. You decide the folder is more important than the hands. Because what's written on the papers inside the folder tell the story of her impending death. You focus on how hard it is to maintain eye contact with someone who has the power to deliver a death sentence, but whose first name you don't know. Your eyes slide to the floor. To the plastic container of cotton balls. The red Sharps needle container on the wall. Away from the steel grey eyes of the man sitting across from you and your mother.

Somewhere in my story is a message I want to share with you, Tara. These things I want to share with you, but it has been so many years since we thought of each other as friend. Still, when I ran into your Uncle James a few weeks ago and he told me about your dad's diagnosis, I longed to call you. I thought we would spend hours on the phone like we used to. When we knew that our listening was a life raft for the other. But so many years have passed in complete silence that I can't imagine what I would say if I did call you. But as I've been thinking about you and missing you and longing for your friendship again, I've thought about what I might tell you about losing a parent. About staring into the place you once called home, the place where your life began, and knowing that place will be no more. The day we found out about my mom's illness, I suddenly felt the weight of expectation and knowing. And when I looked around, I

realized there was no one there to share this feeling with. At first, I avoided my mother's gaze, so afraid of what I'd find there. In that doctor's office that day, I looked everywhere but in my mother's eyes.

You focus on the absence of things. Like the fact that there's no clock on the wall. When Carl, the first guy you fell in love with, kissed you for the first time, it was midnight. You had sneaked out of the house and he kissed you as you stood in the back yard, crouched by the fence lined with honeysuckle vines. And you went in the house and called your best friend, Tara, and you talked on the phone all night imagining, falsely, that a simple kiss could grow into a lifetime together. When your grandfather inhaled his final deep breath, your eyes slid over to the grandfather clock in the corner. Nine twenty-two. Yet this moment, the moment when you feel the earth slipping out from beneath your feet, the moment that will be forever etched on your brain, will bear no time stamp.

You notice also the heavy silence that weighs on everyone in the room when the doctor says the words as though he's asking for extra cheese on his pizza. He feels no impending loss but he knows enough to let the silence fill up in the space around you, it's a small kindness. You think about your four-year-old son who's visiting his aunt, your ex-husband's sister, and you wish he were there with you. You long for his incessant chatter. You long for the distraction.

Your eyes are drawn to a stain on the doctor's pocket of his white lab coat. Inside his pocket is a pad for writing prescriptions. He will use that pad later to write a prescription for Oxycodone. "This should help manage the pain in the short term. As it progresses, we'll look at some other options," he says before adding, "I'm sorry." But you know he's not. Words, for him, are empty noise to fill up long stretches of silence. That he too has never learned how to manage silence. Besides there are other patients to see.

You notice his eyes, glinting like jagged streaks of lightning, when they wander over to the curtain-less window that opens out on the parking lot. When he turns his head, you notice the scratches on his neck, and you can't help but speculate about the many things that could have caused them. Maybe his partner scratched him while they were making love the night before, in a wild fit of passion where her legs encircled his neck while he tried to lose himself inside her. Or maybe his dog scratched him this morning as he bent down to nuzzle with him before leaving for work. Or maybe it happened while he was shaving. And how old are those brown loafers he's wearing? Seems like you remember your dad owning a pair just like those 20 years ago. Before he walked out on you and your mother. Or maybe it was one of the men your mother tried to use to piece together her broken heart after your father left to start another family. Eventually, you cared less that he left, and were heartbroken by the fact that he acted as if though you had never existed.

Mostly, though, you focus on the warmth of your mother's hand inside your own. Upon hearing the word terminal, she'd slid her hand inside yours. You remember how you sought the warmth of your mother's hand when you stood in front of your grandfather's casket. You were only six. Your mother had squeezed your hand then and hugged your shoulders before kneeling before you and placing a hand over your heart. "Grandpa will always be alive to you in here." Now you avoid looking into her brown eyes, instead wondering if you will feel comfortable enough taking your son to his grandmother's funeral. Immediately, you feel a sting of regret for accepting so easily what you have just been told. So, you squeeze your mother's hand gently to reassure her that you are existing in that moment with her. But, even though you're there, your heart feels inadequate to hold all that your mother means to you.

Her eyes have become a sort of no-man's land, a place to avoid at all costs. Even when you're driving her home later, you nearly collide with a car as you try to change lanes without first glancing back over your shoulder because you are afraid that your eyes might accidentally meet hers.

This time your mother does not scold you. She doesn't jokingly ask, "Who taught you how to drive?" So, there's no need for you to respond "I know what I'm doing old woman," while offering what you hope is a warm smile that conveys just how much you love and need her in your life. What you don't and couldn't possibly know is that one day, you will need to recall all of this for a friend who no longer considers herself a friend, that these words will one day fill up the silence surrounding her as she grapples with losing her father. If only you could say the words to her face instead of writing them in a letter.

In the tight, suffocating confines of the Honda Accord, where the air blows semi-cool at best, conversation centers on the mundane. The possibility of rain. The temperature outside has to be one hundred degrees. But your mother believes she heard the weatherman say on TV, this morning, that there is a 20 percent chance for rain. So, you talk about the rain that may or may not come. "My vegetables in the backyard could use some water," she says, her eyes staring out the window at the passing landscape that is Elvis Presley Boulevard. J.J.'s Liquors. Lady D's Barbecue & Things. Church's. A title loan company. Another liquor store. The mansion. The plane. At a red light, a woman sits on the sidewalk, stuffed black garbage bags on either side of her. Something about her reminds you of your mother. Maybe it's her piercing dark eyes. Maybe it's the utter helplessness you feel as you stare at her. As you drive through the intersection, you find her in the rearview mirror and don't let the image of her go until you have no choice.

“Hungry?” you ask, but what you really want to ask is, “Are you afraid?” Even when you know you could probably not stand to hear her speak about her own fears. What you really want is to tell her about your own. She’s always been the one you confided in about everything. Now, you think, it would be blasphemous to pour your concerns into her while rejecting her disquietude.

“Can we stop at the store?” your mother asks, ignoring your question about lunch. In the past couple of hours, you have both learned the art of talking past one another instead of to each other. The simple request nearly brings down the walls of the dam that has kept your tears inside. Tears you’ve been holding inside since you heard the words *typically less than a year*. Admittedly, you did cry that morning before you left your house to go and pick her up. She’s never asked you to go to the doctor with her before, so you’d already suspected that the news would be bad. You both had suspected. And, when she’d slid in the car beside you wearing a pair of white culottes and a floral-patterned blouse, you wanted to crumple and break down so that she would hold you in her arms, gently rub your back and whisper kiss your forehead, “It’s going to be alright.” But you didn’t cry then, and you won’t cry now. You will remain strong like your mother was when she dropped you off at school for the first time. Alcy Elementary School. Ms. Parker’s class. You fell out on the floor, tears streaming down your face. You kicked. You screamed. You begged. Eventually your mother walked away. It wasn’t until you were much older that she told you that she went out and sat in the car and broke down too. “I wanted to come back and get you, but I knew that letting you stay would be best for both of us.”

At the supermarket, you decide to stop in front of the entrance so that your mother can hobble up to the front door. It’s the best way you have at that moment to say *I won’t be able to live without you*. Her ankles are swollen to twice their normal size. If someone dares to confront

you for inconveniencing them, you will tell them that your mother is dying. You won't. But the thought is there all the same.

No one protests when you drop your mother off in front of the store. You drive up and down the rows searching for a place to park. No place seems appropriate. You bypass two empty slots, pretending not to see them. Finally, you choose a space that is four rows out, far away from the store's entrance.

Inside the store, you find your mother leaning on a shopping cart. She is struggling to breathe. You watch her struggle, her body swaying as she struggles to take in a breath; her body moving like leaves trying to remain connected to the limbs of a tree. Then she coughs and stands up, her eyes locked on the large bags of candy. So many varieties of chocolate. Pure milk chocolate squares, chocolate-covered raisins, chocolate-covered peanuts.

"It's been so long since I had some candy," she says. "They told me I needed to stop eating it. That it would stop the heart flutters. And that it would help me lose weight." She looks down at her body and shrugs.

Without a word, you grab several bags of candy off the shelf and place them in her shopping cart. Together, you stand there until she's ready to start moving again. One lady, with three small kids, nearly pushes her cart into your mother and you place a firm hand on the rim of the lady's cart to stop her. She apologizes and goes around you. It takes ten minutes for your mother to pull herself together and move on. Six hundred seconds. Less than a year. Seventy-two, the age she'll be in a year.

You follow along behind her as she walks down one aisle and up the next. You're standing so close to her, you can smell the Red Door perfume she's wearing.

The shopping cart is full by the time you join the line that stretches out from checkout lane number four. You pay for her groceries with the one hundred seventy-five dollars you'd been saving for your rent. You are learning how to care for the one who has always cared for you. This is something you will want to explain to your friend: how to love a parent as if though they were your child.

Back at her house, you carry the groceries in and put everything away in the kitchen for her. You're still standing in the kitchen, waiting, when you hear her slowly make her way to the bathroom. You listen as she pees, then washes her hands, and cries.

Later that night, you will lie in bed and, finally, release the tears you have been holding in since you left the doctor's office. Then you will get up and spend an hour trying to locate every photograph in the house, stopping only to take your son a glass of water and read him a bedtime story. His favorite book is *Read to Tiger*. He likes the way you become the tiger when you read. He is smiling as he drifts back to sleep. You return to gathering all the images you own. You take framed photographs from off the walls. You rummage through closets to find forgotten photo albums. And look all over until you have every photograph you own covering the floor in front of you. You will thumb through photo albums you have not thought about for years as these days all your pictures you thought you cared about are stored on your phone. The glossy photos offer something more. You fell in love with taking pictures when your mother bought you a camera for your eleventh birthday. Snapping photos, removing the 110 Kodak film from the camera, and dropping it off at the Walgreens down the street from your house. You remember standing there, at the photo counter, sorting through the stack of developed memories. You can't help but smile as the tears stream down your cheeks.

Holding one picture of your mother, taken probably when she was about 40 years old, the age you are now, you gaze into her eyes and try to guess what she was thinking at that moment when the photograph was taken. You cannot remember if you were the one who took the photo. You trace the curve of her smile, which has been frozen in time for more than three decades, with your fingertips. She has always been the most attractive woman you know. When you were younger, you longed for her smooth, flawless dark chocolate skin. You longed to look in the mirror and see her brown eyes, eyes that would flash with anger when she caught you doing something wrong but soften and hypnotize when she was pleased with you. To you, she was the epitome of beauty. And you were captivated by her.

Impulsively, you go over and pick up your phone. It's 2:30 in the morning. You call anyway.

"Hello," she answers the phone on the second ring. Her voice is not heavy with the weight of sleep.

"Hi, Mom."

"Is everything okay?"

"I can't sleep."

"I couldn't fall asleep either," she laughs. "Maybe it's all the chocolate." Quiet settles on the other end of the line. Then, "I'm afraid that if I go to sleep, I won't wake up."

At first, silence. Then, "I love you, Mom."

"I know." You can hear a smile hiding behind her words. "And I love you too, honey."

You tell her about the picture you found. Describe it to her, careful to include every detail, including the way she is standing defiantly, her left hip jutting out and her hand resting on her hip.

She can't recall the picture, she tells you. In the photo, she's wearing a blue dashiki and sporting a large afro. You are willing her to remember and, for you, she will try.

She does remember one of the black and white photos. In the photograph, she is surrounded by other black girls her age. They all have round baby faces. But their eyes give them away. They are no babies. They are standing in front of a food market you vaguely remember. A hazy memory from long ago.

"We were picketing outside the store," she tells you. "The owner shot and killed a nine-year-old boy. And the police never even questioned him."

She is silent. You imagine her struggling to find the words to convey the message she wishes to share. Reject the idea that she might be struggling to breathe again.

"He never went to jail, but he never stepped foot in that store again," she continues, with an undeniable note of pride in her voice. "His sons ran the store for him."

"You never told me about that."

"A man from the paper showed up and just started taking pictures. I don't even remember how I ended up with that one."

In another picture, the teenaged version of your mother is standing with a group of young men. One of the men is tall and skinny. His afro is shorter than your mother's. He's smiling at the camera, but his arm is draped around your mother. "That's your father and his brothers," she

tells you. “We had gone to a football game that night at Melrose stadium. Mitchell beat Melrose that night. We took that picture before we walked to the bus stop. Right after taking that photo, we had walked a couple of blocks maybe and were boarding the bus when this boy ran up and sprayed your uncle in the face with mace. He fell down on the steps and people started trying to rush over him to get on the bus.” You have never tired of hearing these stories, hearing about your parents’ life before you.

There’s a photograph of you as a baby; your chubby cheeks and bald head make you look like a baby boy. “We had that picture taken at Blue Light Studio,” she tells you.

And you describe another picture to her. Your mother searches her memory for the story to go with the picture.

You don’t notice when the sun comes up. Don’t notice your alarm sounding. You only notice when there’s silence on the line.

Between the telling of stories, your mother grows quiet. She could be sleeping. Or thinking. Or remembering. Whatever she’s doing, you’re there waiting for her when she begins talking again. And she does. She tells you one story after another.

What you most want to tell your friend is that your mother lived for another two years. That you had started to believe that she would live as long as she wanted to. And maybe she did. But mostly you just want to be there for your friend, to listen to her stories, or whatever she wants to tell you.

## Ruby

### Memphis, 1976

Staring through her watery vision at the pile of broken glass on the floor, Ruby cringed. And the ripple of an unnamed emotion traveled through her veins like venom, causing her to feel physically ill. She retched. Dry heaved. Felt her ribs pushing inward. Once. Twice. Three times.

*I can't do this.*

The words reverberated in her head and the only thought that could break through was how badly she needed a drink. But Charles had finished off the whiskey last night after they'd argued again. "I don't know what came over me," he'd said. "I'm sorry." His lame apology and the stitches in her face were still fresh.

Looking around at the mirrors that were scattered and broken, she couldn't claim relief. She'd smashed every mirror in the house so she wouldn't have to look at her face. Not even accidentally. But just because she couldn't see it, didn't mean she could unknow. She kicked at the broken glass with her toe and thought back to other so-called *messes* she was accused of creating. Like the time she blurted out during a family gathering that Aunt Katherine's husband had tried to fuck her. How she described in detail the scent – old sweat, stale cigarette smoke, and alcohol – that burned in her nose before he climbed in bed behind her and tried to pry her legs open so that he could "stick it in just a little."

"Surely she did something Gerry," her aunt had accused hours later when it was just the three of them. "You know my Ricky's a good man. He got a good job. He took me and Melanie in when he didn't have to. And Melanie ain't said nothing about him touching her."

Geraldine's silence had told Ruby everything she needed to know. They thought of her as the fast one. That she was the one who never took time to think about possible consequences of her

actions. Even though she knew she should hate them, she missed them. And wished that she could call either her mom or one of her aunts now. But none of them were speaking to her. They were still holding grudges and she had discovered that she could be just as stubborn as them. But maybe if she called now, she'd find that they now realized that she wasn't the one at fault. She had done nothing wrong. Just like she'd done nothing wrong against Charles.

Reality quickly snatched her up and forced her to realize that most likely nothing had changed. If she called her mother now, the silence between them would be thick and palpable still. That was part of the reason why she never considered leaving Charles because, if she did, where would she go? Ruby heard her mother's voice in her head, trying to break through the silence. Despite the years that stretched between the last time they spoke, she heard her mother's voice clearly. "That's what's wrong with you child. So damn selfish. Doing things without thinking about what the consequences are going to be." But her mother was wrong. She had thought of the consequences. She was always thinking about the consequences. At least where Charles was concerned. That's why she'd never do anything to go against him. A hand came up to touch her cheek.

A feeling of anxiousness spread through her and warmed her all over. A desire to destroy something was gathering inside her like storm winds. Her eyes searched the room. On the windowsill, a stack of Charles' books: *Sula*, *Trick Baby*, and *Nobody Knows My Name*, along with two Jet magazines. Beside the books was a mason jar with a lone sunflower. Charles had placed it there for her to see. She loved flowers, all flowers, but especially sunflowers. She wouldn't destroy the flower. Inside her shirt pocket was a joint she'd rolled earlier. She lit it, took a long drag, filling her lungs, and released smoke rings that circled her head like a cloud.

Cutting through the haze of unfiltered smoke, Geraldine's voice was persistent, warning, "One day you gone wish you had listened to me." But she just kept on smoking, knowing that soon her mother would go away.

Later, when she was sweeping up the remnants of every mirror in the house, her mother's voice, a prickly sensation thrumming at the base of her skull, continued to try to penetrate the hazy fog in her brain. The more the voice worked to break through, the harder she pulled on the joint.

Music sauntered in the house later as Ruby sat cross-legged on the floor. Tiny pieces of glass were ground into the backs of her legs, but she chose to ignore the pain. Instead her eyes were drawn to the place where she'd heard music come in. She pulled the paper tight on the joint she was rolling and placed it between her lips. And as she relaxed into music's embrace, she felt lighter than she'd felt all day. Music ran its soothing fingers through her hair and down her spine. Eventually, the joint and the music rocked her to sleep.

Ruby was barely 13 when she first stumbled upon music. Her mother had gotten into the habit of shoving a crumpled note, along with a few bills she'd retrieved from inside her brassiere, into the palm of Ruby's hands. "Go get me a pack of cigarettes."

"Can I get me something," she'd ask.

"Use the change to get you something."

"But, it's only gonna be a quarter."

“Look inside my purse, girl, and see if you can find some change. Then go get my cigarettes.”

The afternoon, she discovered how much she loved music, she was walking down the street, on one of those store runs for her mother.

A crowd had gathered a few steps away from the entrance to Vescovi's Food Mart. It was the first time she'd ever seen so many white faces in their neighborhood at one time. Everyone was standing in a kind of semi-circle. They were all staring at something on the ground. The closer she got to the crowd of people, the more tense she started to feel. Before she looked down, she already knew what she'd find. The only question to be answered was who.

“He had no cause to do that,” a voice came from somewhere inside the crowd of onlookers.

When she made it to the front of the crowd, the people parted for her. It surprised her that she was able to remain on her feet. That she didn't throw up. Lying there on the ground, obviously dead, was one of the little boys who lived in their neighborhood.

Blood pooled at her feet. It was seeping out of Six-O's body. Six-O, who at only nine years old, already stood taller than most adults. Six-O who always took the seat behind her on the school bus so he could loudly make fun of her. Called her a black ape. Called her burnt toast. Called her a jigaboo. Made the other kids laugh at her all during the ride home.

She knelt down and swiped a finger at his blood. Someone grabbed her from behind. “Don't you dare touch that, girl.” A layer of sweat covered Beulah's forehead and her eyes were filled with tears. “You best get on back home to your mama. You ain't got no business out here.”

“What happened,” Ruby asked, making no move to go back home.

The story came out slowly and painfully like all things in their neighborhood. The owner of the market, Vincent, had shot Six-O in the back as he was leaving the store. And then he'd followed him out to the sidewalk and shot him in the head. Said he'd stole a piece candy. A candy bar maybe. Or maybe a couple of Chic-O-Sticks. Ruby looked on the ground for fallen candy, but there was no candy. Only Six-O.

Already people were predicting that nothing would be done to Vincent. And they wondered aloud about whether they should boycott his store. The only other store that allowed them to shop in peace was two bus rides away.

"Black man life don't mean much to them," Brother Man lamented. "Shoot us down like dogs." For a while people were quiet as the air around them became heavy with the truth of what Brother Man had said.

One of the older men sent one of the younger boys to go fetch Six-O's mother. They worried aloud about how she'd hold up once she arrived. Her oldest son, the one who took such good care of his mama, was out of town. So, who would care for her? Who would hold her up? They would have to. They watched Six-O's younger sister Tammy, who was sitting on the ground weeping. A group of girls were standing around her like they were too afraid to touch her, but not wanting to leave her alone either.

One of the older boys broke away from the group surrounding Six-O's body and went over and scooped Tammy up into his arms. She collapsed against his chest. She allowed him to baby her while she continued to cry out, "My brother."

Everyone was crying. Everybody feeling the same grief. The Negroes anyway. The white folks had moved away and were standing closer to the store talking to Vincent. Their faces were calm. Ruby had watched their faces, trying to understand. But her attention soon shifted back to the

people she knew. A couple of the older Negro men, the ones who usually sat outside on their porch playing checkers, stood along the periphery of the crowd talking. They formed a wall around Six-O's body. The sheriff came, stood talking to the other white men, including the one who'd murdered Six-O. They exchanged a few words before the sheriff moved on, without even acknowledging Six-O's body on the ground. The wall of men grumbled as the sheriff walked away, their voices drifted over to Ruby like snatches of the wind. She heard the words "shotgun," "men" and "just a baby." And then there were the sounds inside her head. She heard Six-O singing, "Jigaboo, jigaboo, face so dark you look blue." Every time she'd slump down in her seat, that cracked leather eating into the back of her legs and wish that Six-O was dead. And now he was. Back then, she'd wondered if she'd somehow been responsible for his death.

Ruby didn't realize she'd started crying until she felt the tears on her cheek. Charles, who she recognized from school, materialized at her side. He reached up a hand to wipe away her tears and then he steered her away from the scene. They were halfway down the block when he grabbed her hand. They were walking so slowly that she saw when Six-O's mother showed up and threw herself on top of her son's body, Ruby tried to turn back, but Charles forced her to keep walking. He walked with her all the way back to her house and explained to Geraldine why Ruby hadn't bought her any cigarettes.

While Geraldine moved to the telephone to see what she could find out, Charles took Ruby back outside. They sat down on the steps; her hands were still wrapped up inside his. He sang to her. *He has such a beautiful singing voice*, she remembers thinking. *I wonder if he sings at his church*. When her body began to shake uncontrollably, he tightened his embrace. Kept singing to her. And promised never to let anyone hurt her. The thing that bothered her was that she didn't feel bad about Six-O, only about the death but not the one who died. She was able to overlook that feeling

though because Charles had sung to her for the first time and helped her know music in an intimate way.

Lifting her hand to her face, she traced a finger along the surface of her face; she could still feel small bits of thread embedded in the scars. *That was so long ago.*

She was sitting at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette and listening to Roberta Flack's voice drift over from the juke box next door when someone knocked at the door. She wasn't ready to weather the looks of pity or judgment so she ignored it and eventually whoever it was went away. Like she found herself doing often these days, she ended up running her hand along the scars on her face. Before he'd apologized last night, he kept telling her that she'd gotten what she deserved. That he'd told her already that he wouldn't compete with any man for her love. Not that he had to compete with another man, only possibilities he conjured up in his own mind.

Sitting there, it seemed her thoughts had nowhere to turn but back to the past, to a few weeks before. When Charles had gotten up off her, the bloody razor in his hand, one word, an order, came to her: *run*. She raced across the yard to Felicia's house, unable to hear her own screams anymore and blinded by her own blood. A loud rushing in her ears prevented her from realizing how her screams carried up and down the street. And her face was on fire.

Ruby's screams eventually drew Felicia outside; she never thought to knock on the door. Felicia would later say how scared she'd been to open the door at two in the morning, but she had thought she had somehow already known it was Ruby. The front of Ruby's shirt was covered in blood. She was still communicating in screams and groans. Blood continued to pour from the long

gash on her face. Felicia rushed inside to grab a towel and when she came back out, Ruby was lying on the porch in a fetal position. With Junior's help, she'd lifted Ruby up off the porch and carried her to the car.

When they arrived at John Gaston, the colored hospital, Ruby had collapsed on the floor near the entrance. She awoke the next morning lying in the hospital bed, part of her face wrapped in a bandage and a dull pain throbbing beneath the bandage. Her nurse, Belinda, came in to check her bandages, she asked Ruby what happened. The lie that fell too easily from Ruby's lips was that she'd been leaving Lorraine's the club next door to her house, when someone grabbed her from behind. "I never saw who it was."

"Well, it's a good thing your friend discovered you and brought you in. Whoever it was did a number on your face." Before leaving her room, Belinda asked if she needed anything. Ruby hadn't known how to respond to the question, so she didn't say anything.

The screen door banged close and Ruby jumped. She tried to ignore the way his gaze, which she felt strongly, was making her feel. And when he came to sit on the floor beside her, she didn't turn to acknowledge him. Her heart was racing, beating rapidly in her chest, fear the bandleader that was directing the rhythm. Her insides churned and she wished she could just get up and leave. But she knew he would stop her if she tried to leave.

She knew what he wanted and was repulsed by the thought of it. The need she felt radiating off him caused her to feel nauseous. The scent of old sweat and leftover cologne rushed toward her as he leaned over to kiss her. *My God. Please don't touch me.* But he did.

Loving him had become a chore. One she avoided whenever possible. And when she couldn't escape the obligation, Ruby accepted Charles' body inside hers with the resignation of a woman without options. A woman too stubborn to ask for help from people who would never offer it.

As he reached out to touch her, she willed herself to remain still. Not to react. To let it happen. The sooner it happened, the quicker it would be over. She didn't want to argue with him again about why she no longer desired him like that. Trying to ignore the scent of him that burned the inside of her nose, she kept her lips pressed tight together as he tried to pry them apart with his tongue. His mouth tasted like the bitter elderberry wine his grandmother makes for him. The scent of the wine turned her stomach. Closing her eyes, it was easy to swallow the sounds that would usually escape her lips even as she knew that her silence would not be enough to keep him from having sex with her.

A noise from outside tugged at Ruby's attention but she kept her eyes closed tightly. A subtle, but she hoped not too subtle, message to Charles that this moment was his alone.

Outside, heavy steps sounded on the walkway in front of their house. The approaching steps of men. Musicians. Larry, who would have his guitar slung over his shoulder, and Reggie, holding the case in which he carried Garnet, his trumpet. As they got closer, she heard bits and pieces of their conversation. Deep laughter. The smoke from a cigar drifted inside the house and she knew that it was Larry's. Any other night, she might run out and join them, walk over with them. But not tonight. Even if Charles wasn't using her body for his pleasure.

When Charles finished, and she knew this because of the way his body began to spasm on top of hers, she sat up with her back pressed against the sofa, her exposed butt against the cold hardwood floor. "Open your eyes," he whispered, his voice hard around the edges. Sex juices flowed

down the inside of her legs as she watched him pull up his pants. She opened her eyes, at first, staring up at the ceiling. He kept his eyes trained on her as he dressed, but she turned her gaze to the world outside the open screen door. As much as she hated arguing with him, at least when they argued, she could tell what he was thinking. Now, she was afraid to consider what he might be thinking.

That night she fell asleep on the floor, the sound of Larry's guitar, like a mother's lullaby that carried her off to sleep, and she didn't wake up until she felt Charles' lips on hers. "I love you," he whispered, then waited for her to reply. When she didn't, he got up and walked over to look out the window. "I love you," he said. "And you know it. I don't know why you're acting like you don't." As he moved away from the window, he reached back and knocked the mason jar holding her sunflower to the floor. "Nobody could ever love you like me." The door slammed behind him, almost knocking the picture of Jesus off the wall. In the picture, Jesus was wearing a white flowing robe like he always wore in movies about his life. On the front of the robe was a red heart shaped insignia. One of his fingers pointed at the exposed heart, another pointed upward.

Ruby had made up her mind. She was going back to Lorraine's. Charles had told her that no one else wanted her, that no one else would ever love her like he did. As much as she believed him, she couldn't deny that she missed being on the stage. When she was on the stage, she could forget about her too dark skin. On the stage she wasn't just Ruby, the jigaboo. On the stage, she hoped no one would care about the gash across the left side of her face. On stage, hatred of her dark skin was replaced with love for how she made people feel when she sang. As long as people focused on her voice, they could pretend not to see her. She grabbed her silver studded clutch bag and was about to leave when Charles came in the house. His eyes traveled over her body, took in the black slim-fitting

dress and silver pumps. His eyes hardened, bringing a feeling of warmth to her face. “You going somewhere,” the words sounded more threat than question.

“I’m going back to Lorraine’s.” She dropped her arms to her side, trying to hide the fact that her hands were trembling. She had been locked away inside the house for two months. “I’m singing tonight.”

He shook his head. “Nah. You not going anywhere.” He made no move to step aside so she could leave. “We settled this already.”

Something inside her hardened. In her head, she heard her mother saying to her, *A woman ain't nothing without a man. Some of these women think they such hot shit, but if they is why don't they have a man?* She shook her head to clear out her mother’s voice. No, they had not settled anything. Scarring her face had been his way of putting an end to her singing career. Had been his way of keeping her to himself. She shook her head, kept her emotions in check. It wouldn’t do for her to start crying. Not now. She was determined to leave. He was determined to keep her from leaving. He used his body as a wall. But she wasn’t willing to back down. When she stepped to the right to try and slip past him, he shoved her into the door. They tussled and she was eventually able to ease through an opening between his body and the door. Once she was outside, she ran off the porch and didn’t stop running until she was inside the safety of Lorraine’s club, where men like Larry and Reggie would never stand for a man putting his hands on a woman, even a dark-skinned one.

Standing just inside the door, her back against the wall, her fingers traced the surface of the raised scarring on her face. One scar began just underneath her eye and ran along the length of her face to just underneath her chin. Like a blind person, she used the tips of her fingers to refamiliarize herself with her own face. Her encounter with Charles had left her feeling unsettled. Her feet felt cemented to the floor. Music was still pouring from the juke box. The voices of Lorraine and her

kitchen workers spilled out from the kitchen. People were dancing. They were eating. They were drinking. They were enjoying themselves.

Recoiling away from the crowd, she leaned against the wall wishing it could open up and swallow her. Her head began to swim and her vision dimmed. Or maybe the lights had been turned down low in the club. It was hard to tell which. Her heart began to pound so loudly, she felt a rushing like a river in her ears.

Nina Simone's voice caused the rushing river to calm. "Birds flyin' high you know how I feel. Sun in the sky you know how I feel. Breeze driftin' on by you know how I feel." Nina's deep and sensuous voice loosened something in her. She ended up being the third person to take the stage that night.

With Larry and Reggie backing her up, she sang a song she'd written herself.

*I've been chasin' love all my life  
And it's been one long race to nowhere  
Soon as it seems like I'm gainin' on love  
He up and runs away again.*

While she was singing, she found a space, a tiny space within herself where she felt at peace. Where she hadn't been unhappily married for two years. Where she wasn't forced to accept the apology of a man who clearly felt he had no true reason for apologizing. Where she was just Ruby and that was enough.

She was nearing the end of the song when Charles walked in. At first, he stood near the door and just watched her. He'd changed clothes. His facial expression was unreadable, but his eyes were glued to her. For the first time, she didn't feel afraid of him. Singing tonight filled her with a kind of strength. As she sang, she met Charles' gaze without flinching.

Her set consisted of four songs that night. The one she'd written herself and two Dionne Warwick songs, including "What the World Needs Now." She concluded her set with Smokey Robinson's "Tears of a Clown," and as she was singing, tears slid from her eyes until she could barely see Charles anymore.

By the time her set ended, Charles was gone. Lorraine came over and ushered her to a table in the corner. Larry and Reggie and a few others rounded out the table. And they sat around drinking and eating golden fried chicken and barbecue ribs. She would always remember that night. Lorraine cut off their free drinks somewhere around one. "If you gonna keep drinking, put some money on the table."

"I think it's about time for me to head home anyway," Ruby told her.

"If you ever need to," Lorraine began, and Ruby felt the calculation behind her words, "I have one of those couches that lets out into a bed. You more than welcome to sleep on it."

Everybody got quiet then. Ruby didn't respond one way or another. Larry and Reggie saw to her making it home even though it was right next door. "We're here for you if you ever need us," Larry told her as she walked up the front steps.

"Thank you," she whispered before turning to go in the house.

Later that night, she was asleep in the bed when she felt something cold next to her face. "Do you still love me?" she heard Charles whisper. "Answer me. Do you love me?" With her eyes still closed, she brought her hand up to swat away the cold thing touching her face and she realized quickly what it was. Her heart was a jackhammer in her chest and her stomach muscles drew taut. His whiskey stale breath came at her, almost suffocating her. She didn't want to open her eyes, but she had no choice. For days, she'd been feeling this anxious and she wanted it to end.

Charles had parted the curtains so that light from the full moon spilled across his face. She had considered taking Lorraine up on her offer or staying the night at Felicia's house, but she had

told herself that nothing else would happen. Her plan was to continue to exist in this space with him until she couldn't anymore. Other women did it. She knew plenty of women who didn't love the men they lived with. But that had been a mistake. What she saw in Charles' eyes scared her even more than the gun he held in his hands. There had been a few times over the years when she'd looked in his eyes and didn't recognize the person she saw there. Tonight, felt worse because she did recognize what she saw. It was what she'd seen in his eyes the night he'd sliced her face with a razor. Even fully clothed – she'd taken to sleeping in her clothes – she felt naked and couldn't stop shaking. A bone-deep shivering throbbed in her body. That feeling of someone “walking across your grave,” as her mother would say. *This isn't love.* The thing that she saw there, in his face, that had been masquerading as love all those years, grabbed her heart like a fist and squeezed.

She tried to meet his cold and detached gaze with one of her own, but she knew the only thing reflected in her eyes was fear.

He did the unthinkable, pulled the trigger. And she pissed on herself. *I'm going to die tonight.* And then he laughed. Pulled the trigger again. “There's one bullet in the gun,” he informed her. And she saw him the way she imagined a snake would look if it could talk. His eyes hooded and his skin scaly but warm; his skin was coated with a layer of sweat. “I took all the others out,” he hissed.

“Please,” she begged.

He smacked her with the butt of the gun and a warm pain blossomed on her face. Some of the stitches had opened and blood streamed down her face. She touched the blood and tears on her cheek. “Please don't,” she begged. “Just let me leave. Please.”

She brought up her knee and started flailing her arms causing Charles to lose his balance. If he'd been sober, her actions might have had less of an effect. While he was trying to regain his balance, she jumped out of the bed and ran. Blindly, she raced out of the bedroom, not stopping until she had made it outside. Ignoring the sharp pebbles and shards of glass that were eating into

the bottoms of her feet, she ran down the middle of the street. All she could think was I need to get away.

*Please don't let him come after me*, she prayed. Any other night, someone might be sitting out on their porch listening to the radio. Smoking. Talking. Anything. Tonight, the street was quiet. There was only the sound of her bare feet slapping against the pavement and her ragged breathing. Her head was still hurting but she couldn't stop.

Despite the fervent prayer that was running through her mind, she didn't expect a heavenly hand to extend from the clouds and save her. She was all alone. She knew this. Even without turning around she knew that Charles was somewhere behind her. Wearing only his pajama bottoms, the gun possibly aimed at her retreating back. Just keep moving, she told herself. Don't stop. Even when her stomach began to cramp, she kept running, but she wondered if she'd ever be able to stop running.

## Because He Was Gone

When Marvin died, he was down on his knees in a prayer position. Portia had just finished cleaning the dinner dishes when she went in the bedroom and found him beside the bed. At first, she stood in the hallway, wearing a sardonic grin as she silently observed him. *Who's he trying to fool? Me or him*, she thought glancing up toward the ceiling. She suppressed the urge to laugh out loud as she moved further into the bedroom. *Now, he's using God to try and make me think he's changed*. She had made up her mind, she would not let him off so easily. Her mother had never once confronted her father even though it was commonly known that he cheated; she wouldn't be like her mother. Then it hit her, he was too still, and she knew he was dead and so she tried to set aside her anger to make room for the sorrow.

*Now this*, she thought as she went over to touch his shoulder. His skin was still warm, of course. And she could detect the lingering scent of the mixture of his cologne and hours old sweat. They had only finished dinner minutes before. It had been a tense evening. She had asked him about the photos of the woman she'd found in his phone. She picked up his phone, mistaken it for her own and there in his text messages was a photo of a woman. *Sheila*. She was obviously sitting in her car when she took the selfie. And she'd sent it to Marvin with the caption: *Thinking of you*. Portia and Marvin had argued. He cursed. She cried, then cursed, too. And, finally, he had pushed aside his dinner plate, declared that she had ruined his appetite because she refused to believe him when he said his relationship with Sheila was platonic, and he had come back to their bedroom where he said a final prayer before dying.

In her remembering, she tried to believe that she had instantly placed him down on the floor and begun CPR. In reality, she knew she had stood there, minutes too long, scolding him in her head, her heart imperfectly broken. It would be good if the sight of death brought instant healing.

But it didn't. He had been unfaithful. She felt like a fool. And as she shoved down on his chest, trying to re-start his heart, she struggled to breathe herself, felt her own chest rising and falling, loud wails escaping her own lips as she begged him not to leave her while wondering if he'd really left her long before this moment anyway.

When she realized no amount of breathing into his mouth or shoving on his chest was going to bring him back, she stopped and collapsed on the floor beside his body. "What the fuck, Marvin," the words barely touched her lips. "You can't leave me. Please don't leave me." She paused. Looked over at their bed. Marvin had already pulled the covers back on his side. "I can't believe you fucking did this to me." Then, she called for the paramedics and the funeral home.

By the time the ambulance pulled up in front of their house, grief had made its way to the surface and was steadily streaming down her face. She was openly weeping when she led the two male paramedics to Marvin's body. One stood at Marvin's feet, looking down at him, as if he were an exhibit in a museum. The other knelt down immediately and began checking his vitals before launching into the cycle of chest compressions. Portia thought about telling him his efforts were wasted, but a small part of her held out hope that he would be able to do what she had not been able to. Until he turned to her with an open expression that communicated the futility of it all. "Do you want to continue?"

As a response, Portia collapsed in a nearby chair, cradled her face and sobbed loudly. In her mind, she could still see Marvin kneeling beside the bed, praying. But she also saw him smiling up at Sheila, longing in his eyes. Once she had discovered the text message with Sheila's selfie, she had searched through his photo gallery and found more. One would be forever burned on her brain. It was the type of picture you looked at and said, *now there's two people who are meant to be*. She didn't

know if her tears were for the pictures she'd found in Marvin's phone or because he was gone. Forever. Either way, the tears didn't stop coming for a long time.

“When I lost my mother, it was as if death were just being discovered.” The woman speaking was obviously wearing a wig. Portia wanted to reach over and straighten it for her. “It felt like no one had ever died before and I didn't know how to accept it as real. Every day I picked up the phone to call her. And every day, I found myself crying. Death remained fresh for me for a long time.” When she dropped her head in her hands, the wig shifted to the front as if it were going to slide off her head. And the lady cried out and blew her nose loudly.

Grief had a way of curving the shoulders forward, weighing heavily on the neck and tapping into the underbelly of liquid sorrow. Everyone in the circle began to cry, if not for the speaker's mother, then for the loved ones whose deaths had brought them to this grief counseling meeting. They knew enough not to try and speak encouraging words; they cried collectively, filling the room with all the emptiness they felt in their hearts, it seemed to Portia. And she was crying, too.

She and Marvin had been married for twenty-two years. They'd been high school sweethearts. They'd attended Junior and Senior prom together. They had one son, Marvin Jr., who was now a freshman at Morehouse College in Atlanta. What she felt with Marvin, she'd never described as happiness. Loving him had felt like the most natural thing in the world. From the first day they met, he had been so easy to talk to. And they talked all the time. About everything. One day, she'd looked at him and said to herself, *I love him*, but she could never quite put her finger on one moment when

she fell for him. She'd never questioned that. Until she discovered the photographs of him smiling with another woman.

“My husband had a heart attack,” she told them. “The same day I found out he was cheating on me.” She didn't know if they offered no words because the counselor had warned them against judging one another's grief or for some other reason. She was just finally glad to be able to say the words aloud.

Surrounded by people who knew the sadness of trying to make sense of the void that had suddenly reshaped their lives, she cried for the two times she'd lost Marvin. And she wished not just to have him back, but to have him back without the knowledge that there had been someone else who loved him. Someone that he had loved too.

“What are you doing, Mom?” MJ startled her and the black object she'd been holding slid out of her hand and landed on the floor. “Why do you have dad's phone?”

She looked up at her son, who looked so much like his father. He had his dad's short wavy hair that curled instantly from only a drop of water, his hazel eyes. His prominent nose. Both former athletes, they had broad shoulders and muscular arms. “He was seeing someone else.”

Now he looked startled. Then confused. Then it seemed he was about to protest; he opened his mouth to speak but closed it without responding.

“The night he died, we argued about the other woman he was seeing. I found the photographs in his phone.”

There was something in his eyes, a brief flash of something resembling anger, but it passed over like a summer storm as he moved to comfort his mother. He sat down beside her and wrapped his arm protectively around her. “Mom, you’ve been through enough. Don’t put yourself through this.”

She bent down and retrieved the fallen phone. “I can’t just forget. Your father was in love with another woman.”

“He’s dead.”

“He cheated.”

“He can’t apologize now.”

“He didn’t apologize then.”

She thought she saw unshed tears glistening in his eyes, but it might have just been her looking through her own tears. When she touched his skin, it was warm and soft. The love she felt for her son tried to force her lips up into a smile, but grief kept them in a straight line. She couldn’t shake the feeling that Marvin wasn’t supposed to hurt her. Everyone always told them how lucky they were to have found each other, how happy they looked together. Their friends shared the photos she posted on Facebook accompanied by the message: *#goals*. Now, she was avoiding those friends, and hadn’t posted anything since Marvin died.

“I’m sorry.”

“You aren’t the one who hurt me.” But he was the one who held her while she fell asleep, her eyes still moist with tears, the phone still held tightly in the palms of her hands.

Two months after Marvin died, despite what MJ. had told her, and despite what the women in the group told her, Portia called Sheila. It was almost like Sheila had been expecting the call. She didn’t ask how Portia had gotten her number. She didn’t ask if Marvin had told Portia about their secret relationship. She accepted the call as if though they spoke all the time.

“Where?” Sheila asked when Portia suggested they meet for lunch.

Portia suggested a place she and Marvin had often patronized. Marvin said the place had the best buttered rolls of any place in the city, and they found a reason to go there at least once a month. Sheila seemed familiar with the place.

They agreed to meet the next afternoon.

When Sheila walked in, Portia recognized her instantly. She was wearing a black dress with slits on the side and a plunging neckline. Her heels were so high that Portia knew she could never walk on them comfortably. Her hair was pulled up into a tight, severe bun on the top of her head. Portia noted that when she walked in, she scanned the restaurant, saw and recognized her, and walked over without assistance from the hostess.

Pulling the chair out from under the table, Portia saw the first glimmer of uncertainty cross Sheila's face.

"Have a seat," Portia said and nodded at the chair.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Sheila said as soon as she was seated.

"I'm not sorry for yours."

They ate their food in silence, surreptitiously sizing one another up between bites. The waitress, a soft-spoken young girl, interrupted their silence several times, stopping by the table to inquire if everything was okay. "Would you ladies like to order dessert?"

Portia ordered a slice of lemon crème cake.

"So, why did you want to meet me?" Sheila finally asked as the waitress walked away.

"Wouldn't you want to meet the woman who slept with your husband if you had one?"

She considered the question. "No. I don't think I would."

"Why were you sleeping with my husband?"

"Nothing I say will make you feel better." She removed her linen napkin and placed it on top of her plate, which still had food on it. "I was wrong. We were wrong to carry on any sort of relationship."

Portia hadn't thought this through. She wasn't sure what she'd wanted from this meeting. All she'd known was that she wanted to live in the longing she'd seen on Marvin's face. She needed to occupy the same space as the woman in the picture, the woman who had somehow managed to

open the space of love her husband had felt for her, making it wide enough for them both to fit. She stared at Sheila, wanting to hate her. She tried to find something like a blemish on her face, unkempt nails, something she could latch onto and massage with her grief until it transformed into anger. But Sheila was attractive. And without the air of conceit that could diminish her beauty.

Reaching across the table, Sheila covered Portia's hands with her own. "I'm sorry for your loss. I'm sorry for the pain you must be feeling now, and my role in it. I won't make excuses for myself. I would ask you to forgive me, but I understand that I have no right."

Portia once again felt the tears. "He was kneeling by the bed, praying when he died."

When they left the restaurant, they hugged in the parking lot. For a moment, it was as though Portia wasn't really there, but hovering off to the side watching the scene unfold. When Sheila embraced her, she inhaled the scent of perfume. "What are you wearing?"

Confusion colored her features, but she responded. "Donna Karan Cashmere."

"It smells nice."

"Thank you."

Portia didn't know if Sheila was thanking her for the compliment or the meeting.

At the next grief counseling session, Portia told them about meeting Sheila for lunch.

"Why would you want to do that?" asked the woman who'd been crying about her mother the last time.

“I don’t know. It’s hard to explain. Even to myself.”

“Did it make you feel better?” another woman asked. She’d lost her husband as well.

Portia shrugged. “Nothing can make me feel better. This is my new reality, and I’m just trying to settle into it.”

“It just doesn’t make sense.” This was a man speaking, whose name she couldn’t remember. He hadn’t attended the first group therapy session because he’d worked late that day. “Sometimes it’s like women do things to allow themselves to cause their own sadness. That woman doesn’t owe you anything. It was your husband who cheated. And she can’t make you feel better.”

Dr. Gibson, the counselor, interrupted the man. “You weren’t here the first day, so you missed our discussion about meeting norms. This is not a space for judging one another.”

“I’m just saying,” he continued, undeterred. “There’s no point in contacting that woman.”

“When my father was cheating on my mother,” Portia said, “she never confronted him. The other women never even knew she existed. I wanted Sheila to know I exist.” It didn’t make sense even to her, but she also didn’t know what else to do. How do you make sense of the silence when someone you love is gone, completely? He’d died so quickly they never had a chance to talk about why he’d felt compelled to step outside of their marriage for whatever he needed. Whatever she wasn’t providing.

A couple of nights later, Portia called Sheila well after midnight. “Hello,” Sheila answered, her voice deep with sleep.

“Why the fuck did you have to sleep with my husband?” Portia screamed. “Why couldn’t you find your own man? Didn’t you care that you were destroying a family?”

At first there was nothing but silence. Then she could hear Sheila moving around. “I’m sorry,” Sheila said. “I’m really sorry. If I could go back in time, I would change things, I promise.”

“Did he ever tell you he loved you?”

It was a long time before she responded, but when she did, they both knew it wasn’t the truth.

“How long were you and Marvin seeing one another?”

“It wasn’t long at all.” Another lie. “I know this is hard for you, Portia, but you’ve got to let this go and try to move on.”

“Who are you to tell me what’s best for me? If you cared about anyone but yourself, you wouldn’t sleep with another woman’s husband.”

“You’re right. That’s all I can say, Portia. I’m sorry.” And then Portia heard her start to cry and she started to cry and for a long time, they sat holding the phone as they listened to the other’s grief.

When they met the next time for lunch several weeks later, Portia was wearing Donna Karan Cashmere. This time Sheila suggested they meet at a coffee shop downtown. They sat outside on the patio drinking sweet tea. Sheila ordered a cheese Danish as well.

“How are you?” Sheila asked.

“I don’t know.” She told Sheila about the grief counseling sessions. “Some days I think I’m doing okay, but then something will happen like I’ll read something funny or overhear someone saying something and I’ll think ‘Let me tell Marvin and then I remember again that he’s gone and I just start crying. It doesn’t matter where I am. I cry in the car. Cry in the shower. In the grocery store.’”

Sheila took a deep breath and averted her gaze. “I have a question to ask.”

Portia dabbed at her eyes and waited. “Okay.”

“Why do you keep calling me? I’ve tried to make sense of it, and I just can’t.”

Portia thought about the people from group therapy telling her that she was only hurting herself, MJ telling her to let the past go and try to move on, and she thought about the nights she couldn’t sleep because she kept sifting through memories, trying to figure out where Sheila had fit in their memories, trying to figure out when Sheila had entered their lives. But nothing had ever felt different. Unlike her mother and father, Marvin had never spent days away from the house. Money had never disappeared. And no child had shown up claiming to belong to their family.

“I don’t know,” Portia finally responded. “When I first called you, I wanted to hate you. I wanted to make you hurt the way you had made me hurt, but I don’t know now. Sometimes I have these dark days, days when all I can see is blackness. And I just need to reach out. I was having one of those days when I called you the first time.”

“Maybe you should take a break and just get away from everything and everyone. Go on vacation. A friend of mine lost her husband a few years back, and she took a two-week cruise. When she came back, she said it had done her a world of good.”

“Maybe I will one day.” She knew she wouldn’t. There wasn’t any place she wanted to go. She didn’t like water, so she definitely wouldn’t be taking a cruise. And everywhere she’d ever wanted to visit, she’d wanted Marvin there with her. Without him, she didn’t see the point. They’d once talked about visiting Paris so they could stand on that bridge where people left padlocks as a symbol for their love before throwing the key into the River Seine. It had seemed like such a romantic destination. But a few years ago, officials in Paris had started removing sections of the bridge containing the locks because it was too heavy. Marvin had said, “We should still go. Just to stand there on the bridge together.”

When she told Sheila this, she told Portia she should still go. “Don’t let one mistake erase everything you had together.”

Portia shrugged wishing Sheila had told Marvin that instead of sleeping with him. “The padlocked gates are being replaced with panels with murals on them.”

“That’s still something to see.”

“Mom, are you sure you’re okay?” MJ asked when she called him. “It sounds like you’ve been crying.”

“I’m fine,” she lied.

“Do you need me to come back home?”

“No,” she said. “Stay at school.”

“So, I’m just supposed to pretend I don’t know you’re lying to me?”

“It’s hard, MJ,” she finally admitted. “It’s like you know in the back of your mind that one day we’ll die, but somehow you hold out hope that you won’t really die. And I just never thought I’d lose him. Not only did I lose him, but I discovered that I had lost him long before he died, and I didn’t even know it. And at the same time, I’m realizing that life really isn’t forever. It’s a strange mixture suddenly facing your own mortality while dealing with this huge loss. You know what I mean? Probably not, because I don’t either.”

“I love you, Mom.”

She smiled. MJ expressed his feelings easily, but there were times when he didn’t know what else to say, when saying *I love you* was his way of saying *I don’t know what else to say*. “I love you, too.” And she told him about her lunch meetings with Sheila.

He sighed heavily. “Why are you doing this to yourself? Don’t you think you’re dealing with enough already?”

“I’m sorry, baby. I don’t know what to say about any of this. I’m just trying to exist in this new space that’s been carved out for me,” she explained. “When I first called her, I just wanted to confront her, to unleash all my anger on her. But I didn’t. I don’t know. Nothing makes sense anymore. Death changes so much for you; it forces you to live your life.”

“How is having lunch with Dad’s mistress living your life? I’m coming back home.”

“No. You don’t need to come back home. I’m fine. I promise.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Did you know about her?” she suddenly asked. He was silent at first, and in the lull of that silence she found her answer. “You don’t have to protect me, MJ. I’m going to be all right.”

“Nothing is going to bring him back, Mom. He can’t come back to undo the past.”

She stared at the ring on her finger, the one Marvin had given her for their twentieth wedding anniversary. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t know for sure,” he responded without pause.

“You should have told me.”

“You’re both my parents,” his voice pleaded with her to understand. “I didn’t want to come between you.”

She felt wounded, but she didn’t respond.

“Mom, you need to see someone. Talk to a professional.”

“You should have told me. You knew that he was sneaking around behind my back. You knew that he was falling in love with another woman while I was home looking like a fool thinking everything was okay.”

“Mom, I’m sorry. You’re right. I should have told you.”

“I keep thinking about my parents. My dad, he cheated on my mom. I heard them arguing one night, they woke me out of my sleep. I got up and went in their room. When my dad tucked me back in, he told me not to worry.” Her voice caught. “He said they would work things out. Less than a month later, he was gone, and we had to pack up our stuff and move because my mom couldn’t afford the house alone. I don’t like liars. I don’t like being lied to.”

“Mom, this is different.”

“How?”

“What if I told you and I was wrong?”

“You still don’t understand, do you? Even if you didn’t know for sure, you should have told me.”

He sighed heavily. “All I can do is apologize. I’m so sorry, Mom.”

“How’s school going?” she asked to change the subject. “Did your professors allow you to make up the assignments you missed while you were here for Dad’s funeral?”

He filled her in on all the goings on with school before adding, “I’m still really worried about you.”

“They gave us this folder in group therapy,” she said. “One of the pamphlets describes grief as a spiral. How a loss can make you feel all these different emotions, sometimes depression, sadness, and elation all in the space of an hour. I looked at the pamphlet and saw myself. I can’t explain what’s happening with me, but I also can’t pretend this is not where I am now, because it is. And on top of losing my husband, the man who I loved, and no one else, I have to deal with the fact that he had fallen in love with another woman. And you knew about it. You knew.”

When she hung up, she walked over and touched the side of the urn that was filled with her husband’s ashes. “I’m just trying to find peace,” she whispered.

On the night of the final six-week grief therapy session, Portia sat in her car long after everyone had said good-bye and wished each other well. Earlier that night, each person had shared

their loved one's story with everyone else. Dr. Gibson had encouraged them to bring a photo and a linking item, something they used to remain connected to their loved one. She had brought one of the photographs taken on the day of their wedding and Marvin's cell phone.

In the photograph of them, she and Marvin were wearing the matching jogging suits they'd changed into after the ceremony. She was sitting on his lap. Before passing the photograph around for everyone to see, she traced a finger across their matching smiles. This photograph of them had always made her smile. The way he was staring at her with such naked joy; all that had mattered was the love they felt for one another. They'd been so young then. "I'm gonna show you the world," he'd told her before the photograph was taken.

"You are my world," she'd told him.

When she'd shared this with the group earlier, Dr. Gibson told her that it was okay for her to feel whatever she was feeling. "If you want to cry, cry and if you want to smile, then smile. When we love someone and lose them, this is what happens. All of these emotions are normal. And they're yours."

"I'm angry with him," she'd responded. "Angry that he died. Angry that he left me." What she didn't say was that she was also mad that he'd allowed Sheila to have a place in their life. And now she would never have an opportunity to tell him that.

They'd allowed her time and a space to share as much as she wanted to.

"Thank you for sharing with us," said Dr. Gibson when Portia stopped speaking and cast her eyes down to stare at the surface of the table. The person seated next to her shared the story of her loved one and by the end everyone was crying.

At the end of the session, Dr. Gibson led them through breathing exercises. She told them to focus on their inhalations and exhalations while silently repeating a centering word of their choice. Portia chose peace.

Now, sitting in the car, after everyone else was long gone, she held Marvin's phone in her hand. She'd gone through every message he and Sheila had exchanged. She kept re-reading them, trying to find the message hidden beneath them. After she tired of reading their words to one another, she switched over to his photo gallery and she moved slowly through the pictures, trying to read them like she'd done with their messages. She stayed in the parking lot going through his phone until about midnight when a security guard came up to her car and asked if she was alright. Turning the key to start the engine, she glanced in the rearview mirror. She hadn't realized she was crying again. This happened a lot lately.

Later that night, she woke out of her sleep and felt a terrible longing for Marvin. She reached out her hand to touch him and felt only the space where he'd once been. The sheet was cool beneath her fingers. And as she ran her hand up and down the cotton sheets, Portia felt that she was losing Marvin all over again. Almost without thinking, she grabbed her phone up from the night stand. After unlocking it, she scrolled through her contacts; her finger lingered over Sheila's name. She answered on the second ring. At first, Portia didn't say anything; she just listened to the sound of Sheila's breathing.

"I had a feeling you'd call," Sheila finally said.

"I couldn't sleep."

## Lunch Date

The season of her beauty was brief and unexpected. For much of her twenty-eight years, she'd moved through life barely registering much notice. Then one day the awareness of her beauty stealthily sidled along beside her and whispered in her ear. "Hello, beautiful. Let me take you out for lunch today."

Jordan looked up into the intense, dark brown eyes of her co-worker Paul, who was leaning on the edge of her desk. His eyes were fastened on her, waiting for her response, but she could tell, he already was anticipating that she would say yes.

Jordan had been working as a legal assistant at Paul's family's law firm for two months. Her best friend Michelle had set up the interview for her because she knew Mitch from NAME Montessori school, where both their kids attended. In all that time, Paul had seemed not to have noticed her at all. She recalled the day Mitch Duvall, Paul's uncle, had shown her around and introduced her to everyone. Paul had not even bothered to acknowledge her, his eyes never leaving his computer screen. Yet, every afternoon this week, he'd gone out of his way to speak to her and invite her to lunch. And every other time, she'd turned him down. The first time he asked, she told him about her husband King. "Calm down," he'd told her, "I just invited you to lunch." He'd walked away laughing, leaving her feeling ridiculous, but then later that afternoon, she'd looked up and caught him staring at her; she smiled nervously and looked down in her lap until she felt he'd turned his attention back to his work.

The second time he asked her out, she'd considered taking him up on the offer. Perhaps the offer had been nothing more than a simple courtesy extended from a junior associate to a legal assistant. But before she could agree to have lunch with him, King had called her cell phone. "I just wanted to see how your day was going," he told her.

She glanced over at Paul before responding, “Just another day at the office.”

They chatted a few more minutes. He told her that he needed to stop by his mom’s house because she wanted him to cut her grass. She told him that she’d have dinner ready when he got home. Same as every day. And when he said, “I love you,” she repeated it and wondered if Paul had heard her. One furtive glance told her that he hadn’t been paying attention to her. He was on the business call making plans for an upcoming meeting with the trial judge.

Now, two days later she was faced with another lunch invitation and she couldn’t think of a reason why she should turn it down. “Sure, I’ll have lunch with you.”

“Excellent,” he smiled widely, and they agreed to meet by the elevators in a half hour.

“I’ll drive,” he threw back over his shoulder as he walked back toward his desk. But she knew she knew she’d drive herself. That was the first rule her mother had told her about men: always drive your own car unless he’s your husband or your boyfriend.

Mitch was expecting a report this afternoon for a case he was prepping for. He’d asked her to search for precedents for a case he was preparing for. A young mother-to-be had been murdered by her boyfriend. She died shortly after arriving at the hospital, but doctors saved the baby. Now the maternal grandmother, who had custody of the newborn, was trying to deny the father visitation rights of the child. Usually, this type of case intrigued her, but she was so nervous about her lunch date with Paul that she was having trouble concentrating. She kept reading about the same case, one that happened in Iowa, but she wasn’t retaining any of it. What would they even talk about at lunch? They’d never so much as said two words to each other in the office.

A text message came through on her phone. Michelle, her best friend since middle school, sent a crying laughing emoji and the message: “save me”.

“What’s going on?”

“Girl, one of my student’s parents threatened me because I gave her son a zero for cheating.”

Instead of sending what she usually would, something to get her friend started on how parents believed anything their kids said nowadays, she told Michelle about the lunch date with Paul.

“Does King know?”

“No.”

“Would you tell him about it?”

“Yes.”

“Have fun. Stop beating yourself up over nothing. I eat lunch with my co-workers all the time.”

Looking up from her phone, she saw that Bethany, the receptionist from two floors up, was seated across from Paul. Jordan covered every inch of Bethany’s long, slender legs with her eyes before moving over to Paul’s face to see if he, too, had noticed how attractive Bethany’s legs were. He was leaned across his desk, pointing at a document that was lying open on his desk. Jordan looked away before either of them could catch her staring.

When Jordan met Paul at the elevator, he was having what appeared to be a private and important call on his cell phone, so she stood off to the side, giving him space to continue. After he ended the call, he smiled at her and said, “The wife.” He held the elevator door open until she entered and then followed her. Out in the parking garage, Jordan headed for her car, but Paul grabbed her arm. “Ride with me.” But she gently pulled her arm away and told him that she

preferred to drive her own car. "I'll follow you," she told him. *Actually, I think I'm going to just go grab a burger. I have to turn in a report in a few hours and I'm so behind.* The words lived only in her mind, never making it to her lips.

They had agreed to have lunch at Ms. Patsy's, a soul food restaurant that had been featured on the Food Network. He should have turned off Crump onto Union Avenue, but he kept driving. "Where is he going," she muttered beneath her breath. But she continued to follow him. Even when he turned into one of those cheap motels that attracted prostitutes and johns all day long. Lunch, it turned out, meant a quickie in a motel. She glanced down at the coral colored dress she was wearing; it wasn't tight or short, but still something had made him think she wanted to come here with him. She watched him park in front of the office; he avoided her questioning glance by refusing to look in her direction as he headed to the office. Then he got back in his car and she again followed him.

The parking lot was filled with holes. She tried to dodge them before realizing there was just too many of them for her to avoid. Doors of a few of the rooms stood open, a few with small children playing on the sidewalk in front of the room. Near where they parked, two small children sat on the ground. Behind them, a woman was seated in the doorway smoking a cigarette. As Jordan exited the car and followed Paul, she and the woman made eye contact, silently judging one another. A blue Kia pulled into the space beside Jordan's car while she waited on Paul to open the door. A Hispanic man got out and knocked on a door before disappearing inside. Jordan had caught the smile he threw back to the men still sitting in the car before the door closed behind him.

What am I doing here, she kept asking herself. She wanted to leave, but what if she did leave? Then what? Would she lose her job? Or worse would she keep her job and have to face him every day? The inside of the room carried a funk that the owners had not attempted to disguise. A large bed took up most of the room. The musty, moldy smell seemed to be coming from every

corner of the room, from the walls, the comforter on the bed, the dull brown carpet. Again, she asked herself why am I here? “I thought you said we’re going to lunch,” she questioned him when he tried to kiss her.

He shrugged like a little boy caught sneaking snacks after midnight. “You’re what I want to eat for my lunch.” And he smiled that smile again, the one that was meant to disarm her and make her relax, but in this room, it was impossible to relax.

“You have a wife,” she said when he leaned in to kiss her. *And I have a husband.*

“I never forgot about you.”

“That was so long ago. We were just kids.”

He’d sat behind her in Algebra I class in the ninth grade. They never spoke to each other except the one time, he’d asked if he could look over her shoulder during a quiz on rational numbers. Quizzes didn’t count as much as tests, but still he said he couldn’t afford a bad grade. After that he never spoke to her again.

He leaned in to kiss her again and this time she didn’t pull away. She rigidly accepted the warm insistence of his lips. No other kiss would ever be the same after this one. She’d always remember this feeling. On the bed, she resisted when he tried to pull back the covers; she couldn’t stop thinking about the countless other faceless individuals who had lain in the bed in the middle of the day like they were doing. She felt him pressing his body into hers and she felt nothing, but she couldn’t summon the energy to push him off her. “I don’t want to do this,” she squeezed out the words against his sloppy, insistent kisses. “You know you want to,” he told her. When he finished, she turned away from him and pulled her body into a ball. “See you back at the office,” he told her before he left the room. She lay there a long time, crying off and on. Sometime while she was lying

there, there was a hesitant knock at the door. “Housekeeping,” a male voice called out, before she heard a key being shoved in the door and then the door being pushed open. “Sorry,” the man who entered the room apologized, but made no move to leave. He stood in the doorway, a stack of white towels thrown over his arm.

Jordan stood up and tried to straighten the front of her dress. She’d left her car keys and sweater on top of her purse in the chair next to the window air conditioner unit. When she picked up her things, a small white card slid to the floor. It was Paul’s business card. On the back, he’d written in block letters: “You can call the police, but they can’t unrape you.” She tore the card into pieces and tossed it in the trash can. *Had she been raped?*

She didn’t go back to the office. She called Mitch and told him that she wasn’t feeling well, and she went home and crawled into her bed. It was still early. It would be hours before King got off from work. Had she been raped? She didn’t feel like she’d been raped because hadn’t she followed Paul to the motel? She’d had time to turn around if she didn’t want to go there with him. But did that mean that she’d only gotten what she wanted?

Sometime around four in the afternoon, she forced herself to get up from bed to shower. As she was running the water, trying to wait on it to get hot, she changed her mind and decided to take a long, hot bath. In the tub, she scrubbed at her skin with the pumice stone until it was red and sore. When Jordan lifted her arm and sniffed, she smelled the honeysuckle scent of her body wash, but the inside of her nostrils still burned with the scent of Paul. She worried that when King made it home, he, too, would smell Paul and know what she had done.

Sitting in the warm water filled with bubbles, she wondered if King would notice the change in her. Would he demand to know what she’d spent her afternoon doing? And if he did notice, would he divorce her? Once, when she’d come on her period early, he’d accused her of having sex

with someone else. “How does that make sense?” she’d demanded. But, of course, that was early in their relationship. They were both younger back then. Back then they fought about him buying sanitary napkins for her. It wasn’t manly he argued. That was a stupid way to look at it, she argued back.

“I’ve heard about how sometimes you can skip a week of your pills to manipulate your cycle when you want to plan a special weekend or something like that. I overheard some women at work talking about it.”

“That’s ridiculous, King. My cycle has never been consistent, even with the pills. And you know that.”

They argued all night and he never said he believed her; the discussion just came to an end. And she always felt that he never completely trusted her anymore after that.

When she got out of the bathtub, she stood in their walk-in closet and tried to decide what to wear. Searching through her clothes, her mind wandered back to this afternoon. All evening her mind had been a playground for memories of what had happened in that motel room. I should have stopped him. If I had been more forceful with my resistance, he would have taken me seriously. Jordan ended up settling on a large Tupac t-shirt and black leggings. And she strategically placed scented candles throughout the house and lit them. She had to get rid of Paul’s scent that was still strong in her nostrils. She went and pulled her oversized black sweater out of the closet and threw it over the T-shirt.

There were leftovers from last night’s dinner, she took those out and warmed them up. She wrapped the fried chicken in aluminum foil and slid it in the oven beside the half pan of lasagna. A half hour later when King arrived home, he came into the kitchen and stood in the doorway watching her moving around. *He’s gonna know*, she lamented. *He’s going to be able to tell. I never should*

*have agreed to have lunch with him. I should have known better.* She could feel King standing behind her, his eyes roaming over her body. Afraid to turn around to face him, she kept checking the food in the stove even though it was already warm enough for them to eat. She hated when he did that, and she'd told him so on more than one occasion. Watching her without saying anything. It was unnerving. She felt him scrutinizing her and couldn't help wondering what he was thinking. Jordan had never thought of herself as what some would call beautiful. She knew she was just average, and for that reason, she felt uncomfortable accepting attention or compliments. Even from her husband. Every time he complimented her, she struggled to find some hidden truth behind his words. Is that why you went with Paul today, a voice in her head asked. *I didn't want to. I told him I was married.* The skin on her arm and legs began to burn.

“How was your day,” King asked.

She finally turned to face him. She met his eyes, while trying to keep tears from spilling out of hers. Her heart hammered in her chest and her stomach knotted up. “It was just a day,” she said as she moved past him and went to their bathroom. She rubbed cocoa butter on her arms and legs.

King came up behind her while she was rubbing the cocoa butter on her skin. He kissed her on the back of her neck. “You smell good,” he told her.

“Dinner should be ready,” she said, ignoring his compliment.

She felt his eyes on her, knew that if she looked up into the mirror over the sink, he'd be staring at her curiously.

King followed Jordan to the kitchen. She fixed his plate, which he took in the living room. The Lakers were playing the Nets, so he was soon lost in the game. She heard him yelling at the television when the referee made a call he didn't agree with. And she smelled Paul again. Looking

around, she saw that she was in the kitchen alone. Of course, she was. There was no way he could be in her home, but somehow, he was. She felt Paul's presence as she stood over the sink, trying to swallow the lasagna. The food couldn't get past the lump in her throat. She ended up spitting it in the trash, then she washed her plate and tried to drink some ice water, which also got stuck in her throat.

When she bent down to get King's plate, she could have sworn she smelled Paul's cologne. She looked all around the living room and then glanced back over her shoulder, back toward the kitchen, which was of course empty. "You want anything else," she asked King, who had already started to get comfortable by unbuttoning his work shirt and kicking off his shoes.

"I'm good. Thanks baby." Behind her, on the television, the crowd erupted with cheers and applause.

At the doorway leading into the kitchen, she turned back to face her husband. *Maybe I should tell him*, she thought. Her skin started burning again. The inside of her nose burned. Tears struggled behind her eyes. "I think there's some chocolate cake left in the refrigerator," she finally asked. "You want some?"

"Do you mind bringing me some?"

"Want some milk, too?"

"Please."

She carried him a saucer with a small slice of cake and a glass of milk. "I've been thinking, King. If someone broke into our home and killed me, do you think you'd be able to tell something was wrong? You know, have a feeling before it was even confirmed?"

King turned the volume down on the TV. His knotted eyebrows revealed his confusion.

“Why would you ask me something like that? Are you okay?”

“I’m good. Just something I saw on TV today. This woman was able to sense when something was wrong with her husband. It just got me to thinking.”

“You ask such ridiculous things sometimes.”

“Will you just answer the question, please? Would you be able to tell?”

“I’d know because I’d see you. You would look different so of course I’d notice. Why would you want to talk about this?”

“I’m just curious.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

Her shoulders sagged with disappointment. “I’m fine,” she told him. “Enjoy the cake.”

## I'm Still Here

Tara used to joke that she'd one day have to take care of her parents when they got older. She never considered what that meant: if she had to care for them, that meant they'd be unable to care for themselves. It was just something to say like agreeing when your husband says you'll be married forever or when your best girlfriend promises that you'll grow old together. But then one day her father showed up with a phrase to explain all his strange behavior: early onset Alzheimer's.

Without hesitation, she invited her father inside and they headed straight for the kitchen where she made two mugs of coffee, hers with so much creamer added, the coffee carried the pale color of a glass of milk, her father's dark as the smooth skin on the back of his hands. She'd left the television on in the living room. It remained on much of the time these days, a kind of white noise background, something to ward off all the silence. From their places in the kitchen, they could hear the voice of local news reporter Stormy Shaw. There'd been another school shooting. This time at an elementary school. Twenty six- and seven-year-olds had been murdered. A 20-year-old man had murdered the children, six adults and then himself. *Thoughts and prayers. Possible legislation. Thoughts and prayers. Sobbing parents.* Then they cut to an interview with a local resident who was suggesting that the massacre had been staged, calling the school children crisis actors whose families had been paid, parroting the sentiments of a local Republican politician. The grief of the families of the murdered children wiped away from public memory as easily as dry erase markers on a white board. Tara wanted to get up and turn off the television, but something in her father's face, in his demeanor, kept her seated.

The news faded into the background as her father told her about his doctor's appointment from the day before.

“What does that mean?” she questioned him. It wasn’t the words that were foreign to her, but the idea that this could be something used to describe her father.

Clarence Leodis Crutcher, Junior stared into his open palms that were resting face up on the table. Their family physician, Dr. Percy, had given her father the diagnosis and a folder filled with pamphlets and handouts about the disease.

“It means there’s a reason why I’ve struggled to remember the passwords for my computer and email accounts,” he told her. “You didn’t know it, but a couple of times I had to leave behind groceries in the store because I couldn’t remember his PIN numbers.” And then there was the evening he was driving home from the grocery store, but something happened, like he blacked out, and hours later, when he came to, he discovered he’d driven all the way Downtown. He’d parked the car behind the building where Easy Way used to be.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I could have helped you.”

“You have your own troubles.” And he lifted the coffee mug to his lips like he was going to take a sip before placing it back on the table.

Tara remembered the trees the most from that day, two months before she woke to the smoke in the house. A stark contrast with the dark reds and bright yellows. A few leaves still clung to the branches of the maple tree in their front yard, splotches of vivid color painted on the canvas of a cloudless blue sky. But most of the leaves had dropped to the ground by then, a blanket of fall

leaves. She remembered thinking how people could be like those leaves that stubbornly clung to the tree, refusing to let go even when it was obviously the only choice.

After all these years, she still hadn't accepted the fact of her mother's death. And after her father's diagnosis of early onset Alzheimer's, she was stubbornly fighting against the idea of losing another parent. And yet, she found herself thinking, winter always follows the fall.

When she was growing up, Tara had always felt like the luckiest little girl in their neighborhood. All her other friends' fathers were workaholics who barely had time to spend with their children, but her father was always outside playing with her. They played basketball together, he taught her how to catch a baseball, taught her to ride a bike. When she and her girlfriends were old enough to want to be dropped at the mall or the movies, they always asked him, and he always did whatever they asked. Growing up, he had been her favorite parent because he always seemed to have time for her. Not only was he her protector, he was the first man who loved her fully and unconditionally. During the two weeks he'd been visiting family in Louisiana, she had to fight the urge to pick up the phone to check on him. And when he called and asked her to come get him and bring him home, she didn't ask any questions, just told him she'd be there as soon as she could. She and DJ woke up early that Saturday morning, drove straight to New Orleans and once they had her daddy, they turned back around and headed to Memphis.

DJ had fallen asleep by the time they made it to the Lake Ponchartrain Causeway, just as Tara had suspected he would. If he hadn't fallen asleep so quickly, he would have tried to sit up in his seat, keeping his eyes focused out the window for the entire twenty-four miles it took to make it across the bridge. When she'd first told him it was a lake, he skeptically responded, "Looks too big, to me, to be a lake."

Her father had always been a storyteller. When she was younger, his stories were something to avoid. She would beg off from listening to his stories, claiming she needed to finish homework or study for a test. Or she'd roll her eyes and say, "Not now, daddy." And mostly, he obliged. But now that she was much older, she found herself craving his stories. Nowadays she found herself gulping down his stories like a parched person would a bottle of water.

Out of the corner of her eye, she scrutinized her father as he watched the passing watery landscape and she wondered what he was thinking. They'd just passed one of the final crossovers on the bridge when her dad finally spoke, breaking the silence. "You know your Uncle James almost drowned in that lake?"

"I thought you said he never visited family down there because he didn't want to drive across that bridge."

"He went once. It was me and Brenda and him and Patsy. It was about a year or so after your mama and me got married. You know she had a way about her, she could convince anyone to do something they didn't want to. And she wanted to visit Bourbon Street." He glanced over at her, offered a sweet smile, before turning back to face the window. "We went fishing in the lake. Your mama packed a cooler for us with sandwiches and beer. He was sitting there eating a sardine sandwich and something tugged on his line. I don't know how it happened, but him and the pole ended up in the water."

"Why didn't he just let it go," she asked, sounding amused.

"Exactly," he laughed. "Mama was still alive back then. James had to spend the night in the hospital because he lost consciousness for a little while. We called mama from his room so she could talk to him and she called us all fools for going out there by the lake then hung up."

As soon as he'd started talking, Tara had reached inside her jacket and hit the record button on the digital recorder she'd recently bought to start preserving his stories. She'd always have a doorway to this part of him. Even once his memory was gone.

One night he and James were walking down by West Peebles Road, back when there were fewer homes on the street. A few weeks after Dr. King had been killed and things still hadn't quieted down in the city yet. "We were still living on Grant's Corner then. And this car full of white boys come along. They were trying to scare us, making like they were gonna hit us with the car. I think they got mad when we didn't run off like they thought we would." His voice was filled with an unmistakable pride. "But they made a mistake."

"What's that?"

"They came back." When the car returned, her uncle and father took out the small pistols they kept in their front pockets for protection. "We didn't stop shooting till the pistols were empty."

Even though she'd heard this story many times before when she was growing up, she asked, "Did anybody get hurt?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. Just know that they kept going that time."

As her dad talked, and the device in her pocket recorded, she smiled inwardly knowing she'd always have this part of her daddy. Her strong and fearless daddy.

DJ woke with a start just as they crossed over the Mississippi state line. He'd removed his seat belt and was dancing across the seat. Tara pulled off at a rest area just off exit three. "Give me just a minute, Junior, and you'll be able to use the restroom."

The parking lot was half full: a few multiple family cars and several eighteen-wheeler trucks. She pulled into a space between an unoccupied red Toyota Camry and a black Range Rover with three small children inside. One little girl with colorful beads at the end of her braids, kept ducking down and hiding then popping up to smile and wave at them. The driver, who was probably the children's mother, had reclined the driver's seat and lay there with eyes closed. Tara wondered how the woman could possibly be resting with the way the children kept jumping across the seats, climbing from the front to the back, and roughhousing like they were. Tara smiled in their direction as she shut off the engine.

DJ popped out of his seat and asked, "Can I get a snack?" He was no longer doing his "gotta pee dance."

"We'll see."

He repeated his question as they passed the vending machine filled with overpriced snacks and candy bars.

Why hadn't she thought to bring along snacks and drinks for him? "Maybe when we come out. But make sure you stay with Pawpaw, okay? Don't come out of the bathroom until you both have finished, got it?"

While they were in the restroom, she raced back out to her car to grab a few dollar bills out of her wallet. It took less than two minutes for her to sprint across the courtyard and to duck inside the car and snatch up her wallet. Knowing already what her son would want, she pushed a dollar bill

and two quarters in the machine. A large iced honey bun dropped to the bottom. Her had was inside the little door when she looked up and saw DJ coming out of the restroom –alone.

“Where’s Pawpaw? I told you to stay with him.”

He shrugged. “He left me. I tried to tell him that you said we had to come out together, but he said he’d be right back.”

She grabbed him by the shoulders, turned his face so she could stare in his eyes. “What do you mean he left? There’s nowhere for him to go.”

“He’s okay, mama. He’s older than both of us so he can’t get lost.”

“Go back in there! He has to be in there. He wouldn’t just walk off.” She shoved him back toward the bathroom just as a white man wearing a red plaid button down and cowboy boots exited. On his right hip was a holstered pistol. They made eye contact briefly and both apologized before she went back to shoving DJ.

“But I told you he’s not in there. I called his name before I came out and he didn’t respond.”

“He’s right,” the man offered. “There’s nobody in there.”

“Go check anyway.” A few minutes passed and DJ still hadn’t returned. She looked out toward the car, thought maybe he’d just gone out to the car to wait on them, but he wasn’t out there. When enough time had passed that she finally had to accept that something was truly wrong, she went in the bathroom. DJ’s face was red and tear-stained, he was bawling and repeatedly saying, “I’m sorry.” Standing in the center of the bathroom, he pointed, and she turned to face the bank of empty stalls. “I told you he’s not in here.”

Wordlessly, she grabbed his arm and pulled him out the bathroom behind her. The lights in the parking lot had come on and the sun had gone down. With the sun gone, it was a bit chillier. She spotted the man wearing the cowboy boots walking a small black poodle across the grassy area.

Despite the signs that warned against the brown water, the rest area had a serene atmosphere to it. With a gazebo covering picnic tables and a wide expanse of open space. Picnic tables covered a large swath of the open space. Tara and DJ started far out, searching the wooded area first. And she kept looking back toward the car in case her father went back there. She and DJ went back to the picnic area and spotted the guy with the dog again. “Have you seen an older guy? Gray hair? He’s wearing a purple sweater and black slacks.”

Up close, she realized the man was missing the top part of his right ear and that he had a tattoo of a dark black wolf with its mouth open, baring its teeth, on his neck. He immediately bent down and picked up his black dog and helped them look for her father. His name was Phillip and he was a truck driver who’d been driving since he was eighteen. DJ walked along beside them, holding the leash of Phillip’s little black poodle, Lady. Phillip was talking, telling her about how his son wanted to ride with him on the road. “He’s too young now, but when he’s older, he’ll be out here with me.” When he stopped talking, she looked over at him, and saw what he was looking at: her father sitting on the ground, beneath a copse of trees, facing out toward the highway. Phillip dropped down on the ground beside her father. Both men sitting cross-legged, staring at the passing cars. “We’ve been looking all over for you,” Phillip told her father. Her father turned to look at the strange man, his face impassive. “I don’t know you,” Clarence finally responded.

“This is Phillip, daddy. We’ve been looking for all over for you.”

“I’ve been right here.” He looked up at his daughter, a long intense expression.

“Daddy, I told you not to leave the bathroom without DJ. You left him in there alone.”

“I meant to go back. But then I just forgot.”

Tara thanked Phillip for helping them and he smiled and told her that it had been his pleasure. “Don’t be too hard on him. And don’t be too hard on yourself. I’ll be praying for your family.” She watched him walk away and head back to his truck.

Exhausted, she finally collapsed beside her father. “My God, dad, you scared us.”

A look of contrition came over his face, lengthening his facial features and she immediately regretted her words.

“I killed him,” he said finally. “It’s my fault. I killed him.”

“It’s okay, daddy,” her voice softened. “It’s going to be okay. And nobody’s hurt.”

Her father’s face crumpled, and he began to sob loudly. “I didn’t mean to,” he wailed. “I didn’t mean to do it.”

Behind them, Lady started barking. Her father continued to cry. Tara looked behind them and saw Phillip and his dog standing not ten feet away from them. They locked gazes. But her father’s sobbing continued, and she turned away and pulled him into an embrace. “Are you guys going to be okay,” Phillip asked. She nodded her head without releasing her daddy from her arms.

“Mama,” DJ called out to her, his voice barely above a whisper.

No. She wasn’t sure she’d be okay. She wasn’t sure her dad would be okay. She wasn’t sure about anything anymore.

In the car, her father kept mumbling and intermittently crying about the brother he supposedly killed. "I didn't know any better. I thought it was a toy."

"Did Pawpaw kill somebody?" DJ asked from the back seat.

She wanted to ask how he knew what that meant, felt she should have a conversation with him about death. "Of course not," she assured him. "Remember, we talked before how sometimes Pawpaw might say things that don't make sense because he has Alzheimer's?"

"Yeah."

"Well, today, Pawpaw's having a bad day and we just have to be patient with him."

"Don't tell him that lie," her father demanded. "I'm not having a bad day. I know what I'm talking about."

"Okay, daddy. I'm not going to argue with you." He'd never used that tone of voice with her before. This was part of the frustration of having a sick parent, needing to be able to depend on their strength but not being able to.

"I didn't try to kill him. And, you know, one day, I won't even remember him. I won't remember he ever existed." Eventually both he and DJ fell asleep, but her father woke back up and stared at her. She thought maybe he'd had a bad dream while he was sleeping. "I'm not having a bad day," he told her. "I killed him. I accidentally killed my little brother."

She reached over and wiped at his tears. "You didn't kill anybody, dad. You'll see when we get to Memphis. We'll stop by Uncle James' house first. He's still alive. I talked to him on the phone before we left the house today."

“We used to live in the Walter Simmons apartments. Our parents were outside. I found my dad’s gun under the mattress. I don’t even know what I was looking for.”

“It’s okay, daddy, you don’t have to tell me this.”

“I want to.”

And he told her how he shot his brother with his father’s gun. And instead of going to get his parents so they could get his brother some help, he sat down beside his brother’s body. She let him talk, but she still didn’t believe him. And Tara felt the crushing weight of this new knowledge. Her daddy had killed another person, and not in self-defense. For the rest of the ride, she didn’t record anything else he told her, and she fought the urge to pull over to the side of the road to give herself time to figure out how to carry this new image of her daddy.

Two days later, at the reunion, which was held at her Uncle James’s house, a new light and a new life entered her father’s eyes. James offered his brother a beer, which he enthusiastically accepted. Tara gently reminded her father about all the medicine he was taking and that mixing the two could have a bad consequence.

“It’s just one day,” he pleaded, once again making her feel like the parent of a teenager as he looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to grant him permission.

Finally, she took a deep breath and said, “Fine. Just this one day.”

She’d stopped at the store before arriving at her uncle’s house and she took the groceries in the kitchen. She put some of the canned sodas in the refrigerator and the others in the coolers on

the picnic tables in the backyard. DJ and his cousins were playing on the video game in the den. Everyone else was outside.

Tara's cousin Gerard was playing the music and running the grill. Some of her older male relatives were doing that old man step dancing with a beer in one hand to "Members Only." Her cousins Valerie and Regina were seated at the picnic table, drinks in hand. She hadn't seen them since they were much younger, but she went over to join them, while keeping an eye out for her daddy. He hadn't wandered off since that day at the rest stop, but she was still wary and wanted to avoid another incident.

Valerie was telling Regina about her daughter making the majorette team when Tara walked up. She listened as Valerie bragged about their team making it to the championships. And then Regina started talking about her son who played football and the schools that were trying to recruit him. "Schools have been after him since he was in middle school," she laughed. "Taking him out to dinner and everything, trying to get him to agree to come to their schools." She listened to them a while longer before she got up and started moving around again.

Her dad and Uncle James as well as other uncles and older cousins were in the front yard. They had a cooler full of canned beer and a few of them were smoking large cigars. Uncle James had just finished telling a story about a fight they had one night when they went to a basketball game at Carver. "Back then schools were just starting to integrate," he said, "and Germantown had this one black player. I think his name was Marvin or Melvin or something like that. Anyway, when those Germantown boys started losing, they got mad and started calling our boys out their names."

"Sure did," Tara's dad chimed in. "And some of those white boys in the stands started throwing things at us."

The men laughed at the memory of them chasing those white boys back to their bus after Carver beat Germantown by more than 20 points. Her dad looked over at her and the look that passed between them made her smile.

At one point in the evening, conversation turned toward the accidental shooting. The truth of what happened slapped Tara across the face. It turned out they had had another brother, a younger brother named Marcus. Clarence was six years old when he found their father's gun and accidentally shot his four-year-old brother in the chest. Their mother had been sitting on the porch chatting with her best friend and neighbor when she heard the shot. She came in saw one son covered in blood and trembling violently and the other sitting on the floor, his little brother's head resting on his lap.

Tara lost track of what they talked about after that because she was stuck on an image of her dad at a young boy with a gun in his hand. She was torn between being upset with her grandmother for not preventing the shooting and being upset with her dad for not recognizing the danger of the weapon he held in his hand.

Weeks after the family reunion, Tara concluded that she couldn't take care of her daddy alone. She watched her father stir mustard instead of honey into his hot tea. When she went to remove the mug before he could drink it, he raised his voice at her, accused her of treating him like a child. She ignored him and poured out the tea and made him a fresh cup. At first, he ignored the newly made cup of tea, but eventually he drank it and thanked her. And later that night, he was cooking a bologna sandwich and walked out of the kitchen. He forgot he was cooking and by the time Tara made it into the kitchen, flames were shooting out of the skillet on the stove. That was also the night, she found the letter from Katrina, her best friend from high school. Though they'd been so close they'd alternated spending the weekend over each other's house, they hadn't spoken in

several years. Uncle James ran into Katrina a few weeks back and Katrina, who'd recently lost her mother, wrote the letter. While she read the letter, she fought back tears, because she knew that it had become inevitable that she would have to place her daddy in a home and she dreaded even the thought of that.

“Jesus wants to love you right now, but you’re making it difficult.” Her father’s voice, the words ragged and strangled by fear and uncertainty, raced out to meet Tara as she walked down the narrow, chemical-smelling hallway at Brookdale Assisted Living. “Jesus wants to love you.”

Now, the foul stench of shit assaulted her as she entered her father’s room using the security code she’d already memorized. When her father had moved in with her and DJ back in December of last year, she had not imagined she would have to move him into a place like this. But then one morning she’d awakened to find the house filled with thick, dark smoke. And after weeks of arguing with her brother, she finally caved and brought him to this place. Neither she nor her father were happy about it. It just felt like another fact of life like the Alzheimer’s.

Her older brother Brandon was the one who’d found the place. But Tara was the one who’d had to drive him to the facility. And she was the one who had to visit him so he wouldn’t feel that he’d been thrown away. And she was the one who sometimes received calls in the middle of the night from her father, trying to figure out where he was and why he couldn’t find Tara or his wife

Brenda. Originally, Brandon had said he'd try to make the trip down at least once a month. But it was more than 800 miles. They'd all known Brandon was just talking.

After he'd first moved into Brookdale, Tara would bring DJ along for her visits because he often complained of missing Pawpaw. Back then it felt like family visits. She would smile as DJ and her father talked about sports and movies they'd watched. But as time passed, she watched her father become some other person. So, these days, she has started to leave DJ with his father in his new apartment and his new girlfriend Whitney. Daniel's only question had been, "What time are you coming back to get him."

"I'll call when I'm on the way," had been her response.

Entering her father's room, she immediately set to work. She went in pulled the bathroom door shut and sprayed two short pumps of scent from the bottle of body spray she kept in her purse. And then she busied herself plumping pillow cushions on the sofa and opening the curtains to allow some of the natural light in.

Tangie, the woman who was tending to her father, smiled to acknowledge Tara, but kept her attention on her patient. Wearing burgundy hospital scrubs, black running shoes, and a stethoscope around her neck, she offered, "I just need to take his blood pressure, then I'll get out of your way. As you can see, he's a bit grumpy today."

Tara returned the smile, but did not respond, not right away. Should she apologize for her father's behavior? Should she remind Tangie and herself that this wasn't who her father really was? That he was repeating the words his own mother used to say to him whenever he'd been caught misbehaving. Instead, she turned her attention, too, toward the man lying in the bed. He'd always been tall and lean, but his lean frame now looked worrisome. The frantic look in his eyes worried her, too. His gray eyes were locked on Tangie's face.

Clarence Junior had always been such a strong and brave daddy. Tara cannot remember a moment when she felt otherwise about him. Even finding out about the accident from when he was a child couldn't undo the years of love and support she received from him. Whenever she needed a tire changed or something done around the house, she always called him, even after she married Daniel. In this place, though, he appeared vulnerable and helpless and she knew he resented her for forcing him to live here. She leaned over and placed a hand on top of her father's head and leaned in to kiss him. Still, his eyes never moved away from Nurse Tangie's face.

"He's been talking about you all day," she told Tara. "He told Miss Lisa that his daughter was coming here today, and he was going to tell her about the bad lady who kept sticking his finger with a needle," she laughed. "We tried to tell him it wasn't a needle, but a machine to measure his oxygen, but he was having none of it."

How do you raise a father, the father who raised you? That's what Tara was thinking as she watched Tangie go about her work. Her father used to wake her and Brandon early on Saturdays for fishing out at Shelby Farms. They always chose a spot far away from other people because it wasn't about the fishing, not really. It felt like it was more about the time they spent together. He'd ask them about school. And then he'd let them talk about it, really talk about it, without inserting his opinion or sanctimoniously sermonizing to them. Tara could count on her hands the number of times they carried fish home with them. And he was the one who introduced her to Miles Davis and Nina Simone. He used to sit in his study with a glass of wine or Jack Daniels, the lights turned down low, listening to his records. Sometimes Tara would come in, plop down at his feet and he might tell her a story about Miles. Or they might not say anything at all. And when she turned sixteen, he took her to buy her first car, a red 1976 Trans Am. He looked all over for that car because she'd told him she wanted it. And then when he located one, they drove the 700 miles to see the car and purchase

it. After receiving his diagnosis, she couldn't help thinking how one day, all these memories would belong only to her. Like owning a car with no engine inside, she wasn't sure what to do with that. Now what, she wondered. What will our relationship look like now?

That's why she took every moment she could to call him daddy, gently reminding him of their special identity. He was her daddy. He was hers and she was his. And she didn't want it to be any other way. "Hey daddy," she repeated. When her father still didn't turn his face toward her, she swallowed hard and fought to keep tears from streaming down her face.

She watched as Tangie rubbed Vaseline on the back of his hands. His dark hands, deep as the soil they often worked in taking care of their mother's flowers. "Your baby girl is here, Mr. Clarence. You been talking about her all day. Aren't you going to turn around and say hello?"

"Everything looks good," Tangie said as she rolled up the blood pressure cuff and put it away. Her eyes were filled with a sort of pitying and in that moment, Tara hated her for it. "He went outside this morning after breakfast, but he might be up for another walk. What do you think, Mr. Clarence? You want to go for another walk?" On her way out the room, she stooped over and whispered in Tara's ear, "He was a little grumpy this morning, kept asking why he was here and saying he wanted to go home. He told us to call you so you could come and get him. That's why we called you." Then she smiled and left them alone.

His eyes were bright and alert, roaming about the room now, as if he were trying to take everything in for the first time, but refusing to land on his daughter. She was seated on the sill of the bay window. Waiting on him to acknowledge her, she remembered the photographs in her purse: a couple from when he used to take her and Brandon fishing, one of her and her father taken before the father daughter dance in sixth grade, and one of her parents dressed up to go out for one of

their date nights. She removed them, each in its own little frame, from her purse and placed them on the night table beside her father's bed.

She'd been seated on the windowsill for a half hour and still her father had refused to acknowledge her. "You want to go outside for a walk, daddy?" she asked, trying to penetrate the fog. He looked at her then. It was like two strangers' eyes connecting across the room for the first time. No recognition, only curiosity. Even as something inside her crumpled up and self-fed on its anguish, she smiled at her father. She suddenly remembered the first day he'd taken her outside to teach her to ride the bike her parents had bought her for her eighth birthday. A powder blue bike with blue and white streamers extending from each of the handlebars. A brown woven basket decorated with blue and white flowers rested between the handlebars for her Barbie doll, the first black doll she'd ever owned. There was an anxious feeling in her stomach the first time she sat on the hard-plastic seat. She kept glancing back over her shoulder at her father. *Don't let go until I'm ready she begged.* "You don't ever have to worry," he reassured her, "I'm not ever going to let go before you're ready." And he ran behind her for days, holding the seat, never complaining. And when the neighbor from across the street told her father to just let her go and let her fall, he'd told that neighbor, a man who looked to be younger than her dad and always had different women coming by his house, that no man should ever let his daughter down like that. "I'm not going to be the man that hurts my daughter." After about a month, she asked him to let go for the first time. He asked, "You sure?" She wasn't but nodded her head because she knew if she fell, he would catch her. Instead, Tara learned to pump her legs and pedal hard enough that the ribbons on her bike were always waving and flying as she rode.

"I've been waiting on you," he said to her now as he finally recognized her. "Come help me get up."

She went over and offered him her arm and helped him sit up in the bed. She helped him put on his shoes, a pair of black Reebok sneakers he used to wear when he did work around the house like cleaning the gutters, trimming the hedges, or watering mama's flower garden. They were his *outside* shoes.

Clarence held tightly to his daughter's arm as they made their way outside to the courtyard. His grip tightened when they walked past the information desk in the lobby. Once they were outside and the warmth of the sun greeted them, gently caressing and warming their skin, he relaxed.

Everything about the assisted care facility was designed to offer the illusion of home. Each of the three-room suites had a bedroom, living room area, and a half bathroom. Each floor had its own bathing facility where residents were able to take baths with the help of a care attendant. The outside, though, exuded the atmosphere of a well-landscaped city park. A half-mile walking trail was lined with vibrant and beautiful flowers: rows of purple and pink Coneflowers, bright yellow Coreopsis, and bright orange daylilies. Some of the same flowers her mother had grown in her garden. Every Saturday morning when they didn't go fishing with their father, Tara's mother would come and wake her so they could weed and water the flower garden. Tara's favorite part was when she was allowed to hold the water hose. Watching the tender flowers holding their own under the pressure of the stream of water. Even if they flattened a little under the pressure, it wasn't long before they bounced back. And sometimes her dad would come out and grab the water hose out of her hand and spray her and her brother. Then they would take it and spray him back. By the time they finished, they'd all be soaked.

She and her father claimed a bench near the cherubic angel stone fountain with water cascading from its mouth. A few copper pennies rested at the bottom of the fountain; she imagined one of the adult children visiting their mother or father, standing near the fountain and throwing a

penny in as they wished for things to return to normal. Wished for parents who the child didn't have to parent. A gentle breeze pushed through, gently ruffling the leaves of the Magnolia trees. She followed her father's gaze and knew he was remembering the tree that had stood in their front yard.

Lost in thought, she didn't at first feel her father tugging at her sleeve. "Daddy," she asked him, "do you remember those Saturdays when we used to barbecue in the front yard and our neighbors would come over? We'd be out there all night."

He smiled and she knew that he remembered too. "Yeah, those were some good times, weren't they?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking about them. Remember the evening we found out Luther Vandross had died, and we went outside and played his music. Nothing but Luther all night long."

"I remember that," he smiled again, a smile that reached all the way up to his dark brown eyes.

"And you ended up singing "A House is Not a Home," to mama."

He laughed. "Oh man, I sure do remember that. Ain't nothing been right since your mama died. She was such a sweet woman." He remembered. Sometimes he didn't. Sometimes he thought she was still alive and that he needed to find her.

A heavy and uncomfortable silence settled between them again. Families around them prepared to leave, saying goodbye to their family member before they walked them back into the facility. New visitors came to sit in the courtyard. She and her father had gotten up and started walking the circuit of the walking trail. He stopped, bent down and pulled one of the small yellow petals off a Black-eyed Susan and handed it to her. "Put it in your hair," he instructed her. As she

slid it in behind her ear, she knew it probably looked ridiculous, but his wide smile encouraged her to do as he'd asked.

“How you been feeling, daddy?” she asked, tracing a finger along the back of his hands. She'd always loved his hands. The calluses covering his palm and the scars reminded her how much he'd done around the house for them. And how hard he'd worked to support them. He'd started out at Federal Express unloading and loading packages on trucks but eventually moved up to a supervisor position.

“I been okay. My sugar was a little high last week. Your mama went and picked up some of those pills from Dr. Champion and I've been taking those.”

“Yeah, she always took such good care of us,” she laughed, trying to carefully steer the conversation back to the present. “Except when I used to beg her to let me stay home from school. She'd give me a spoon of cod liver oil and tell me to get my butt up out of the bed.” They both shared a laugh at her mother's expense, and then she added, “I miss her so much.”

“Well go on inside and say hello to her then.” He pointed in the direction of the nursing home entrance, where a man wearing khaki pants and a navy-blue sweater, and his young daughter were entering. Something hardened inside Tara. He'd forgotten already.

Tara turned away from her daddy and stared up into the face of the sun. She squinched her eyes and released a deep sigh. “I'll go talk to mama later,” she finally replied. She was still learning which things to let slide and which she should push him to remember. Her phone buzzed and she looked down to see a message from her ex-husband Darren: *Are you on your way yet?*

Her daddy dropped her hand and frowned. His brown eyes hardened. “You know, you sure can be silly sometimes. You just said you miss your mother. If you miss her so much, go talk to her.”

“Not right now, daddy. I’m here for you.” She responded to Darren’s message with one word: *no*.

She hoped her words would soften his features, but he kept frowning at her. She could tell him, try to re-situate him within his memories, but there was no telling what the outcome would be. In the books she’d read, she read descriptions of Alzheimer’s patients exploding with anger when they were denied their distorted memories. He might storm off. He might cry. It might confuse him. Or he could say nothing, as if though she’d never spoken. Retreat back into himself, leaving her outside alone. The quiet of these moments hurt the most, when all she could do was sit there and wait to see how he reacted so she could follow his lead; she hadn’t yet figured out what to do with all the quiet when it settled between them.

When your parent is sick, you learn to dread the ringing of the phone. She was walking out the door, headed to work, when the phone rang. Her father was being violent and angry and wouldn’t calm down. “We’ve already called for transport to take him to the emergency room,” the woman on the phone told Tara.

“Please. Don’t do anything yet. I’m walking out the door now.”

There was a slight hesitation before the woman on the phone responded. “Get here as soon as you can.”

As she drove to the facility, Tara felt guilty for leaving her daddy to deal with this by himself. Like his mother had done. They hadn’t protected him. And now she felt like she was neglecting him, too. In those support groups she’d been attending, some of the children talked about different ways they changed their routines and their homes so they could provide care for their parents, but she hadn’t considered it, not seriously, because it was so hard watching him age before her eyes. Losing memories she’d always thought would be theirs, not just hers. By the time she arrived at Brookdale, her father had already been transported away. “I asked you to wait until I got here,” she yelled at the facility director.

“We tried to wait, but nothing we tried would calm your father down. We couldn’t just allow him to hurt himself or one of our staff members.”

At the hospital, when she finally located her father, she was even more upset to see him restrained; his arms were handcuffed to the rails of the hospital bed. “Help me,” he kept yelling. “Why won’t somebody please help me?”

A large male attendant and police officer were standing near her father’s bed. “Mr. Crutcher, no one is doing anything to you,” the male officer said. “You need to calm down.”

She dropped her purse and jacket on the chair by the door and shoved in next to her father’s bed. “It’s okay, daddy. I’m here.”

His eyes were glazed over, and he looked scared, not angry. She could tell he was just confused. She crawled into the bed with him. It was awkward with the restraints on his arms, but she needed him to feel her presence. “Daddy, it’s me. Everything is going to be okay.”

She turned to the officer. “Can you please remove these handcuffs?”

“The doctor is on his way. I’ll remove them as soon as he arrives, and they give him something to relax and calm down.”

“Can you take off just one, please. He’s scared.”

“He’s scared quite a few people himself. The way he was carrying on when we got to the nursing home.”

She didn’t want to argue with him. She just wanted to be able to get close to her father. Eventually, she convinced him to remove just one side of the cuffs, so she could squeeze in the bed beside her father. When she got up there, she cradled his head on her shoulder. She could feel him relax and knew that he wouldn’t do anything else, but she couldn’t convince these people of that. So, they waited on the doctor who administered a mild sedative that put her father to sleep.

While he slept, her mind wandered. When she was about three or four-years-old, her parents had taken her to see the Easter bunny. She’d screamed her head off when she laid eyes on him. Her father had picked her up from the floor where she was kicking and screaming. She thought sure she was going to get a spanking when she got home. But he had lifted her out of the back seat and carried her into the house. He’d gently cradled her in his arms, she could feel his heartbeat beneath her head. He’d carried her to her bedroom and changed her into her night clothes. After she was ready for bed, he continued to hold her in his arms, and he read to her. As she fell asleep, she could hear the steady beat of his heart and his calm, soothing voice as he read *The Purple Dinosaur* to her.

While he slept, she embraced him, held his head close to her chest. She downloaded a digital copy of *The Purple Dinosaur* to her phone and she read it to her father as he slept. It was her way of saying to him *I’m still here*.

She kept on talking to him even after he woke up. As she talked, she thought of all the changes she would need to make at the house. Changing the locks to make it difficult for her father to leave the house. Enlisting the help of Uncle James and Brandon, who might just have to move back home, to help keep an eye on him. And she'd make over the bedroom, fill it with photographs and memories to help keep him grounded in this life. And her leave of absence would probably become a permanent leave.

“How long I got to be in the hospital,” he asked her.

“The doctor said he would sign the release papers tomorrow.”

“I didn't mean nobody no harm.”

“I know you didn't, daddy.” She pulled her father closer to her and smiled into the top of his head. “We're going to be okay.”

## Rearview Mirror

September 30, 1996

It felt like a dream, weightless and unsure. Like walking into a room in your home and finding that everything was out of focus, all the furniture appearing to be shapeless and colorless blobs. But then everything slowly came into focus, gained the weight of reality. She shifted beneath it, trying to adjust to this new weight. Her body tensed at the sound of the screeching tires on asphalt. No matter how many times she pressed her foot on the brake pedal, the car refused to stop. And she knew they would crash before they actually did; she felt it in her bones. Yet her only thought had been to protect her son. Before she could turn her head to search for Caleb, everything went black. Rayna's eyes snapped open. She'd had that dream again. The room was cold and dark. The blinds had been lowered and closed, but she could see the moon peeking through. Her legs ached as she pulled them straight so that she could sit up. Across from her, Will was still asleep. His snoring competing with the sound of the machines in the room.

Rayna stood up and walked over to the bed. She lifted Caleb's small hand, massaged his fingers. Suddenly, her legs felt weak and she needed to sit so she perched on the edge of the hospital bed. Her head was still pounding; this was the fourth day of her headache. She leaned over and kissed Caleb on his forehead. "Don't die, please." For the past four days, she'd been pleading with her son and God. But while she'd been praying to keep him, Will and the doctors had been trying to convince her to let him go.

Her eyes moved from the ventilator tube in her seven-year-old son's throat to the monitors by and over the bed. So many numbers. His blood pressure seemed normal. His heart rate vacillated from the lower 50s to the 60s. She didn't know if that was good or bad. Him lying on the bed, his eyes closed, and him not aware that she was in the room: that was bad.

A couple of days ago, when she was reading to Caleb, he'd squeezed her hand. She had asked Will to bring a couple of their son's favorite books from home and she read to him a couple of times each day. She picked up *Love You Forever* and opened the book. "A mother held her new baby and..." she whispered, trying not to wake Will. "very slowly rocked him back and forth." Usually when she read this book to Caleb, she liked to try out different voices, but that night she just needed him to hear the words.

When Caleb was first brought to the hospital after the car accident, she and Will had been equally wrung out with grief but they'd both been willing to do everything humanly possible to hold on to their son. A parent wasn't supposed to bury their child. After the doctor had told them they could keep Caleb on this ventilator for two weeks before they'd have to make a decision, Rayna and Will had locked gazes. When he'd looked at her, she didn't see blame in his eyes; the anguish she saw in his eyes mirrored her own feelings. He never asked her what had caused the accident. The question would come, she was sure of that. He would ask if she'd been messing with the radio. Or trying to eat while she was driving. Why had their son ended up in the hospital fighting for his life when she didn't even have a scratch? Those first couple of days, she'd had faith that Caleb would wake up. That he would recover. That she and Will would be okay. But with each passing day, she felt more and more that their life was fractured beyond repair.

"We're not seeing much of a change in his condition," Dr. Hughes had told them earlier that day. "He might not even be aware that he's here anymore."

They both had cried at hearing his words. They fell into each other's arms. In her mind, the accident replayed again. The accident had happened so quickly. A car stopped suddenly in front of her, she drove into the back of the car, which sent her car into a tailspin and they ended up in a ditch. When she'd called out Caleb's name, he didn't respond. They would have to make a decision

soon, if Caleb didn't show any signs of improvement, Dr. Hughes had reminded them. "We're not letting him go," she shook her head. Will didn't say anything.

"I'm really sorry," he said, holding Rayna's gaze, as if he felt responsible for the loss. But Caleb wasn't lost to them yet. "I'll come back tomorrow morning to see how he's doing."

After the doctor left, Rayna and Will sat down on the two-cushioned sofa that became a bed at night. He turned her to face toward his. "Maybe we're being selfish trying to keep him here when he's already gone."

"I'm not giving up on my son."

Snatching her hand from his grasp, she narrowed her eyes. "I'm not going to let my son die. No one can force me to make that decision." Her heart quickened as she said the words.

"But what if he's already gone, baby?" His voice was low and husky with grief. "We can't allow him to suffer because we're too selfish to..." He paused, leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. When he tried to pull her closer to him, she pulled away. "I can't do this," she wailed. Sobs ripped from her throat and she bent over. "I can't do this."

November 5, 1996

A smile was already touching her lips when her eyes slid over to the rearview mirror. Normally, Caleb's eyes would be watching her, too. And he would return her smile. Today, he was asleep. His head cocked to the side. Even with his eyes tightly closed, he looked troubled. Dried tears stained his cheeks.

As she stared at her son's tear-stained face, a sense of relief washed over her. She couldn't explain why. She thought of Will, who was hardly talking to her these days. The other night, she'd heard him on the phone telling his mother that he was thinking about divorcing her. Most nights he didn't even come to bed. He slept on the sofa or didn't come home at all, claiming he'd pulled an overnight shift at work. From inside her purse, her phone started to ring and, at first, she was about to lean over to fish it out of her purse, but her gaze was drawn back to the rearview mirror and her son's sleeping face. Eventually, the phone stopped ringing.

Her eyes slid back to the road. A black Toyota Camry stopped suddenly in front of her. Her heart started to race; she could feel it pounding as if though it had been locked away and was trying to get out. The traffic light was green, but a motorcycle had suddenly appeared in the intersection, its siren and green lights flashing. The funeral escort had stopped beneath the traffic light and stood waving the long line of mourners through the light. Rayna toyed with one of the buttons on her white blouse and briefly closed her eyes and whispered a quick prayer. The small circular button felt cold to the touch, but it grew warm in her hand. When she opened her eyes, the last car in the procession was going through the intersection. The escort mounted his motorcycle and zipped away.

A car horn sounded behind her, forcing her attention back on driving. She glanced up into the rearview mirror and the driver behind her threw his hands up in the air as if to tell her to get out of the way. She eased her feet off the brake pedal and her car moved through the intersection. Her hands gripped the steering wheel. She had to hold it tight to keep her hands from shaking. Her heart was still fluttering in her chest, bird wing flutters. Please, she breathed a silent prayer. And her fingers, once again, searched out the roundness of the button on her shirt. Tears fell from her eyes unchecked. One hand fingered the button. Another gripped the steering wheel.

Once again, her eyes slid up to the rearview mirror and she noted the caked eyeliner beneath her eyes and black streaks on her cheeks; she had been crying longer than she'd realized. A grief that felt interminable. The problem was, she could never figure out why she felt so sad lately. Most days she felt nauseous and dizzy, sometimes so bad she didn't want to get up out of bed. Today had been one of those rare days when she not only didn't feel nauseous, but she found she felt well enough to take Caleb to the park.

As they had strolled through the park, Caleb kept watching her and holding his trains up for her to inspect. His latest obsession: trains. Any kind of train. All kinds of trains. One weekend, she'd even driven him nearly 100 miles to the train museum in Jackson. Disappointment that it was—there had been so little to inspire awe in the heart of a young boy – he'd still left with three brand-new trains.

Graffiti covered trains loudly clacked and inconvenienced them less than a mile from their house every morning when she used to drive him to school. On mornings when the train caught them, Caleb would unbuckle his seat belt, move closer to the edge of the seat and stare at the box cars as they swiftly passed.

He'd carried three of his favorite trains with him to the park. Thomas, James, and Spencer.

“Spencer is always angry,” he'd said. Imitating Spencer's angry voice, he'd added, “Who cares?”

“And that's why Spencer ran out of water. He refused to listen to the other trains. So, Gordon had to help him.”

In response, she'd smiled down at him. Her eyes said what her mouth would not. And her smile, too. Out of the corner of her eye, she could feel herself being watched. An older woman

wearing a brown jumper with a white top underneath was staring hard at them. No, not them, Rayna. Her eyes had been fastened on Rayna. Something akin to fear swam in the woman's eyes. "Do you need some help, young lady?" Other people had stopped to see what the problem was, but Rayna had ignored them all.

"You want to watch Thomas when we get home?" It came out as a question, but really it was his way of letting her know that he wanted to watch one of many Thomas and Friends DVDs when he got home.

They'd watched each of the videos so many times that Caleb and Rayna often ended up reciting the lines along with the trains. "Sure," she responded.

Before long, Caleb was lost in a world of his own creating, taking on the different personalities of each of the trains. Engrossed in his own world of playacting. When they arrived at the park, he'd at first, settled at his mother's feet and continued to play with his trains.

Since they'd first arrived, some of the families had left. A few people were jogging the course of the walking trail. Rayna had left a voicemail for her friend Cecily, asking her to meet them at the park, but her friend had not responded. And a quick scan of faces let her know that it would just be her and Caleb.

A thin layer of sweat covered Caleb's forehead. Absently, he would bring his hand up to swipe away the moisture that kept collecting over his brow. But he never left the made-up world he'd created until he had noticed the empty swings.

Usually the park was filled with so many children that it was impossible to get to one of the six swings. But today, all the swings were free. He chose the swing next to the one for toddlers.

As she had pushed him, Caleb kept yelling out for her to send him higher. “Higher, mommy, higher,” he yelled, kicking his little legs and trying to use them to pump him up higher. They were both giggling uncontrollably when Rayna felt the heat of a gaze. She looked up and a woman wearing big lens shades was standing beneath a large red maple tree. A black curly haired poodle strained against the leash she was holding in her hand. Her attention never wavered from Rayna. Even with her eyes hidden behind the dark lens, she could tell. *Why is she watching us?* She looked around for the woman who’d yelled out to them earlier, but Rayna didn’t see her.

This new woman was openly staring at them. Rayna steeled herself. Stared back. “Push me, mommy,” Caleb’s singsong voice broke through her thoughts. But she didn’t move. Returned stare for stare. Stonewashed jeans. Ripped. White sweater. It would be soft to the touch. Navy blue tennis shoes. In case she had to identify the woman later. “Mommy, push me,” Caleb’s voice grew more insistent.

“Not now,” she finally responded. Reaching down, but never taking her eyes off the woman, she lifted Caleb out of the swing.

He immediately fought back. “I’m not ready to go yet.”

“We have to go,” she whispered.

He kept resisting, trying to kick free from her grasp.

“Stop it,” she hissed.

In response to the scolding, Caleb nuzzled his head in her chest. “I just wasn’t ready to leave,” he whined. His warm tears soaked the front of her shirt.

When they made it to the car, Rayna asked, “Caleb, honey, did you see that woman staring at us in the park?”

Pretending not to hear her, he had climbed into the back seat. Fastened his seat belt. Collapsed against the seat. And closed his eyes. Looking at him now, she could still see the edges of anger touching the features of his face.

Once they arrived home, Rayna parked the car in the garage and gently lifted Caleb from his seat. She used her right foot to push the car door closed because Caleb's sleeping body felt heavier than his 85 pounds. Then she maneuvered her way through the garage and into the house. She managed to do all that without jostling Caleb awake.

The house smelled faintly of fried chicken; it was punctuated with the scent of cinnamon. Will had cooked rice pudding and fried chicken. Her stomach growled in protest. It had been two days since she last ate anything solid. She didn't call out to Will to let him know that she'd made it home. She kicked off her shoes and left them by the back door and she padded through the house in her socked feet.

Inside Caleb's bedroom, Rayna placed her son carefully on the bed and removed his shoes. She also took off his pants, which she folded and placed over the chair beside the bed. Just for the briefest of moments, she considered leaving Caleb's pants on. Whenever he got himself ready for bed, he refused to take off his clothes, preferring instead to sleep fully clothed. Once she'd bought him a pair of Thomas and Friends pajamas, thinking his obsession with the trains would encourage him to stop sleeping in his clothes. The pajamas sat in the dresser drawer untouched. That was months ago. And, as tall as he'd grown, she suspected they were now ready to join the box of too little clothes in the garage.

“I love you little man,” she whispered as she brushed her lips against the side of his face. Adept at avoiding her kisses, he squirmed away from her. Rayna smiled and kissed the side of his face again, this time much softer. And as she did, she inhaled his little boy scent, a mixture of dried sweat, outdoor, old shampoo, and the cocoa butter she rubbed on his face every morning.

When she exited the room, Rayna didn’t close the door completely. A long blade of light from the hallway cut through the darkness in his bedroom, so that if Caleb got up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom, he wouldn’t be scared.

“I fixed dinner.” Will’s sudden presence startled her and she jumped. Had he been watching her?

“I don’t want anything, but thanks.”

“You haven’t eaten for a few days. You need to eat something.”

Shaking her head, she said, “I’m not hungry.” And immediately her stomach grumbled its disagreement.

Will narrowed his eyes. He fell back against the wall, one leg bent with his bare foot touching the wall. Rayna’s eyes followed his hands. One massaged his right temple. The other reached out at the air as if though trying to catch something. Caleb was a miniature version of his father. They both had the same short curly afro. The same shade of caramel skin. The same piercing green eyes. Watching him, Rayna experienced a contradiction of emotions. She felt both comfortable and anxious. They’d been married for eight years and she’d never felt anxious in his presence before. She wasn’t sure how to carry this new emotion.

Before she could fully process this change, the walls began to close in on her. Breathing became difficult; she stretched out her arms to stop the walls from getting too close to her.

Will's leg fell to the floor and he took a couple of hesitant steps in her direction, closing the distance between them, and she thought he was going to reach out and embrace her but then his arms fell to his side.

"I thought we agreed to stop going in Caleb's room," he said. "Yes, it's too soon to get rid of his things. I support you on that, but we both agreed that we needed to stay out of his room so that we can move on. I know it's painful for you. It's hurting me, too."

His words hung between them like a thick curtain that Rayna wanted to pull shut. As the silence increased in size and weight between them, she noticed an almost indecipherable change in Will. And why was he telling her to stay out of Caleb's bedroom? Like a butterfly on its maiden flight, her hand fluttered in the air between them. She wanted to touch him, but her gut was telling her that he didn't want to be touched. So, she didn't. Clearly, her marriage was in trouble.

"I only wanted to say goodnight," she finally responded.

That's when she noticed the tears. She watched the tears escape from his eyes and slide down his face. Again, she suppressed the urge to reach out and touch him. She wanted to wipe away his tears, like she sometimes did for Caleb, but she held back.

"I can't do this anymore, Ray. I can't keep pretending this is normal." He pointed toward the open bedroom door.

"I was only kissing his goodnight. We went to the park today and he fell asleep in the car. I didn't want to wake him."

"What are you talking about?" This was the first time Rayna had ever heard her husband raise his voice. She made a move to caution him to keep his voice down so that he wouldn't wake Caleb, but the flash of something in his eyes stopped her. "Why are you doing this?"

“Doing what, William?”

“You know it’s not possible that you and Caleb went to the park today.” He held her arms and looked hard at her. “He’s gone baby. You’ve got to let him go. Caleb is gone.” And she saw something in him break. Not something she could put a finger on or express with words, but the brokenness darkened his eyes and made him look less like himself than a shell of his former self.

Rayna shook her head. “He’s not gone. He’s right in there,” she said pointing to the bedroom door. “I just put him to bed.” More tears burst free from her eyes. The dam broke. She tried to break free so she could wipe away her tears, but his hold on her was too strong.

That night Will forced her to take two sleeping pills. “Maybe you’ll feel better after a good night’s sleep.”

November 7, 1996

“I can’t save you!” The words were almost washed away with the rain. They were like cold pinpricks awaking every nerve in her body.

Rayna reached her hands out in front of her. She would have pushed him away, but she couldn’t bring herself to touch him. It had been weeks since they’d touched one another and now didn’t seem like the right time to change that.

Her black tank top stuck to her body like plastic wrap. She was soaked. Her shorts too. It all felt so heavy. But she’d gotten used to heavy. Her hair hung in loose damp curls. Her head began to throb. Behind her eyes, a sharp pain crackled to life as if though it had been struck by lightning. Her insides were on fire. Goosebumps covered the skin on her arms. I. can’t. save you. From what, she wondered.

Standing in the rain like that, they could have been anyone. They could have been a couple who'd just met one another. They could have been a couple arguing about where to go for dinner. They could have been mistaken for trees in the park. The way the rain was falling it was impossible to make out who they were.

The thread that connected them was fraying. Rayna stepped back tentatively. Will didn't move. The rain had soaked the ground. Her foot found a hole. She slipped and fell. With her on the ground, he towered above her like one of the trees. Immovable.

Despite the pouring rain, she could make out the distress that had darkened his green eyes. Or maybe it was all in her mind. Maybe she was imagining the rain collecting on his face, yet doing nothing to mask his face, a tableau of anger and frustration. *I can't save you.* But then his hand was reaching down toward her. Her hand enveloped in his. He was helping her up. And they were once again face-to-face. And when the tears began to fall, it was impossible to separate the earth's grief from her own.

She looked over, saw Caleb sitting on the swings. After the argument with Will yesterday, she'd considered staying home. But lately being at home felt claustrophobic, so she and Caleb found someone to go every day. Before Will had arrived at the park, Caleb had been racing around playing. Now he was just sitting there. He was holding one of his toy trains, but he was staring at the ground. She was about to go over to check on him when Will turned her back toward him.

"I can't save you. "I've tried," he declared. "I thought time would be enough."

"What are you talking about," she asked. "Why would you need to save me?"

His facial expression revealed that he thought the answer was an obvious one. "Why are you standing out here in the rain," he finally asked.

She looked up and the raindrops pelted her face. She started to tremble. Touched her clothes. “We wanted to come to the park,” she told him.

His facial expression transformed from one of concern to anger. “Why are you so angry about a little rain,” she asked him. His cheek glistened with moisture. “I only came out here to let Caleb play in the park. We didn’t know it was going to start raining.”

“Raining,” he sounded incredulous, “It’s not just raining. It’s pouring down. Been storming for hours, Ray. Mrs. Van Pelt called me. She told me you were out here running around in the rain. Why, Ray? Why?”

Will placed his hands on her upper arm. He pushed her away from the swings.

“But what about Caleb,” she began to sob.

He stopped pushing her, released a deep and heavy sigh. “Caleb is dead, Ray.”

And when she turned and looked back to where they’d just come from, she saw that he was right. Caleb was gone. But he wasn’t dead. He couldn’t be dead.

She didn’t know if her fall came as a surprise to Will or why she was so easily able to slip from his grasp or if Caleb’s absence was so heavy that it weighed them both down, but she ended up on her side in a soupy mud puddle. She was covered in mud. Could feel it filling up the spaces between her toes. When she looked up, she thought for a second, that her husband had left too.

“I thought you just needed time.” He pulled her to an upright position. He cupped her chin with his hand and looked in her eyes. “I know you’re sad. I’m sad, too. But Caleb is dead, honey. And he’s not coming back.” When he said the word “dead,” he winced, his pain visible on his face.

She looked at the expression on his face, tried to feel what he was feeling but she couldn't. All she could think about were the words that he'd said. Caleb. Dead. She didn't believe him. Could not believe him.

"That's not true," she yelled at him. "Why are you saying that?"

"Yes. It is true, Ray." And the look on his face, as he said those words, injected new fear into her soul. She stared at the swings. All the swings were still. And empty. Her eyes roamed all over the park. The only two people in the park were her and Will.

Panic set in. Had she left Caleb somewhere? Recently she had started to forget things. Like which day of the week it was. She had sometimes had to check a calendar to see if it was Sunday or Monday. Is this the day she was supposed to pick up Caleb from his grandparent's house or is it the day she was supposed to take him to school? She didn't think anyone had noticed.

She searched Darrius' face, trying to read the message that was written there. But it might as well have been written in braille. Which only felt like raised dots to her.

"I can't do this anymore, Ray," he said. He pulled her up out of the mud. They walked out of the park. "Rayna, baby, Caleb is gone." And there was something behind those words, a feeling that she believed she should recognize.

"Does your mama have him? When is she going to bring him back," she asked. She didn't know what prompted her to ask that. She looked at him and knew the answer already.

He lifted her up off the ground and carried her to the car. They rode in silence. A drive that seemed to take forever. She asked, a couple of times, where they were going, but Will did not respond.

As they were speeding down the highway, a new mixture of scents permeated the air in the car. The new scent was a familiar one. She looked back over her shoulder and there in the backseat was her brown-skinned baby. His skin radiating with a sheen of sweat. Or maybe rain. He was still staring at the floor, avoiding her eyes. Her heart swelled at the sight of him, but she wanted to know why he suddenly appeared so sad. She turned back around just as the car pulled to a stop.

They sat in absolute silence. Will stared out the front windshield. It had stopped raining. A few stars shone up in the sky. “Do you know where we are,” he finally asked.

When she looked out the window, her heart sank. They were in a cemetery. In every direction, marble and granite headstones containing condensed love notes, final words for the ones who’d been lost from the ones who’d been left behind.

“This is where we left Caleb.” His words hit her in the face like an open palm. There was so much pain in his words. She almost accepted them. But then she turned back around and faced the backseat. She shook my head no, refused to accept his words.

Will exited the car. Came around to her side and opened the door. He lifted her out of the car and carried her up the hill. The cool night air hit her wet clothes and she shivered violently. He almost dropped her. Had to set her down and allow her to walk on her own. They passed a tree, barren and leaning, yet towering above their heads. The tree leaned toward the graves instead of away. Like a mother bending down to look after her child. She tried to read some of the names on the markers, but Will was moving too fast and she was trying to keep up.

They stopped at a fresh grave. One that had been dug only weeks before. Images like movie stills flashed through her mind. She saw herself standing over a powder blue coffin being lowered into the ground. William standing beside her, his hand holding her elbow. The strength she was getting from him, the only thing that made it possible for her to continue standing.

Somehow, she managed to not cry. This place of sadness didn't seep into her bones this time. The wound of grief was crusted over. The wound no longer felt hers alone. Sadness was everywhere. Even the trees. They seemed so lonely. Even the crickets seemed to be singing a song of loneliness.

Will kneeled down on the mound of dirt. He kissed the palm of his own hand and touched the cold marble, still slightly damp from the earlier rain. Traced the letters etched into the stone. And then her husband broke down and cried. Her eyes moved over the stone so that she could read the words beneath his fingers. *Caleb Latrell Montgomery, Beloved*. The dates carved into the stone were what nearly stopped her heart. *September 26, 1989-October 16, 1996*. Three weeks ago.

Something shifted. This was more sorrow than her heart could bear. She turned away from the sight of Will on the ground. Away from the sight of her son's name. All around her was death. There was no escape. Not even in her mind.

## Choosing Kayla

Tajey had known something was terribly wrong with the first ringing of the telephone. If Alwan had still been living there, he would have answered while she fretted and waited to find out what the call was about, but he'd taken an apartment on the other side of town and more than likely they were headed for divorce, so she lifted the phone from its cradle. Before she had the time to offer a greeting, she heard Kayla's voice. "Mommy," she said, her voice impossibly low. "I need you, Mommy."

There had been an incident. Not an accident. She troubled over the difference between those words as she drove to the hospital. An accident would not have been intentional. An accident would be so much easier to fix. A scratched mirror to fender. Hurt feelings or pride. Something that wouldn't end with her child in the hospital. This incident tonight had been intentional and was meant to cause harm. Adding to the harm done by strangers, was the harm by Alwan, who said "I told you before. My child dead to me," before hanging up on her.

At the hospital, Tajey found Kayla lying on a hospital bed in the hallway of the emergency room. A male nurse was standing off to the side behind the nurse's station and two uniformed police officers stood on either side of the bed. Tajey walked up just as the male officer asked, "Did one of the guys try to date you and discover what you are? Is that why they jumped you?"

Tajey cut her eyes at the officer. "Are you kidding me? Is that an appropriate question for someone who has been attacked?"

The officer looked nonplussed, but clearly was interested in hearing Kayla's response. "I told you, I'd never seen these guys before. They don't go to our school. When my friend's mother told them they had to leave, they got mad. They passed us on the way out and started calling us names."

She looked exhausted. Tajey couldn't tell if it was her or Kayla who released a sigh, one that began so far deep down inside her that her body shuddered like aftershocks following an earthquake. She locked gazes with her only child and nodded her head.

Kayla was sitting up on the side of the bed. Her eyes swollen from crying. Her right wrist was bandaged, and scratches and gashes covered her legs.

"How can you blame her for what those monsters did to her?" Tajey asked.

The next morning, the story in the newspaper would include a quote from one of the boys who'd been detained, but not arrested. *"Are you a boy or girl," one of the teenaged boys asked before punching sixteen-year-old Kayla Foster in the face. "The first punch," the article would continue, "reportedly split the teen's bottom lip, causing blood to flow freely and mix with the red lipstick she'd been wearing."*

"We're not blaming your...we're not blaming Kayla. We're just trying to find out what happened and why," the female officer responded. Tajey felt judgment simmering beneath the surface of the officer's words. Tajey reached over and grabbed Kayla's hand, the one that wasn't bandaged, and said, "Tell them what happened baby. And when she does, you will leave her alone. And you will do your job and go find the people who did this to her."

The female officer locked glances with Tajey. People like you, her eyes seemed to accuse, you're the cause of crimes like these. If you would just raise your children up correctly. Everything must be black or white. Right or wrong. And the judgment lies always in the eyes of the beholder. She either was or she wasn't. They decided she wasn't. And that's what had triggered the hate in them. Like it had done in Alwan. Like it did in the officers.

“I hope this is not one of those parties with a bunch of horny down-low brothers trying to experiment,” Kayla told her friends Tiana and Sasha.

“It’s not going to be,” Sasha assured her. “I just got a text from Nya and she said it’s live as fuck up in there.”

“Still, we need to have a safe word. Just in case.”

Tiana and Kayla had been friends longer. Tiana was one of the first friends she’d confided in about how she’d never felt like a boy. When she told Tiana, “I’ve always been a girl trapped in a boy’s body,” Tiana had responded, “Of course.” She used the mirror in the sun visor to apply a second coat of purple lipstick, which matched her purple sweater. “You worry too much, girl,” she told Kayla. “We’re not going to need a safe word tonight. I told you, it’s all good. I check it out already.”

“You say that now but remember what happened last month.” The month before, Kayla had been with a boy in his bedroom when he tried to rape her. Tiana and Sasha had been in the living room with two of the boy’s friends. When they heard things being knocked over in the bedroom, they knew something was wrong and had rushed back to the bedroom. The door was locked. Sasha had been the one who thought to grab a butter knife from the kitchen, which she used to open the door.

The word they decided on for the party was radio. Tiana had watched the movie the night before and it seemed like a word no one else would think to say.

At the party, they'd gone inside to see who among the guests they knew. It was too crowded inside though, so they grabbed glasses of punch and were headed outside when the commotion broke out.

"When they came over, the one in front looked at us like we smelled bad or something. But he asked Sasha to dance. When she looked at me, I thought she was going to say the safe word. She didn't get a chance though."

"What the fuck," the boy exclaimed. "You niggers think you too good for us?"

The female cop interrupted Kayla's story and asked about the race of the boys. Kayla confirmed that the boys were black and continued with her story. "Then he called Sasha a name, something I'd rather not repeat. And when he did, Sasha cursed at him, which angered him even more. But honestly, it's obvious they just wanted to take out their anger on someone."

"Are these friends of yours," the male officer asked, "girls like you? Or are they real girls?"

Later, when Tajey was repeating this scene in her mind, she would regret not having a comeback for this. Kayla continued with her story. The guy who'd asked Sasha to dance punched her in the face. "And then the whole group was on top of us. We couldn't get away. We tried, but they chased us down. And the worst part was that not one person at that party tried to stop them. A few had their cameras out to record, but nobody thought what was happening was bad enough to try and stop it."

"I know it doesn't seem like it, but you guys were lucky. People like you usually end up dead. People think this evil agenda is being pushed on our sons and they want it to stop. They think you were born a boy, you should stay a boy."

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Tajey said and she helped Kayla get up off the bed.

Kayla Foster, formerly named Jamar, had been Tajey and Alwan's only child. From an early age, she struggled with identity. Asking questions like why are only women allowed to wear nail polish and why can't I wear shoes like mommy? It didn't make sense that only certain people could wear color on their nails. Jamar would watch Tajey apply her makeup and ask to try on some too.

The obsessive watching didn't bother Tajey. She enjoyed the attention showered on her by her only child. For some reason, it never occurred to her that her only child was fantasizing about one day being able to wear different shades of lipstick and eye shadow.

The year Jamar turned seven, he asked for one of those toy kitchen sets with all the plastic food accessories and a tea party set for Christmas. Just like every other year, Alwan discovered what they'd bought Jamar for Christmas early that morning when they were seated around the tree.

Opening presents that morning, Jamar was over the moon excited because he'd received everything he asked for. So engrossed was Jamar in opening gifts that it went undetected when Alwan nudged Tajey back toward their bedroom and closed the door. It quickly became obvious why Alwan had wanted privacy, but just as quickly, his angry words began to seep outside their bedroom. "Just because your family allowed your brother to be one doesn't mean I'm going to let you do that to my son. I told you I'd kill him first. I'll kill any son of mine before I let him be like that. No son of mine is going to walk around acting like a goddamn girl."

Tajey, who'd already allowed so much in their marriage, accepted without complaint this tirade from Alwan. She did not raise her voice when he stormed out of their bedroom and out of the house. She had no words to offer him, the man who she'd been married to since she was a child herself.

That evening, she and Jamar ate Christmas dinner: turkey and dressing, candied yams, greens, and spaghetti, without Alwan, who stayed gone for several days. After she and her only child shared a large slice of chocolate cake, they attended a pretend tea party.

When Jamar asked about wearing her high heel shoes, Tajey shook her head and said, "Too much. That's too much. It's okay to play with these things, Jamar, because there's really no such thing as girl and boy toys. But my shoes are for women."

Before they'd left the hospital, the officers assured Kayla and Tajey that they would be calling when they had more information, but neither of them felt reassured at all. "Where's your car," Tajey asked. Kayla shrugged. "Have you heard from either Tiana or Sasha?"

Kayla tried to call them both, but ended up reaching both girls' voice mails.

"I'm sure one of them drove it home. Let's go get something to eat and then we can drive by both of their places."

They agreed to eat lunch first then drive through the neighborhood to see if her car was still where she'd left it.

At their favorite diner, Kayla ordered chicken and waffles and Tajey ordered a bowl of grits. Neither one of them really touched the food.

“Is this my fault,” Kayla asked, her voice low.

Tajey was aware that the silence that followed the question stretched longer than it should have. She shook her head and responded just as quietly, “No.”

“My AP Lang teacher had us read an essay about this girl named Sage who was murdered. None of the detectives or anyone tried to really find out who did it. Like maybe she deserved it because she refused to be what they wanted her to be.”

She reached across the table, placed her hand beneath Kayla’s chin and lifted her head, forcing her to meet her gaze. “You are one of the bravest people I know. I love you for that and so much more.”

“I don’t feel brave.”

Since Kayla had told her that she was a girl and not a boy, Tajey had been fighting an internal battle, trying to accept her. Sometimes having to talk herself out of feeling disgusted by her own child. But looking into her child’s eyes and seeing the pain there, it was a pain she didn’t want to contribute to. Maybe that’s what it meant to be a mother. Not just giving life to someone who bore a small resemblance to you, but knowing when to be a guide, someone to offer advice, and when to be a friend, someone who reminds her of who she is when she forgets. So, she spent the rest of lunch telling Kayla what she needed to hear because, at that moment, that was all that mattered.

When lunch was over, she drove back to the neighborhood where the party had been held. Kayla's car was still parked on the same block as the house, but her back window had been knocked out and on the passenger side door, someone had painted the words: *girl dick*.

"We'll get it fixed up and it'll be good as new," Tajey promised. They called a tow truck to pick up the car and they drove home.

Alwan called the day after the story appeared in the newspaper. He asked whether Kayla had named any of the young men who attacked her. "Is *he* staying back with you at the house?"

"She," Tajey corrected him. "And, yes, she is back home where she belongs."

"So, no overnight stay at the hospital then?"

"What you want, Alwan? You know you don't care about our child's well-being, so what do you want?"

He didn't deny what she said. Instead he asked if it was okay if he stopped by the house later, when he got off work. In her mind, she heard Alwan's voice declaring that their child was dead to him. Saying that he had no desire to father a child like Kayla. And she replayed the day when she'd finally put him out the house, when she knew without a doubt that she had was choosing herself and choosing Kayla. "Where's all my stuff foolish woman?" He was obviously irate as he stormed into the kitchen that morning. At the time, he'd been wearing a pair of white boxer shorts, a black tank top and one black sock that had slid down around his ankle. And he looked silly standing there trying to intimidate her with his anger. For once, it had no effect on her. She could have laughed loudly in his face. She pointed out the window. The front yard was covered with his

belongings. A few things she'd taken the time to stuff in black garbage bags, but most of the stuff had been dumped on the grass and stretched from one end of the yard to the other. When he left that day, he promised that when she heard from him, it would be to serve her with divorce papers. And that was when she had laughed. "You think I want to be married to you?"

"I need to ask Kayla if she feels like seeing you or anybody right now," she told him.

Kayla agreed to see her father but, like her mother, she was rightfully suspicious of his motives.

They were cleaning up the kitchen from an early dinner when they heard the doorbell. Tajey sniffed the air. "Still smells like neckbones and beans."

Kayla shrugged. "Doesn't matter. I bet he won't be here long."

Alwan had not come alone. He brought Reverend O.C. Franklin with him. Tajey invited them into the living room. She and Kayla sat together, and the two men sat across from them. A candle sat on the coffee table and there was a platter with some sugar biscuits on it. She offered them both something to drink and they both declined.

The Reverend broke the silence first. "How you've been Tajey?"

"What's going on here?"

"Alwan reached out to me and asked for my advice."

She thought he meant advice about dissolving their marriage. The advice he sought involved one of the boys who'd hurt Kayla. Alwan knew one of the boys and was concerned that Kayla was going to press charges and "cost him his future."

"Cost him his future?" Tajey asked.

“He’s going away to college next year. He plays football and has been recruited by several universities to play for them. If he goes to jail for this, his future will be ruined.”

“He could have killed our child.” She was incredulous. Couldn’t believe that he’d brought the minister here to try and convince them not to press charges against the boys who’d attacked their child. “And, Reverend, I’m surprised at you. I’d think you’d be more interested in protecting an innocent victim.”

He squirmed and looked embarrassed. “I just happen to believe the young man deserves a second chance. What Jamar...what you’re doing is a sickness. It should be treated, not respected.”

Kayla looked like she wanted to respond, but Tajey responded for her. “Everyone who’s minding their own business, Reverend, should be respected. Kayla is not hurting anyone else. She’s just trying to live her life. She didn’t deserve what happened to her.”

“Won’t you please consider what we’re asking of you, sister? This young man has a bright future ahead of him.”

“What about my future?” She regarded them both as if though they were asking her to walk across the surface of the sun with no shoes on. “You keep talking about this boy’s future as if though I haven’t been affected by what he did to me. How dare you? How dare you?”

Tajey told them to leave. “And don’t you ever return. We want nothing else to do with either one of you.”

“I’ll pray for you, sister,” the Reverend told her before he left. “Pray that the lord shows you mercy, so you’ll show your brother mercy.”

“Go to hell,” she told them both and slammed the door.

After they'd left, she pulled Kayla into an embrace. They stood there, holding each other up. Tajey felt the wetness of her daughter's tears on her shoulder. She let her cry. She rubbed her back, whispered I love you. Then told her to play some music. Kayla set up a wireless speaker and opened her music playlist. "Not that music you used to listen to when you used to lock yourself up in your room. Something else." Born a girl. That was the name of her playlist. She started the music and then she and her mother lay on the couch together, Tajey supporting Kayla's weight. At one point, Tajey considered saying something. A litany of things ran through her mind, things she could say to Kayla at that moment. But she didn't say any of them. Not then. Maybe later.

## The Man She Loved

Jessie Mae was standing outside watering her grass while her next-door neighbor Larry was cutting up his wife's body. If he'd made the choice to end his marriage a couple of months earlier, Jessie Mae would have still been at school preparing her students for the bus ride home. But on that afternoon, she was standing outside on her lawn and he was obscured in the shadows of his home, both of them reaching for something that had always seemed just out of reach: peace.

Jessie Mae pressed a finger over the hose's opening, creating two streams of water. The newfound idleness that now characterized her days was beginning to feel like a boulder around her neck. She spent most of her days trying to figure out how to crush it into small, manageable pieces, something that would be easier to carry.

One thing certain about life is that it wears a different face every day. And some people will gouge out their own eyes rather than accept the changing faces. Self-mutilation over self-improvement. At least that's what it said in the book she'd been reading, *Grow Your Own Happiness*. Some people are so afraid of change, Charles Dutton, the author of the book said, that they will spend a lifetime lamenting loss brought on by change as heartbreak before finally learning that it's not the changes that bring sorrow to our hearts, but our refusal to let go of the people and things that are no longer ours to hold onto. Jessie Mae wanted to be different. She wanted to accept life's changes and move on, but that was proving to be difficult.

In the weeks after she was forced into retirement, she spent a lot of time reading self-help books and that's why she was standing out in her front yard on that Wednesday afternoon. She was trying to embrace the unexpected changes that had occurred in her life by doing things she'd always wanted to do but never had the time to do. And, one of the things she'd always longed to do was grow and tend her own flower garden. But recognizing you're a prisoner and choosing to be free

didn't always go hand-in-hand. At least, it didn't seem to be for her. She was constantly having to corral her thoughts and rein them in before they could carry her to a place where she lamented what was lost instead of accepting the inevitability of change as an opportunity to make room for something better.

A low stone wall surrounded the flower garden she'd planted, a lively burst of colors with pink and purple impatiens and blue and yellow English Primrose and Sweet Alyssum and deep blue, almost purple, morning glories. She noted how some of the flower petals were drooping under the weight of the water and wondered if she was overwatering them. "It'd be just my luck to spend all this time and energy in this garden only to end up killing the flowers." She curled her lips into an indulgent smile as she stared at the diamond drops of water that glistened on the flower petals, knowing that the flowers were much stronger than they appeared.

Her gaze shifted to the grass, which sparkled like gems as the sun's rays caressed each damp blade. For her, this scene offered a small slice of something that resembled happiness. Like the sponge cake Mrs. Peterson, another retired teacher who lived down the street, had baked for her. It looked like cake but tasting it was a different matter entirely. Absently, she used her free hand to reach up and adjust the brim of her gardening hat before it could slide off her head. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the orange school bus, with Apple Springs Schools printed on the side, pull to a stop at the corner and knew it was 3:30. A lively group of children and teenagers spilled out of the open doors of the bus and slowly the past began to creep into the present. The bus transported students to and from Richland Elementary and Middle schools. Jessie had been a teacher at Richland Elementary before she decided to take one of the boys in her class, Danny Archer, to the barber shop to get a haircut. The kids at school had been taunting him about his hair and his mother didn't seem to be able to afford a haircut.

She smiled and nodded greetings to the children as they shouted to her and told her how much they missed her. All the while she was trying to ignore the pinprick feeling of guilt that pounded in her head because she knew that the principal had signed paperwork stating that she did not want Jessie Mae to ever return to the school.

Inside his house, Larry was concentrating on cutting the chunks of flesh into near-perfect squares, which was no easy feat with the bones and muscles. Some of the pieces of flesh looked like pieces of the chicken breast cubes Jessie Mae would add to her salad later that evening. Once the pieces of Lenora's body were cut into almost perfect chunks of flesh, he began to wrap them in butcher paper that Lenora stored in the kitchen pantry. The sturdy paper, which she had used to break down large trays of pork chops, ground beef, and neck bones, was perfect for containing the blood and keeping it from spilling on the floor as he wrapped the pieces of flesh. Unlike Jessie Mae, he didn't appear to be bothered by the blood stain of memory nor was he tortured with regret over the merging of the past with the present. Even though he'd told himself that Evelyn, his last wife, would be the last one. Like a drug addict, he yearned the high that came with killing, and he'd convinced himself that he'd be able to just stop when he wanted to. Still, as he stacked the white packages on the floor by his feet, he managed to not feel like he had suffered a relapse. It had been necessary, he told himself, because their marriage was over.

Jessie Mae had just shut off the outside faucet and was coiling the hose around her arm, so she could return it to the outside storage closet on the side of her house, when Larry left the kitchen and went up to the second floor hunting the tape he knew was in the house somewhere. He found

the tape in the drawer in the master bathroom. Jessie Mae listened as the group of kids continued to make their way down the street. Something twisted and knotted inside her as she admitted to herself how much she missed being in the midst of her students. Unlike some of her co-workers, she had found joy in the cacophony of children's voices. Being a teacher had made her feel less alone.

It had been only a couple of months since she packed up all her teacher belongings and moved them into the storage room where she also kept her lawn and gardening equipment. Not wanting to continue with this particular train of thought, she allowed her gaze to be drawn to her kitchen window which was lined with potted green plants she'd bought from the Home Depot over on Galveston Road. Each room in her house was now filled with a variety of potted plants. The plants proved to be a poor substitute for companionship and she often found herself mourning the fact that the four-bedroom house, which had been the perfect size for raising a family, was too large for her now that she was living alone. All the empty rooms and the deep quiet possessed the power to turn being alone into loneliness, a feeling that if she was completely honest with herself, she'd been fighting to keep at bay for most of her life. Recently, she made the mistake of telling her daughter Lilora this and now every time they spoke on the phone, Lilora begged Jessie Mae to sell the house and move to Chicago to be near her and the kids.

Jessie Mae was pulling her mail out of the mailbox when Larry lifted the lid on the deep freezer in his garage. Already stored in the freezer was what remained of a month's worth of the various meats Lenora kept on hand so she'd always have something to prepare for Larry's dinner. Since they'd never had children and Lenora's younger brother, who she had raised like a son after their parents died, left as soon as he turned seventeen, a full freezer of meat usually lasted several months. As he removed the white packages with Lenora's flowery script identifying each type of meat scrawled across the front, he felt a phantom sensation at the base of his head and his eyes were

drawn to the four square garage door windows; seeing his neighbor standing on her front lawn and appearing to be staring in his garage caused him to hesitate, but only for a second. Everything he was doing would appear totally normal as long as he acted like it was.

When at seven years old, he killed a stray cat with his bare hands, he had no idea of the feeling that was being awakened in him. He'd learned early how to guard his secrets and he wouldn't risk messing things up after all this time. He brushed the paranoia away as if though it were an annoying insect and quickly turned his attention back to the task at hand. More of the raw packages of meat had to be moved out of the deep freeze to make room for Lenora. Idly, he wondered what he should do with the meat that would not now fit in the freezer. Lenora and her best friend Jessie Mae often shared and exchanged food; maybe he'd carry some of the meat over to her later instead of throwing it all in the trash. *Don't be a fool*, he chided himself. *Take the meat and dispose of it in the dumpster behind the supermarket like you planned.*

The sudden chiming of bells from inside the house startled him. Moving his gaze back to the garage door windows, he saw that Jessie had moved away from the spot where she'd been previously standing. He, at first, ignored the doorbell thinking it must be her, but the successive chiming of bells became one long sonorous clanging that entered his head, like a snake slithering through his ear and settling in his brain and he could think of only one person who would make her presence known so insistently. *Go away*, he muttered under his breath. But the unwanted visitor did not go away, so he was forced to stop and confirm the identity of the determined intruder. Peering out of the peephole, he didn't, at first, see anyone, so he was about to head back out to the garage to finish his work. "Mr. Evans," a female voice called out to him as if though she'd seen his face when he had his eye pressed to the peephole. "Are you home, Mr. Evans? Mrs. Evans?" Like he'd suspected, it was his neighbor from down the street, Alexis. A Jehovah's Witness who stopped by once or twice a

week to talk to Lenora about “Jehovah and the paradise that was waiting on the other side of death but only for those who serve Jehovah.” *Is it true, Lenora? Was he waiting for you?*

He had no interest in talking to Alexis. That’s why he always invented some excuse to leave whenever she was inside the house. Now, like always, he ignored Alexis. He didn’t go directly back to stacking the packages in the freezer though. He waited for the quiet that settled throughout the house when she finally stopped ringing the doorbell. Then with his head emptied of the noise she brought with her, he turned and headed back to the garage.

Jessie Mae was kneeling in her garden to investigate the fragile petals of the sleeping morning glory flowers while Larry was stacking the packages of flesh in the freezer. She’d seen Alexis ringing the bell at Lenora and Larry’s house. And had been as shocked as Alexis when Lenora didn’t show up at the front door to welcome the young lady into her home. The only one on the street to indulge the pedestrian preacher, her best friend Lenora seemed not to mind listening to Alexis even though she’d once confided to Jessie that she could never convert to a witness because something about it seemed cultish. “I get the feeling that all of them are going to get together at one of their big assemblies and drink poisoned Kool-Aid and that’s something I just can’t do girl. I don’t wanna go until he,” and she had pointed up toward the sky, “calls *me* to come home.” Yes, Lenora was the only one on their street who didn’t hide behind closed doors and curtains when Alexis and her friends came knocking on their doors, determined to share their message. *That’s really strange*, she noted before turning back to her flowers.

Diverting her thoughts back to the work at hand, she thought, *These are such beautiful flowers. I wish I could get them all to bloom at the same time. It would be so beautiful to have them all open at once.* Next door, Larry was thinking to himself, *It’s not all going to fit*, as he stacked the packages in the freezer. He removed all the meat from the freezer and made row upon row of Lenora’s wrapped flesh in the

old white box. For the briefest of moments, he was his seven-year-old self, filling the deep freezer with marked down nearly spoiled rotten meat that his mother had gotten from Dave's, the neighborhood grocery store. Every Saturday morning, his mother would get up before the sun and walk the three miles to Dave's. When she came home, she'd be so tired from the walk that she yelled for Larry before she even made it to their porch. He would run out and meet her and take the bags from her. His mama would soak her aching feet in Epsom Salt and warm water while he put the food away.

While Larry was packing the freezer in his garage, Jessie Mae's four-year-old neighbor Travis and his mother came outside and sat on their porch step. The little boy was singing a song for his mother, one he'd learned in school. When he finished singing, his mother applauded and told him how proud of him she was. His sweet voice was like a pickaxe to Jessie Mae's heart. And she swiped at her face, trying to wipe away the falling tears without revealing to the mother and son, who clearly were not paying her any mind, that she was crying. Her young neighbor launched into another song and the tears welled in her eyes again, making it difficult for her to focus on the flowers. *Focus on the present as future and let go of the past*, she reminded herself.

When Jessie Mae was pushing her trash cart down to the curb, Larry was standing before the mirror in his second-floor bathroom admiring the freckles of blood that dotted his face, a galaxy splayed across the bridge of his nose. Though he'd been careful not to stain the kitchen floor with blood, his clothing and face and neck held traces of his wife's blood. He brought his fingers up to touch his face and he licked the sweet nectar from his finger. To him, it tasted just like the juice from the honeysuckle flowers he used to sneak in to his neighbor's yard and grab by the handfuls. If his mother ever caught him, she'd send him outside to peel a switch from the tree and she'd beat him until his arms and legs were covered in bloody scratches and sores. But whatever whipping he

did get, it always felt worth it because he never seemed to be able to get enough of the honeysuckle nectar.

As she was walking back up her driveway, Jessie Mae glanced up toward her neighbor's bathroom window. From where she was standing, she could make out the silhouette of his body as he stood in front of the mirror. Guiltily, her eyes slid down to their front door to ensure Lenora wasn't standing in her open doorway watching her best friend watching her husband. Seeing no one on the porch, she allowed her gaze to climb back up to the second floor. Watching the man she couldn't remember ever not loving, she admitted to herself that the one thing she had never learned and more than likely would never learn to do was fall out of love with Larry.

"Sorry, I'm late again with the mail, Ms. Jessie. I had to run another carrier's route again today." She tried to quickly avert her eyes before Vince, their longtime mail carrier, could read the truth behind the lies of the false smile she swung in his direction. That he'd once again caught her staring up at Larry and Lenora's bathroom window. She grabbed the mail before he could shove it inside her box and hurried up her driveway without another glance at the second-floor window.

Standing in the kitchen, she sorted through the mail. The envelope containing the cable bill and the sale circulars landed on the table with a thunk, but she opened the white slim envelope from her attorney, Gray, Rice & Grant Attorneys-at-Law. Her attorney, Grant was friends with one of Lenora's cousins. Inside was yet another letter from Mr. Grant informing her that the hearing to appeal her forced resignation had once again been re-scheduled. A sigh of near resignation escaped her lips and she wondered if it was even worth it to try and get back her job when it was so obvious that her former principal, Ms. Powers, was determined to keep her gone for good. She was arguing that the incident with Danny was just one among many acts of insubordination and she presented as her proof a stack of write-ups that Jessie had accumulated over the years. For not turning lesson

plans in on time and for not attending after-school functions, all of which were part of her professional responsibility.

Lenora and Lilora had told her from the very beginning to forget about going back to teaching. “That’s always been your problem, hon. You’re always fighting for the things you should easily let go,” Lenora offered by way of advice.

“But I was only trying to help,” Jessie Mae remembered replying.

“And the people who matter, we know that. Sometimes you just need to let go. It’s obvious that for whatever reason, Powers doesn’t like you. Some people dislike us for their own reasons and nothing we do will change that.”

Standing in the kitchen holding the letter that was identical to the one she’d received last month, she was struggling to quell a sense of hopelessness that had settled heavily in her chest. Exasperated, she tossed the letter on the table with the other mail. Part of her wanted to reach out to someone, to talk to someone about what she was feeling, but the other part of her wanted to go crawl into bed.

In her head, she heard Lilora insisting that she sell the house and move to Chicago. “Maybe this is a blessing in disguise, muh,” she said. “Why fight to be somewhere when they obviously don’t want you there? You should take this opportunity to pick up and go somewhere else, even if it’s not coming to Chicago. Go somewhere where you can start over. I mean, what’s keeping you there?”

Unable and unwilling to respond directly to her daughter’s questions, she simply replied, “I’m too old to start over. This is where I’ve lived and this is where I will die.”

Twenty-eight-year-old Lilora, who now lived more than 500 miles away in a nice little row house in Lincoln Park, released a sigh of exasperation. “Muh,” she addressed her mother by the

name she first called her mother as a toddler when mama had felt like too perfect a pebble in her mouth, so she held onto it. “You’re never too old to start over. I was watching Oprah the other day and one of her guests said...”

She interrupted her daughter before she could continue. “You know I’m not interested in anything that woman says. Her advice is for unhappy middle and upper-class white women. She ain’t got nothing useful to say to a black woman like me.”

“I don’t think that’s true, muh.” Jessie Mae could imagine her only child’s facial expression. She was rolling her eyes and drumming her fingers on the surface of whatever piece of furniture was nearby. Then she twisted her lips in disappointment, before adding, “Besides Oprah didn’t say it. One of her guests did.” As if the talk show host’s guests’ opinions didn’t always mirror her own.

“Whatever, little girl. I’m too old to even think of starting over somewhere else.”

Jessie thought of that discussion she’d had with her daughter now as she removed the bag of ready-mix salad vegetables and the skinless chicken breast from the refrigerator.

She was slicing the chicken for her salad when Larry stepped into the shower. He adjusted the spigot so that a full blast of water came rushing toward him and he just stood there as the pinpricks of scalding hot water beat against his body. With his eyes closed, he was working to beat away a premature feeling of elation, one that could threaten everything he’d worked so hard for. This is just the beginning, he knew. Now he would have to mentally prepare himself for the days ahead and all he knew from experience that they would bring. As the water rushed down toward him so did a train of thoughts. Like a dutiful husband, he’d have to call the police and report Lenora missing. And he’d have to call her family, too. Her brother Josh, who now lived with their great-aunt in Missouri. Josh and Lenora spoke on the phone almost daily. It had been at least two days since

they last spoke. He'd start to worry soon. And the worst thing he could do would be to allow Josh to report Lenora missing before he did.

The faintest touch. More like the suggestion of a touch. Something brushing against his shoulder. As impossible as he knew it was, he opened his eyes and searched the confines of the shower stall, though he knew nothing was there.

I'm going to have to call Josh first, he was thinking as his eyes continued searching, trying to make sense of what he'd felt. It had felt like a hand grasping his shoulder. Irrationally, he wondered if it could have been Lenora. Of course, he didn't believe in ghosts. If he couldn't see it with his eyes, it wasn't real. Period. He quickly shoved the irrational thoughts aside and refocused on the matter at hand: calling Josh. A long, rogue tear escaped his eye as he prepared himself to make the call. When he stepped out of the shower, he was smiling.

Jessie Mae ate her meal standing with her back pressed up against the kitchen sink. A scented candle placed in the center of the kitchen table cast a soft glow over the room, causing animated shadows to play against the wall. Occasionally, she'd turn and cast a glance out the window, studying the all-too-familiar shapes that made up her neighborhood. Her attention wavered between the world outside her window and the interior of her own home, where it sometimes felt the walls were closing in on her. From the living room, Teddy Pendergrass' smooth baritone voice could be heard softly issuing forth from the record player.

When she was done eating, she cleaned her dishes. When she saw the police cruiser pull into the driveway next door, she wasn't entirely surprised. All day, it had seemed that something was off at Lenora's and Larry's house. Holding the wet soapy plate in her hand, she watched Larry come out of the house and walk down the steps to meet the officers. Both officers stood talking to him for a few minutes before one, a female officer, walked off, going through their fence and into the

backyard. Jessie Mae used the dishtowel to turn off the water and dried her hands, being careful not to take her eyes off the uniformed officer in her neighbor's backyard. After removing her apron and hanging it on the nail beside the wall-mounted telephone, she cut through the living room and went outside to stand on her porch. Larry was still speaking with the uniformed officer, who was taking notes in a black leather-bound notebook. She stood, silently, watching them for several minutes. Then she slipped back inside her house. Back in the kitchen, she lifted the phone carefully from its cradle, as if the very action might disturb someone, she dialed a number she'd called nearly every day for the past 15 years that they'd been neighbors. When, as she suspected, no one answered, she placed the phone ever so carefully back into its cradle.

A short while later, after the police got in their cars and drove off, Larry got in his pickup truck and left too. *What's going on*, she wondered. *Has something happened to Lenora?* The mere thought sent shivers down her spine.

Later that night while she was sipping a glass of her favorite pomegranate raspberry-flavored wine, Larry was disposing of the excess meat from the freezer. He parked his pickup truck a couple of blocks from the Big Star grocery then he got out and walked, balancing the bags of meat in both hands. He felt ridiculous walking like he was but he wasn't really worried about someone seeing him and saying something because if anyone went searching through the trash, all they'd find would be raw meat. There's nothing suspicious about finding raw meat in a dumpster behind a grocery store. He kept his eyes straight ahead though, not wanting to interact with anyone.

Jessie Mae had been sitting on the sofa much of the evening, sipping her wine, one of her self-help books in her hand, but the words on the pages kept melting until they became one indecipherable blob of black ink or she'd read an entire page and not remember one word. Her thoughts kept returning to Lenora. After calling the house several times and getting no answer, she

knew for certain that something was wrong. Her eyes had just moved back up to the top of the page when a knock at her door startled her. Sliding her eyes over to the clock on the wall, she saw that it was nearly midnight. Closing the book, she placed it on the table and took another sip of the wine, closing her eyes to relish the light berry taste on her tongue.

When she opened the door, she was shocked to find a haggard looking Larry standing on her porch. His clothes seemed to be draped on his slim frame and his eyes were bloodshot and he reeked of sweat and night air. “Larry,” his name shot from her mouth like a bullet. He didn’t respond and she wondered if he’d even heard her. And when he faced her, he seemed to be looking through her, not seeing her at all. She held the screen door open as he moved past her to come in the house. As he stepped past her, the unwashed scent grew stronger, burning the inside of her nose.

He walked straight to the living room, stopping to take in the half-empty glass of wine and the book she’d been reading, before plopping down on the sofa. She wondered perhaps for the millionth time that evening where he disappeared to after the cops left and where Lenora was. “Is Lenora sick or something?” she asked.

Again, she got the feeling he wasn’t even aware of her presence. Not only did he not respond, he showed no outward sign of even having heard her question. Waiting for him to speak, she felt an expanding tightness in her chest. This was new. Even when he’d been angry and distant with her, she’d never experienced this new feeling. And when she looked over at him, slouching on her sofa, she only felt worse. An air of despair was radiating off him in waves and filling up the entire space. She plopped down on the sofa beside him and she felt, at once, weary without explanation. She placed her hand on top of his, an effort to make her presence felt. “What’s going on?” she asked. “Where’s Lenora?”

He shifted in the seat or shrugged his response, she wasn't quite sure how to read his movement. But something about the movement bothered her; she found herself alarmed by his presence and the tension he'd brought in the house. He refused to make eye contact with her, so she couldn't see if his body language and his eyes spoke the same language. He kept his eyes glued to the black box he was holding. "I don't know where she is. That's why the police were at the house this evening. I called them."

She waited for him to continue. But his attention remained focused on the black box on his lap and he stayed silent as if he'd said everything that needed to be said. His silence became a wall she was forced to climb. Reluctantly, she climbed it. "What did you tell them?"

The wall between them seemed to grow taller. He seemed to be trying to work through an appropriate response in his head. Finally, he offered her a response. "I'm scared something has happened to Lenora." He told her how Lenora had been begging him to take her to the casino that just opened on the river. She wanted to eat at one of the restaurants inside the casino and put a few dollars in one of the slot machines. His theory: she got tired of begging him and decided to go alone. *She would have called me and asked me to go*, she thought but didn't say aloud. *Who else would have rode with?* "And that's what I told the police," he added. "Of course I called Josh to ask if he'd heard from her or seen her. He said he hasn't heard from her either." When his gaze finally met hers, she saw tears glistening in his eyes. The tears seem out of place because of the lack of emotion behind his words. It seemed this had been a cold read for a play he was auditioning for. "I don't know. I just really don't know."

She wanted to accuse him of not caring about where Lenora was. The nonchalance he was exhibiting now didn't jive with what she'd witnessed over the years. So, yes, she questioned the

authenticity of his sorrow. Why are you putting on this act for me, she wanted to ask. But she knew better than to ask him something like that. So, she said nothing.

He'd almost decided against coming. He saw the doubt in her eyes. Saw the questions she would not dare ask. Watching her watch him, in his mind's eye, he once again saw the red door. Like a movie reel being played in the old-time movie houses, at first jumpy and fuzzy before slowly becoming clearer.

The red door that he'd stumbled upon one afternoon when he was racing through the wooded area behind his house. He'd just bashed his pet hamster's head in with a brick and taken off running, hoping no one had seen him. Then he'd spotted the red door. Why hadn't he noticed it before, he'd wondered. And who was the young girl standing in front of the door? She beckoned for him to follow her and, for some reason, he had followed her into the house.

He saw himself moving through that red door. His mind, like a helium-filled balloon, was being carried away too easily and it was that day, that first day, the day he discovered the red door, once again. In the beginning, when his mind would wander to this day, to this place, he would fight it. Now he welcomed the opportunity to remember. It was like recalling the day you were baptized. The holy water of remembrance washed away the old Larry, made him the man he was today. That was what happened when the red door closed and he found himself on the other side. It transformed him.

As soon as he made it through the door, he swept the room with his eyes. Ignoring the scent of wet laundry left to sit too long that hit his nose as soon as he'd walked through the door, he stared at the mountains of newspapers, the books stacked on the floor and on the sofa, the black garbage bags that sat along the walls. As he followed the girl through the house, he stepped gingerly

over man-made mounds of paper and books, some as tall as his ten-year-old self. She took him down a small hallway in the back of the house, which led to the dining room. Directly in front of them was the kitchen where he could see a pile of dirty dishes, some with food still on them, stacked haphazardly in the sink. But it wasn't the dishes or the roaches that caught and held his attention. It was her.

Seated at the dining room table, obscured in a cloud of cigarette smoke was an old woman with skin that was the color of molasses. She was holding a slim brown cigarette between her fingers. She stuck the slim stick between her lips and exhaled tiny smoke rings. Amidst all squalor and disarray, she somehow appeared out of place. Something about her drew him to her. When she smiled, she exposed yellowed teeth, and gaps, like open doorways, where teeth should have been. Her eyes, which were as dark as the little girl who'd invited him in, house a mysterious light. Though not entirely unattractive, he knew that in her earlier years, she'd been very attractive. Now, she was a statue, a monument to a mystery he'd never be able to solve.

The young girl who had invited him in the house stood behind him. He could feel her body heat emanating from behind him. Later, he would learn the little girl's name, Princess. And learn that she was two years younger than him. And that she was living with her grandparents because one day she told her kindergarten teacher a secret she wasn't supposed to tell, that her mother's boyfriend had been touching her "down there." When her grandfather started touching her, she said she was afraid to tell anybody because she was afraid of where they'd send her. "They say it's the adults who are doing wrong and then punish me." And she didn't want to be punished anymore so she kept this secret. But in that moment, on that first day, he knew none of that. And he couldn't take his eyes off the black black woman at the table who finished up one cigarette and immediately lit another.

That was the first of many afternoons he spent behind that red door as his friendship with Princess flowered. Sometimes they would stay inside listening to her grandmother, Madame, and her grandfather Pierre argue. Other times, they would venture off into the woods in search of things to kill. Butterflies. Kittens. Rabbits. Rats. And eventually she'd become his first human kill.

He shook his head and turned his attention back to the present, to the woman sitting beside him. There would be other times to think about Princess. His gaze dropped from Jessie Mae's face to the box he was still holding on his lap. Suddenly he felt reckless enough to form a response to the question he saw trying to form in her eyes. He brought his face closer to her. "You know, one of the cops told me this happens a lot. That they take missing person reports on people who disappear on purpose."

"They think she left on purpose?" A note of disbelief lingered behind her words.

He nodded his head. "It's a possibility. One of the officers hinted that she might have a lover."

The new look that entered her eyes let him know that she didn't believe what he said, and she knew he didn't believe it either. Seeing the crinkle appear in the center of her forehead as she squinted her eyes, as if trying to figure him out, caused a feeling of liquid satisfaction to flow through him.

Without a word, Jessie Mae rose from the couch and walked out of the room.

In the kitchen, she stood with her back pressed against the sink. All sorts of emotions swirled through her and every time she tried to grasp one it moved away before she could touch it. Nothing like this had ever happened to her. Intuitively, she knew that her best friend, if she was gone, had not left on her own. But, for the life of her, she couldn't figure what might have actually

happened. She felt something akin to disgust settling in her and tears welled up in her eyes. She slid down to the floor and allowed herself to cry. But then she realized she had left Larry in her living room for too long and she stood up and filled two glasses with water. She returned to the living room and offered him one of the glasses of water and drank the other.

“Do you think she was cheating on me? Is it possible she left me for another man?”

His words flowed through her like boiling water being poured down the drain and they shook something loose inside her. Looking up at him, his gaze holding hers, every fiery comeback that she could think of was softened along the edges like a knife dulled after too many uses. Dropping her arms to her side, she allowed her gaze to wander around the room as if this were her first time seeing it. She focused on the grandfather clock in the corner, which her mother had given her a week before she died. Knowing that death was near, her mother had arranged for the clock, the dining room table and two photo albums filled with family portraits to be delivered to the daughter she hadn't spoken to in years. Silence filled the space between her and Larry as she focused on the furniture in the room, ignoring the heat of his gaze that was focused on her. She stumbled backward, making room for the silence. You have no right, she heard a voice in her head say. Unsure of whether the statement had been meant for her or Larry, she rolled the words around on her tongue like a banana Now & Later, the ones she would always give to someone else, before spitting them out. “You have no right,” she whispered. “You have no right.”

But she may as well have been throwing her words into the wind. The smile on his face confirmed this.

What's changed between them, she wondered. She'd witnessed no change in Lenora. But, if it were true, if Lenora had willingly left, did that mean she and Larry could finally be together? Most men never left their wife for the mistress, but suppose this was opening the door for them? The lie

touched her softly like the long, soft kisses they used to share. When they used to make love. So long ago. She wanted that so badly now. Even considered taking him by the hand and guiding him to her bedroom.

Her thoughts were closet doors that opened at will and unexpectedly she entered another door. To a time after she and Larry had just finished making love. Back when their passionate lovemaking, the way his body seemed to fit hers perfectly, kept her from seeing that he had no plan of ever leaving his wife for her. And she felt him pulling away like he always did after they made love.

Guilt had walked with her through the doorway of memory, but she refused to acknowledge it. Jessie Mae hadn't wanted to be Larry's mistress forever. She'd been ready to see action along with those halfhearted promises he'd made. That night, she told him this and, she felt hot tears slide down her face as he told her that he would never leave Lenora.

When she reminded him of those early days when he'd promised they would one day be together, he grew silent.

Eventually, he told her, "She loves me so much." His words were so precise, so painful, it was like he was stabbing her in the back. Repeatedly, she felt his words pierce her skin. "I could never hurt her like that." Yet somehow two years later, he was standing before her trying to convince her that Lenora had done what he could never bring himself to do. Left.

Suddenly the temperature in the room plummeted as if the thermostat had been adjusted to the lowest possible temperature. As she began to shiver uncontrollably, she brought her arms up to hug herself. As if she thought he could read her thoughts, as if though he'd somehow been able to walk through the door of memory with her, she expected him to grab her by the shoulders and try to shake her. She couldn't stop shaking. With a trembling hand, she closed the door to the past.

Taking another step back to place more space between them, she said, “You’re a liar.” She wished she sounded surer, but she couldn’t keep the trembling out of her voice. “We both know that Lenora would never leave you.” She flinched, expecting him to slap her like he had done the last time she had called him a liar. He had, of course, apologized and though he said he would never touch her that way again, the look in his eyes now seemed to be contradicting that earlier promise.

Larry’s response was to narrow his eyes while closing the physical space between them. Through clenched teeth he said, “Let’s not talk about my wife anymore.” Then he echoed the words Lenora had once spoken, “You shouldn’t want to force anyone to be with you. Someone who wants you doesn’t have to be forced or cajoled. If she returns, okay. If not, that’s okay too.” And he held the box out to her. “I need you to hold this for me.” As he spoke, he purposefully kept his voice flat, emotionless. He pushed her into a sitting position on the couch and placed the box on her lap like she’d already agreed to his request.

She studied the box. It was the size of the supply boxes she used to require her students to keep their pencils, glue sticks, and safety scissors in, except this box had a lock on it. One of those embedded combination panels. She lifted the box, feeling the weight of it in the palm of her hands. The cool metal burned the tips of her fingers, but she didn’t drop it like she would a burning match, instead she welcomed the pain of the burn. Because with that pain came the painful realization she’d been fighting off all evening. Lenora’s not coming back. She couldn’t explain how she knew this for certain, but she was certain of this. “I can’t,” she said, trying to hand the box back over to him. It felt like someone, some unseen force was taking her insides and twisting and knotting them until her stomach started to ache.

Larry grabbed the sides of her face so he could stare into her eyes and all the knots began to come undone. And instinct told her that had been his intent, to dissolve any doubt that might be creeping into her. When he lightly planted a kiss on her lips, she was unable to resist the flowering passion that bloomed inside her. She'd loved him from the beginning and, in all the years she'd been trying, she had not learned how to stop loving him, so his touch had the effect that he knew it would. Usually he was very economical with his touches. But today he was generous. The kiss, a ghost memory that awakened old longings. The longings that stirred within her drowned in a sea of guilt when she pictured Lenora's face. And another emotion flowered within the guilt and while she was loathe to name it, she couldn't ignore it. His touch had always and would always affect her. "Look," he told her, his voice soft and convincing. "I'd never ask you to do anything you don't want to do, but I really need you to do this for me. I can't explain why right now, but one day I will be able to answer every question I know you have. But right now, I just need you to trust me." He kissed her on the lips. "Can you trust me?"

She wanted to kiss him with such force that Lenora's name would forever be removed from his lips. This thought compounded the influx of confusing feelings that were threatening to knock her over just from the sheer weight of them. She nodded weakly and assented to putting away the box for him.

Before Larry left, he gripped her shoulders so tight she expected to find his fingerprints tattooed on her skin later that evening as she stood examining herself in the mirror. His eyes bored into hers and she wanted to believe that he was trying to read the secrets etched on her soul. She knew better though. His eyes, hazel brown like cat's eye marbles. The eyes always got her. "I thought I knew her. Thought I could..." and he stopped like he was searching for the right words to express what he was feeling. "I guess no relationship is guaranteed to last forever."

And the spell he'd had over her was broken then. His words sounded scripted, carefully arranged, for her benefit. "I don't think she's gone for good," she said. She was trying not to linger on the golden flecks in his eyes. "Your marriage is important to her. She would never just walk away." She stood up then, still holding the box in her hand. After she had closed the door behind him, she felt tears begin to slide down her face.

*Where are you, Lenora?* The question repeated in her mind as she lay in bed that night. Sleep eluded her for hours as an unending loop of past conversations with Lenora played in her head. Like reading a novel, she searched for clues in their interactions with one another, searching for layers of meaning that might not be so obvious. She did not believe for a moment that her friend had been seeing anyone else. If she had been even entertaining thoughts of seeing someone else, it would have come up at least once. So, she shifted through their talks, their words becoming soft powdery flour running through the silver sifter, so the texture was made more appropriate for her use. As her mother's little helper, she was always the one who got the job of sifting flour for the homemade cakes. Before long, her little arms would start to ache and she'd commence whining. "It's hard ma," she'd complain in her tiny singsong voice. Her mother would initially pretend not to hear as she moved around the kitchen stirring inside pots, checking on the ham or turkey and washing dishes. Jessie Mae would not be deterred, though. She would grumble a little louder and her mother's patience would fall away like the petals of a wilting flower. "Stop that whining, girl. I ain't asking you to lift a bale of hay, just sift the flour for the cake." This is how it is with sifting through past conversations, after a while, it started to become too much for her to carry. Still, following her own disjointed thoughts was better than acknowledging the fear that had settled in her gut when Larry told her that Lenora was missing and was waiting for her to grab hold to it: if Lenora was gone she didn't leave on her own. And that would lead her to form questions that would demand to be answered. Like how could someone so seamlessly disappear without a trace? It wasn't possible, was

it? Instead of grabbing hold to questions she couldn't yet bear the weight of, she closed her eyes and carried herself back to the last time she'd talked to her friend. They'd been sitting on Lenora's front porch slowly moving back and forth in the gliding slider rocker.

"Why didn't you ever re-marry?" Lenora had asked. The question, which had been put forth as a light-hearted one, had come at the recipient like a slap.

And just like a person who's actually been slapped, she sat for a moment trying to understand what had just happened. She felt a stinging on her cheeks that she recognized as the heat of the embarrassment. She knew it hadn't been her friend's intention to cause her pain. Lenora never did anything to purposely injure another person. As the shock wore off, she shook the words loose that were lodged in her throat. She gave her friend the most honest response she could muster. "After Carl told me he wanted a divorce, it stunned me. I thought we were happy. It never occurred to me that he could be unhappy because I wasn't. I never thought about his happiness, to be honest. And realizing that I'd been blind to his feelings, well, it made me wonder what else I'd missed. Like there had to be something wrong with me, right?" And she looked to her friend for support.

Lenora laughed. It was the tinkling sound of a bell hanging over a door's entrance to announce the arrival of a new person. Jessie Mae's head shot up to see who was laughing. Though the laughter had an airy quality to it and not a cruel underpinning, she felt betrayed by her friend's laughter. "That's crazy, girl. He was just one man. Just because he didn't want to be married to you doesn't mean there no one out there for you, someone who would love to be married to you."

Jessie Mae shrugged noncommittally, but she was still nursing hurt feelings. "I guess."

"Look, girl. Everybody ain't meant for us. We think that liking someone automatically makes them "the one." And, of course, this nice person is the one we should marry. And quickly, before

someone else can steal them away. As soon as we realize a man is what we call a good man, we start to plan our whole life with him. Carl was a good person, but he wasn't the right man for you because he didn't love you. He didn't even want to love you. And who wants to spend their entire life trying to force someone to love them? A marriage license doesn't shackle a person to us forever. People have all these rules about love, but love doesn't need rules. Love just is." She stopped to see how Jessie was receiving her words. "You've got to be open to meeting someone else. The right someone," she added.

"Well, I'm too old for that now."

And she laughed again, but this time it didn't feel like a betrayal. It felt like a gentle brush of a hand against her cheek, a lifting of her chin to force eye contact. "You're never too old for love. Don't believe that lie. You hear me? Don't believe that shit."

Jessie Mae's eyes left her friend's gaze as she studied her own hands, which were clasped on her lap. The wrinkles. The fragile fingernails. This was one of those times when everything about her just seemed wrong. "I'm a good woman, sis. At least I thought I was. So why didn't he want me?" Even now, after all these years, the tears came too easily.

"I can't answer that because I don't know what he wants or needs. All I know is that things change. And people change. And we can make ourselves miserable by trying to cling to the past. Or we can move on."

The whole world grew silent. The trees, who only moments before had been dancing to attract attention, held their breath and grew still. The squirrels ceased their scampering. Birds halted mid-song. Not a soul on the street, save for Lenora and Jessie Mae. It seemed the world held its breath, waiting, giving the women time to adjust to this new space they were entering. Then just as quickly as everything had stopped, it all started back again.

“He told me he could never be happy with me. That he only married me because I’d given him an ultimatum.” They were her words, ones that she’d never told anyone before. Alongside them came the echo of a voice in her head. *Every time I think about coming home, I wish there was somewhere else I could go.*

Lenora leaned toward her, using the pad of her thumb to stop the flow of silent tears that were sliding down her friend’s face. “We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. I wasn’t trying to make you sad.” Encircling her friend’s waist and pulling her into the cradle of her bosom, she whispered into her hair, “I just always wanted you to be happy like Larry and me.”

The words had almost slipped out then. Almost mixed with all the words already surrounding them. But her mind, always working, flashed back to the day in her bedroom with Larry and she decided to keep quiet. Besides Lenora was the only friend she had, the only real friend. They’d been best friends since middle school and she didn’t want to lose her friendship. As if afraid Lenora might sense the secrets hiding within Jessie Mae and try to leave her, she tightened her hold on Lenora and continued to cry into her shoulder.

Eventually that memory faded away and Jessie Mae lay beneath a blanket of darkness, curled into a fetal position with her eyes closed. When she did finally fall asleep, the nightmares began. Not one nightmare but a series of interlocking nightmarish scenes. She dreamed that one of the neighborhood kids destroyed her flower garden. She saw the back of the child’s head as the child sat on the damp grass snatching the blooms off the flowers that Jessie so carefully tended. After removing the blooms, each one was tossed aside as another was ruined. Then she dreamed she was walking up the stairs in front of the courthouse. But when she made it to the top, she stopped and turned to focus back from where she’d come and that’s when she noticed that the stairs were no longer made of concrete. Instead they were wooden, rickety stairs that were in serious danger of

falling apart. But the dream sequence that remained with her when she awoke was the one where she saw herself sitting in the middle of a street with traffic rushing by on both sides of her. She'd fallen asleep sitting upright like her mom used to do. There were two images of her in the dream, the one sitting in traffic and the one who was looking on. Miraculously, though she was asleep in traffic, no car had hit her. At the moment of realization that her dream self wasn't being run over, both of them were startled by shrill screaming. Neither Jessie was able to discern where the screaming was coming from but they both recognized it as Lenora's voice. And they began to search for her, desperately trying to follow the sound of the screams. Everywhere they ended up, Lenora wasn't there. The two dream Jessies were running down a street that resembled the one she currently lived on, except the dream street didn't end in a cove; it appeared to stretch on endlessly. As they were running in the direction from which Lenora's screams were coming, Larry stepped out of the shadows. Wearing brown corduroy trousers and a white button-down, it was obvious this was a teenaged version of him. He flashed her that lopsided toothless grin he often wore as a teenager and, in her mind, she said, "No, don't drown in his smile." Jessie Mae shook her head and attempted to run past him.

Jessie Mae would have remained trapped in the dream if the sound of shattering glass had not inserted itself into her dream. She halted in the middle of the darkened street and scanned the façade of all the houses on the street. Even in the midst of the suffocating darkness, she knew the sound had not come from any of the houses. The sound hadn't originated inside her dream at all. It was a strange awareness to hear a sound and know, yet not know, its origin. She walked on down the street, which was now covered in a hazy veil of night fog. The further she walked into the fog, the more unsure her steps became. She kept looking back over her shoulder, watching for the approaching dream Larry and trying to locate the source of the sound she'd heard moments before.

When the sound shattered the quiet again, she understood that this was a sound from outside her dream, not inside. Startled, she sat bolt upright in her bed.

She jumped out of bed and raced down the stairs and down the darkened foyer leading to the living room. It was instinctive and not until she was standing in the darkened room, trying to adjust her eyes to the darkness so she could search the room, did she realize she wasn't holding anything in her hand. An aluminum baseball bat rested in the jamb of the door in her bedroom and she kept a hammer underneath her bed, yet she had not thought to grab either in her haste to get to the living room to investigate the jarring sound that had wrested her from sleep. Hearing no other sounds, even without a weapon in her hand, she did not hesitate to switch on the overhead light. She walked through the house several times inspecting locks on windows and doors and checking under and behind furniture. Concluding that she'd dreamed the noise, she was finally able to go back to bed. But, though her body was heavy with physical exhaustion, her mind remained alert.

What's he hiding in the box? The question made its way through her mind like an intruder creeping through an open window left untended. She couldn't pretend it wasn't there, stalking her. Leaving her no time or space to reconsider what she was about to do, she balanced the box on her thigh. Sitting cross-legged on the floor with the box resting on her leg, she tried to ignore the way her hands trembled like fall leaves in a breeze. So much was locked in this one moment.

A few years ago, when she and Larry had been still sleeping together, she'd made the mistake of bringing the "L" word into what they had going on. Using words she now regretted sharing, she told him how she daydreamed about them being together like a real couple. How throughout different parts of her day, activities performed alone transformed into things she imagined them doing together. She conjured him up beside her when she was eating dinner, when she was watching television, when she was listening to music. Sometimes when listening to music, she imagined them

dancing together before a fire. In her mind, she was able to share her life with him, the man she loved. Building up the nerve to tell him those things, she never thought ahead to what his response might be. Even if she had, she never would have predicted what he said.

“What am I supposed to do with that information?” he asked her. They were lying in her bed and he was using his finger to trace circles across the surface of her stomach, but he stopped when she told him about how she had imagined their life differently.

She willed him to put his hands back on her. She wanted to convey to him how his touch awakened something in her, something she never knew existed. She wanted to put into words the feelings he awakened in her, but looking at his face, the way his eyebrows furrowed, she settled for saying, “I just wanted you to know.”

“I thought we both understood that this thing between us, that this is all it is. It can never be anything more.” He threw his long brown legs over the side of the bed and sat with his back to her. “Nora is my wife and I’m not going to leave her.” Hearing him call his wife by the name he only called her when he was being affectionate toward her achieved its goal; it was a sucker punch to her gut.

She pressed her naked body into his exposed back and began kneading his back and shoulders with her hands. She stopped only to pour baby oil in the palm of her hands, which she rubbed together first, to warm the oil. She didn’t think her touch affected him the way his did her, but she convinced herself she didn’t care. Just one of the many lies that functioned as the thread to hold together the patchwork pieces of her love. Still there existed within her a need to touch and be touched as much as possible so even though he’d turned cold toward her, she clung desperately to him knowing that their time together would soon be cut short as he crept back across the dew-

covered grass that separated their homes so he could slide back into bed before Lenora woke up and found him missing.

The weight of the cold metal box on her leg brought her back to the present. Studying the numbers on the face of the combination lock, a surge of irritation built up in her, threatening to overwhelm her and she almost threw the box across the room. She had no idea how to break into the box. But she had to. A part of her cringed as a litany of options for opening the box scrolled through her mind; the mere fact that she was even considering opening the box felt like a betrayal of Larry's trust. Were her suspicions enough to justify the betrayal? Before she could give up and decide to leave the box unopened, thoughts of Lenora re-surfaced. She would open the box.

Her fingers caressed the raised numbers on the face of the lock. And then she found herself trying random combinations of numbers. But none of them worked. As determined as she was to get the box open, none of the sets of numbers that she tried would open the box. She'd try a combination of numbers and try to force it open and nothing. It was in the moment of trying to pry the lid open with her fingers that she was forced to accept that no amount of force can make something work if it's not meant to. Maybe what she felt for Larry had never been love, but something else entirely. This new awareness settled in her like a weary worker collapsing in a comfortable armchair after a long day at work.

Finally, the sheer determination to know what was in the box sent her looking for anything that she could use to pry the lock open. In the kitchen, she found a Phillips head screwdriver in the utility drawer where she kept miscellaneous tools and other odds and ends. Back in her bedroom, she sank down on her knees, feeling the plush carpet beneath her. Immediately, she began working on the lock. When the lock snapped open, a stack of photographs spilled out onto the floor. There were photographs of young girls and women, Lenora included. Some of the pictures were obviously

old, like twenty years old or more, their edges frayed. But the images on the front were clear. The smiles frozen in time. She sifted through the images. Larry at different stages of his life standing next to the girls and women. Something about those smiles on the women's faces would forever haunt her. But there was something more that bothered her. In some of the pictures, there were only headstones. She read the names on the stones: Princess Johnson. Rachel Bradshaw. Joan Russell. Going quickly through the photographs, she checked to make sure there wasn't one with Lenora's name on it. And she breathed a sigh of relief when she saw there wasn't.

In the one that had to be the oldest, Larry appeared to be not much older than 12. The person who'd taken the photograph hadn't been worried about illuminating the subjects in the photo by capturing the sun behind them as Larry and a girl around his age stood within the deep shadows of an old porch in front of a red door. The door was the brightest thing in the photograph and it kept tugging her gaze back toward it. Someone had spent at least a couple of hours braiding the girl's hair. And placed an assortment of colored beads at the end of each braid. As in all the other photos, Larry was staring straight ahead, not even looking at the person taking the picture but beyond them, showing no emotion. *There's something here. There has to be.* The photos that caused her hands to shake visibly were the cemetery shots, but all the pictures seemed to hold a sinister feel to them like walking across a newly dug grave. She shifted back through the photos again – all the pictures of Larry, not smiling, and different girls and women. *What am I missing?*

She studied the photograph of Lenora and Larry the longest. The park setting felt familiar. To the right of Lenora, the sun's rays made curtains of the trees, opening just enough to allow a hint of sunlight in. The brown leather sandals Lenora had been wearing that day rested on the ground beside her. And she was reclining on the grass, staring at the camera. Jessie remembered the occasion. It was the weekend after she and Carl celebrated their one-year wedding anniversary. Both

couples had spent the day at the park grilling and playing games. At some point, Larry and Lenora wandered off to be alone. Tears glistened in Lenora's eyes and Jessie traced her finger across the surface of the image trying to wipe away the tears before they could fall. *If only I'd known.* Even with a trace of tears in her eyes, Lenora wore her trademark smile. Larry was stretched out beside her, his gaze focused somewhere outside of the frame. Probably Larry had stopped someone and asked them to take the photo of him and his wife.

The prickling sensation that felt like millions of tiny insects crawling on her skin returned. How had she not been able to see it before? A false bottom. She banged the box against the floor until it shook loose and along with it came more photographs. A salty bile gathered in her mouth as she stared at the images. There had to be at least a hundred or more photos. Mostly of women. There were a few of young boys and girls. The children appeared to be no older than ten. And the women. Blond haired women. Brunettes. White women. Two black women, both with short curly afros. A couple of women who could be Asian. About half of the women posed in a way to suggest toplessness. Looking at the patterns of some of the clothing, it appeared the photos went back over several decades. What is this? she puzzled as she shuffled through them. When she got to the photograph of herself, standing naked before her bathroom mirror when she was about sixteen, she grew cold all over and felt herself being cracked wide open. She hadn't voluntarily taken the photo. As her hand began to violently shake, the stack of photos fell from her hand and drifted to the floor. And the tears came. And she didn't try to stop them.

## Acknowledgements

I am forever grateful to my mother, Amy Sue Thompson. Though she is no longer here with me, her love continues to make me feel . To my father, James Thompson, the first storyteller I fell in love with. And to my children: thank you for loving and supporting me.

I have had some wonderful teachers since I came to the University of Memphis MFA program: Alice Bolin, Courtney Santo, Eric Schlich, Marcus Wicker, Emily Skaja, Cary Holladay, and Mark Mayer. All of my instructors and the experiences they've exposed me to have been invaluable to my growth as a writer. I offer my extreme gratitude to them and all other fellow writers in the program.