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GOLDEN SLUMBERS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

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BY

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ABSTRACT

GOLDEN SLUMBERS

BY ELLA LEE

Golden Slumbers is a collection of four short stories that revolve around dreams, blurred realities, and memory. What secrets lurk in the corners of the subconscious? Does something profound lie on the edge of consciousness, or is it only blank space? Can the memories of a person keep them with us forever? And isn't it a kind of magic to connect with strangers, even if only for a fleeting moment? The first story, "Sundown," follows a girl's stay at her grandmother's house, where the mysterious content of her dreams seems to echo a darkness within the house's history. In "Grace Lee," the titular character meets someone with the same name as her, and her fixation on the double leads her down a dangerous path. "Bird Book" tells the story of a young man's life through his relationship to a book his grandfather gifted him: a field guide for birds. Finally, "Spring breaks!" follows a group of college students road-tripping home for break, and the conversations and unlikely encounters they have along the way shed new light, bringing them together. As you make your way through *Golden Slumbers*, I hope the light hits you at just the right angle. And I wish you sweet dreams.

For Momma & Dada. Leaning on you always.

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Sundown

A week after Iris moved in with her grandmother, they started talking about dreams.

Iris had been keeping a dream journal by her bed for the past year or so. Whenever she woke up at night in the middle of a dream, or in the morning with the memory of one, she would scribble it down in a small orange notebook before the details slipped away. Sometimes she forgot everything mid-sentence, and the dream transcription came out disjointed and confused, even more so than a dream already is. When reading them over later, Iris would struggle to make out the words. Her own sleepy longhand looked like someone else's handwriting. After deciphering what she could, she'd feel alarm at the dream's incoherence, but also a certain comfort in the written proof that she really did dream it. The dreams were often a jumbled collage of memory and nonsense:

Walking in a suburb at night, found a baby stroller, people walking away from it—parents? I help baby put on diaper, he puts legs through on his own, I am impressed. Parents come back and say they were so worried, I make sure they're not lying by quizzing them on his favorite foods, then give baby back. Then... later I'm on the bus, a man is throwing eggs at me, I know if I get hit by an egg I'll die so I dodge them like a motherfucker. Then we become friends.

At that one department store from recurring dream, this time on upper floor with women's clothing, I'm picking out long dresses, they keep getting tangled at my feet and I'm stepping on them. I go to the dressing room to try them on but it's a casino inside, I win a lot of money at blackjack table but am scared that I will get addicted to gambling so I run outside with the money. Mrs. Latham from second grade was my dealer? Somehow, I end up back home, standing in the kitchen, I'm cooking something... can't remember... toast maybe.

Roller-skating down a long street, I end up on a huge water slide with walls on the sides and I climb the walls like a lemur (no more skates) and when I get to the bottom I'm at Sather Gate, people are cheering me on so I dive into the pool but then I drown. My rugby neighbor (the short one) jumps in to save me but too late, I'm a ghost. Then I haunt him, but why?

These kinds of dreams were typical for Iris. The shifting locations, the randomness of objects, the characters that came from life but weren't anyone she was close to. She had the occasional recurring dream, but it wasn't the same dream on repeat so much as several different dreams that all took place in the same location—the multi-floor department store, the jagged ocean cliffs, her high school football field. (She never dreamed about football, though. The field became a cow ranch, or a stage for the Nutcracker, or a tidy backyard set up with veggie boxes and a picnic table.)

Since arriving at her grandmother's house in New Jersey, Iris's dreams had become much more vivid. She thought it might be a result of the heat that invaded the poorly insulated bedroom she was sleeping in. Her grandmother, unaffected by the hot temperatures, had no A/C. Iris had grown up in Los Angeles, so she was no stranger to a hot summer, but that dense, East Coast humidity got to her. Hard to sleep when sticky. Over the past week, she had tried everything she could think of to make falling asleep a less agonizing experience, stripping the blankets and sleeping naked and putting a fan right next to the bed. Nothing worked. Without the blankets she felt exposed; naked, she worried that someone would see her through the window despite the closed curtains; and the fan made a loud buzzing noise that was more infuriating than the heat. Maybe it was the summer climate, or the poor quality of sleep, but for whatever reason, her dreams had taken on a brighter color. As though the lens of the camera was dirty and someone had wiped it clean.

She told her grandmother as much at breakfast.

“I’ve been having weird dreams this week.”

“Weird? How, weird?”

“I don’t know, exactly... they feel more vivid than usual. More real.”

“Mm. I have real dreams, too. What you were dreaming about?”

“A piano. Your piano, the one in the basement. In my dream, if you played it, the keys would curse you, and the music poisoned your ears. Like the sound waves became some clear, noxious gas, and it would get into your ears and burn your eardrums, like acid. Then hearing music would be painful for the rest of your life.”

“Bad dream,” her grandmother said. She pushed a cutting board towards Iris, with a knife and an orange on it. Iris started slicing.

“Oh, definitely bad. I played it, the cursed piano, felt my ears burning. Then I came back upstairs and started going through your record collection, and everything I played sounded like nails on a chalkboard. Actually, it was even worse than that—it was like if an orchestra was made up of instruments, and each one made a different kind of awful sound, like silverware scraping plates and a construction jackhammer and whatever shit goes on at the dentist. It was like if all those instruments were playing at the same time on full blast. Painfully loud, like when you’re standing too close to a speaker. I went through every record looking for one that wouldn’t sound terrible, but even the Debussy was bad, even the Chopin was a cat scratching a window. And I could still hear the piece, even though it sounded completely different—I knew that it was the Berceuse playing, but it just sounded horrible.” Iris picked up an orange wedge. Her grandmother was buttering toast, the knife in her hands scraping slowly.

“Would be tragic. To lose beauty of the music. Maybe... maybe dream is telling you, be glad for music. Appreciate how beautiful the sound.” Now she was pulling boiled eggs out of their ice bath, tapping them on the counter. She rolled one back and forth, and the brown shell crackled.

“I’m almost afraid to listen to anything now, that’s how real it felt.”

“It was just a dream. Go play piano, practice Berceuse. Piano isn’t cursed!” Her grandmother chuckled at her. Her laugh brought Iris some comfort. Iris smiled and bit into the orange slice.

“And don’t say ‘shit.’ Even I know, bad word.” Her grandmother passed her an egg, perfectly peeled.

After they finished eating their breakfast, Iris went down to the basement to practice. Her grandmother kept the piano downstairs to preserve its condition, away from the bleaching sun and slacking heat. Iris’s fingers hovered over the keys. Of course it wasn’t cursed... so why did she hesitate? Her left hand fell onto the first low note. Iris was relieved to find that the Berceuse was still beautiful, despite her clumsy fingering in the passage of thirty-second notes. The piano still sounded like a piano, the notes were still the notes. It was just a dream.

Over the next few days, Iris and her grandmother spent most of their time outside in the garden. On Iris’s insistence, her grandmother sat in a folding chair and gave Iris instructions on what to weed and where to prune. Her grandmother was eighty-four and in relatively good health for her age, but she had fallen and broken a hip in April. Iris, at her mother’s suggestion, had moved in for the summer to help her grandmother with housework and driving to appointments.

They worked in the garden until, finally, her grandmother was satisfied that the azaleas would bloom well in July. Iris went to bed that night sore as well as sticky. On the plus side, she had finally acquired a pair of earplugs that allowed her to keep the fan on at night. She slept for a glorious nine hours. The next morning, orange notebook in hand, Iris shared her new dream over eggs and toast.

“I was in the garden, pruning the bushes by the front door, only instead of azaleas they were apple bushes. I know that apples grow on trees, but these bushes had dark green leaves and bright red apples. And every time I cut back a branch, a new branch would appear with a couple of shiny apples on it, and they kind of looked like Snow White’s poisonous apple only they weren’t poisonous at all, they were just picture-perfect, delicious apples.”

“How you know? You ate one?”

“No, I didn’t. I don’t know how I knew, I just knew. They were that perfectly juicy, sweet, tart-but-not-sour kind of apple. So I kept pruning the bush, and more apples kept appearing, and then I realized that I was pruning with just one arm, somehow holding the shears in my right hand, and my left arm was growing the bush. The branches were growing out of my fingers, like if your fingers just kept dividing into two more fingers and two more fingers and they were all growing leaves. When I realized that, I started freaking out, but it didn’t even hurt to prune them. I couldn’t feel anything. I just kept doing it, I was supposed to keep doing it, and the bush, my hand, grew bigger and bigger and taller and taller until it reached the roof of the house.”

“Supposed to? Someone telling you to do it?”

“No, nobody told me to, I just knew I had to. I don’t know. Like it was some kind of obligation, like I owed it to someone. And then, once my arm bush was as tall as the house, I

stopped pruning and I could feel something in one of the highest branches. Suddenly it was like they were my hands again, and I could feel some animal climbing around the tips of my branch fingers, and when I looked up, I saw some furry grey thing jumping around. Then he picked an apple and, oh my god, I know it was a dream but it was the most painful thing I've ever felt. Worse than when my appendix burst, or when I dropped the iron on my foot. It was like if someone was ripping your fingernail from the nailbed, but in slow motion, and your finger is also on fire, and they're also chewing on it with jagged teeth, crushing your bones, and you're also getting a thousand papercuts right under the nail, all in one fingertip. It was so painful that it woke me up. Even thinking about it, my finger is tingling."

"Hmm. Raccoon." Iris's grandmother seemed deep in thought, her loose sleeve falling into her coffee as she reached across the table for the jam. Iris passed it to her.

"Maybe. I couldn't see what it was, I was thinking of a big squirrel. Could've been a raccoon. It was like real life, that part of the dream, because the pain was so bad it was blinding. I couldn't see anything anymore." Iris watched her grandmother bite into the red toast.

"Good thing no garden today—we start in the attic. Very messy, I think. Haven't been there in years." She spoke about the attic like it was a country she used to travel to. Iris started to get up from her seat, but her grandmother stopped her. "You aren't going to finish?" She gestured toward Iris's untouched eggs, fried and peppered just the way she liked it. Iris paused, then cut through the middle of one and watched the shining yolk break.

Iris worked in the attic all week. It was a small space with a low, vaulted ceiling, just large enough that she could walk from one side to the other in three or four steps. Her grandmother stayed downstairs in the kitchen where it was cooler, helping Iris with the occasional sorting

decision from below. Iris might have enjoyed it for the rediscovery of old things and the satisfaction of sifting treasure out from trash, if she weren't in the hottest room of the house during the hottest month of the year. Summer solstice had just passed, and each day felt hotter and wetter than the last.

Everything in the attic had belonged to her grandfather. He'd passed away two summers before, and Iris's grandmother had instructed her two sons to carry all of his belongings up to the attic. His clothes, his watches, his extensive collection of physician's books, even his last bottle of shampoo and what looked like a used toothbrush, all piled up in bins and boxes. His double bass was propped up in the corner in its hard black case, like a wide shadow. Iris imagined her two uncles carrying the bass up the narrow staircase in heat like this and felt her legs leaden at the thought.

She turned back to the box in her lap, full of miscellany—a shoe polish set, several brightly colored ties, a half-smoked pack of Marlboro Reds—and considered the metaphor of the attic: a room full of things that were once part of a life but were now just things. Inanimate objects, without a person to animate them. Each thing seemed to express something essential about her grandfather, as though his entire personhood was summed up in this room of objects. Unless she was just projecting... But no, surely this stack of Ray Brown CDs proved his love of jazz? Surely these brightly colored ties reflected something bright about his personality, and this shoe polish, a sign that he liked to look polished? But then again, maybe not. Iris couldn't know. When he was alive, she could hardly get him to remember her name, much less get his life story. And her grandmother didn't like to speak about him, which Iris contributed to the relative recency of the loss. After a marriage of sixty years, the grieving period probably lasted longer than just two. Iris had tried asking her mother about him, what he was like before the dementia,

but her mom would only talk about how important sleep and fish oil are to keeping a strong memory. For all Iris knew, the CDs could've been unwanted gifts from a friend; the ties a hand-me-down from a cousin, the shoe polish a staple of his generation. Maybe the only essential thing about him in the attic was the pack of cigarettes. She took one out and twirled it between her fingers.

Iris had stopped feeling the heat. She no longer noticed the sweat dripping down her spine, didn't realize that her head hung, heavy, over the box... that her eyes were closing... it was nice, the darkness somehow made her feel cooler... she may have even felt a light breeze coming from behind her, where the bass lurked in the corner...

"Iris? You need break?" Her grandmother called to her from the bottom of the stairs, pulling her out of heat sleep. The attic's edges sharpened around her. Iris's mouth was dry, and she suddenly felt claustrophobic in the small space, her shirt smothering her back like duct tape. One bead of sweat ran down her neck, triggering a shiver, and Iris reflexively jumped out of her seat. She turned her head to the right, as though making to look behind her, but stopped. She shook her head.

Iris tossed the yellowed cigarettes into the trash bag that hung on the lock above the doorknob. The hardened shoe polish followed, and the ties flew brightly into the donation box. Then she picked up the stack of CDs and went down the stairs. She felt a slight relief at the five-degree drop, but it was quickly followed by the disappointment that, really, it was still just *hot*. She landed in the kitchen where her grandmother sat at the linoleum-top table. Iris stood before her now, waiting for her to look up from her crossword puzzle.

"Halmeoni, these Ray Brown CDs?"

"Donate." She looked up. "Hungry? We need dinner, I think. Getting late."

“I could eat. Here, I’ll do the cooking.” Iris set the CDs on the counter and went to the fridge to assess their options. Her grandmother stood slowly, not one to sit around when a meal was being prepared.

“Good to get up sometimes, all I do is sit. You heat soup, I make some rice.” Iris winced at the thought of hot soup on an already hot day, but took the tupperware out of the fridge anyway. It was more of a stew than a soup, chunky with potato and carrot, splattering Iris as it slopped into the pot. She looked down at her white shirt, now dotted with brown bits at the bottom. Those would probably stain. Too lazy to change her shirt and give it a proper wash, Iris stretched the bottom hem toward the sink’s faucet and ran a few seconds of water over it until the dots faded. She wrung it out, then let it sit, wet, on the waistband of her jeans.

Once the stew had boiled and the rice was ready, they sat down at the table with two steaming bowls in front of them. The sun was setting, but still, the heat oppressed. Iris decided to put off eating by speaking instead.

“I had another dream.”

“Good dream? Or another bad one?” Her grandmother blew on a spoonful of stew.

“Worst one yet. I dreamt that I was in the attic.”

“Sorting boxes?”

“No, there were no boxes. The only thing there was the bass in the corner behind me, but it was around sunset or just after, dusk, and in the light it looked like it could’ve been a person. A man.” Iris’s grandmother put her spoon down.

“Man. Who?”

“I couldn’t tell. It was weird—it was just a bass, but it was also a man. Like it had a double identity. I could feel that it was him, and out of the corner of my eye I swear I could see

him, but then I'd look again and all I saw was the big black case. And then he, or the bass, started walking towards me, creeping up from behind, and I knew it was going to be bad, whatever was about to happen. I could feel it. I was terrified."

Her grandmother was sitting completely still.

"But nothing ever happened. The whole dream, the bass was just walking towards me, coming closer and closer but never actually reaching me. And I was just stuck there, facing away from him. I couldn't move. It felt so much worse than the last dream—nothing was painful, but the whole time I knew that something bad was about to happen and there was nothing I could do to stop it. It was like... like when you swerve your car too hard and lose control of it for a second, and you're careening back and forth... but, no, that's more of an adrenaline rush. It was like... you know when you look over the edge of a skyscraper, that weight that drops in your stomach? But that's not quite right, either. It was like... it was like..." Iris searched her memories of fear, trying to find the right kind. She thought about movies.

"I know. It was like that scene from *The Twilight Zone*. I can't remember the name of the episode, but it's the one with the man who's afraid to fall asleep. In the scene, he's driving his car at night, and he keeps imagining a person in the backseat who's about to kill him. He knows it's not real, but he can't bring himself to look in the rear-view mirror to make sure, because even though he knows there's no one in the backseat, he also knows that until he looks in that mirror, there *could* be somebody in his backseat, and so he's locked in perpetual dread of the moment when he'll look in the mirror and see a man with crazy eyes reaching out to strangle him. Schrodinger's cat, but a horror movie. That's the kind of fear I felt. Trapped. Afraid of the bass, the man, coming towards me, for what seemed like forever." She let out a shuddering breath.

Iris had been so lost in her retelling of the dream, eyes out of focus and on the table, that only when she finished speaking did she see that her grandmother was clutching herself, shaking.

Iris would remember everything about that night for the rest of her life. She would recall the dull cut of her fingernails into her own palms, the tension in her shoulders that held for the several hours they spent at that table and left her sore the next day. She would memorize the words, the exact phrases, that her grandmother used to describe the last ten years of her grandfather's life, like fragments of a dream. *Good brain, gone rotten. Mean, but don't know what he is doing. Worst is after sundown. Day is okay, but every night, so angry... like different person... like book, what is that book? With two men that are one man? Yes, like Jekyll Hyde. He chase me. Some nights, I get away. Hide in attic, lock the door. He bang on it. I stay there all night. Until sun come up.* Iris would remember the droop of her grandmother's eyelids and the tears that rolled out from under them. And the burn of her own tears, hot and acidic, that warped her vision like a desert mirage. And the feel of her grandmother's hand—the skin fragile, like the petal of a poppy, and the grip strong around Iris's fingers. And the ticking of the kitchen clock, cutting apart the silence.

They sat at the table for a long time. Even after there was nothing else to say. A thin layer of sweat formed between their two hands, still holding one another. Their forgotten soups sat at room temperature.

It was dark outside, and the air was finally starting to cool.

Grace Lee

“There are hundreds of Grace Lees. Thousands, probably.” Grace scrolled through Instagram profiles, scanning the small profile pictures for Graces prettier than her.

“So?” said Ethel, glancing over Grace’s shoulder. “Your profile is still just yours.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to be just another Grace Lee. It’s college, everyone uses Instagram instead of phone numbers, my cousin said so. I need to stand out a little.”

Grace kept scrolling. There were all kinds of Graces: Asian Graces, White Graces, Black Graces, ambiguously mixed Graces. A lot of Korean Graces, like her. Someone had once told her there was a documentary about Grace Lees and how common they were. Grace couldn’t bring herself to watch it.

“You’re overthinking it. We’re going to make friends, and they’re going to remember our names. I don’t think Instagram will make or break it.”

“I guess.” Grace tapped through her profile to the Edit Username box.

Grace drafted up name after name until she found one with the right mix—quirky but not weird, something that was easy to say out loud to another person. Memorable. She typed it in and smiled at the green check mark that confirmed its originality: notgracefulintheleest. It was perfect.

Ethel and Grace drove separately on move-in day, each of them with their families, texting each other updates throughout the drive to entertain each other. “Grace, you’re gonna have to bail me

out of jail for murder because if Jeffy kicks me one more time I'm throwing him out the window." "As your friend, I would not recommend you commit fratricide, it'll derail your whole career as a peaceful environmentalist." "True. Must preserve the image of loving all creatures." Every once in a while, Grace would look at Ethel's location in her Find My Friends; Ethel's family had left a half hour earlier than Grace's, so Grace wanted to see if she was catching up. She liked watching the two dots on the map, gliding peacefully down the line of freeway. She wished her dot would speed up, or that Ethel's would slow down, so they could arrive together.

Grace and her parents arrived at her dorm in the late afternoon, roughly half an hour after Ethel had arrived at hers on a different part of campus. Grace opened the door to her room and found that her roommates had already moved in but were currently out. She wondered if they were hanging out with each other.

Her mom sniffled as she hung up Grace's sweaters, her dad welled up at the photos Grace was taping to the wall. Grace pictured her roommates walking in, cool and windswept from whatever excursion they had been on, to find Grace with her weepy parents cooing over her. She asked them not to cry.

They met up with Ethel's family at the diner a few blocks from campus. Their parents were reminiscing loudly about how their girls were "all grown up," while Grace and Ethel snickered over a SpongeBob meme on Ethel's phone.

"He kind of looks like your brother," Grace said. "No offense, Jeffy."

"Oof. Tough one, Jeffy," Ethel said. "Hopefully you'll grow out of it."

Jeffy bounced on his mother's lap, too focused on his ketchup-coated fry to register what they were saying. Grace and Ethel kept scrolling together, and a follow request popped up at the top of Ethel's screen. Ethel wiped it away.

“Have you met anyone cool yet?” Grace asked, trying to remember how many people she had followed on Instagram since moving in. Three? Four?

“I met one of my roommates, she’s really nice,” Ethel said, “and we ran into some other people on our floor. They’re cool, you would like them.”

Grace made a mental note to hang out in the dorm lounge with her roommates once she had befriended them, so they could make new friends together.

“We’ll probably meet a lot of new people at the club fair tomorrow,” Grace said.

“Oh yeah, what clubs do you want to join?” Ethel asked.

“I don’t know. Whatever seems interesting.”

Grace and Ethel walked from table to table, grabbing as many stickers and free snacks as they could carry. They picked up melting popsicles from the Ultimate Frisbee table, snatched trendy stickers from Radio Club, even bought a homemade bagel from the Bagel Boys. Ethel talked to the club members at each table, while Grace picked up flyers with QR codes on them and assessed the people from behind Ethel’s shoulder. She felt that she was good at making these assessments, at distilling a group to its common denominators. The Ultimate Frisbee guys were B-level jocks, vaguely cute until you took a closer look at them, most of them wearing Vans. The Radio people were intimidating, with face piercings and dry humor and expensive headphones worn about the neck; Grace knew they would shit on her taste in music. Most of the Bagel Boys wore nerd-camp t-shirts that hung off their bony shoulders, and none of them stood over five foot seven.

By the end of the club fair, Ethel had convinced Grace to join Hiking Club with her and Grace had taken flyers from at least twenty different clubs. Grace decided to sort through them later and choose which ones to join after looking them up on Instagram.

The first hike for Hiking Club was after the first week of classes. Grace was taking general ed. requirements since she hadn't chosen a major yet. She liked her Media Studies class with the young, stylish professor, but found History of Buddhism and Intro to Moral Philosophy boring.

She met Ethel at her dorm so they could walk to the pick-up spot together. Ethel came down in hiking pants with useful-looking pockets and carried a large water bottle; Grace realized that her high-waisted jeans might not have been the right choice, and she had forgotten to bring water. She didn't want to make them late, though, so they started walking toward the main library to meet up with the rest of the club.

"Aren't you excited?" Ethel asked, taking the stairs two at a time.

"I don't think I've been hiking since we went camping by the river." Grace remembered the gritty mud, the way her feet sank into it.

"Really? We were, like, thirteen," Ethel laughed. "Wait, wasn't that the trip where you fell into the river and your parents had to pull you out by your jacket and—" she was laughing harder now.

Grace groaned. "I didn't need their help, I was climbing out on my own—"

"And your shirt came off and all the boys playing in the river were like, ooooo!" Ethel wheezed out her last laugh, reaching the top of the stairs. "I forgot about that. You spent the whole rest of the day in the tent."

“Yeah, because the mosquitos were awful,” Grace muttered, taking the last few steps to the top. “There better not be any on this hike.”

A few minutes later, they were in front of the library with a group of about twenty others. Everyone was shyly introducing themselves to each other, and Ethel turned to a tall girl with braided brown hair and laced-up hiking boots.

“I love those earrings,” Ethel said to her, pointing at the small silver fish that dangled from her ears. Grace hadn’t seen the fish—she had been looking at the girl’s hands, which were covered in stacks of thin rings. They made her seem older, well-traveled.

“Oh, thank you! I made them.” She beamed at Ethel.

“Wow! That’s so cool. I love fish, I watch a lot of ocean documentaries,” Ethel said.

“Me too! Have you seen Seaspiracy? I stopped eating fish after watching it,” she said, playing with one of her earrings. Her eyes were kelp green.

Ethel’s voice went up in pitch, “Me too! But, I’ll be honest, it was hard to give up sushi.” The girl agreed, and the two of them shared a laugh. Grace noticed that the girl’s dimples were perfectly symmetrical.

“I’m Ethel, and this is Grace.” Ethel gestured to Grace, who smiled back at the girl, wondering if her own dimples were symmetrical.

“Oh my gosh! You’re Grace? I’m also Grace!” She said, her eyes wide open. “What’s your last name? Just so people can tell us apart!” She laughed at her own joke, and Grace gave a small chuckle. This new Grace was White. It wouldn’t be difficult for people to spot the difference between them.

“It’s Lee. What’s yours?”

“Oh my gosh!” The Other Grace grabbed Grace by the shoulders, “You’re joking, you have to be joking!”

Ethel jumped in, “Wait, don’t tell me your last name is also Lee?”

Grace started saying, “It couldn’t be—” but Other Grace cut her off, “It is! My last name is Lee! That’s so crazy!”

Grace grimaced. Another Grace Lee. Ethel and Other Grace were freaking out together, both yelling *No way!* and *Holy shit!* at the same time, each of their voices indistinguishable from the other.

“How do you spell it?” Grace asked. It took a second for Other Grace to realize Grace was speaking to her.

“Oh! Yeah, I guess sometimes people think it’s L-E-I-G-H, but it’s actually spelled L-E-E. Is that also how you spell yours? I mean, obviously yours isn’t going to have a G-H, right, at least, I would assume it doesn’t, but I could be wrong?” Other Grace laughs, and it sounds a little nervous.

“Yeah, it’s L-E-E. Are you...” Grace looked at Other Grace, trying to deduce the origin of her Lee. “Are you Welsh or something?”

“Ooh, close! It’s English. Yeah, sometimes people think from my name that I’ll be Asian, but my Lee is from England. And it means meadow,” Other Grace said, smiling.

“Aw, meadow, that’s so pretty,” Ethel said. “I mean, there are a lot of famous Lees who aren’t Asian—Stan Lee, Spike Lee, Barbara Lee. Grace, remember when Carter asked you if you were related to Barbara Lee?” Ethel turned to Other Grace to tell her that Carter was someone they went to high school with.

“That’s funny. He must not have known what Barbara Lee looks like?”

“Yeah, or he was trying to make a stupid joke,” Grace said, voice flat. She remembered not really knowing what to say to Carter. No, I’m not Black, she’s not Asian, you’re not funny.

They moved on to talking about other things. Majors, hometowns, their first week of classes. Other Grace raved about her Environmental Economics professor, and how local exchange economies were crucial for a more sustainable future. Ethel agreed and spoke about the community garden she organized in high school. Grace wondered how far away the bus was.

The hike was seven miles long and quite steep. At first, Grace tried to keep up with Ethel and Other Grace, listening to Other Grace’s first-week stories. She had already begun collecting wild party anecdotes, and Grace made sure not to give away her own inexperience with drinking by pretending to relate. Other Grace said something about not mixing light and dark liquor, and Grace said “Totally, just like laundry.” Other Grace laughed, and Grace was proud of herself. Ethel gave her a sideways glance, but didn’t say anything.

It had been a while since Grace had done any serious exercise, and she found herself falling further and further behind. Several people behind them, she could hear Ethel telling Other Grace about something Jeffy did and Other Grace squealing “Aww, I want to meet him!” Another handful of people passed Grace and now they were out of earshot, though she could still see Other Grace’s two brown braids, her tanned forearms gesturing with enthusiasm.

Grace was in the back of the group. She tried to enjoy herself—to ignore the poison oak that gleamed at her from the sides of the trail, to not shriek every time she walked into the flyaway of a spiderweb, to be at peace with how tightly her jeans constricted her movements.

The rigid waistband dug into her stomach with every upward step. Her feet were pressing into the toes of her shoes. She was thirsty.

At the top of an incline, Grace took a second to catch her breath. She leaned against the nearest tree, wiping sweat off her neck.

A voice from behind her said, “Welcome to the back of the pack.”

Grace stopped smearing her neck with her t-shirt sleeve. The voice came into view—it was a Bagel Boy. She remembered the hat he was wearing, the one that said “Mathlete” in sports jersey lettering. He had handed her the homemade everything bagel at the club fair.

“Happy to be here,” she said.

“This your first long hike?” Bagel Boy asked.

“You can’t see how experienced I am?”

“Oh, no, the jeans are a classic hiker move.”

“Yeah, I got them at REI, they’re great for sweat wicking and flexibility, look.” Grace got down to do the splits, only she didn’t even get close and instead ended up in a half-bent lunge. Bagel Boy laughed.

“I’m Park,” he said, putting out a hand. “Or, that’s my last name, but it’s what everyone calls me.”

“And your first name?”

“Ernest.”

She took his hand to shake it. “Grace.”

About an hour into it, the hike leaders called for a break in a shady patch of trees. Everyone found a place to sit, on fallen tree branches and in the dried-out grass. Grace started making her way over to Ethel and Other Grace, who were sitting in a circle with a few others, but then Ernest asked her whether she had seen *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and so she sat with him instead, a few trees over. They talked about movies for a bit, until Ernest declared his need to pee on a tree.

After he walked away, Grace realized she was still really thirsty. She thought about getting up to go ask Ethel for some of her water, but when she looked over, she saw Other Grace's hand on Ethel's arm, both of them laughing loudly. Grace became aware of the fact that she was sitting by herself.

She decided to get up and walk around a bit, under the pretense of stretching out her arms. Walking away from the group, she found a clean-looking patch of grass. Grace sat down, brushed away a couple of twigs, and laid down on her back, letting out a breath.

She closed her eyes.

Opened them.

The oak branches above her were twisty, overlapping. The leaves glowed a bright afternoon green.

Her grandparents used to have trees like that in the backyard before they passed away and her parents sold the house. They'd caught the light the same way.

Grace felt as though she was on the edge of something, at a precipice. Her eyes prickled.

"Grace? I think they're calling everyone back now." It was Ernest. Grace sat up quickly, getting a head rush. He reached out his hand to help her up.

"Sorry, must have fallen asleep or something," she said and stood up by herself.

As they continued on the hike, Grace pushed herself to the front of the group, determined to spend some of the hike with Ethel and Other Grace. She was more focused on her breathing than the conversation, but she laughed at Other Grace's jokes and put her hand on her arm.

Before they left, Grace made sure to get her Instagram. It was gracekellee.

The second hike came the following weekend, and Grace was one of the first people signed up to go. She waited by the library, keeping an eye out for Ethel and Other Grace. Two brown braids walked by, but it wasn't her. Grace kept checking her phone—she hadn't heard from Ethel since they had gotten dinner earlier that week. She had asked Ethel then if she wanted to do the next hike together, and Ethel said some sort of yes, like "I'd be down." Now, Grace was wishing she had double-checked with her. Grace thought about looking at Ethel's location, but decided not to. She shouldn't have to stalk her own friend, and if Ethel didn't come, Grace should be able to do this herself. She dropped her phone into her bag. It clanged against her water bottle.

Grace wished she had invited someone else to come with her, one of her roommates or the girl she had met in her Media Studies class... but that girl was a second year, so she probably already had enough friends and wouldn't be interested in Grace as anything more than a study-buddy. And one of her roommates had spent all weekend partying, even Thursday night—she didn't seem like the hiking type. Maybe Grace could have convinced her shyer roommate to come with, but now it was too late.

The bus arrived, and Grace felt a pressure tighten in her chest. She considered walking back to her dorm, but everyone around her had already started to board the bus and it would've been weirder to walk away. She got on and sat in an empty row near the back.

Grace succumbed. She took her phone out, opened up Find My Friends. After swiping twice to refresh it, she finally saw that Ethel's dot wasn't near the library, or in her dorm, or even on campus. It was ten miles away, in some large park. Grace tapped over to Instagram, searched for ethicalethel and looked at the picture on her story. Other Grace, brown hair tucked into a bandana, was holding up a wooden bucket of apples, her dimples even and bright. Posted thirty-six minutes ago.

"Mind if I sit here?" someone said, and she shoved her phone under her leg. She looked up to see Ernest's brown eyes under his Mathlete hat.

"Go for it," Grace said. He sat down, careful not to touch her leg with his.

"So, real hiking pants. You've changed," Ernest said.

Grace wanted to laugh, she knew it was funny, but for some reason all she said was, "People change." It fell flat, sat stagnant in the space between them. She wished she hadn't said it like that.

He tried starting a few different conversations, asking her about her classes and her old high school and her family, but Grace kept giving him dead-end answers. She felt like a dead-end person.

Ernest eventually stopped asking her questions. She took the opportunity to check her phone again, angling it towards the window so he couldn't see the screen. This time she went to gracekellee—there was something on her story, too, a selfie of the two of them, each sinking their teeth into an apple. Other Grace's apple was a pale yellow, Ethel's hair was in two black braids. Posted twelve minutes ago.

The bus finally arrived at the trailhead. The hike leaders took off with Ernest right behind them, and Grace realized that Ernest was the only person she knew there. She picked up her pace to catch up to him.

“What happened to back of the pack solidarity?” Grace tried to make it sound playful, but after saying it, she worried that it sounded accusatory.

“It seemed like you wanted to be alone,” he said.

Grace laughed it off. She tried again to sound bubbly, lighthearted. “Oh, no, I just had to check some stuff on my class website for an essay this week. It’s for History of Buddhism.”

“Oh, cool. What’s the essay on?” He kept his eyes on the trail ahead of them—this one was more exposed than the last, and she wished she had put on sunblock. She could feel her shoulders warming.

“I’m supposed to meditate every day for a week and then write about the experience, but I haven’t really been doing it. Every time I try, I can’t focus, and then I just get annoyed.”

“I get that. I used to feel the same way,” Ernest said.

“You meditate?” Grace was surprised at how immediately this changed her idea of him. He was someone who meditated, someone who had done it for a long time, someone who had advanced beyond her amateur level.

“Yeah, my grandparents were Buddhist, they introduced me to it when I was a kid,” he said. “I was frustrated by it at first, having to sit so still, but after a while I just stopped caring about whether I was doing it right. Like, you’re not doing it for someone else. It’s not a performance. It’s just for you.” Grace looked at him, at the roundness of his head and the flat of his nose, not unlike hers. She wondered if he liked his own face.

“That’s probably a better way to think about it,” she said.

During the first break of the hike, Grace walked a few paces away from the group and took her phone out, opening Instagram to see if Ethel had posted anything else. There was nothing new, and nothing from Other Grace, either. Grace opened the camera on her phone and flipped it to the selfie side. Holding it in front of her, she turned in a three-sixty, looking for an angle that would flatter both her face and the scenery around her. Just when she had chosen the best lighting, she heard laughter from the group—she hadn't walked as far away as she thought she had, and was still fully visible to them. Grace put her phone down, hoping nobody had seen her spinning around. Looking at her surroundings, she spotted a small patch of orange poppies making their way through the rocky dirt. She snapped a quick photo and posted it to her story, making sure to tag the hiking group.

When they all stopped for lunch, Ernest suggested she try meditating. After finding a good-looking rock far enough away, she shifted around, finding the right nook to lean into. She closed her eyes and tried to think about nothing.

Nothing, nothing, nothing. Nothing... Other Grace and Ethel at the orchard. Nothing, nothing... Other Grace's slim fingers and her slim rings... no, wait. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing—two braids, silver fish, "Oh my gosh!"—nothing. Nothing, just clouds drifting on by, nothing and nothing and Other Grace's hand on Ethel's arm. Other Grace's green-brown eyes, Other Grace's long legs, Other Grace's passion for making the world a better place and making friends and making cool climate change jewelry. No—nothing. Nothing, remember? What did he say... Don't perform. It's just for you. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing for you.

Later, when Ernest asked Grace how the meditating went, she told him that what he said had really helped. She didn't think about anything at all.

It's the day of the third hike. Grace and Ethel hadn't spoken since the last one—Ethel had liked Grace's Instagram story of the poppy but didn't reach out beyond that. Grace hadn't reached out, either. She had originally decided not to go on the third hike, but when she saw that Other Grace had linked the hiking sign-ups on her Instagram telling people to “come hike with me!” she put on her hiking pants, filled her water bottle, grabbed a granola bar and walked to the library. She remembered to pack sunscreen this time. Grace rubs the oily stuff onto her face now, sitting next to Ernest on the bus. It feels filmy, expired probably, and gets underneath her fingernails.

Everyone is excited about this trail. It's a steep incline up the side of a mountain, and at the top lies a sweeping view of the valley and forest below. When they start hiking, Grace stays with Ernest, though they don't say much. She wants to continue their conversation about meditation but has nothing new to say, not having meditated since the last hike. Other Grace and Ethel are towards the front of the group again, this time in a bigger pack of people. Grace can't hear their conversation; she can only just make out the sharp, excited notes of Other Grace's voice. Maybe she's talking about fish.

At the break, they're halfway up the mountain. Grace leaves Ernest to look out at the view; she breaks into the granola bar with her teeth, chewing slowly and looking down at where they started. The rocky slope bleeds down into the forest at the bottom, like pimpled skin into hair. Grace sits in a patch of gravel, warm in the open sun, and closes her eyes. She tries again—nothing. Nothing. Nothing. The sound of Ethel's laugh strikes like a bell. Warm becomes hot, and her forehead prickles with incoming sweat. She opens her eyes and rips off another bite.

Before they start walking again, the hike leaders warn everyone that they're approaching the steepest stretch, and that at one point they'll have to cross a stream, so it's best to go slowly. Grace feels the incline in her legs, but this time she's enjoying the burn in her thighs. She pushes

hard into each step. Slowly but surely, she works her way through the back half of the group to the middle. She can almost make out some of the words Other Grace is saying.

They go up and up, zigzagging across the face of the mountain in steeper and steeper increments. When the forest below is looking significantly farther away, one of the hike leaders yells down at everyone, “We’ve reached the stream! Be careful!”

Grace watches as the leaders cross—it doesn’t look very big from below. Other Grace and Ethel are next to cross, Grace can just see them over the heads of the people between them.

She thinks she hears Ethel say her name. *Grace*. But maybe she misheard it, maybe it was somebody else... Then she hears something about a different stream, *a river*... She listens harder, trying to discern Ethel’s voice from the sound of rushing water and other conversations. *She fell in*, Grace thinks she hears. She watches Ethel from afar, tries to read her lips. Grace can’t be sure, but it looks a little like *her parents... shirt came off... boys were laughing...* Grace steps past the person in front of her, trying to hear Ethel better. She and Other Grace are standing on the other side of the river, both safely across, laughing now. Other Grace’s hand is on Ethel’s arm, she’s bent over in laughter, braids flopping, and Ethel’s eyes are full of mirth. Then, and maybe Grace is imagining it, but she thinks Ethel looks at her, looks right at Grace, and then whispers something else to Other Grace that makes them both laugh harder.

Grace splits. She moves as fast as she can, shoving and smashing her way through the people between her and Other Grace. She pushes through her legs, hard, and they’re on fire, it feels amazing. Some part of Grace wonders whether she should apologize as she knocks bodies into the ground, but she doesn’t, she just keeps running towards the river, almost tripping over a rock but catching herself. People are shouting at her now, but she doesn’t notice, all she sees is Other Grace’s face—her dimples are disappearing, and her stupid green eyes look afraid—and

for once Grace doesn't even think about what her own face must look like because in this moment she doesn't care. The stream is bigger than she thought it would be, it's really a river, but it doesn't matter, she leaps anyway, she knows she's going to make it and when she lands on the other side it will be glorious, she can feel the victory—

Her body lands with a violent slap against the water. A bone cracks. Someone screams. A hand tries to grab her arm, but she slips out of their grasp; Grace is pulled by the river, and down she rolls. She tries to swim, but she can't move one of her legs and the current is undeniable. Grace rolls until the river shallows out and takes a turn and she's thrown out of it, tossed onto the rock where she hits her knee her tailbone the crown of her head, she's like a tire blown off a crashed car, ripped rubber, landing in a battered heap.

When Grace is finally still, she is lying at the edge of a grove of trees. She can't feel her body. All she can see are the twisting tree branches above her, the nodes where they touch, and the pieces of sky that lie in between. She thinks about nothing.

Bird Book

Black-footed Albatross (*Diomedea nigripes*)

Family: Diomedidae

Collective: A weight of albatrosses

Sighted: 7/23/03

The only all-dark albatross. Wingspan approximately 7 feet. Diet consists of fish, squid, and fear. Drinks seawater; excretes the excess salt through a tubenose bill. Often follows ships to the ends of the earth, trying to figure out where the ship is going, what it is carrying, how it flies on the surface of the water.

The bird was so large that when it flew high over little Callum's head, the entire world seemed to go dark in its shadow. Like a solar eclipse. His face must have looked afraid, because his father said to him, *Don't be scared, it's just a bird*. Callum wasn't scared. He was six years old and didn't have the right words to describe what he was feeling. If anyone had asked, he might have said that it was the biggest bird he'd ever seen, that it was "cool" or "awesome." But what he really wanted to say was that the bird was impressive, majestic; that the bigness of its shadow made him feel small, in a good way. Like standing in a grove of tall trees.

Callum took out the book his granddad had given him, a field guide to birds of North America. He took great care to not get sand on it, holding it above the beach towel with wide margins between where the book might fall and where the sand threatened the towel's edge.

The book's front cover was blue and featured an illustration of three birds sitting on a green-leafed branch. When his granddad gave it to him for his sixth birthday, they had identified the cover birds together. Each was a different kind of bunting: Indigo, Lazuli, and Painted. Callum was confused and asked why they were sitting on the same branch if they were all from different places. His granddad asked Callum what he thought. Callum considered it for a minute and then said, *Maybe they were all travelling for fun and met on vacation. And now they're becoming friends.* His granddad said, *Maybe they met a long time ago, and now they are old friends who convene on this branch once each year to talk about life.* Callum asked if they all spoke the same language. His granddad said that they had made up a new one for just the three of them to use.

On the beach, Callum flipped through the book trying to identify the impossibly large bird that had flown overhead. He was torn between two: the Great Black-backed Gulls were more common, but in his memory, it had been large and dark enough to be the Black-footed Albatross. Callum thought about asking his father what he thought, but then saw that he was on a phone call several feet away. He looked angry.

A minute later, Callum's father walked back to their spot and his steps kicked a little sand into Callum's book. Callum immediately tried to shake it out, but a few grains had gotten lodged between the pages close to the binding and wouldn't budge. Knowing that his dad would tell him not to, Callum tried not to cry, but he couldn't stop a couple tears from falling out. He sniffled as quietly as he could and let the drops roll down his cheeks, into his mouth. They tasted salty, and this observation distracted him enough to stop feeling sad about the sand in his book. Instead, he wondered if everyone's tears tasted the same.

Later, they went back to the hotel room and Callum's father allowed him to pick a movie. He hadn't let Callum watch TV all vacation—maybe he had seen Callum crying and was trying to be nice. Callum was deciding between a pirate movie and a whale documentary, but he must have been taking too long because after a minute, his dad took the remote and put on the one about pirates. When all the pirates turned into zombies halfway through, Callum wished he had chosen the one about whales.

Wild Turkey (*Meleágris gallopávo*)

Family: Phasianidae

Collective: A raffle of turkeys

Sighted: 11/17/06

Common in open woodlands and forest clearings, where they can hide at the edges and keep watch over the open field. Can fly short distances, but often choose to run from danger. Displaying males have a round, fanned tail and a red-and-blue head that looks as though it was dipped in tempera paints. Males gobble to attract mates. Females are brown—just brown.

Callum thought the turkey's gobble sounded kind of mean, like he was laughing at someone who had tripped and fallen. Leaning out of the backseat window, Callum got up on his knees and stuck half his torso out for a better view. The car was still, the turkeys a few feet in front of them. Callum admired the flat spread of the largest turkey's tail, the simultaneous fear and threat in his small black eye.

His mom was resting her hand on the horn. Callum saw and asked her not to honk, because it would scare them away. Sighing, she took her hand off the wheel and put the car in

park. There was one other car behind them, also waiting for the birds to finish crossing. His mom asked Callum to tell his father that it wasn't her fault they were late.

Callum wondered why the other two turkeys didn't have spread-out tails or colorful heads. He took out the bird book from his overnight bag to look up turkeys. After reading the passage to his mom, she explained that in many species, the males were the ones that got all dressed up to find a mate. *Kind of like how human women put on makeup and pretty clothes*, she said. This made sense to Callum because his mom didn't used to wear makeup before she broke up with his father, but now she did. He asked if she was looking for a new mate. She laughed, hard, and he laughed too, without knowing what was funny. Instead of answering, she told him to sit back down so she could drive again—the turkeys had finished crossing the road. Callum waved good-bye to them and said *gobble-gobble* out the window.

When they arrived at his father's, Callum pictured him with a red-and-blue head and a small black eye. Then he wished he hadn't thought of it. What if it came true? But when his father opened the door, it was just his regular face. After his mom left, Callum remembered to tell him that it wasn't her fault they were late—it was the turkeys, he explained. His father laughed a mean laugh, like he didn't believe Callum. *No, really, there were three turkeys, they were crossing the road*, Callum said. His father said, *What, to get to the other side?* And Callum didn't know if he was expected to answer, so he didn't say anything.

Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*)

Family: Bombycillidae

Collective: A museum of waxwings

Sighted: 10/12/09

Crested, with a black mask around the eyes and yellow tips on the tail. Named for the red wax-like spots on adult wings. Diet consists of small fruits and berries. Becoming more common in suburbs due to the popularity of ornamental berry trees in home landscaping. Travel in large nomadic packs; seldom seen alone.

There were sixteen, no, seventeen of them on the hawthorn tree. Callum counted twice just to be sure. They seemed to be in constant movement, flitting back and forth between branches. One waxwing would land next to another, causing that one to get up and go somewhere else, causing the next one to move, and so on. Callum thought it looked like a big party, like a family reunion or a game of musical perches.

He pointed this out to his cousin, Lark. *Look over there, that one's eating a berry.* Lark looked, but the bird had finished eating by the time he spotted it. Lark asked to see the field guide, and Callum showed him the page with the waxwings. *You can tell that they're Cedar Waxwings and not Bohemians because they have yellow bellies,* Callum explained. Lark seemed impressed that Callum had figured this out, which made him feel good because Lark was three years older and a sophomore in high school.

Callum's mom came out to the porch and placed a rinsed container of blueberries on the table. Looking with his fingers for the firmest berries, Callum asked Lark what he was going to be for Halloween this year. Lark laughed a little, said, *We don't really do that anymore.* Callum didn't know what he meant by "that." Dressing up? Trick-or-treating? Or did they not do *Halloween* anymore? It made Callum sad to think that one day he and his friends might not do Halloween. No dressing up, no walking around with friends, no collecting candy. He loved the collecting—especially the moment when everyone dumped out their hauls on the living room floor, ready to trade and barter. Callum always sorted and lined up his own pieces first, taking

inventory before entering the market, where he would make all kinds of shady deals to secure as many chocolates as possible.

Lark asked Callum what he was going to dress up as, and Callum told him about his idea for a ninja costume. Lark thought it was cool, the all-black look, being able to sneak around like a spy. *Like James Bond. Or Jason Bourne. Or the guy in Mission Impossible.* Callum nodded like he knew who those guys were, but really, he was just excited to wear the mask.

Anna's Hummingbird (*Calypte ánná*)

Family: Trochilidae

Collective: A charm of hummingbirds

Sighted: 5/21/12

Known as “the smallest bird in the world.” Found west of the Sierras. Top of head and throat glow bright red-pink when the light hits at just the right angle. Wingbeat is up to 50 beats per second, which is 3,000 beats per minute, which is over 1.5 billion beats per year, which is an unfathomable speed at which to live life.

See, look, magenta, Callum said to his granddad. *Definitely an Anna's.* His granddad sighed in defeat and agreed. They had been walking on the trail for a half hour or so and decided to take a rest on a cluster of large rocks.

Callum loved these trips to Bishop, especially in the spring. His mom had started teaching him to drive in the grocery store parking lot—he had turned fifteen the week before—but Callum kept getting distracted by the mountains. The way they shifted behind the lampposts mesmerized him. The closeness of the posts made the mountains seem grander and farther away,

and their black paint exaggerated the white peaks of snow. He had almost hit a row of shopping carts, watching the mountains move.

Callum passed his granddad the water bottle. He had seemed sprightly when they were walking, but now, Callum noticed the curve in his back and the skin on his neck that sagged. His expressions were still the same, though, and his face lit up now with the delight of discovery. *Welcome back, Anna*, he said. Callum turned to see the jeweled throat again, then recalled to his granddad what he had read about their rapid wingbeats. Wondering aloud, his granddad tried to picture a hummingbird's conception of time: *Do they move more quickly through the same river of time as we do? Or do they experience a slower ticking of the clock?* Callum had watched a video on relativity for his physics class, and while he didn't understand all of it, he knew that it had to do with gravity. He said to his granddad that since they lived on the same planet and shared the same gravity, they must also share the same experience of time. *I'm not sure I agree...* The hummingbird whisked away, out of sight within seconds. *See? She isn't tied down like we are.*

They saw two more on their way home, suckling at the creamsicle-colored monkeyflowers. Their birdsong was kind of screechy—not unpleasant, but nothing like a robin's pure whistle. More distorted, like it was meant to be heard at some higher frequency.

That night, as he tried to fall asleep, Callum took his own pulse, checking his watch. 74 beats in a minute. He did the math in his head, rounding up as he went along: almost 40 million beats per year. Unfathomable. He started counting, just to see. One... Two... Three... He fell asleep in the seven hundreds.

Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*)

Family: Strigidae

Collective: A stare of owls

Sighted: 12/13/15

Diurnal, arctic owl. Occasionally spends winter in the northern regions of the US. Adults are almost a pure white. Celebrity Snowy Owls include Hedwig from Harry Potter, who leaves the strong impression that seeing an owl is a magical omen. Snowy owls stay silent when they go south of breeding grounds.

When Callum woke up, he couldn't remember how to breathe. Still in the thick of half-sleep, he thought a swallow might help; it left him gasping as though he had just resurfaced from a deep-sea dive.

The room was dark. Callum wasn't surprised by this, as he had been waking up in the middle of the night every so often for the past several months. He was surprised, though, to see a sliver of window to the left of his bed—at home, the windows were on the right. As soon as he had the thought, Callum remembered that they were in Eugene, and that he had spent eight hours the day before in the backseat of a car with his mom and Gavin. His body ached at the memory. Callum stood up to stretch, arching his body from side to side, and then drank from the glass of water on the dresser. He walked toward the window and drew the curtains back to look outside. It was snowing. Lightly, like chalk dust falling down a blackboard. It didn't stick to the ground, just fell and then vanished.

Not really thinking about it, Callum opened the window fully and climbed outside onto the back deck. Someone had left the outdoor light on. Probably Gavin, smoking a night cigarette. Callum looked around and found the orange butts resting in a dish on the bench. For the most part, he liked his recently acquired stepfather—Gavin was kind and well-read—but Callum judged him for his nicotine addiction. He figured, if you knew something would probably give

you cancer, you shouldn't do it. Callum tugged a string to turn the light off and sat down on the bench, facing the yard. Crossing his legs, he felt one hip pop, so he crossed them the other way to pop the other one, too.

Callum's favorite thing about Gavin was that he owned this house in Eugene. This was Callum's second time here; the first time had been over the summer, a full week of biking, rose gardens, and pottery at Gavin's usual studio. Callum remembered it fondly, especially because he'd just taken the SAT, so it felt like a well-deserved rest. But it was a completely different place in the winter. Sitting out on the deck in the cold, Callum thought he preferred it like this: soft, dark, silent.

A noise came from behind the trees, too soft to fully break the silence but just loud enough to be heard. Callum thought, *It couldn't be*. He looked out at the woods by the edge of the yard, trying to spot something round and white, but there was nothing. Only darkness.

The snowy owl was Callum's pipe dream. His white whale. He wanted to see it with his own eyes, to watch its head swivel in that animatronic way. And those yellow eyes—Callum wanted to know what it felt like to be caught by that stare. He imagined it was terrifying.

Snow kept falling. Callum couldn't feel his legs, but he stayed out for another minute, just in case.

Ruddy Duck (*Oxyúra jamaicensis*)

Family: Anatidae

Collective: A raft of ducks

Sighted: 6/16/18

In summer, males boast a rusty brown coat, a lifted tail, and a bright blue bill, while in winter they look more like females with dark brown wings and a lighter brown-grey chest. Diving ducks,

they dip underwater to feed on seeds, insects, even crustaceans. Upon resurfacing, they bob up and down in the water with a surprised look on their face, as though they didn't think they'd be back above water so soon.

What a color.

Callum nodded in agreement. He knew Forrest was referring to the duck's blue bill because it was the most remarkable hue he'd ever seen on a bird, which was saying a lot. It wasn't the color itself so much as how out of place it seemed on the otherwise normal-looking duck. The blue was bright, plastic, like a broken piece of a kids' toy. Callum said this to Forrest, who replied, *It's funny how this naturally occurring color reminds us of something made of plastic, and not the other way around.* Callum agreed, it was funny, not in the way that made him laugh but in the way that made him aware that some contradiction was afoot. This kept happening to him—he would notice something ordinary, like the bed of rocks around a tree in the sidewalk, or the green leaf printed on his paper coffee cup, and it would trigger a line of questions that felt like a snake eating its own tail. Like, was this tree native to the area? Where did these rocks come from? And wasn't the concrete sidewalk made of rocks, too? Why was any of this here if it all came from somewhere else?

Callum and Forrest watched as the blue-billed male paddled under the bridge they were standing on and crossed to see him emerge on the other side, still just as shocking as before. A female appeared a few moments later with three ducklings trailing behind her. Callum thought about making a joke about settling down soon—Forrest was a year older than him and had just graduated from their college—but decided not to, because he didn't want to think about Forrest settling down soon.

It had been Callum's idea to make a couple of stops on the drive from L.A. to Sacramento, where Forrest would say good-bye to his family before heading to Europe for the summer. Forrest had gotten a job in London that started in August, and he planned to backpack around the continent in the months before. Callum was going to spend the summer taking ecology classes at the college. They hadn't talked about it because there wasn't much to say; it was all obvious.

Callum looked out at the clear reflection of sky on the lake, and the ripples that ran off the ducks' trails to distort it. Beside him, Forrest quacked at them. *Ruddy ducks don't usually make much noise*, Callum told him. Forrest quacked again. Callum shrugged, then quacked. *Quack? Quack, quack*. A group of people passed behind them, and Callum wondered if they thought the two boys were quacking at the ducks or quacking at each other. He wondered which effort was more futile.

Nuttall's Woodpecker (*Picoïdes nùttallii*)

Family: Picidae

Collective: A descent of woodpeckers

Sighted: 8/10/19

Small ladder-backed woodpecker with dark rump, spotted sides, and red crown on the males. Common in oak woodlands and chaparral. Call is made up of 15-50 high-pitched *pit* noises strung together in rapid succession, like *pitititit*. Diet consists mainly of insects, which they find by drilling into oaks, cottonwoods, and willows. They make their nests in the trunks and limbs of dead trees, hatching new life inside.

Every time Callum heard a woodpecker's drill, his first thought was, *What a beautiful sound*. The way it seemed to resonate with the whole forest, as though it could be coming from any direction. His second thought was always, *Doesn't it feel awful to repeatedly slam your face into a tree?*

Callum was halfway up the trail to Eagle Rock when he heard the noise, and he stopped to analyze the oak grove beside him. Rather than strain his eyes looking for the bird, he allowed his vision to unfocus slightly, then waited. A tiny red hat moving in his left periphery caught his attention, and Callum smiled at the little bird bouncing up the branch. He opened his book and tried to make the sound. *Pitititit...*? It sounded nothing like the woodpecker's call, and the bird bounced out of sight. Callum wasn't surprised at this—birdcalls did not lend themselves well to being spelled out in letters.

He thought about that trip with Forrest, the lake by the Oceano dunes, the quacking. That had been more than a year ago. At what point was he supposed to have moved on?

Callum tried to think about something else. He remembered the phone conversation with his mom from earlier that morning, and then wished he hadn't thought of that, either. *It's granddad*, she had said. His stomach flipped when she said it, and then he felt some horrifying kind of peace, relaxed by the confirmation that his worst fear had come true. *He's okay*, she'd said. Callum thought now that she had left him hanging for a moment too long. *He just forgot to turn off the stove when he left the house. There was a small fire, the house is mostly okay. I'm going to stay with him for a few days*. Callum wanted to take time off work to go with her, but he had just started at the research lab a few weeks before and didn't think he could get the time off since granddad was, technically, *okay*.

Maybe it was just the incline of the trail, but Callum was having a hard time taking a deep breath. *Worried about his memory*, she'd said. Callum inhaled, and it felt like sifting sand. He turned around and headed downhill.

When he heard the woodpecker again, his first thought was, *All that head-banging can't be good for one's brain*.

Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*)

Family: Parulidae

Collective: A confusion of warblers

Sighted: 9/14/20

Bright yellow rump with yellow side patches. Ability to digest bayberries and wax myrtle allows them to winter farther north and endure colder colds. Song is a soft warble made up of repeated upward notes, followed by repeated downward notes, which sounds a bit like asking and then answering its own question. Call is a single, high-pitched chirp; agile in flight, warbler will sometimes call as it changes direction.

Taking off his two masks, Callum sighed in relief. His ears ached from the pull of the elastic strings. Sitting on the windowsill of the laundromat, he let his body fall into a deep slouch. The scent of several different detergents and softeners wafted out of the place, hitting Callum with an overwhelming wall of clean. It calmed him.

He decided to go for a stroll while waiting for the last load to finish drying. His granddad had wet the bed the night before, so Callum had been here all morning, doing two loads instead of one. Each customer was restricted to using one machine at a time, and only every other machine in the room was available to maintain social distancing.

Callum had moved in with his granddad in May, when his mom finally allowed him to—she had been worried that he would feel isolated in Bishop, all alone with an old, deteriorating man, unable to socialize with anyone else. Callum had argued that he was the best possible caretaker for him, and besides, he couldn't socialize with anyone anyway.

It was mid-morning now, and the streets were bare of people. Only cars passed by, big trucks and small hybrids that had none of the life or energy of human bodies.

A yellow bird crossed in front of Callum, chirping as it swerved around his head. He'd been seeing a lot of the little warblers lately, on the long walks that kept him from losing all sense of time and space inside the house. The bird landed on a young cottonwood planted in someone's front yard. Callum took out his phone and recorded her song, to play for his granddad later. Sometimes that jogged his memory, and Callum would see the clarity of recall in his granddad eyes; Callum would ask him questions about the bird, hoping to keep him afloat for a few moments longer, hoping that it would last long enough to have a conversation. Too often, the light in his eyes faded as soon as the recording was over.

On this day, when Callum got home and played his granddad the warbler's song, he seemed to come back completely. Excited, Callum asked him if he was up for a walk, and soon they were strolling up and down the block. Even through the masks, Callum thought the mountain air was doing more for his granddad's mind than Callum ever could with his trivia questions. His granddad even asked Callum something—*What ever happened to that nice boy, Forrest?* Callum laughed, in shock that his granddad suddenly remembered the name of someone Callum had only mentioned a few times. *Forrest moved to London*, Callum reminded him. And then, to Callum's dismay: *London? What do you mean? There's forest right over there.* His granddad pointed to a cluster of bare trees with a straight face.

Scrub Jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*)

Family: Corvidae

Collective: A party of jays

Sighted: 3/24/21

Crestless jay with white throat, grey back, and blue head, wings, and tail. Omnivorous ground foragers. Often sit high in trees or on telephone wires. Gregarious and extremely vocal, calls are raucous, demanding, obnoxious. Song, typically performed in courtship or when pairs are together, is delicate, whispery, beautiful.

The funeral was in some outdoor amphitheater in Marin that Callum's mom had chosen, which bothered Callum because his granddad had only ever lived there when Callum was a baby. Though, he supposed more people would be able to attend this way, and funerals were more for the sake of the living. And the amphitheater was nice, tucked into an enclave of evergreens. Callum decided he would take his granddad's ashes back to Bishop, to the mountains or the dried-up riverbed.

During his mother's eulogy, Callum was left sitting beside his father. Even though Callum's parents hadn't been together in twenty years and Callum only saw him every few months, it was comforting that he had come. It confirmed for Callum that his granddad had been a respectable man, too respectable to snub by not showing up.

His mother started crying as she spoke, and the tremble in her voice made Callum cry, too. His father moved to hold Callum's hand, and to his own surprise, Callum let him. It was the first time they had ever held hands. Callum didn't like it, exactly, but he also felt that if his dad let go, Callum would float away into the white sky like a helium balloon.

Then it was Callum's turn. Approaching the podium, he heard a loud *squawk*, the unmistakable yelp of a jay. He reached the podium, and again, *Squawk, squawk!* Callum squinted out at the trees, looking for the culprit. He leaned into the mic. *Scrub jay*. A few people chuckled; Callum saw that Lark was one of them.

Callum read what he had written down, fidgeting with the yellow legal pages and doing his best to deliver the pre-conceived phrases with fresh sincerity. *He taught me a lot. Squawk! How to be kind, how to be curious. Squawk! How to listen.* The jay interrupted him at irregular intervals throughout his speech, as though punctuating what he thought were Callum's best lines. *He gave me this,* Callum pulled out the bird book, *so in a way, he'll always be around— Squawk!—to answer my questions.*

Callum sat back down. Looking at the three birds on the book's cover, his grandfather's words came back to him. *Maybe they met a long time ago, and now they are old friends.* Callum thought of Forrest, not for the first time that week—not for the first time that day—and thought about calling him, to see if he wanted to talk about life.

Later, on his way out of the amphitheater, Callum heard what he thought was a different bird entirely. In fact, he thought it was multiple birds, a mix of chirps and gurgles and purrs all coming from different bodies. It sounded like a conversation, like one bird was telling the other a funny story.

European Starling (*Stúrnus vulgáris*)

Family: Sturdinae

Collective: A murmuration of starlings

Sighted: 11/18/30

Originally brought to New York by Shakespeare enthusiasts, now one of North America's most common songbirds. Coat is black and iridescent in summer, dark brown with white speckles in winter. Often live near people, foraging in open, grassy areas and nesting in trees or buildings. Above those open areas, between late fall and the end of winter, they gather in huge numbers to perform something astonishing.

They were in Sacramento, visiting Forrest's parents for Thanksgiving. Arden was four years old, turning five next February. Forrest's parents spoiled her even more than Callum and Forrest already did, giving her the earliest birthday cake ever and complaining that they wouldn't get to see her again until the next summer. Forrest reminded them that it was too expensive to come back to the States more than twice a year, that Arden would get an excellent education for free in London, that Callum needed to be in the UK for his research on barn swallows. Callum let Arden have a second slice of cake.

After dessert, the three of them went on their routine walk. Forrest had come up with these nightly walks, hoping to wear out Arden's seemingly incessant energy before bedtime. Sometimes it worked, sometimes she returned more awake than ever. Now, she seemed to be running off a sugar high, talking animatedly to an imaginary friend several feet ahead of them.

They were walking by a short chain-link fence, which lined the edge of a large, open field. Forrest pointed to a bird that sat atop the fence. It was difficult to make out in the evening light, or maybe Callum needed glasses. *Is that a starling?* Forrest asked. Callum couldn't quite tell, but he remembered the story about starlings and the Shakespeare people. He told it to Forrest: the group had wanted America to have every bird Shakespeare had ever mentioned and brought most of them from the UK to Central Park, including starlings. *The story is actually a*

myth, but however they got here, now they're one of the largest bird populations on the continent. Invasive species.

Callum remembered when he first read about it in the book. He'd read it aloud to his granddad, who responded, *Oh, every bird Shakespeare ever mentioned? Then tell me, where are the nightingales?*

Arden finally seemed to be wearing out. The sun had mostly set, and the sky was a wash of pale evening blue. The three of them turned around to head home, and as they passed the open field Arden let out a shriek. *What, what is it?* Forrest and Callum looked around in a panic for a person or a spider or a dead mouse. But Arden was looking up, laughing now, and when Callum followed her gaze, his mouth parted at the sight.

Hundreds—maybe a thousand—maybe several thousand birds in the air.

Callum knew the word for it, but he was so enraptured by what he was seeing that he couldn't remember it. Didn't even need to. He had never realized how big the sky was until he saw it filled with birds. They formed mysterious, elliptical shapes, like a silk sheet rippling in the wind, forms flowing together and pulling apart over and over again. Different every time. It reminded Callum of the old iMac screensaver, the starburst that swirled in rainbows across the screen. But then he thought, really, it didn't even come close; and watching the thousands of birds in their imperfectly, beautifully synchronized flight, Callum didn't feel the need to compare it to anything else. He just wanted to look.

Spring breaks!

Sunshine SUNshine sun is SHINING no, not like The Shining Jack Nicholson freaks me out in The Shining in One Flew Over even in the rom coms, something about his eyebrows they look pointy and evil, hardly rom or com, and the sun the SUNSHINE today isn't evil it's goodgoodgood. Say it three times and your wish will come true, sunshinesunshinesun, SHINE, spring is here spring is coming spring is around the corner. Shining around the corner. Rays in your eyes, raisin in the sun, dream deferred but coming soon. Raisin in the—hmm, a raisin is already dried, how much more can a raisin dry up in the sun? Maybe he meant a grape in the sun, does it dry up like a grape in the sun, it's like that joke, what do you put in the toaster?

I said, what do you put in the toaster?

Toast! you say.

No, I say, *bread*. Ha. Got you. Got you good.

Toast was once bread, raisin was once grape, all the dried things were once wetter and fresher, even the browned leaves that clatter on the pavement used to be bright and green and shiny. And now the bright is coming the green is around the corner soon the leaves will be smooth and new. Smooth like jazz. Huh, really? Really, smooth like jazz, leaves can be smooth like jazz? Well maybe not but I keep listening to At Last, it's rhythm and blues, the child of jazz, the newer fresher leaf of jazz, and Etta James knows exactly how to slide that note, at laaaast. At last we get to the top note, the top of the slide, and the sliding up is like helium, it defies gravity, gravity like planets but also gravity like graveness, sliding up defying the grave, she takes her time on it on the whole song so it really does feel like, ah. *At last*.

At last, spring has come along, winter days are over. Heart wrapped up in clover.
Greengreen heart, now that's a start. I dream of green, the green seems clean, the green seems
and the green seams and see, it's all stitched together.

The green is almost here. New is coming, spring is bright around the corner! Springing
forward jumping over leaping ahead, like we can't get there soon enough, like we'd skip all the
hours and days to get there right now and nownownow it's almost here I can almost hear the new
smooth leaf coming out of its brittle twig, just a little sprig, but this is big. Rays, peeking past the
corner.

Spring is almost here.

At last.

Snesodyne toothpaste, check. *Camera*, check. *Ultramaax*, ultracheck. *Ektar*, checktar.

Maggie is double-checking her packing list (spring break packing list), typed on her
phone in a sleepy rush the night before when she had one of those oh-no-what-if-I-forget-
everything moments. Inevitably, she will forget something, like her favorite pen or extra
underwear or floss. Good thing her roommate Sol lets her keep floss in the car. The car floss has
saved her from that discomfort of having something stuck in your teeth and not being able to get
it out with your tongue and getting really annoyed about it until you finally dig in there with a
fingernail even though other people are watching—so thank you, car floss. Maggie still needs
laptop charger and *book*. She wraps up the cord, *charger*, check. Now for which book to bring.
She'd normally pack all three she has picked out and then read only the first chapter of one of

them, but by now she knows this about herself, so she'll try to just pack one. Maggie is an avid book buyer and a less-than-avid reader. An avoid reader.

She is staring at the three books: *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hotel World*. Maggie is still staring and deciding when Sol opens the door, forehead sweaty and jeans ripped. A stream of sun comes through behind her, Maggie sees it in the dusty air, wonders why the LA air is always dusty—remembers it's pollution. Thinks of climate change. Wishes she hadn't noticed it in the first place.

Sol walks over to Maggie's packing pile, books and clothes spilling off the coffee table into her suitcase.

Ready? We're late to get Keith and his friend, Sol says, breathing not quite heavy but not light either, she must've run up the stairs to their front door from the driveway.

Yes yes sorry, trying to decide on a book,

Just grab one of them and let's go, we're late and not five minutes late more like twenty minutes late and we don't even know them, I just Facebook-Messengered him that we're on our way,

Okay Jesus one second,

No here just take this one, and Sol stuffs one of the books into Maggie's already full backpack, shoves it roughly so the cover bends out at the corner and the pages ruffle, now Maggie is ruffled, but also Sol is right they just found these guys in the rideshare group a few days ago, probably shouldn't keep them waiting, so she slings the bag on her shoulder and lugs her duffel out the door, Sol locks it behind her, wait, forgot my camera, and Sol groans but opens the door again and grabs it from the table for Maggie, and then they're in the car and Sol is gunning it to the address Keith sent her, car scraping the driveway on their way out.

When they get there, Keith and his friend, what was his name, Ryan, are waiting outside in the bright sun, bags in hand, but they don't seem too grumpy about it. One of them smiles when they pull up across the street. Okay, the other one looks a little bit grumpy, he's wearing his headphones and looking down at the curb. Sol gets out to help them with the bags, but the smiley one hauls them into the trunk himself, *gentleman*, check. Maggie opens her window halfway, offers to help, but Sol is already closing the trunk. The old Volvo creaks from the slam of the trunk and the weight of four people's luggage. Everyone gets in the car. The smiling one slides into the back behind the driver's seat and leans over the middle compartment where Sol keeps the Altoids and lightly used face masks to shake Maggie's hand and says,

Hey, you must be Maggie, right, I'm Keith,

Yeah, hi Keith, nice to meet you,

Likewise, he says. Then he gestures to headphones and says this is Ryan, and Maggie turns around in her seat best she can and says

Hi Ryan, and he takes his headphones off one ear and says

Oh, yeah, hi, his eyes meet hers only for a second. Maggie turns back around, thinking about how Keith said the word 'likewise.' She's never heard someone her age say it, and it reminds her of a late night talk show host, or her grandfather.

Sol buckles into the driver's seat, puts an address into her phone and then gets her sunglasses out of the garage-opener compartment. She tells the boys that they're planning to take the 101 because the five is soul-sucking and there's better food for lunch in San Luis Obispo. Keith says sounds great, Ryan nods, Sol says alright, let's get out of here. Maggie gives a soft woop-woop!

Keith says hey, thanks for responding to my post. You guys are really doing us a huge favor, thank you, and Maggie says

Of course, we'll take the gas money haha. Then she thinks, ah, now he's gonna think we're obsessed with money or we're poor or something, what should I say to make it clear that that's not the case, even though it is true that we could use the extra money for gas because gas is six fucking dollars a gallon, but then Keith says

God, I know, gas is still so expensive,
and Maggie feels better.

About an hour into it they're passing Ventura, it's Saturday morning so the traffic out of LA was actually bearable. Sol is quietly sucking on two Altoids, clacking them together, rubbing the gritty sides against each other and then crunching them to paste. The Volvo speeds through the carpool lane, and Maggie is talking to Keith about music.

So you like jazz, but not R&B, no new jazz? she's asking, after he named people like Louis, Ella, Thelonious.

Well, they're not the same thing, right, like R&B is more a descendant of jazz. Especially the R&B coming out today, it's like the great-great-great-grandchild of traditional jazz, entirely different.

Hmm, traditional jazz, sounds like some kind of paradox, says Maggie, and all of a sudden from behind her, Ryan says

It's an actual genre, traditional jazz, it's called trad jazz, and Maggie says,

Oh. Ryan keeps going,

I mean, it's technically a genre, but most trad players were old white dudes even though jazz originates in Black culture, and also jazz is really all about improvisation which is like the opposite of tradition so yeah, you are kind of right, about the paradox.

Maggie is surprised at how much he's just said. She's also feeling pretty good about herself for being kind of right.

Yeah, that's what I meant, the improvisation stuff, she says. Ryan goes on, headphones all the way off now,

But Keith, Louis and Ella and Thelonious were all bebop artists, so you should say you like bebop if you want to be specific to that era of jazz.

He's in the music school, Keith explains, jazz trumpet. That's why I listen to so much jazz, or *bebop* jazz, because he's always playing it.

Maggie is about to say something like wow Ryan, that's so cool, but as she turns to say it she sees that the headphones are already back on. Oh, well. Sol asks her to open a big metal water bottle and a little bit of water slops out onto Maggie's lap. Sol takes a sip, then another, then hands it back to Maggie and takes off her sunglasses, putting them back in the little compartment. The sun is gone and the clouds have come drifting in, grey ones not white ones, Maggie figures it's too dim for sunglasses.

They've passed Santa Barbara and the dark wash above them is dropping heavy and sparse pellets of rain, the kind of shower that doesn't last long, or comes and goes in unpredictable waves. Keith is talking about how wet it's been this winter, the record rainfalls in California. Sol laughs in her head, ha ha, we're talking about the weather. Maggie says yeah, we're hoping it means good conditions for a superbloom, Sol and I really want to see one. Sol thinks, wait,

talking about the weather is actually a very normal and also interesting thing to talk about, it affects our daily lives and our future ones, of course we talk about it. Keith asks, what's a superbloom? Maggie says, whaaat you've never heard of a superbloom? He says no I haven't, I'm from Boston, must be a Cali thing, and Sol says noooo he said Cali, Maggie says yeah, don't say Cali, everyone thinks we call it that but we don't, only tourists call it that, Keith says well, shit, thanks for telling me, I've only been saying it for three years now. They all laugh.

Here's what Sol says about superblooms:

A superbloom is what happens when the grassy hills of California get enough water but not too much water and there's also enough sun but not too much sun and the seeds have been burrowing in the ground for long enough but not too long, and if all of that happens just right, then the hills turn orange and yellow and purple with wildflowers.

Here's what Sol doesn't say about superblooms:

Seeing a superbloom is spectacular, like a true spectacle, kind of magical. They usually only happen once every decade or so, but I saw the last one in 2019 with mi mamá and it was so beautiful we both cried. We went before sunrise, hiked out to the hills in the dark, and when the sun came up all the poppies opened. They closed at night to stay warm, so when the sun comes out they all open, like a bunch of tiny fists opening their palms up, wide and orange and glorious.

They make it to San Luis Obispo just before Keith's bladder gives out, Sol had offered to pull over on the shoulder of the highway but he insisted he could wait. Now all four of them have peed in the café bathroom and they're sitting at a table waiting for the sandwiches they ordered. It's quiet for a second, Maggie is fiddling with the cross-body strap on her point-and-shoot

camera. She's tightening and loosening the straps trying to think of something to say, until Sol turns to a headphoneless Ryan and asks,

Is your name from a different language or something? I had never seen Ryan spelled that way.

What way? Not R Y A N? Maggie says, confused.

Yeah, it's actually R I O N, my full name is Orion, Rion says. Maggie remembers that Sol is the one who found Keith's rideshare post, it must have had Ryan's, no, Rion's name in it.

Orion, like the constellation? Maggie feels bad for thinking Ryan this whole time, now that she's thinking Rion it's like he's a different person.

Like the guy from Greek mythology, who the constellation is named after, so yeah, also like the constellation, I guess, he says.

I know he was put in a constellation because of some hunting thing, but didn't he also, like, rape his fiancée? Sol asks, tapering off a bit at the end. Maggie makes a yikes face, thinking that his parents should've done more research. Rion grimaces, guess it's not the first time someone's reminded him. He says,

Yeah, and then the fiancée's father ripped his eyes out and threw him off the island, so. Got what he deserved.

They fall quiet as the conversation comes to one of those uncomfortable closes. Nobody says anything else because nobody really knows what to say to comfort Rion in the awkwardness of having a rapist for a namesake. *Don't worry Rion, we don't think you're a rapist!* might not land so well. But nobody has to come up with anything stupid like that because the sandwiches have arrived, phew. They all thank the waiter with enthusiasm, filling their mouths with crusty

bread and oozy mustard-mayo. Someone says something controversial about horseradish, and now they can go back to Rion the person and forget about Rion the name.

They leave the café with full bellies, a little more comfortable with each other now than when they had gone in. Their conversation had moved toward lighter things and they all laughed a couple of times, even Rion, though his laugh is more of a soundless smile-and-bob-your-head motion. It's still raining out as they walk back to the car, more of a light drizzle now, it feels like bubbles of fizzy water landing on your skin. Everything is damp, you can smell the pavement and the bark of the trees planted along the side of the sidewalk.

Maggie lets the other three walk ahead of her and tries to get a picture of their backs walking away, framed against the corner of the sidewalk and the flower shop windows. She stops to take the picture, turning the camera on behind her back so they won't hear the noise and turn around. Then she wonders whether it's weird to take pictures of people you've just met, whether Keith and Rion would mind, but then they land in that perfect window-sidewalk corner and she snaps the picture and figures it's weirder to ask for permission after the fact. It's just of their backs, anyways, and she doesn't publish her pictures anywhere. She speedwalks to catch up.

They pile back into the Volvo. Maggie is driving the second shift, she says it should only be about three and a half hours to Oakland, where Keith is staying with Rion.

They get to a red light on Monterey Street, a few blocks away from the highway onramp, and Maggie sees a tiny figure on the block ahead in a green raincoat facing them, arm out thumb up. Maggie would usually just drive past and wish them good luck, but as they pass the green figure Sol makes out a wrinkled face underneath the hood, sees the rain picking up, and tells Maggie wait, she looks older. Maggie pulls over. Sol turns to the others.

Okay, this might be weird, but do you guys mind if we just ask her where she needs to go, it's probably not that far, she doesn't have a bag with her and she doesn't look crazy, she says.

Keith and Rion look at each other, not immediately saying yes, and Maggie sees their look and says,

Good with me if it's not too far, but if you guys feel weird about it, no worries. Though now Maggie's thinking that it'd be weird to say no since they've already pulled over and confirmed that she's older, so she's glad when Keith says,

No, let's ask her, she looks cold, and Rion nods.

Rion is in the middle seat, pressed up against Keith on his left to try and give Yo more room on his right, not that she needs very much. She's pretty small, not thin exactly but small. Her name is Yo, she introduced herself to Rion and Sol who had gotten out of the car to talk to her, being on the right side of the car. They had put on their best non-threatening smiles and said hi, do you need a ride somewhere because we can take you if it's not too far, and she said, going to Morro Bay, twenty minute away, very rainy day. Sol said great, that's not far at all, we can take you, my name is Sol and this is Rion what's your name, and the woman said yo, and Sol said yes hi, and Rion asked the woman, your name is Yo? And Yo said yes, name the same as greeting, nice meeting, and Sol said, oh! sorry Yo, it's nice to meet you too, and Yo smiled and they all went back to the car.

Now Rion is doing his best to not touch Yo, because there are already four of them and one of her and so he doesn't want to give her the added discomfort of having to touch legs with a stranger. She's still wearing her green raincoat, and Rion feels the occasional drip of water fly off her sleeve and land on his leg. Keith is asking Yo questions across Rion's lap, like what's Morro

Bay like, do you live there, how did you get here. And she's giving him answers, like ocean is lotion, live south of bay more out of way, walked this morning in mourning. (Only everyone thinks she's repeating herself, saying this morning, in morning.) Rion is turning his head back and forth between them, thinks about how observing a conversation is a bit like watching tennis. Maggie says,

You walked? All the way from Morro Bay? (Yo chuckles.) The map says it's thirteen miles.

You must be in great shape, Sol says.

Great shape back on the cape, then we make our escape, Yo says.

The Cape? You don't mean Cape Cod, do you? asks Keith. Rion thinks, ah, here we go, Boston Keith incoming.

The cape with cod and clam chowder, summer was louder, too many tourist so we move west to get rest.

Yeah, Keith says, I used to go stay with my cousins on the Cape every summer, they were always complaining about the tourists. I didn't really mind, though. Rion stops himself from saying, maybe because you were a tourist yourself. They've already argued about this before, there's no point in having the same conversation all over again.

Maggie asks, Yo, you said we? Did you move with your family?

Moved and grooved, always with Gyeoul. Name means Winter and she was sprinter, ran away from snow, she always know.

Gale? Was she your sister? Maggie asks.

Gyeoul. Gyeoul. Not sister. My winter, my lover, she fight with her mother, we leave Busan for Cape, new seascape. She make bread and I sell. Parents I never tell.

That's very brave, Rion says.

She brave. Now she grave.

I'm sorry, he says quietly, so only Yo really hears him. But the rest of them understand too and echo. She nods. A few drops of rain drip down her cheeks.

Is okay. She stay, Yo says, touching her chest where it meets her throat, here.

They get off the 1 and drive through the town, Yo directs them to the street that runs along the water, Embarcadero. Just like the one in San Francisco, Maggie says, by the pier. Yeah, embarcadero means pier, Sol says. Ah.

Keith chuckles from the backseat, looking past Rion and Yo out the window to catch a glimpse of the water, it's a green-grey color under the white sky. He thinks about Cape Cod again, the Atlantic Ocean on the other side of the country, a world away but also just another place where land meets water. Keith notices Yo looking out the window, Rion too, and Sol in the passenger seat, all of them looking for a flash of water between the passing buildings. There's a strip of dunes past the water, too, and boats on the water in between, it kind of looks like a lake. They pass a park and end up in a parking lot. Maggie asks Yo if this would be a good place to drop her off, she nods yes. Maggie parks and they all get out, happy for a leg stretch. Keith twists his torso back and forth to crack his back, relishing each click in his spine. The rain has stopped, but there's still water in the air, and it feels good to breathe it in, hydrating, like lotion for the lungs. Huh. That thought rings a dull bell, but just as soon as Keith thinks it it's gone. Yo walks over to a bench that faces the water and looks out at the boats in the water, the dunes above the boats, and sitting on top of the dunes—

Morro Rock. Hill. Call what you will, Yo says, pointing to it.

More o' rock, more o' sand, more o' the water, too, Keith says in a perfect Scottish accent. Everyone turns to look at him. His cheeks break into a blush, but he continues,

Me family, they're from Scotland, originalleh.

And now they're all laughing, Maggie especially hard, and Keith laughs with them, relieved. He doesn't mention that he also studied accents in his high school drama class, and can do practically any UK accent pretty well. Sol says,

Morro, one meaning of it is nose, or like a nose-shaped hill.

She rolls the rr, and it's like the little o is rolling down the rocky hill, o rrrr o, Keith thinks that's exactly what a hill would sound like.

So they named the hill *hill*, Maggie says, about to laugh again.

El morro se llama Morro, Sol says.

Follow nose, where hill goes, Yo says, facing the ocean.

Nosy hill, Rion says.

Wants to know where she go, why she leave, what she believe.

More o' the winter, more o' the spring, Keith says.

Morro everything. More springing, more singing.

Wait, I see the nose. Or I see a face, there, Maggie points. See those two boats, see how they kinda look like eyes? Everyone clusters around her to try and see what she's seeing. Left eye there with the blue stripe, right eye there a little bit farther, and then the hill is a big nose, it's like a face lying down, like we're standing on the left temple of the forehead.

Rion laughs, says yeah, Sol tries to help Keith find it. All he sees is a really big hill. The wind picks up around them, getting under Keith's shirt and prickling his skin. He sniffles, the cold making his nose drippy.

Nose knows where the wind goes, says Yo, grey hair flying around her head. She looks a little like Einstein, or an angel.

The nose blows, says Keith, rubbing his finger under his nose. Yo's face lights up, she repeats him, nodding,

The nose blows.

And the crows doze, says Rion, pointing to a seagull perched on a boat.

The crows doze!

And the hose flows, says Maggie, looking out at the water.

The hose flows!

And the rose grows, says Sol, a patch of daisies in the grass beside her.

The rose grows!

(And the prose glows, but all the toes froze.)

The four say their goodbyes to Yo. Sol asks Yo about her name before getting in the car, is it short for something? Yo says yes, Yojeong, means wing person. Pixie, can be tricky. Sol says, a fairy? Yo smiles. Sol tells her, Sol means sun, my full name is Marisol but Mamá always said I was more sun than sea. Yo takes Sol's hand in one of her own, pats it with the other. Sol gets back in the passenger seat, and they roll their windows down and wave.

Happy meeting, so fleeting!

They turn around in the parking lot, head back to the street. Sol looks in the rearview, sees Yo walking back to the bench to sit down. She thinks about how if any of them ever sees Yo again, they would get to say, yo, Yo!

By the time they're back on the 101, it's raining again.

Robins. Robbin' robin rockin' robin yes, just like Robin Williams I love him in Mrs. Doubtfire in Good Will Hunting even in RV, which is sort of a good bad movie, but Robin Williams he is always goodgoodgood, he makes you laugh and cry but there's also that one scene in Dead Poets Society where he tells everyone to rip out the pages and at first no one does it but then once people realize he's serious there's this excitement, this energy this oomphness that comes with breaking the rules but for a good reason and he is so good at getting you to feel *that*. Robin Hood, also breaking rules for good. Robyn, dancing on her own. And the robins, today, the robins are out in the yard dancing. Orange bellies, movin' and groovin'. Looking-for-foodin'. A housecat watches them from the window, his green eyes tracking. Soon it'll be warm enough for him to go out and chase, and he'll have a bell on his collar so he won't catch any, they'll hear him coming, but that's okay because he gets fed twice a day by his humans and he still gets to chase and that's what he really loves, the chasing, so he'll just chase and chase until they've all flown away. Soon it'll be warm enough for chasing.

Because now, finally, spring is here, spring has come. The bright is in my eyes the green is turning round the corner the leaves are growing longer, smooth and jazzy and new. The branches have buds, fuzzy and grey, and soon there will be spring magnolias, already there are wildflowers covering the grassy hills, the grassy morros. And ah. At last, the skies above are blue. Then grey, then blue again. Then grey again. My heart is wrapped up in wildflowers.

Oh! And then the spell was cast,

And here we are.

REFERENCES

- On page 14, I reference an episode of *The Twilight Zone* called “Perchance to Dream” written by Charles Beaumont.
- On page 20, I mention the documentary *Seaspiracy*, directed by Ali Tabrizi.
- On page 32, I describe an ambiguous field guide to birds of North America; I drew from my own Golden Field Guide, *Birds of North America*, the 1983 edition. I did all my research on the bird species using this book, as well as the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s incredible website, allaboutbirds.org.
- On page 39, I reference Hedwig, the owl from the Harry Potter series, written by J. K. Rowling.
- On page 49, I reference a myth about Shakespearean birds which I read about in a New York Times article by Jason Bittel, “The Shakespearean Tall Tale That Shaped How We See Starlings.”
- On page 50, I mention two movies featuring Jack Nicholson: *The Shining* directed by Stanley Kubrick and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* dir. by Milos Forman. I also reference lines from the Langston Hughes poem “Harlem.” I also use lyrics from the song “At Last” performed by Etta James; these lyrics come up again on pages 51 and 64.
- On page 52, I mention three books: *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* by Langston Hughes, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by one William Shakespeare, and *Hotel World* by Ali Smith. Smith’s work inspired much of the tone and form of this story.
- On page 54, I mention three musicians: Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Thelonious Monk.
- On page 64, I mention four movies featuring Robin Williams: *Mrs. Doubtfire* directed by Chris Columbus, *Good Will Hunting* dir. by Gus Van Sant, *RV* dir. by Barry Sonnenfeld, and *Dead Poets Society* dir. by Peter Weir. I also reference musical artist Robyn and her song “Dancing On My Own.”

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