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TRUE NORTH

A CREATIVE THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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True North

A collection of short fiction

Leah Christianson

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Mom, Dad, and Jack—home is wherever I'm with you. I couldn't have done this without tugging on our lifeline, regardless of where the other end was tethered.

To the best friends whose lives I shamelessly stole from: I found my beginnings in your shoulder-shaking laughter and my endings in our matching scars. Thank you for the constant pushing and undeserved praise; for welcoming the stories I sent your way and reminding me that there is, in fact, so much more to say.

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The Only Time I Heard My Father Swear

My father, Maurice Daniel, was a good man. He worked on cars and only spoke when necessary. I remember him in smells—crisp and leathery on the days he drove me to school, sweaty and oddly fresh when we worked in his garage, lemony and pressed on Sunday mornings. He filled up rooms. Even when I managed to avoid his heavy-handed back pats, whatever smell he inhabited that day always managed to stick on my clothes until lunchtime.

He didn't like laziness and wouldn't tolerate interruption. I often wondered how my father occupied his time before he had work to fill it, as it was impossible to imagine him without a tool in his hand or a dirty rag over his shoulder. Every weekend there was a new project. If it wasn't cleaning out the gutters it was tarring the driveway, and if it wasn't re-thatching the roof, it was waxing cars in the shop.

“Customers will love it,” he always said.

My mother was a plain woman who spoke less than my father. She worked at the school with the kids with autism and things of that sort. She bought gifts for them at the Dollar Tree and always came home looking tired. Her hair was usually tied up, except when she came downstairs in the morning. Sometime during hastily made scrambled eggs she would pull it back, but the strands around her face always managed to escape as she bustled around the kitchen. My father and I would watch as she flew about pouring orange juice and jotting down lesson plans in her loopy penmanship, sprinkling the pages with little tan dots spilled from a coffee cup packed too full of creamer. She never raised her voice.

Years after I graduated, I ran into an old English teacher of mine at the bar.

“Your mom was the best,” he slurred. “She kept ‘em so calm. I think it was something about her face that helped. Just glad to help anyone, she was. How’d she get to be so good?”

Then he bought me a beer.

It was common knowledge around town that my mother was not my father’s first love. He had been mad over his high school sweetheart, a farm girl whose mother was part Native American. This would have been enough to condemn her in our small-minded town, but my father’s affection and her father’s annually successful corn crop kept her in everyone’s good graces. Apparently, she was a knockout. I’m sure that didn’t hurt.

Anyway, her father had a bad year, as all farmers eventually do. The thing about this particular year was that it coincided with the year my father was meant to leave for school. He was good with numbers, see, and the university downtown had offered him a scholarship. She ran through the town after he told her, crying and swearing. That’s what people say, anyway. It was cold then, early December probably. She didn’t stop when she reached the lake, just kept running out across the ice. December is cold, see, but it wasn’t cold enough.

Our teachers told her story in elementary school. *Don’t walk on the ice unless you’re absolutely certain that it’s solid. Never go alone. Wait until January. February, even. Even if you’re a strong swimmer, you won’t beat the cold. Don’t want to end up like Rebeccah, do you?*

Her name singled my ears as a kid. My father’s love was our cautionary tale. A while back, there was talk of renaming the bay after her but this idea was shot down. Instead, a simple plaque stood watch over the lake where we swam in the summer. I’d always pause to look at it before jumping on my bike and scooting home. I couldn’t remember how I first heard about Rebeccah, or found out that my father drove her out onto the ice. It was something I’d just grown

up knowing, the way you know how to shit on the toilet but can't remember learning to wipe your ass.

Sometimes, when my mother assigned me extra chores on the weekends, I would imagine my life with Rebecca as a mother. The things she could teach me about tracking a deer or sharpening an arrowhead—knowing next to nothing about Native American culture, I was stumped after cycling through what I'd seen on television and cigarette cartons. Still, I felt I was destined for an infinitely more interesting life that I had been cheated out of by hasty assumptions and some thin ice.

My father never spoke of her. I understood why he didn't, but at times I wished he would. I wondered if he ever felt that same pull; if he knew I had taken on regrets I couldn't comprehend. Winters confined the haphazard projects he could toss my way to the garage. There, he'd ask me about things like school and girls.

“Got any girlfriends, Will? Someone you wanna take to the movies or something? Horror, dramatic stuff, those are good for that kind of thing. When you get a bit older, maybe. I took your mother to see that stupid shark one—Jaws—on our first date. She hid her face the whole time. You should try it, son.”

I never knew what to say, not wanting to lie but hating to disappoint. Instead, I'd shrug and continue working, trying to shake off the feeling I got whenever he called me son. It landed too heavily.

He seemed quieter during the winter. Sometimes, I wondered if the silence between us while he changed the rotors on oxidized Chevys was due to other thoughts, thoughts of Rebecca, rather than a quiet ease. Yet every time I worked up the nerve to ask, he would ask me

to check the rear drums, pass him the lathe, or put on a fresh pot of coffee. And the words slipped back down my throat.

High school began, but instead of erasing Rebecca it only drew her clearer. Perhaps knowing that she walked these very halls strung on my father's arm was enough to raise her up. Maybe it was the photograph of her rumored to be hung on the ancient principal's wall. I pictured a girl with long dark hair that reached down her back, mouth stretched into an aching smile as she glided around school's linoleum maze. That is until my mother, on a break between classes or helping one of her students to the bathroom, would waggle her fingers in a muted hello before whispering, "Do you have enough lunch money?" when she passed me in the hall. Maybe I was just lonely.

I made a few friends. As is the case with most desperate friendships, they were based more on convenience than mutual interest. Even so, we clung to each other, just to have someone to share the silence with as we ate our peanut butter sandwiches at lunch. One boy with floppy hair and a speech impediment—Donny was his name, I think—had a father who worked at the liquor store and we would get drunk in his basement off stolen Canadian Club. It was on one of those sloppy nights that the boys and I began to talk about Rebecca.

"Does your dad tell you about her?" they asked, eyes wide and chests heaving.

I told them that he did.

"I heard she was the most beautiful girl in the wh-whole state," said Donny.

"The whole country, man."

"Yeah. The wh-whole country."

My mother picked me up after midnight and didn't say a word as my head bobbed like an enthusiastic marionette. I woke up in the morning with a headache and a glass of water on my nightstand.

After that, my friends and I had something else to intoxicate us. We tracked down every clue we could find, from the little plaque by the beach to the outskirts of her father's old farm. We thought we could feel her on the air currents. We each felt we understood her in some inexplicable way, but I knew that she was really mine. Donny (it may have been Davey) suggested that we go through my father's things in search of a note she might have passed him during class, sitting in the same mundane rooms we occupied while we plotted how best to know the girl who ran into the lake. I'm not sure what we thought it would accomplish, but accomplishing something wasn't what we had in mind. We simply wanted someone to call our own, someone that we knew was capable of the love we had read about as kids. The kind that makes you run through town like a maniac, happier to freeze in a lake rather than spend a summer without the other. The girls at school barely moved out of our way in the hall. We would knock into them just to tell ourselves they noticed, but the truth was they thought more about tomorrow's hairstyle than they thought about us.

I told Donny no. Invading my father's privacy in such a way seemed to be a graver violation than some of the things the boys joked about in the cafeteria. Still, I noticed that the top left drawer of his desk had a lock on it. This picked at me, driving a wedge between my father and I that he didn't understand and I couldn't explain. Whatever was behind that drawer, I felt, held the answers to all the questions my teenage self had concocted. I finally decided that I simply could not go on without knowing the truth about what really happened between Rebeccah and my father.

I spent nearly a month plotting how to broach the subject. Evenings were dedicated to planning how to find time without my actual mother, casually bring Rebecca into conversation, and convince my father to give up every little detail that I knew he secretly yearned to divulge. I was so focused on strategizing that when he asked if I wanted to sand the back porch with him one late afternoon while my mother was out, I almost said no in lieu of brainstorming how to accomplish just that.

We worked in silence for the first hour or so, him with the power sander and me with the broom. The whir and swish blended together like a summer song. Fitting for August, when the days were long and the sun still hung low in the sky.

“What’s in your head, Will?” he asked at one point. “Seems like there’s something on your mind these past few weeks.”

My moment had arrived. I felt everything I had agonized over pooling in the back of my head, clogging my bursting brain. But I asked him anyway.

A history spilled out of me, cataloguing what felt like a lifetime’s worth of frustrations. I rambled on, God knows for how long, posing questions that he couldn’t answer. No one really could. My father listened patiently. When I ran out of air, my hands were white and indented, marked from choking the broom that anchored me to our somewhat sanded deck.

We stared at each other for a while. My father’s face spelled everything between mirth and disappointment. I could see responses forming behind his eyes, each thought chased down by an even graver realization.

“What do you know about Rebecca?” he finally asked in a way that was opposite of mad.

I thought of standing at the edge of a corn farm with withering stalks and the warm breeze that pulled me there. I thought of plaques and cracked ice sculptures and flowing hair. I thought I had a hold, however tenuous, on part of her. I suppose the realization that I didn't was what caused me to slip.

“Why don't you ever talk about her? There's a sign with her name on it not five miles from here and you act like she doesn't exist.”

“She doesn't exist, William,” I never realized how fluid my father's voice was. Perhaps I hadn't heard it enough. He returned to the deck, abandoning the sander for a bumpy brown square and moving on to the railing. His hands moved in small circles, scratching away years worth of weathering. He did not look up.

“Because of you,” I spat. Immediately, I regretted this. My father chewed the inside of his cheek and rubbed his hand across his face, leaving flecks of sawdust in his auburn beard. He finally raised his gaze to meet mine with a look of amused bewilderment that said, *I still have work to do.*

I was only a few years younger than he was at the time, he exhaled. He wasn't stupid, he reminded me. He was waiting, he said, waiting until I was old enough for a real conversation. “Man-to-man,” was the phrase he used. Clearly, I was not ready.

“You talk about her like she's a person in a story, son.”

I hated when he called me son.

“You have to tell me. She could have been my mother, and everyone knows her name, and I don't know anything—“

“Now you listen. Your mother is the greatest woman you'll know, and it would break her heart to hear you say that.”

“But, you haven’t—“

“Enough.”

He sent me away, smelling of cedar and tasting ground enamel. We never spoke of Rebecca again. When I left for college half a handful of years later, I hugged my father tightly and wondered if that unfortunate conversation in August was to blame for my desire to leave home. Whatever the reason, I was happy to go. My mother dabbed at her eyes and held onto me like I was going to war. When I pried her hands off my shoulders, she placed them upon her own, folding herself into a pretzel. I can’t remember what she smelled like, but my father reeked of new mud and old shaving cream. He patted me on the back once more before leaving, and my jacket held onto his scent for weeks.

My mother died in a car wreck twelve years later. It was spring and the flowers were blooming from green specks into purple and white blossoms. She was on her way home from school and there were cupcakes in the backseat, leftover from a favorite student’s birthday party. When we put her in the ground, my father fell to his knees, ripping the earth up in fistfuls and cursing the sky. It took three of us to get him in the car, and I still haven’t forgotten the look in his eyes.

When his heart gave out, I came back to town to pack up the house. It was fall and the leaves began to do just that. But the pictures frames were free of dust, the driveway had been newly blackened, and the cars in the garage were waxed. I raked the yard and called the funeral home and thought about what a stupid kid I was at fourteen. I found a box of keys, in the kitchen of all places, and used them to unlock the place I grew up. When I got to my father’s office, the top left drawer was locked. There was a slight tremble in the pit of my stomach, as my inner

teenager roused himself from hibernation and began salivating at the chance to discover my father's long buried not-so-secrets. So I poured myself a drink that put him back to sleep before opening the drawer.

Inside, I found some thumbtacks and two crinkled movie stubs from a late showing of "Jaws." My birth certificate. Recipes for bland chicken wild rice soup and chocolate cake, scrawled in familiar loops. A yellowing photograph of my father, almost unrecognizable in his glee, with his arms wrapped around my mother—younger than I remembered—as she fell backwards into a thick chest and an auburn beard, hair escaping a hasty ponytail.

I sat on the back porch for a long time after that, smelling the violet winds that used to hold so much. The lake seemed too far of a trek, and the store only held old faces. So instead I watched the yard I'd cleaned grow messy again, and I thought about how falling in love was a bit like jumping into a pile of leaves. That porch was still pretty smooth, all things considered.

I'm a lucky one, I thought, and couldn't remember ever feeling so alone.

It's only now that I've realized. Some loves were made for the bright lights; they get etched in stone and recounted in black and white in all their sticky glory. But others are more quiet, with their cyclicalities and small smiles across the dining room table. And no one will ever know the story of my mother and my father.

Noises

My husband hears noises at night. Sometimes I wake up to find him staring so intensely that I confuse him with another player in the dream I've just quit. One with men in dark suits that have come to tell me something, but as they climb the steps of our house their eyes turn red. Every night they come one step closer. I don't know what it means, and I don't like how quiet he is when I open my eyes. Completely silent, just barely.

Some nights I sleep well. Most nights he doesn't. In fact, I think he hardly sleeps at all. He naps during his lunch break, I know that. A few months back, I thought he was cheating on me because I found a crumpled bill from the Motel 6 around the corner from the car dealership. I drove straight there and watched that parking lot for hours, even after his car had pulled away, waiting for someone else to show. But no one did. Deciding that the other woman must work at the motel, a maid maybe, I drove home and began tearing through his closet to find a clue—a stray hair or the scent of cleaning supplies. He came home to find me crying in a pile of dress shirts. He finally admitted that he got the room because he kept nodding off during group meetings. There was no mid-life crisis, no replacement girl with bad taste in music and perkier everything. He was so tired that he had to book a room just to get some shuteye. His voice got real tight while he spoke and the look in his eye said *please please please*, so I blew my nose on a sleeve and put his shirts in the laundry. That was almost a year ago.

He sleeps better when the sun is shining. On the rare days that he nods off in front of the television, lulled by some football game, he twitches and shivers as though the world he's traipsing through is colder than this. I watch his face, examining the creeping wrinkles that haven't sunk into canyons yet.

Our room is dark at night, save for the window illuminated by the neon glow from the 24-hour Chevron sign. Makes it hard to focus on anything else, so I think of nothing until I get hungry. What I really want is some bacon, even though I know the girls at work think I'm putting on a few. But what do they know, anyway? Fumblefuckin' around in the back all the time, "sorting new inventory," leaving me to deal with persnickety girls that don't know their own bra size. It's enough to drive anyone to drink, but we had to pour the whiskey out. So if I want some bacon, that's what I'll have.

"They're back," he says.

I start to get out of bed but he pulls me back.

"I'll go," he says.

But he doesn't move, not for the next ten minutes or maybe longer. It's so warm in our bed with the wool blankets on my prickly legs and the cotton pillow under my cheek. If I have to get up, I would rather get it over with so I can return to my cocoon as quickly as possible. Or maybe I'll just make breakfast. I think about potatoes peeled thin, fresh fruit, and black coffee. Some days it feels like the only moments that still belong to us are in those mid-morning hours, as we both sip from chipped mugs and read the paper. I bought an automatic coffee maker before things got like this, got bad, and I still hear it click into gear at 7AM every morning. No one bothered to turn the timer off.

"I'll go," he says again.

He's frustrated now, because I won't give him that fight he wants. He can't fight sounds. He can't battle what keeps him up nights. But me, I'm right here, baby. Here, wanting to help. But this is not the way he thinks it should be—his wife chasing his demons away—and when I try, his rage redirects at something more tangible. So I try to keep my mouth shut. We used to go

months without so much as raising our voices. But soon months turned to weeks and then the gap between weeks got shorter and now the fighting happens more than sex. I roll over. The clock tells me that it is too early for breakfast.

“I said I’ll go,” and this one has more bite.

Once, at least fifteen years ago now, I got it in my head to take a road trip across the country. Thought it would be good for us to spend the time, or something. I want to do this. For us, I want to do this. That’s what I told him. So we gassed up the car and packed it full of Trail Mix and Red Vines. What else did we need besides the open road? Problem was, I hadn’t figured in the weather and how quickly it could turn on us. One night, our car ran out of gas on the middle of an empty interstate in Iowa. Always the planner, he pulled a plastic jug out of the trunk and began pouring it into the thirsty car. It pulled at my heart to see him braving the cold alone in his thin jacket, so I crawled out of the passenger seat to stand by him as he refueled our car. Wind almost knocked me on my ass, but he laughed a laugh that wasn’t mean. It was freezing, absolutely, but when you’re laughing even cold doesn’t feel as bad. And I was so in love with our adventure that I didn’t care that I could see my breath in the air, or that his beard felt scratchier than usual when he leaned in close.

“I can do it,” I whisper.

“Well, fine then. If it means so goddamn much to you.”

I nod. It feels icier than that night on the road when my toes hit the floor. We do all right with cold. Instead of turning on the heat, we used to drink to stay warm in the winter. Just enough to make the sheets feel nice as we slid our buzzing bodies under them. Back when his noises first started—has it really been a year? —he thought that a little extra might help, so I kept pouring and he kept guzzling. One night, after an especially bad one, he finished a fifth. I put

him to bed on the couch, but an hour later he was up, eyes wild, careening off the walls. Another man, that's what he became, one coaxed out by depressants poured over ice. I locked the bathroom door and tried not to scream, praying he would realize that whatever it was, it wasn't. It wasn't real, it wasn't here—it wasn't me. Now we drink our Coke without Jack, and it keeps his terror somewhat bottled.

I don't mind, I really don't. If things were different, if the tables were turned, I would want him to do this for me. Although I don't know if I could ask. I have trouble asking for anything, even from those girls at work when I need the extra help out front.

“Sheila, aren't you going? Go. Now, go now.”

If you listen, you can hear it in his voice.

I'm about to brave our uneven staircase when there's a hand on my shoulder. He pulls me back, shaking his head and rushing down, stubbing his toe on the loose floorboard at the bottom that I keep telling him to fix. I crawl back under the covers, tracking his footsteps as they lead him through the foyer, past the automatic coffee pot in the kitchen, all the way to the back door. I'm sure the moon is hitting the glass panes just so, and I'm sure he is standing there, wondering what its light will show him. A handle turns. A creak, a crunch, and a hustle of footsteps confirm. There's nothing there. Of course there's not.

It's still too early for breakfast, but a cup of coffee sounds good anyway.

Heavy footsteps plod back up the steps, more tired than before. I try my best not to berate them, but in my head is a cacophony of insults and placations raging against one another. I can't decide which past version of myself I miss—the one with a loving husband, or the one who was alone. Then I realize how I've shifted back to singular, which answers my question.

Because our lives are so much smaller than I thought they'd be. I sell lingerie and he trades pick-up trucks. There aren't any children. He mows the yard and I pick out new wallpaper for the downstairs bathroom that never seems to be finished. We breathe the same air and usually pay our taxes on time. We eat. We try to sleep.

I should just get up. There's nothing to be found in this bed.

But the blankets are fuzzy, the pillow is warm, and soon he slides back underneath them. He lays still, eyes closed, and for a minute I wonder if he's fallen back asleep without so much as a word. Just as well. In dreams there are open roads and sunshine, Sundays with the paper and things fully felt.

But then he turns to look at me. His face is pinched and his eyes are red.

You know, they tell you about the jerks and the cheaters and the liars and the beaters, but no one ever warns you about the day-to-day. How the sameness can drive you insane. There is something I was supposed to remember for the rest of my life, and I think I missed it. It's completely silent in our room, just barely.

Filling Up

On the day they put Brody in the ground, I held on tight to Daniel's hand. We hadn't spoken in years but as they put his best friend's brother six feet below the dirt, my hand found its way to his trembling fingers. On my other side, Annette sat very still. October had made her pale already, and her eyes seemed even redder against that paper skin. After a while, I grabbed her hand too. What a funny sight the three of us must have made, sitting together as though we were kids again. Ones told that they were grown, holding onto each other in hopes of being anchored in something familiar. Strange, to be meeting again like this.

At the reception, Colton walked around thanking everyone for coming to his brother's funeral. His face didn't seem right, and it bothered me that I couldn't place the difference. I suppose that is what loss does—changes a person in some obvious way that you can't put your finger on.

"You came all this way," he said when he reached me.

"Your tie is crooked," I replied, reaching out to straighten it. He held his wide shoulders back, standing the way Brody tried to. They were Irish twins, but they might as well have been identical. Always the competitor, Brody used to revel in this size similarity. *"I'm coming for ya, Colt! Soon I'll be bigger!"*

I held onto the knot a few seconds too long. Colton didn't seem to mind.

"He would have been happy to see you," he said. *What a strange way to put it*, I thought. A hug seemed like a good idea, but my arms didn't agree. Colton moved along, and I realized that the difference was in the top half of his face. It was frozen, as though it couldn't be bothered to mimic the emotions its lower half pretended to feel.

The church was out west, so Annette and I drove together. On the ride home, we listened to the radio and commented on how short we heard the fall had been. We talked about our lives in other places and felt guilty when we laughed, stopping quickly.

When we got to my parents' house, I waited for Annette to put her car in park and scale its steep driveway with me. This was where we congregated in high school—not only due to its central location, but because my parents had opened up our home to anyone and everyone who was willing to jump in. Having both come from large homes, they hadn't known how to fill the silence when a job transfer landed us in the middle of the country, far away from the wonderful disarray that is extended family. So my friends became their new agents of chaos. Not that they minded. My house was a place of orange warmth and teenage noise. We would sit on the floor of my kitchen and eat peanut butter filled pretzels or watch movies in the basement, sneaking a beer when we could and feeling drunk regardless. If I caught a ride somewhere else—although we rarely found occasion to leave—it was understood that my chauffeur would come inside and endure one of my father's bad jokes while sampling what my mother made for dinner.

“I actually have to get going,” said Annette.

Remnants of mascara had settled below her eyes, drawing spindly webs that could have been wrinkles. *So that's how you'll look in twenty years*, I thought. She was beginning to resemble her mother. *Funny*, I thought. *She's going to hate that*.

“I'll see you tomorrow. We'll get coffee before your flight.”

I wanted to wipe the makeup from under her eyes; to smack her arm and tell her to stop being stupid. We weren't coffee date friends. Her cell phone buzzed—“that'll be work”—she said while reaching for her purse, an Iowa State alumni lanyard tied around its outer strap.

“This is Annette,” she spoke smoothly into the phone and it still wasn't right.

I stepped out of the car and she waved at me through the rolled up window before speeding away. The driveway was steeper than I remembered, but at least it wasn't snowing yet. There were mid-winter days when I'd step out of the car and start sliding back down, grasping at car antennas and air, praying for a gravity-induced deliverance that didn't involve sacrificing my tailbone. Once, Brody's car couldn't make it up the driveway so he and Colton climbed up on their hands and knees. They were drenched when they reached the door. My mother shrieked—*“we HAVE to do something about that driveway!”*—and ordered the boys to *“hand those sopping excuse for pants over”* that very instant. They sat in their boxers for the next hour while she dried their jeans. Brody's underwear was emblazoned with Captain America shields and Colton's ears stayed pink even after recovering from the cold outside.

“Where's Annette?” my mother asked as I walked in the door. I shrugged, slumping into a tall chair that faced our kitchen. I loved its set-up, with counter seating that let you watch whoever was preparing your meal. It offered more appreciation—made the food taste better once it was finally finished. The cabinets and oven framed my mother like an Edward Hopper painting as she stood before the stove.

She opened her mouth to comment, then turned back to her cooking without saying a word. After a few minutes, she shoveled a thick chicken breast onto an empty plate in front of me. It smelled like rosemary, her favorite. She joined me at the counter, carrying two large glasses of wine. The crystal clink from our toast sounded like something stolen, something not allowed and far too old for me. She turned my way.

The second time I knew I loved Brody, he had been in that same spot.

I was home over summer break after my junior year of college. I hadn't planned on being back. But an internship had fallen through and I'd ended up at my parents' place, working odd jobs and wondering how many hours it would take to hitchhike to Florida.

Annette's birthday had been the night before, and halfway through her party Brody disappeared. I'd driven home with a nagging feeling, growing angrier with myself as I mentally shuffled through all the places he could have gone. He showed up at my parents' house the next day while I was washing dishes, striding in like he brought the sunshine.

"How you doing?" he asked casually, pouring himself a glass of water.

"Fine. Fine and dandy," I answered, not looking up from the stacks in the sink.

"Have a good rest of your night?" he asked, taking a seat at the counter.

"Yes."

"Good."

"Yes. It was good."

I poured more soap and sudsy bubbles floated in the air.

"Do you wanna get some lunch—"

"Where did you go?" A cup slipped out of my hands and cracked. "Last night?"

He had somewhere else to be, he said while examining his fingernails. I nodded and took the glass of water out of his hands.

"I'm not done with that."

"Yes, you are."

I put the cup in the sink, careful not to break this one. More bubbles floated by.

"You're mad."

"Yes."

“Why?”

“Oh I don’t know. Actually, that’s a great question. Why would I be mad? Jesus, Brody. I know you’ve got a lot of uncharted vagina to discover, but you could have said goodbye!”

The cup toppled over with a mocking splash.

“Uncharted--?” Brody stuck his fist into his mouth, biting at his pointer finger’s knuckle. He rocked back and forth. He had been sitting right there.

“It’s not funny! Fuck you, Brody, stop laughing! It’s not—“ but I couldn’t follow my own request, and soon we were both laughing so hard that they lost their sound. He stood, wiping his eyes and wrapping his arms around me. I scooped bubbles from the sink and rubbed them in his hair.

“Grace. Are you alright?” asked my mother.

I don’t know what I wanted her to ask, but that certainly wasn’t it.

“I don’t like eating without your Dad,” she continued. “Let’s wait.”

My mother could have whole conversations with herself. And I knew I should respond—knew I wasn’t the only one feeling empty and so heavy all at once—but I couldn’t think of an easy way to say just that. We both reached for our wine, then pulled back.

“How’s work?” she asked, a question normally reserved for my father.

I’d forgotten I had a job. There were things—bills and happy hours and traffic jams—waiting for me in Los Angeles. They were new enough to forget.

We let the chicken grow cold. I’m not sure why we didn’t stick it back on the pan. I guess we didn’t think of it.

The doorbell rang.

I recognized the bulky shadow before I opened the door. Its owner stood there, hands shoved deep in wool pockets.

“That driveway, man,” Colton said. The overhead porch light stretched lengthy shadows down his face.

“Are you busy?” he asked, scratching a pink earlobe.

I turned around to find my mother standing there, my coat in her outstretched arm.

“It’s good to see you, Colton,” she said, hanging in the doorframe for a second before closing it behind us. He stared at the space she had filled, as though someone else had been there. I scanned the street for his car.

“I was out of gas,” he said, turning away.

So we crawled into my mother’s two-door car and I almost felt like laughing when I saw how much space he took up. He used to fit better.

“What?” he asked, and I put the car in drive.

Colton adjusted the seat until it was all the way back and I propped my foot upon the plastic sidebar on the driver’s side. We remained like that for hours as I circled our small town. The radio played the same songs and I thought of all the times we had driven the same roads in high school, debating dance dates and college choices years before.

“My mom won’t stop cleaning,” he said to the dashboard after we passed the high school a third time. “Everything in our house—she keeps wiping it all down.”

When he started to cry, it shouldn’t have surprised me. I suppose I was just used to that big shape sealing itself up, rather than letting anything seep out.

“Do you think...?” he began, never finishing. Right then, I couldn’t think of anything but his mother finding Brody like that, in the bathroom where she had given him baths as a baby and

saw him shave for the first time. I wondered if she ran or if she stayed and stared. As if either option would make it less true.

“It wasn’t so long ago, was it?” he asked. “That we were all here, together. Happy.” He wiped his nose on his sleeve, blurring out a desperate laugh. “That was this lifetime, wasn’t it?”

“I can’t remember the last time,” Colton said, only to trail off again.

The only other time I’d seen Colton cry was at the Wrestling State Championship our senior year. He and Brody both made it to the semi-finals. Brody was going to win. They were both good—great, actually—but Brody was better and it had never been more obvious. I had gone outside for some reason and there was Colton, leaning against the brick wall with tears in the corners of his eyes.

“Shit, Grace.” He tightened his sweatshirt’s hood around his head. “Can’t sneak up on a guy like that.”

“Not what you think,” he continued, shuffling his feet. “He needs this. He’ll win it and they’ll all see and he’ll go somewhere good. Now, it’ll be all right.”

He looked up, eyes like glass.

“I just want him to be good, you know?”

His eyes didn’t look like that now. They wobbled, vibrating in an otherwise granite face. And I realized that the difference in his face wasn’t so internal. There was nothing worth reaction now that the person he’d spent his life protecting was gone. Without Brody, there were no expressions for it to offer.

“I should have called more. I should have let him know,” I said.

Colton shook his head. “He wouldn’t have let you.”

He was probably right. Maybe being together wasn't what we needed. Maybe it was being apart—donning our rose-tinted glasses whenever we looked back.

I hadn't seen Brody since I graduated from college. Only a few years ago, really, but it felt like centuries had passed since I'd been a recent graduate with big plans.

We met at the little bar near my house, and I found it funny that the place we'd tried to sneak into as high school graduates seemed so lackluster this time around. He only had one year of school left but was acting like a freshman, proud of excessive drinking and failed exams. His college was in the South and he had picked up a bit of an accent. When he told me he'd lost his scholarship, I didn't believe it. It wasn't his voice that told me.

Still, when he leaned in, I let him. He was forceful that time, as though my kisses were something that he needed, rather than enjoyed.

"Let me help," I whispered, trying not to plead.

"I don't think you can," was his wilting reply.

That was the first time I hated him, sitting in that sad bar, seeing toughness that sat on him like a tattoo. Unnatural, but there to stay.

He said my name, the "A" too drawn out. It didn't sound safe in his mouth anymore.

After that, I didn't call. I stopped cutting holes in my chest in an effort to fill his. I got angry and stayed that way. *You can't fill him*, I told myself. *He is bottomless*. But he had found the bottom. I never thought sadness had such a tight grip on him. I never thought.

They were still there, those holes, and when Colton's sobs hit a high note I felt their sutures rip. I pulled the car over and rubbed his back, whispering clichéd things in hopes that they would stitch us back together.

He fell asleep eventually, and it wasn't until his heavy breath filled the car that I got back on the road. The streets were empty and that was fine. When we reached his house, I allowed myself a moment before nudging him awake. If I looked quickly enough, I could trick myself into seeing Brody asleep in my passenger seat, as though this were all some elaborate scheme to bring us home. But then my brain caught up and I noticed the sharper jaw line and the extra freckles and the calmness in his face that Brody never found. So I woke him up, enjoying the way his eyelids fluttered before they opened.

Colton fumbled for the door's handle, half-asleep still. I thought about telling him I would call. He crawled out of the tiny car and tapped its hood twice after shutting the door, the way they always used to.

The drive home was short. I probably rolled the window down and turned the radio up, but to be perfectly honest I don't remember a bit of it.

My bed felt too small, but I crawled in anyway. I fell asleep wondering if it was possible to see yourself mirrored in another person, and if sunlight could fade that too.

I woke up to black marks on my sheets. My pillow, especially, was covered in them. I stripped the bed and carried the sheets downstairs quickly, knowing if I didn't wash them soon, the stains would set. They probably already had.

Expecting my mother, I was surprised to see a blonde bob bopping around my kitchen.

“Oh, you’re up,” Annette said, bowl in hand and flour on her face. “Can you point me in the direction of some chocolate chips?”

She turned towards the pantry, ignoring the wad of blankets in my arms.

“There’s coffee,” she called into the laundry room, voice muffled. She emerged from the pantry when I returned, proudly brandishing a bag of Nestle chips.

A thankful mumble escaped my lips.

“Sit,” she demanded.

Pouring doughy circles onto a sizzling pan, Annette hummed a familiar song and swayed her hips along, each move deliberate. If anything, Annette was a girl who took her time.

“How are you?” she asked as the pancakes cooked, fixing me with an iron gaze—her specialty—that did not offer the option of looking away.

“I’m sad.”

“I know. Have a pancake.”

And for the second time in the past twenty-four hours, someone I loved handed me a steaming plate of food. The hot ceramic felt nice on my fingers. Annette passed me a fork, and I quickly shoveled a piece of pancake into my mouth. The chocolate hit my tongue with a surprising sweetness, although I’m not sure what I was expecting.

The first time I knew I loved Brody, I was eating chocolate chip pancakes. We were in an IHOP after the Homecoming dance. Annette was with a boy she didn’t like and pretended to be asleep against the wall. Brody and Colton were debating who could tap their dad out faster. I was still dating Daniel, and he was pouting because I’d made him take his hand off my leg.

“Hold up. Genius idea. Give me one,” said Brody, grabbing a mini pancake off my plate and ignoring my shoeing hands. He wrapped it around one of his Tater Tots.

“You’re a chef now?” Colton said. “That’s not gonna help you keep weight class.”

“Sweet and salty. It’ll be delicious. Try,” Brody said, holding the pancake roll in front of my face while suspending his giant body over the table. I leaned back and he pushed forward.

I’m sure I made a disgusted face and I’m sure I took a bite anyway. But somehow, he dropped the rest of his gooey creation and it fell onto the leg of my dress. It was my favorite shade of purple, and I remember thinking, *“I should be angry, I should be mad, that’s going to stain, look how shiny his eyes get when he laughs.”*

He dunked his napkin in water and ran to my side of the table, cursing as the color rose in his face, apologizing over and over. Our friends laughed as he tried to sponge the syrup off my dress. I knew it wouldn’t work but I let him scrub. When he looked up, I knew it quickly and all at once.

“How are you?” I asked Annette, reminding myself to return the question.

“Oh, my dear,” she exhaled deeply, planting her chin firmly in a cupped palm. “I’m suffering from a very small case of heartbreak.”

She stood, giving her head three little shakes, and headed for the coffee pot.

“Nothing that won’t heal eventually,” she said before filling up my cup.

We finished eating and migrated upstairs. Annette rifled through my closet, picking out an outfit for my flight back to Los Angeles, while I groomed invisible lint from my sheets. The clink of hangers and her mumbles about my lack of fashion sense lulled me into something long gone, something as familiar and comfortable as favorite blue jeans.

“Oh god. You still have all these?” A rustle of plastic and a series of little shrieks pulled me back in time to see Annette unearth a pile of sparkly silk and frilly taffeta, still wrapped in plastic bags. Dressed left over from high school dances—of course my mother saved them all.

“I remember this,” said Annette, peeling the plastic veneer off purple silk. As it slid through her fingers, I recognized the look on her face from when we first plucked it off some sale rack.

“Let’s see if it still fits,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

Arguing with her was futile, so I pulled the dress over my head. Surprisingly, it slid smoothly down my body and flowed cleanly to my feet.

“I think you’re one of the only people who’s gotten tinier since high school,” Annette sighed. “Bitch.”

I stepped in front of the mirror. With my hair scraped back into a messy knot and my face bare of makeup, I looked so young. *Funny*, I thought. When I first wore that dress, I’d felt so old. I squinted at my reflection. The stain was still there, but the tinier I made my eyes, the less noticeable it became. I tightened them still, turning back the years. Soon, I began to look like the girl who found a purple dress so many years ago. So excited to be growing up, as though donning lipstick and silk was all it took. There she was. As if not a day had gone by.

Boat

On Sunday morning, we drive to the boat that my mother reserved for my grandmother's birthday party. It sails on the state's biggest lake—impressive, as our license plates declare we have 10,000 of them. I ask the captain for a life vest for my little girl, but he will not get it for me until everyone else has boarded. When I do not like this, he tells me that this cruise is not just for us and he has to help everyone. He turns away to greet the other passengers, and soon we are just flecks of pepper in the blonde sea flooding the dock. I try to get the captain's attention again, and this time he ignores me. He is a real American idiot who decided he did not like us the second he heard my mother's accent. His stomach is round and hangs over his belt, like Uncle Nicolai's before his heart gave out. I carry my little girl and sit her down on a cushioned bench inside.

I ask one of the serving girls for a life vest, but she only nods at my request. She keeps looking at my mother, who is yelling at the other girl, a brunette, about the parking lot's distance from the boat, how confusing it was to find, and her overall aggravations about life's little letdowns. *"I am disappoint, I am very disappoint,"* she says. She has been angry since she woke up this morning. She has been angry since she was born. I turn to Elaine to complain but she tells me to hush.

Elaine is my wife, a take-charge type of lady. We met at a party at university. I told her that I was new in this country, and she said she was new to this life, the single one. She spilled her drink on her dress, then led me into a room where she pulled down my pants. We have been together since. I used to be afraid of my wife and her forwardness, but as the years have gone by she has gotten fatter, and this makes her soft. I do not much like the homely woman she has become. But she takes good care of our daughter, and that is something I value.

This boat is grand—I will admit that. It is two stories tall with dark wood paneling and a winding staircase that leads to the upper deck. Granted, it only winds once, but there is twirling nonetheless. The carpet is a navy blue, splattered with yellow stars. There are even two bathrooms in the back. Two bathrooms on a boat—imagine! The serving girls wear matching uniforms and now stand at a bar in the back. The top shelf gleams with high quality glassware that high quality people pour high quality liquor into, so they can pay high prices to have a quality time. I find a seat.

The girls walk around taking drink orders and smiling. They reach my family last. The blonde server rolls her eyes after I send my drink back. So what if I want a bigger cup? So what if I do not want ice? It is not my fault this girl is too simple to pour a glass of cranberry juice. I am about to go tell this girl that I do not appreciate her judgment, but Lilly spills the cereal we have brought for her and my mother runs over to fuss.

Lilly. My little girl, my princess. I did not know what love was until I saw her face. Sometimes I wonder how I created something so lovely, this tiny person with a head of bouncy curls. Where her papa has features carved by a knife, Lilly is round and smooth. Her mouth puckers out, while mine is drawn tight. On Fridays, I bring her desserts from the bakery by my office. Rich chocolate truffles, fluffy lemon bars, sticky caramel and coconut concoctions—they all delight her. Sometimes Elaine gets mad and says I have spoiled Lilly's dinner, but I cannot help myself. After Elaine leaves the room muttering, I sneak Lilly sweets and she smiles a toothy smile.

The serving girls set out the brunch and my family goes through the buffet line, piling their plates high with eggs and sausages and waffles and pastries. Lilly wants a plate of strawberries and whipped cream, which I give her, but Elaine makes her take some eggs too. For

protein, she says. I think Elaine should lay off the protein, and the pastries too for that matter. The brunette girl smiles at me as I walk by and I want to be angry because it can't possibly be real. But then I notice her shirt, which has come unbuttoned at the top and now offers a glimpse of skin just below her collarbone. It is just enough to get me thinking about what else hides beneath her blouse. The brunette looks away quickly, and the discomfort flashing across her blue eyes tells me I have been staring. I return to my seat, plate full. How soft her dark locks look, while my wife has dirty straw atop her head.

We travel around the lake while we eat our brunch, looking at the houses of American people with more money than God. Elaine looks resentfully at a mansion that could fit our house on its front lawn, and I cannot blame her because I am envious too. The idiot captain speaks on a microphone, broadcasting facts about the lake and the people wealthy enough to live on its shores. One house is worth forty-five million dollars, he says. Another has a hockey rink in its basement. My mother, who is now seated on my right side, leans over and asks if I remember our basement in Vyborg. *"It felt like an ice rink sometimes, no?"*

Yes, Mama. The cold was another tenant in our house during the winter, slapping us awake in the morning and making us afraid to set bare feet on floors. Even the trees hid, shriveling into crooked wires that only served to hold tiny bits of snow off the ground. When Grandmama moved in with us, I was made to sleep in the basement so she could have the warmer room. On nights when the chattering of my own teeth kept me awake, I would wish for my grandmother to die so I could escape that frozen cave. Terrible, yes. But people do not understand what cold like that can do to a person.

My grandmother is still here, seated on the other side of my mother, watching birds fly above our little ship. She is ninety-five today. Mother has brought a cake, but it does not look

good. The frosting is runny and I can see the sugar crystallizing as it sits underneath its plastic wrapping, slowing coming apart.

I walk up to the bar this time, hoping to talk to the brunette girl. But she leaves for the second level and I am left with the blonde one who is too simple to pour juice. This girl is skinny and smiley, but she has a face like a horse. I order a Bloody Mary and do not leave a tip, even though she gives me all one-dollar bills for change.

My brother, Gregory, chastises me for buying a drink when I return. “*What a waste of money,*” he cries. He produces a flask from his hip and takes a hefty gulp. Lilly crawls onto my lap, and I began absent-mindedly stroking her hair, wondering how much money one must earn before he decides it is a good idea to install an ice rink in his basement.

Suddenly Lilly is spitting and crying. She drops Gregory’s flask and it empties all over her lap. Gregory curses under his breath and grabs it back, but it is too late. Elaine and my mother flock to us in an instant, asking what is wrong, but it is apparent once they see the wet dress and catch the biting scent. Mother yells at Gregory and Elaine yells at me. They are a fearsome team, with the fat wobbling under their chins as they squawk. The dark-haired girl comes up quietly behind my wife, and silently leaves a dry towel on the table next to us. I try to wipe my daughter clean.

Elaine gets Lilly to stop crying by offering her Grandmama’s cake. My mother eagerly runs to cut it, and slaps a big piece down on the table in front of me. It looks even worse than before. Even the strawberries once perched atop the cake have wilted into sickly red blobs. I barely touch my slice, instead watching my family inhale their slimy dessert. I look over to the bar, hoping to get another smile, but the girls are talking to each other and laughing. About us, no doubt. Why would they not? Gregory and his wife argue, flinging their arms wide and almost

smacking people at the neighboring table. My mother mutters under her breath, spooning cake into my silent grandmother's mouth. Elaine licks frosting off her fingers before bending over to reveal a spongy lower back that spills over her pants. I move to pull her shirt down, but she slaps my hand away. I look to my Lilly for solace, but she is busy with her cake.

The girls have finished washing the brunch dishes, and the brunette rolls paper napkins around the now sparkling silverware. She stands behind the bar, working quickly with nimble fingers. She begins talking to Lilly, who has been playing peek-a-boo over the plastic counter. I expect Lilly to run away, as she's usually shy around strangers, but she talks back and even smiles. The girl folds a napkin into a hat and puts it on Lilly's head, giggling along with my daughter. And I am overcome, again, with the urge to take her in my arms and never let her go. I see the way it could have been with her, with any other girl, instead of deciding to stick with the first one that did not run from my thick accent. My friends at home teased me before my family left for America. "*You think American girls will look twice at you? You?*" they laughed. "*If you don't jump in bed with the first girl that lets you, you're a fool.*" Well, I did just that. I jumped right into Elaine's bed and stayed there. But now I do not know if this was what my friends meant. There are a lot of things I do not know anymore.

"Look, Daddy!" Lilly, the only lovely thing, twirls.

Elaine walks over and acts delighted over Lilly's napkin hat. She thanks the girl for her kindness. I watch the sort of smile she gives back. It twinkles. Elaine gives me a strange look as she sits back down, and I wonder if my wife can read my mind. I've considered this before, when she glares at me after I think of how much funnier she was at university or how large her thighs have become. I never say these things out loud, but I get the feeling that my wife knows them anyway. Her eyes get full.

“*Start packing,*” she says and my stomach leaps towards my throat. But then I glance at my watch and see that our two hour boat cruise is coming to an end, and she is simply referring to the small bag of toys we brought along to keep Lilly entertained.

At the dock, the brunette jumps off the boat in one graceful leap, quickly wrapping ropes around thick wooden posts and pulling us close to the panels that will lead us ashore. My family quickly exits the boat. Gregory’s face looks like a ripe tomato. He is drunk at one in the afternoon, and eager to get home and fall into bed. His wife clucks her tongue like an angry hen as he stumbles toward their car, and Elaine rushes to walk with her. These women have bonded over their mutual dislike of our family’s men, and they affirm their aversions whenever they can. Elaine pulls Lilly along, not noticing that I am still on the boat, picking up a toy that Lilly dropped in her rush to keep up with her mother. *I never got that life vest,* I realize as Lilly wobbles on the dock.

My mother helps Grandmama off the boat; a challenge as the uneven boards keep snagging her cane. She looks back for a second and I am struck by the idea that, in all her years, my grandmother has never done anything like this before. After we left Russia, she rarely found reason to leave the house. Her skin is so thin that the sunlight seems to pierce to her bones. I consider grabbing her other elbow and helping her along the rickety dock. But I use the bathroom instead.

When I exit the restroom, the boat looks different. The linens are gone from the tables, the bottles of alcohol have been covered, and a bottle of cleaning solution sits on the counter. The brunette girl stands behind the bar, counting money.

“Oh!” she exclaims. “I didn’t know anyone was still here.”

Her eyes are the color of the sky. I stare for a moment, knowing these few seconds I have are precious, knowing that she will soon ask me to leave her boat. That is, unless I say something that stops her. I wonder if I could convince this girl to run away with me. Elaine would be devastated, of course, but she would find another. An American man who eats at McDonald's and doesn't spill vodka on his daughter's new dress and has enough money to put an ice rink in his basement, or at least buy a decent cake. We would take Lilly, of course, who adores this dark-haired wonder as much as I. Then we would leave forever. Perhaps I could take her back to Vyborg and show her to the men; let them know that I, Alexi, was able to get one of the American girls they said I never had a chance with. She would be the subject of the small talk in my small town, and we could build a small life together there, complete with a garden and a church around the corner. I could stroke her dark hair anytime. And maybe she could love me.

“Sophie—” the blonde girl enters the lower deck where the brunette and I stand, and stops in surprise to see me. The boat has been untied, I realize, and we are drifting away from the dock with them as they travel back to wherever they make port. Sophie moves quickly towards the door, and I understand that she means to tie the boat back up and send me on my way. When she brushes past me, I catch a whiff of flowery perfume and Windex. The boat shudders. I begin to feel claustrophobic. The dock is still close—I can make it. I mutter an apology as I duck past Sophie, open the sliding door, and jump.

And I am submerged by the cold combination of embarrassment and regret in the moment before I hit the water, because I know I should have acted sooner. My family stands on shore—I am sure of it—mother shrieking for her boy, wife shaking her head at her husband, and daughter gaping at the churning water that has just swallowed her papa. I'd like to think that the

brunette is worried about me, but I think I hear faint laughter above the surface. Murky somethings—weeds, I think—grab at my ankles. The rippling ceiling doesn't get any closer.

If only I could get out. If only I could go home. My arms move slower, thickened by the cold. I was never good at swimming. Will no one help? The lake stings my eyes as I take my first gulp. I feel calmer now, and decide that Sophie's eyes are more like water than sky.

Interesting, I think. That my last thought should be of her.

There is a splash, a plunge, a rush of white.

Strong arms force my head above water. I see the dock and feel myself being hoisted upon it. I land hard. The captain crawls out of the water and squats in front of me, his face only inches away. He breathes heavily, water dripping off his nose. I smell tuna on his breath.

“Looks like you were the one who needed that life vest, weren't ya?” he slaps me on the back, but I cannot feel it. The high water rocks below my feet, still trying for my ankles. Heat creeps up my neck.

“Hey, you ok? That was a joke. Say, you hear me? Hey, hey. You don't need to cry.”

But I cannot stop. My head lolls forward onto the captain's shoulder, and I feel a bulky hand press on my back. Trails of heat run down my cheeks. I can't imagine how we look—two soaking men on a splintery dock; me crying into this fat American's shoulder.

“Don't worry,” he mumbles. “Your little girl didn't see a thing.”

Over his sloping shoulders, I see the specks of my family, almost to the car. They haven't noticed my absence. I debate hurling myself back into the water and then realize it wouldn't make a difference.

I tell myself to shake the captain's hand. I ask my legs to carry me away. But my head will not leave his shoulder. Eventually, I stop trying.

That's Twice Now

Earlier in the evening, they had dinner with friends. She made a salad and he picked up a red blend from his usual place. She hadn't liked it. He drank the wine himself. They ate their fill and returned home. Now they sat at the dining room table, facing one another.

"I don't love you anymore," she said.

"I'll get you more wine."

She wiped at invisible dirt on her cheek. He went to the kitchen.

"I don't want any."

He returned with two glasses. They were gifts from her mother. There used to be four, he remembered.

"Alright, Ok. I'll pay someone to fix the end table." He sighed. "Will you, just? Here."

He poured the wine.

"You can keep the table. You can throw it out."

"Did you pay the babysitter?" He pushed the glass towards her. A bit sloshed over its crystal edge.

She waved her hand as though swatting at a gnat, lips pursed. Running her finger along the stem, she cleaned the maroon streaks dripping down. She sucked it dry and made a face.

"You don't—" she began.

"Don't be ridiculous, now." He patted her arm.

"Listen," she said.

There was a small knock at the door, a suggestion. He took a sip.

"Can you believe Denise's pie?" He adjusted his belt.

“We have to talk about the kids,” she said.

“I’ll put some coffee on. She sent leftovers.” He stood.

The wine that escaped her fingers seeped onto the tablecloth. It soaked the cotton and pooled above the waxy film protecting the dark mahogany. There was another knock, insistent now. He lifted the glass to his lips, still standing.

“Jim—”

“I’ll do better.”

“I’m going to stay with Denise and Mark.”

“I’ll do anything.”

“I don’t want anything.”

There was a slam against the door, like something being thrown. In three strides, he reached it. It flung open.

“You didn’t pay me,” said the babysitter, a hefty girl with shaky hands. He knew he should know her, but it took a moment to place her face.

“Your wife said she would be right back. I’ve been waiting in my car. It’s getting late.”

“My wife?” he asked. “Said she would pay?”

He looked to the dining room but the table was empty. The Earth was moving, he realized. He felt it shift under his feet.

“But why now?” he asked. The room echoed back.

“It’s been a while now.” She looked at her watch, as if to prove a point.

“What did you say?”

“Didn’t you hear?” The babysitter recrossed her arms.

“Who do you think—?” He took a step towards her.

The babysitter lifted her chin, exposing blue veins in her pudgy neck. He thought about latching his fingers around it and pressing. He would close out the words. He would tell her that she would never see his boy and the two girls—no, she wouldn't see any of them again. Emma, only three, wouldn't even remember her name. He would push her against the wall of this house that he built—he *built*—up from nothing, where his children slept and his wife made brisket and he stayed up late watching Letterman and drinking gin with lemon, not lime. He would make her feel it all. Then, he would let go.

“This should cover it.” He thrust a fifty-dollar bill her way.

He shut the door. Returned to the empty table. Emptied her full glass into his. A bit more spilled out, splattering the tablecloth again. The stain would be permanent, he knew. Like blood.

“That's twice now,” he said to no one in particular.

Soon, a thumping began. Like something being dragged down steps.

Like Home

We were in the last two weeks of the tour. Most of the band had contracted bed bugs, probably ushered in by one of Mitch's girls. The thing about bed bugs is they don't stay in beds. They cling. Itches would crop up mid-chorus, nearly throwing us off beat. Soon, our arms and upper legs became mountain ranges of white pustule hills and red gorges. We burned our sheets and boiled our clothes but nothing worked.

The band we opened for did not have bed bugs. They rode a separate bus, one with a dark interior and tinted windows. Ours pattered behind, with a big star splashed across the side and windows so tiny you had to stand on chairs to catch glimpses of what flew by outside.

"I think Chantie's into me," Mitch said. "She was all over me after last night."

Chantie was the other band's manager. She wore heels in the morning and had long hair that she parted in the middle of her head, dividing her face perfectly in half. It was thin and flippable, something she showed off when reporters were around. At first, I was happy to have another girl on the road with us, but Chantie made it clear that she had no interest in forming a relationship with a person she couldn't use. Her voice jumped a few octaves when she tried to cajole the lead singer out of his dressing room, and then sank silkily back when there were no egos left to stroke. The safer she felt, the lower it dropped.

"She's pretty," I said. "Sure, why not?"

Mitch was the lead singer. He was lanky and unpolished, as lead singers always seem to be. He wore his shirts loose and his pants ripped, enjoyed dragging his fingers through his hair, and ate peanut M&Ms like they were about to stop production. Now, he sat pulling on a strand

that had somehow grown faster than the rest of his sometimes blonde, always greasy locks. I tossed him a hat, which he ignored.

“Come on, Nance. She’s more than just...pretty. She’s got a fucking washboard of a body. And she has the best stories. That one about scoring with Julian Casablancas? Do you think that’s true? Man. Have you seen the way she gets people to notice her group? She’s like...a hypnotist or something.”

I was distracted by yet another bump forming on my hand. I dug into it, hoping to eradicate the culprit taking refuge under my skin. All I got was a bubble of blood that boiled up between my fingers before angrily popping.

“Go for it. Be hypnotized,” I said.

“That’s gonna scar,” said Mitch.

Things were not perfect. The other band fought a lot. The drummer and bassist wanted a name change. The lead singer did not. Not surprising, as the group was named after him. Melvin Drake & the Lugubrious Sunshines. I supported the name change. The lights guy could never get the beams to sway in unison. Mitch accidentally hit on the other bassist’s girlfriend, and their keyboardist purposefully hit on me. The tour manager didn’t know a major highway in the Midwest was closed and we almost missed our show in Memphis. Chantie fucked a guy from Rolling Stone and chain-smoked for three days when he still wrote a lukewarm review. Walker would get quiet, following a darkness inward that made me wonder what needed destroying beneath his skin. The bugs made Isaac prickly. The other drummer didn’t like being compared to a girl. I didn’t know I’d created a competition.

We were about to leave Pittsburgh. Isaac had returned from an unsuccessful search for the perfect cheese steak, and was now enduring Walker's cackles as he explained that not every city in Pennsylvania sold Philadelphia's signature sandwich. Mitch was missing, almost an hour late. I stretched my arms behind my head, diagnosing the popping noise my right elbow made when I moved it too quickly.

My phone rang, displaying my mother's name on the Caller ID. I ducked into the bus's back room.

"You've got some nerve," the phone said.

"Dylan's not coming," the phone continued, monotone.

"It was cruel to invite him in the first place," it finished before beeping of a signal lost, or maybe something else.

The back room was always poorly lit, turning the two sets of bunk beds into gaping mouths with floppy teeth. My bottom bed was a mess of unmade sheets, so I perched on Walker's instead. His wasn't much cleaner, but at least the blankets were soft. I stayed there until I couldn't distinguish between the dead line's buzzing and the little beat inside my head.

I returned to find Mitch finally returned, pelting Isaac with M&Ms. Walker sat out of range, thumbing through the Yellow Pages. "Who uses these anymore?" he muttered to himself before thumping the heavy book shut. When he spotted me watching him, he flashed a hollow smile. I threw an M&M at him. Instead of lobbing it back, he caught and held it for a while, perched between his thumb and middle finger. Finally, he tossed it behind his head. It escaped out one of the tiny windows and I imagined it falling to the ground and bouncing along for a bit, only to be smashed by the next mass of rubber and steel that drove by.

"We're finally gonna meet your little brother tomorrow, huh Nance?" he said.

I sent Dylan tickets after I found out our last show would be in Manhattan, only a few hours from our mother's home in Albany. *We're only the opening act*, I reminded him. *It's ok if you don't want to come*. He wrote me an email a few days later, composed mostly of exclamation points and capital letters. To actually say that his sister had made a name for herself was enough; he didn't care if it was listed in smaller print. Walker printed it out and taped the message to the bus's refrigerator.

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

Although we had known each other for nearly six years, the boys had never met my family. The four of us met at a small arts college in Oregon, where everyone thought they were musicians and wore jeans expensive enough to look cheap. Albany was farther away than the 2300 miles suggested. Still, Dylan had become an ironic legend among my friends. A drummer with a deaf brother—*well at least he couldn't complain about the noise*, they offered. *How do you know if he even likes your stuff?* Walker teased.

I thought of Dylan sitting with his back to my bass drum, saying he liked how the vibrations felt along his spine. I would play a sixteen count and he would close his eyes. We stayed in the attic for hours, me playing until my arms went numb and Dylan feeling the noise they offered.

He knows his sister wouldn't steer him wrong, I'd answer, before rapping Walker on the head with a drumstick.

Now, Walker watched me, absentmindedly running his fingers along the spine of the Yellow Pages. Up and down they went, grazing over the rips and wrinkles, forgiving every one of them.

"Why haven't we left yet?" I barked.

Chantie appeared, lolling towards us from the dark bus parked a few feet away. Her chilly grin spoke of problems to come.

“Shall we?” she purred.

After she glided away, Mitch turned to us, palms raised.

“Can I get a fuckin’ five? I banged Chantie. Yeah. Just now. No, *just* now. Nothing? Really? All right, then.”

Mitch turned to salute the gray sky.

“It’s been real, Pitts. Onward, New Yahrk.”

The bus shuddered awake and lurched forward, knocking Mitch into a plush chair. Isaac grumbled about being hungry. I pulled the letter off the refrigerator before turning off my phone. Dylan wasn’t calling anyway.

In college, Isaac declared that we were the “Anti-Rock Stars,” and that there would never be a band as relaxed, fun, or in sync as we were together. These were adjectives he’s string together after finishing a box of wine or taking one too many hits from Mitch’s bong.

“Never been better friends than the four, the four, of us,” he would say before flopping onto his bed or into his boyfriend’s arms. “I lub ewe guise.”

There had been a safeness we all understood. It was an ease that made us more comfortable waking up on each other’s couches than we did in our own beds. We knew every inch of each other and plotted the ones we didn’t, filling each other’s flaws and burying the things that hurt. There had been nights that promised and mornings that reaffirmed. And regardless of what was said—as things were both screamed and unspoken—there was always the promise of our four.

But now, I worried. I worried that Isaac had been right, that we had reached the peak of our friendship as drunken undergraduates. A stiffness had descended. Now, Isaac rolled his eyes when Walker buried himself in bed sheets and booze or when Mitch came in yelling about the other bassist spitting on his shoes the night before.

“Grow up,” he muttered, clicking his tongue and sticking his headphones deep into his ear canal.

We sounded, tragically, normal.

Whenever they got like this—Isaac with no feeling, Walker with too much, and Mitch only driven by the one in his pants—I would play.

This was how I’d gotten into music as a kid. Before my mother threw him out, my dad kept a collection of old records in the garage. I realized that playing them loudly enough would drown out any argument. After particularly bad ones, my dad would crawl under the pillow fort I’d built and we would share a cup of silence while John Bonham or Keith Moon drummed the anger away.

I decided I was going to be a drummer in the fourth grade, when Tommy Margolis told me that girls couldn’t keep a beat. My mother refused to get me a set, but that didn’t stop me from taking sticks to tabletops and couch cushions—anything I could smack. While the racket must have infuriated her, what I chose love stung even more. *How can you dedicate so much to something your little brother can’t even enjoy?* she screamed when I brought my first drum set home, paid for by overtime hours at the grocery store. But I couldn’t explain why I loved music any more than she could explain why Dylan couldn’t hear it. Falling for the wrong things was the only thing I did well.

Our bus didn't have a drum set on board. So I sat next to a table near the back, tapping out a tune I didn't recognize, ten years old again.

"God damn!" I looked over to see Isaac scratching furiously at his arm. After a bit, he stood up to grab some vodka and poured a bit onto the glaring lump.

"That work?" I called to him.

But Isaac just sat back down. I watched his caterpillar brows inch closer as they studied a tattered black notebook. Probably some new song of Mitch's about a girl in tight pants with long hair that had no room for a drum solo. Mitch wrote stupid lyrics, but Isaac fixed them with his melodies. He strived for sentiment, while Mitch went for Top 40. What came out was a mix between indie pop and folky rock. For now, it would do.

"We're alright, aren't we?" I asked the air.

Isaac removed his left headphone.

"Did you say something?"

We crossed the New York State line around five in the morning, painfully awake. Walker and I had been steadily drinking since midnight, kept from sleep by a paralyzing sort of boredom. Mitch hunched over his black notebook again and Isaac watched him work, smoking a joint. The sky was a navy blanket stitched with streaks of white gold and the occasional office building. Soon skyscrapers would block it out, but just before sunrise the sky was unbounded.

"Welcome home, Nancy Drew," Isaac lifted the joint my way in a skunky, pseudo cheers.

But we were still a long way from Albany. The show wasn't for hours, and yet I could already see Dylan, eyes glued to the window, counting down to a show he wouldn't see. He got

his license last month. My mother hated driving, I remembered as a white Nissan zoomed by. I wondered who taught him how.

“Mitch!” Walker said suddenly. “Hey, hey Mitch. Let me see what you’re working on.”

“It’s not done.”

“Let me see. Come on. I can help. I wanna see.”

“You’re drunk.”

Walker’s smile spread slowly. He hopped onto a chair and opened the tiny rectangular window. It was so small that only his head fit through.

“I do my best thinking piss drunk!” he yelled to the sky.

The wind commended him, or maybe it just laughed. It whipped through his thick hair and pulled his already stretched cheeks away from his gums. This was when I loved him best. When he could fly along with his feelings, rather than get crushed by them. Although it didn’t matter, really.

Isaac plopped down next to me.

“He’s gonna kill himself doing that.”

I snorted in response.

“Can you imagine? *Bassist dies in freak decapitation by tour bus window*. That would get us on the cover of something.” Isaac had a laugh that ballooned out. We shared an apartment in college and his laughter shook the walls. Now, it blended into the bus’s bouncing.

“What would we say?” said Isaac, eyes twinkling. “We would have to write something. What would we call it?”

“Jesus. Are you really trying to title Walker’s hypothetical eulogy?”

“Well, haven’t you ever thought about it?” Isaac said, picking at the nonexistent dirt beneath his fingernails. “Or at least, your memoirs? Oh, I think about it *all* the time. Is that strange? Well, I find it fascinating. Let’s see. Mitch’s would be...oh I don’t know, something cheesy like, ‘The Art of Leaving.’ Yes, that’s fantastic. He would catalog his life by the women he’s slept with. Can’t you see it?”

We watched Mitch pore over his notebook, yanking at that long lock of hair. Out of all of us, he was the only one who looked truly tired.

“Helplessly adorable,” Isaac said, sighing. “Not that mine would be much better. I’d probably call mine something equally as tragic, like ‘Boys I Should Have Loved.’”

I snorted again.

“Ugh. Stop. You sound like a pig.”

“What would mine be called?” I asked.

Isaac pursed his lips together.

“Well, that all depends on what story you want to tell, darlin’.”

I thought back to winters in upstate New York, angry parents and borrowed cars used to sneak into the city. There were teenage nights spent gathered around plastic cups, with plans that wrapped us up and carried us all the way to this wobbly, town-hopping bus. I saw my spot in the back of the stage behind three bobbing heads. I heard the crowd, whispering and settling in when they recognized their favorite song. Some bounced up and down, while others dug their heels in and waited for it to wash over them, their faces glowing in purples and golds. I felt dark eyes, burning black, asking me to wait. Finally, I was in the old attic, Dylan’s head peeking over the top of my bass drum. I had no idea what I would title my memoirs.

“How is Mitch’s new song?” I asked.

“Oh it’s shit. Completely. But that’s not what’s important.”

Walker pulled his head back inside the bus, black eyes full of the peek-a-boo sun. He clambered off the chair and sat next to me, grinning still. I thought about the things he’d taught me: how to shotgun a beer, to always carry my drink in my left hand, that “someday” can be a poisonous word.

“Don’t look that way, Nance.”

He tapped my cheek, pulling the right side of my mouth into a half-smile up with an insistent finger. He acted like he didn’t savor the perfume I sprayed behind my ear, and I pretended that the world kept spinning whenever he grabbed my hand in the dark. Something bit down on my upper arm, and I slapped at the inevitable lump. My elbow popped in and out.

“Look,” said Walker, holding a bumpy arm next to mine. “We match.”

We hit the city soon after.

We were playing The Rockwood, a venue built of brick and red velvet where everyone was in each other’s way. It was the “new ‘it’ place.” Chantie’s eyes grew more pointed with every band she listed off who had recently performed there.

“The sound is incredible. You can hear the music’s soul in a place like that,” she crooned.

Isaac shot soda out his nose in response.

It was a big deal. But a small part of me had hoped to play a place like the ones I snuck into when I was sixteen, and lay down something that would shake the block in gratitude. I used to live for the venues that you had to crawl up fire escapes to find and always smelled faintly of Chinese takeout. People talked about New York and its glorious bigness, but the city I knew was

packed into tight spaces and smelled of sharp things that made my newly-teened heart sing. It seemed strange to be back and not drum a love letter to my version of New York.

“I’m going to need some coffee,” I said.

“When is Dylan getting here?” asked Walker.

“Don’t be late,” said Isaac.

It was drizzling. Mist dyed gold by street lamps floated down, while stoplights spilled onto the road, forming small puddles of red and green that taxis churned into a murky gray. I cinched my jacket over my head and tried to remember what it was like to feel home.

Coffee shops were littered down every block, but I didn’t stop until I found one with a fireplace. Inside, I found a spot by a window and watched people run from the rain. After a while, the barista offered me a refill and I accepted just to have something warm to hold onto.

Outside, a blind man began to cross the street, tapping his way through traffic. Impatient cars wiggled around him but he moved forward methodically. Flyaway droplets greeted his face when his cane hit puddles. I wondered if he could still hear the tapping, with the water and the traffic’s drone. His hands were slender and pale, nothing like the calloused mitts I knew. I thought about leading him back to my little table, buying him a coffee, and telling him how high the buildings stretched above his head, or that the color green looks different in the rain. I wanted to tell him that I knew how hard it was to miss something, or that I had tried to find out. A black sedan screeched past him and I let out an inadvertent gasp.

I’ll play you a song, I thought. Something with a sixteen count.

“He’s fine,” said the barista.

He stood over the table next to mine, wiping it down with a brown-stained rag.

“Hank,” he said, nodding out the window. “He comes in here all the time. Guy’s like a bat—he hears everything.”

The door to the café creaked open, and Hank greeted the empty space at the counter.

“I’m waiting,” he announced. The barista chuckled.

“Sometimes, I don’t think he needs that stick. Old man makes enough noise on his own.”

The barista returned to the counter, beginning Hank’s drink.

“You using me to start conversations with concerned ladies again, son?” asked Hank.

“You’ve got to get some new material.”

“They’re going to worry about you anyway, Hankie,” said the barista, his goofy smile matching Hank’s feigned crankiness. “I might as well be there to comfort them.”

Hank shook his head, tapping his cane twice.

“People should do a bit more worrying about themselves, don’t you think?”

I caught a glimpse of the clock above the counter. With a leaden feeling, I turned my cell phone on. Three angry voicemails greeted me.

“I told you not to be late,” the recording accused.

I bolted, nearly tripping over Hank’s cane as I rushed out the door. I’m sure his head turned, but we did not see each other before I ran into the rain.

The boys had already left when I got to the dressing room. “What the fuck, Nance?” read a note on the table. “On NOW!!!” Walker’s block lettering screamed.

As I ran to the stage, blinking hard and breathing quickly, I could hear Mitch lulling the crowd into waiting just a few more minutes. Frantically searching for the entrance, I tripped over

a cord and fell through a slice in a dark curtain to my left. Brightness blinded me. Three pairs of eyes were all that existed, each with varying degrees of annoyance and concern.

“There she is! Since I’ve introduced everyone else, this is Nance, our sassy leading lady, or Miss Nancy Drew, as we like to call her. Looks like we solved the mystery of the missing drummer, haven’t we?”

I tapped the cymbals in that way wedding bands do after a particularly bad joke.

“Well, I think we’ve kept you waiting long enough. Here’s a fun one for ya.”

We were going to play a song off our EP—some jaunty unrequited love number that even Isaac couldn’t save. I was meant to start us out by crossing my sticks above my head, as silver-screen drummers tend to do. *And a One-Two, a One-Two-Three-Four!* But as I raised my arms up, all I heard was grating metal and exploding hearts.

I sat, frozen, looking out over the tiny, crowded, venue. Soon every eyeball was trained on me, waiting for my arms to fall. I could see all the boys from my spot in the back. Mitch’s floppy hair was perfectly poised—I could almost see his expectant smile burning through his skull as he clutched the microphone. Walker waited, holding his bass low; ready to start whenever I let him. Isaac, the only one who could see me without completely turning around, moved his hands along the keyboard but didn’t hit any notes. He traced a finger along the “G” note in a circular motion, eyes trained on my face. I didn’t look; just watched his fingers move round and round.

“Play me something fast,” a tiny Dylan requested.

G. Isaac’s fingers moved in a circle. G. Circle. G. O. Go. Bright eyes and forefingers pleaded. My arms stayed pinned above my head, held by an invisible rope, like someone ready to be burned at the stake. I would let them, I realized.

If warmth was what they needed, I'd smile as they set me on fire.

Walker turned, swinging his heavy guitar around with him and causing an electric twang.

"Nance!" Isaac hissed.

My arms crashed down. Then sprung back up. Fell back again. They struck the drumhead and reared back. They began their attack. I cracked down on cymbals; let my sticks attack on the hanging toms. I smashed the snare with my bare left hand and slammed both sticks into the drum's taut surface with the other. That ugly beat—the one normally locked inside my head—poured through my fingers, thrilled to have finally found its way out.

Walker may have yelled something, but it could have just been the bass's thump. The beat kept screaming and I knew the right sound lived somewhere within. But I could not find it—was not ready to hear it—so I played, hoping the hurricane of noise would wash away what I could not surrender to. I pounded, praying I'd never missed a beat; I'd never play it wrong. For a second, I might have believed it. Until the inevitable crack.

The front end of my drumstick went flying, followed by a collective gasp from the poorly lit crowd. What was left looked sharp enough to kill a man, or at least puncture an eardrum.

"Nance?" I heard, different this time.

And I became aware of the air escaping my desperate lungs, the sharp pinching in my right elbow, the growing numbness of my small, small hands.

Every eyeball, wide and white, watched me. The boys faced me too, their faces smooth. People usually focused on Mitch and I didn't know what to do with the attention. So I stayed still, the fourth point of our rhombus, waiting for something to descend. The broken stick shook slightly in my fist.

Then slowly, a clap sounded. Followed by another. They gathered speed, and a few whoops emerged in between. They came raining down.

I went to the bus after we left the stage. I didn't stay to hear Melvin Drake's sad sunshine. The door clattered; I shut it solidly behind me. And I knew that soon my boys would come, pressing urgent palms against a door made of plastic and tin, and I would have to answer when they did. My ankles began itching and I let them burn. I buried myself in blankets and pillows, pretending that I couldn't feel one single thing.

I awoke the next morning to the sound of turning wheels and rough fingers in my hair. The bed across from me was empty, its pile of soft blankets unused. For a long time, I laid still, wondering if the heat at my back was really there. Low mumbles occasionally slipped under the door, mixed with an occasional out-of-tune strum. Finally, a sneeze got the best of me. When it escaped, the arm draped across my waist tensed up. It was not out of fear, and it wasn't offering protection I didn't need. It felt like home, warm and heavy.

"Where now?" I asked without turning around.

"Albany," said Walker into the pillow we shared. The air that escaped his mouth danced on my neck for a while, waiting.

And then.

"Nance?" came his steady voice, in a way that sounded full.