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TROUBLES IN VIENNA

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT
TROUBLES IN VIENNA
BY LINSEY ALI MONTGOMERY

My honors thesis is a collection of short stories that follow a threaded theme of girlhood and coming of age in the post-modern period. Each story takes a deep dive into the social, emotional, and romantic challenges that accompany gender, race, and sexuality with a focus on the maternal and paternal familial bond (specifically from the Black American perspective). The poems focus on mental health struggles while the prose navigates the internal and external pressures of time, identity, belonging, and what is ultimately demanded of characters as they grow.

A thank you to my brother, my grandparents, and my beautiful mother

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1. Ghetto Birds

We grasp at straws with thirsty throats looking to coat and quench

Our stomachs growl and bark like rabid dogs in cages

Not hungry— ravished

Craving to be filled with substance, knowing not what that is or would be

There is no reference for our yearning

Only a feeling in the pocket beneath our lungs

We breathe in and out

And the air tastes funny

We want expansion and growth

The kind granted to somebody's forefathers

Carried like light logs down generations of generations

Down, down, down

Along a river of contentment we'll never touch

Or bathe in

Or swim through

The sun is no mother

No streetlight our friend

And we scavenge for warmth

For hugs that linger;

Arms stretched as far as hands can touch and necks can rest and nestle

But we learn rather quickly
That our nails are too sharp and our skin too rough
We call it self-love in self-defense
Somehow furthest from the self, only prefixing our way
Out of the less forgiving reality that the mind
Won't allow us to accept

We demand a respect we don't ask for
Because we know what they think of us anyway
Loud, disruptive, far far too fast
Too Feral

We scratch and claw and they think it's because we are angry
And we are
At the world, at the air, at the earth, at the gods- At God
Loathing everything above so we can function amongst everything below
And we're scared
We are so so
Scared

We live below. Below we are taught the 'types'. Our types. Ghetto or good. Ratchet or well-read and bred. It's one or the other and they tell us it's a choice. The older voices who look like us and have our eyes and our lips and our deep distinct tone teach us the art of assimilation. "You are better than this." They say as they strip us down to cloth and flesh. Dressing us nicely

in button-ups and ties. Scarves are confiscated. Chains are ripped off. The costume rests on our shoulders like plastic mannequins. We stand in a straight line and the critics pat our black backs and check off the boxes with their skinny black pens.

Below they teach us how to be good. We are told to ask questions. But we're reminded that it is "ask not axe" because we're not stupid but we sound it.

We're not ghetto but we look it. We prefer the huge low-hanging hoops with our names engraved in the vacant hole. We mold ourselves like play dough and accessorize like little Lego men. In our eyes, we are Barbie though we're handed big-lipped Bratz. We like those too, but Ivy's mom says they're for fast girls.

We're just as carefree as the opposites. But they're bold and we're wild. Their messy buns make Target ads, ours tell the world we are unloved. That's why we hide behind the scarves and the gold and the chewing gum and the lipgloss. Our small throats are megaphones. "We may not be loved but we love ourselves" we tell the the world. We don't know if we believe it.

"I say we leave"

"Leave to where?"

"I don't know I thought you'd have something in mind."

"You have too much faith"

The air is warm and we bask in the sun like old junkyard dogs, out of view of the school security guard. They let him carry a gun. 4th period started 20 minutes ago but we do this every other Wednesday, sometimes Thursday too if we're feeling risky, and no one ever looks for us. We have the same last name on the roster so Mrs. McClain assumes we're sisters although we've told her before that we're not. We don't even look alike. It pisses me off but Alicia finds the bright side.

“If we both don’t show up she’ll think ‘mom’ kept us in for a sick day or something.”

She laughs.

Annoyingly, Alicia has a point and she always does. She hates to see the bad. As it turns out that's all I see. Which works in both our favor. If I saw the world as peachy keen as she does we’d be two blind mice leading each other to a cheese trap.

“Yeah, I guess,” I reply. The wind kicks up a bit and we sit in silence listening to the leaves clatter together like pom-pom tassels. I liked the outdoors. On the weathered staircase behind the main building, we talk and laugh and play hangman on tattered notebook paper. Safe from the long lectures, the wads of paper in our hair, and Mj Parson who enjoyed flashing himself at us from underneath his desk. But there was still something in me that wanted to be found. Our invisibility made me feel vulnerable. The classroom was a shit-show but the world outside the wired gates of the school sounded much worse.

“Can’t we ditch, London?” I can hear the restlessness in her voice. Something tired and worn possesses her. For as long as we’ve known each other, I am the one who makes the decisions. Where we go, if we go. What we do- if that’s in the cards. She’s always allowed me to take the reigns. When we first began skipping class I made sure to set ground rules.

“No inviting people to skip. Just you and me.”

“So Cash can’t come with?” Alicia had a crush on Cash. Cash’s older brother gave him Rice Krispy edibles to sell during lunch. Alicia didn’t know edibles meant weed and accidentally got high one schoolday. I stayed with her for two hours in the big stall as she freaked out in the girls’ bathroom. I didn’t like Cash much.

“No, sorry,” I never had the heart to kill her dreams, “He’s cool but he’d draw too much attention. 3’s a crowd.”

She writes this down in her pink spiral notebook. “And no leaving the campus,” I add.

“If we skip, we stay here.”

“Not even for food?”

“Not even for food.”

We skipped for months and Alicia never questioned me or budged against our rules. She almost worshiped every word I spoke. I think that's why I liked her. If the rolls were reversed I'd like to say I'd do the same. But she's looking at me with doe eyes now and I don't know how much longer I can hold her off. I choose my words carefully.

“Say we ditch. Then what? Where we finna go?”

“I dunno. We could hop the back fence and take the bus down to the park. Get something to eat.”

“Then what?” I feel my eyes roll. This isn't a bad idea, why was I being difficult?

“Ugh. I don't know, London! Why do I always gotta be the one to come up with stuff?”

“Cause you suggest it!”

She's quiet. I can tell she's thinking of another way to persuade me off the perch like a small bird to his peer who flutters and tweets as a way of saying, “Look how fun it is over here off the wire! *I* sure wouldn't want to miss out on how much fun this is!” It's cute and I bask in the moment where I am the tiebreaker in a decision for two.

“What if we just go to your place?” She finally suggests.

“You already know that's not an option.” I'm stern with my words and she shifts. The truth is she doesn't know. I've never explained and she's never asked. But today she blurts—

“Why?”

“What?”

“I said, ‘Why’” I take a second to look at her eyes before I curse her out for questioning me. That’s what mamma does. When I stick my foot in my mouth she always looks at me first, gauging how hard she’s gonna hit me. I can never tell what rubric she uses to determine it. I’m left with a mark every time.

“Your mom does know I exist right?” Alicia continues. I can tell she’s hitting the brink.

“Yes, of course she does”

“Then what is it? Why do you act like it's such a big secret for me to come over? Or even hang out outside of this place. What are you hiding?”

“Nothing!”

I was telling the truth. It wasn’t something I was hiding from Alicia. It was something I was hiding from the world. That if anyone took one look at us walking outside they’d know. Peering right through me and into my soul. They’d feel the way my heart raced at the sound of her laugh. They’d see the way my eyes lingered on her lips when she talked. My mother especially.

“You do like boys, right?” She confronted me in JCPenney when I told her I wanted khaki pants next school year instead of a skirt.

In this place, were just two girls in a uniform. The same in all the ways but one that not even I know for sure. Outside we become something more. I’m not ready for more. I might not ever be.

“If you’re so ashamed of me, why do we even hang out?”

“I’m not ashamed of you, Alicia”

“Then what is it?” And I can’t come up with the right words in enough time and I think I’d need a lot of time.

“I’ll just go without you.” She stands up in defiance. The wind blows at her plaid skirt as she packs her sparkle pen and notebook in her book bag. She’s angry. She’s beautiful.

“Go where?” I say, but she’s already walking out of earshot toward the back fence.

“I’m starving,” She turns around and gives a tilt of her head. “Are you coming or not?”

2. I am my Mother’s Keeper

I am a memory foam mattress

Her hugs absorb my skin and I'm branded

God's Gift of Life

I am Love and now,

I am worthy.

I am Jaqueline's mended heart

Grounding her with the reality of my being

I was born to breathe and cry

To live and die

I am Mommy's backyard trauma

Mommy who speaks in soliloquies

Who lives in monologues

Needy and broken

A one-woman act

Her life is the play that never ends

Intermission only when footing is lost

And the stage falls through

When the curtain closes

And you get up to leave, hesitant

You didn't pay for this show, you didn't really even want to come

But you made it this far and your popcorn is cold and untouched

So you stay

and pray

the curtain slides open once more

And it does

Though not as gracefully as when the play began

The orchestra has gone home and the conductor lies dead at the foot of the stage

In his eyes, there is a scattered light that lifts to Jackie center stage

With tears in her eyes, she bows and twirls

You throw her flowers and applaud

Because really

that's all she wanted in the first place

You're a prop

a plot catalyst

Happily, reluctantly so

You don't know which is first

She exits stage left and comes back in a hat

You grab a different seat and prepare for Act II

3. Best American Girl

“You’re coming to Kaylee’s birthday party, right?” Julie whispered.

This was the burning question. The elephant in the elevator. The moment of truth that would be the rise or demise of June's 5th-grade social life. She felt the eyes of the other girls at her group table peer into her soul with anticipation.

"Yeah, I'm gonna come. I gotta ask my mom but I'm sure she'll say yes."

June wasn't sure. In fact, she was certain her mom would shut down the request before the words escaped her mouth into the air of their tiny apartment.

"You got your doll already too, right?" June nodded, approving the lie. She made sure to keep it a steady nod so as not to alert anyone of suspicion. That she did not have an American Girl Doll. That she did not have any dolls for that matter.

Julie shifted her attention to the other girls. "*My* grandma just bought me the Caroline doll! I have it in my backpack so I'll show you guys at recess". She smiled pretentiously as they giggled and cooed at the prospect of the white, blonde, Chucky-sized doll.

June shrank in her seat and began to plan in her mind how she'd:

1. Get her mother to agree to let her go to the birthday party
2. Get The Doll.

She didn't even like dolls. That was what she told herself when she and her mom would walk through Walmart. "We're only here for essentials", she'd be warned with a knitted brow and when her mother turned her back, June would sneak down to the toys and electronics aisle and caress her hand across the hard heads of the little plastic people. She wished she had hair like that. Soft and synthetic and silk. Bone straight follicles that filter between the fingers like beach sand.

"Why can't I have an American girl doll?" June finally asked when they made it home. It came out more whiny than June had intended. Her mother sat the 5 heavy plastic bags down on

the duel kitchen table/study desk. She chuckled dryly before sighing, “We’ve gone over this, Junie”. June let the words linger in the room, expecting her mother to add more reasoning behind this statement. That they didn’t have the money, that it was too expensive, and anyway, June just got a brand new set of colored pencils on Christmas last month.

But June already knew all of this and so her mother didn’t elaborate. Save them both the embarrassment. “It’s not that I don’t want you to have one, June. It’s just not the right time.”

Her favorite line. It said no without being final. But it was never the right time for things involving money. She wanted to tell her daughter she was sorry. But apologizing would be admitting fault she didn’t think was hers to carry. This was just the hard reality for families who fall under a certain tax bracket. The sooner June learned this, the easier disappointment would be going forward. “When I was younger, I really really wanted a Cabbage Patch Kid”, June’s mom started.

“Did you get one?” June was hoping there was a happy ending to this story. That her mother would reminisce about her own childhood toys and want her to have the same.

“No, I didn’t”. Her mother frowned a bit at the memory she thought was distant. She didn’t think she could resent a part of her life so long ago. “But, I got something better”

Don’t say family, June thought.

“You.” Her mother turned to June with a painted, closed-mouth smile. She walked over and submerged her hand into her daughter’s tight curls until she reached her scalp. It was warm as she began to massage and lightly comb through the kinks with her fingers. “You’re my doll, Junie” She kissed her forehead. “My little cabbage patch.”

Untangling her hand from her daughter’s hair, she walked back to her task in the kitchen. She surveyed the bare fridge. They had enough milk to get them through the rest of the week.

Only 4 more slices of bread though. She'd save those for June's sandwiches and she'd heat up some ramen for dinner.

June shuffled over to the couch and slumped, accepting defeat, "But..."

What if I get the money? She thought to ask. Or *I can pay you back when I get older. I'll get a job I promise.* But as she watched her mother ponder the cabinet shelves, she had a feeling she'd one day be doing the same thing. Not laughing and cooing over shiny, new things like the girls in her class, who looked so much like their own mothers, mimicking the subtle twang of the elite. Their mannerisms in the same vein of vanity. She wanted to know what that felt like. She had to.

"Can I still go to Kaylee's party on Friday?" She thought she'd take a long shot.

"Sure. You have a ride? I have a shift Friday."

"Uh, yeah I can get one". Her mother didn't look over at her but nodded in confirmation and June beamed quietly, giddily kicking her feet beneath her. It was Tuesday night which meant June had T-minus 2 days to find a doll to bring to The Party.

Wednesday morning in homeroom, Kaylee passed out the invitations. They were teal blue and pink with the American Girl logo almost the same size as Kaylee's own name. The importance of the theme was now very clear to June. This wasn't just a slumber party with dolls. This was a doll party where there happened to be sleeping bags and fluffy pillows- also items June didn't own.

"Don't forget to bring your doll's books! We're gonna do a show and tell after we cut the cake." Kaylee reminded the girls as they flipped the cardstock from front to back.

The invitations were beautifully made. To get them printed must have cost at least 100 dollars, June thought. This was the biggest unreasonable number she could think of for cardstock. On the front, underneath the logo, featured a head cut out of a brown-haired doll.

Freckled and green-eyed with the little bunny gap. It looked a lot like Kaylee, and June assumed this was going to be the party's chosen one. She imagined it with a tiara and princess dress.

Kaylee would have a matching set, perfectly customized and tailored. She wished she knew the name of the doll. She wondered if the company made any that looked like her. This she doubted and to not spend too much time on the thought, she took out her notebook and started to sketch.

June planned to make her own doll from scratch.

When she got home Thursday afternoon, she barricaded herself in her room and laid out the supplies she'd snagged from Mrs. Taylor's desk drawers and from under her mom's crate bed frame.

They were as follows:

- Scissors
- Brown construction paper
- Crayola markers
- Random pieces of clothing fabric
- Craft glue
- Her mother's crochet yarn
- Kaylee's invitation (for reference)
- A roll of paper towels

She spent the rest of the day hacking and snipping and rolling and twisting. She folded the towels and wrapped them in yarn. Before she knew it, her doll had arms, both legs, and a torso! She took the pieces of fabric and glued them together like a dress. She wished they were a solid color instead of weird triangle shapes and squiggle designs but it didn't look bad. She was

impressed, actually. It was all coming together. Another paper towel and string of yarn were wadded, creating the head which she covered in brown construction paper. She carefully drew on a face with the markers, ensuring to include the bunny gap.

The only thing left was the hair. It was what stumped her the most when gathering the supplies. She thought about using macaroni noodles, but her mother would kill her. In class earlier, she had the thought to snip a piece of Julie's pigtails. Her hair was too long anyway, it would smack people in the face if she turned too fast. Just a small piece, June thought, she wouldn't miss it.

But Junie controlled herself and now, sitting in her room with her hairless doll, wished she'd Mother Gothel that little brat. June liked that part of Tangled. Rapunzel with her long, golden hair finally humbled with shrinkage. She felt seen.

Shrinkage. Why hadn't she thought of this? June took her hair down from the puffball she'd had in for a week and a half. She hated getting her hair combed and her mother didn't have the energy to fight, so in the puff, it stayed. June gathered a section of tangled curls from the nape of her head and held it in her fist. Pulling down from the root, she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and cut.

She untightened her grip on the hair, now loosely floating in her hand. She was in shock by how spongy it felt detached from her head. She sat it down and felt hesitantly at the back of her scalp. It was almost smooth to the touch. She didn't realize how much she really cut off. Forget the noodles, her mother was definitely going to kill her now. But the show must go on. She split her hair into 3 parts and glued each section onto the back of her doll's paper head.

Finally, she held it up in the light. It was smaller than the American Girl doll. Much smaller. An American Girl doll was like a toddler, and June's was closer to the size of a Dove deodorant stick. But it was hers and it actually looked nice. It looked like her.

She couldn't wait to show the other girls at the party.

Friday after the bells rang, she followed The Party girls down to the parking lot. They decided to catch rides to Kaylee's right from the school. For this reason, she brought her spend-the-night bag with her which included a couch pillow, a crocheted blanket, her DIY doll, paper towels, and yarn- just in case the girls wanted to learn how to make a doll too. She also made a small flipbook for show and tell. Riley's mom had extra room in her minivan so she rode with them.

When they pulled into the driveway, June was shocked by the sheer enormity of Kaylee's house. June knew she was rich but not to this degree. She finally understood why the word "filthy" was always accompanied by it. There was something icky about someone having this much money.

Still in awe, June managed to keep her jaw clasped shut with tightened teeth and a gritty smile. The other girls squealed and ran into the home, dropping their pink and purple and bedazzled duffle bags onto the hardwood floor of the entrance hallway.

"You must be June." A tall dirty, blonde woman looked down into June's eyes and smiled. Her teeth were blinding. No wonder Kaylee was obsessed with dolls- her mother was Barbie. "The other girls' mom's already dropped off their dolls this week. I'll go ahead and take yours and you can go play with the others in the backyard" Still smiling, Kaylee's mom reached for June's bag.

"Can't I just keep it in here until we come inside?"

“Well, honey, we’re about to set up for the tea party. Your doll will be safe I promise. She’ll even get her own seat.” She pointed at the setup in the dining room which had big plates, little plates, and sit-up chairs. All the other dolls were already in their assigned seats.

“Okay... I’ll get it for you”. Panic set in for June. For some reason, she didn’t feel excited to reveal her doll anymore, especially not to Barbie herself. June reluctantly clutched her makeshift doll and handed it to Kaylee’s mom. Her eyes and mouth widened and then quickly adjusted to a squinting, awkward grimaced smile. She didn’t ask June any questions and only led her out the sliding back door with the other girls.

June could feel her throat getting tighter. The glass door slid closed behind her and her eyes blurred with hot tears. *Don't cry, Junie*, she told herself. Quickly, she wiped away the wet shame and joined the others in the treehouse. She hoped they could all just stay out here forever.

But soon the sun started to set, and with it, June’s confidence.

“Come inside girls! The cake is ready!”

Eagerly the girls trailed after one another, noisily chattering about the names of their dolls and what they were wearing. June staggered behind.

“What’s your doll’s name?” Riley asked. June had only talked to Riley a handful of times, but each was pleasant. She was a nice girl, nicer than the others. June thought she’d make a good friend. Too bad, after tonight, no one would want the honor.

“It’s Liberty.” That was her mom’s name, and lucky for June it happened to be the name of a famous American Girl.

“Cool”, Riley gave a smile and caught up with the other girls inside as they took their seats next to their dolls. June snuck over into the kitchen and pulled at the shirt of Mrs. Barbie.

“Can I use the bathroom?” June asked. She intended to hide in there until the night was over. She

couldn't bare to show her face at the table. All the glossy, pearl-eyed, straight-haired girls and their mini-mes staring at her. At her and her imposter.

"Sure honey, it's right down the—"

Before Mrs. Barbie could finish the sentence that would give June access to her escape, they both heard a roar of laughter and giggles coming from the neighboring room.

June and Kaylee's mother walked in to find the girls hunched over, stomachs in hands, crying deliriously as Kaylee pointed at the paper towel, yarn doll sitting on the sit-up chair. It's kinky hair, the biggest thing about it.

Kaylee could hardly get out her sentence, "M-m-mom" She laughed and laughed. "What is *that?!'*" She laughed some more and the others got louder. As if it was the funniest thing in all the world. "Look at its hairrrr!" She heard one snicker. "And the dress. It's so ugly!"

June thought to laugh too. To join in. If she could blend, then the attention would be off her. But it was too late. As soon as Mrs. Barbie placed her thin hand on her back, June knew she'd be outed.

"Ladies, be nice. It's June's doll. She made it herself I think. That's really nice, right girls." This was throwing water on a grease fire. Now the girls were really laughing. Especially Kaylee and Julie. A few calmed a bit to look at her, feeling guilt or pity. Mrs. Barbie had to have done it on purpose.

June wanted to cry for real now. She wanted to pick up the big and small glass plates and smash them on the floor. She wanted to splash the teacups into the faces of the girls to shut up their wide-mouth howls. She wanted to pick up Kaylee's brown-haired Truly-Me doll and chuck it at her big head. It was heavy, she thought, it would definitely leave a mark.

But June didn't do any of this.

She stood for a moment and watched the scene. Once again, she wiped the tears from her eyes and made her way over to her sit-up chair and DIY doll. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears with every step. She picked it up, grabbed her bag from the hallway, and walked out the door. Mrs. Barbie tried to get her to come back inside, not very hard. When June didn't respond, Mrs. Barbie called June's mom to pick her up.

The car ride home was silent. Liberty missed 4 hours of shift money coming to get her daughter, but she couldn't be mad when she looked at the dried tears on Junie's face. June stroked the hair of her doll and traced her fingers along the glued seams of its makeshift dress.

"I'm sorry, June". Liberty finally broke the silence. June only nodded her head.

"You did a really good job, she looks like you."

"Thank you", June sniffled.

"You even got the hair perfect, Junie! How'd you do that!" Her mother touched the doll and then reached around June's puff in curiosity, eyes still on the road, until finally reaching the nape of her head. Her fingers grazed against the short spot. Frozen, June side-eyed her mother. After a pause that felt like an eternity, Liberty burst into laughter. She tilted her head back and cackled. June was shocked by this reaction.

Liberty couldn't stop laughing, she had to pull the car over against the curb. "You're not mad?" June was waiting for the punchline. Liberty grabbed June's face in her hands and placed a kiss on her forehead. "We're combing it out when you get home."

"No!" June pleaded. She tried to be serious, but she couldn't help but giggle at how silly she sounded. She was tired of that tired puff.

Her mother pulled off from the curb, and June leaned against the window. For once she didn't completely loathe the thought of being a doll.

4. Il Sole y Vento (The Sun and Wind)

I loved her the moment I felt her warmth. A jealous love of envy and rage. No fair to hold such power. Her gaze grounds me still. Still.

I can't remember the last time I was still. Completely void of the desire to move. This must be what it's like to Sunbathe. And to think- back then- back back back, I never understood what I was looking at along the shore. Bodies lined and nude and quiet. Belly or back against the grainy rock in a dreamless slumber. A hoard of zombies calmed by the hypnotic light kissing their flesh. Always so meaty and sweaty. The sea and sand, a baking sheet for the shallow sentients. Other creatures knew better. Knew that she wasn't a force to be reckoned with. A Medusa in the sky. Bold and Bright. Possums and puppies waited for mid-day and cooled in the shadows. But the shallows geared up to face her might. Headcaps and eye shields never keeping them from turning red and raw like fresh salmon, finally waving the white flag against their blood-flushed cheeks. And yet, they always returned. I'd stumble along hoards on every sand sheet. The hotter she was, the more they congregated, lining themselves up to be cooked in her eternal furnace. It didn't matter the stinging pain I could see that they felt. In fact, when I'd try to help cool them down, they'd pack up and leave.

Gluttons for punishment, I'd think. But now I knew. Now I knew for certain that they were. Because as I remained unmoving, untouched- quiet and still. The understanding came, that even if I could feel -if I could hurt, or burn and wince- I'd too let her destroy me.

Today I let myself move. Or rather, forced myself to. The laze of the calm from my Sun had taken over the space I occupied and I began to forget what it was like to fly. With no one or nothing around, I questioned the point. And more so, I found, that I enjoyed doing absolutely nothing. Forever I'd flown and not a thought ever occurred to me that I had the choice not to. Rain needed me and so did Snow, I thought. My Sun did, no doubt. Night too felt empty without my presence. My subtle ambiance. Or maybe that's all I was. Ambiance for a midnight walker or

for a picnic in the park. Or for a chill on a hot day. But no one was grateful to me, not like they were to her. I was the forgotten force. Was I ever needed in this life? Everything needs the sun. But what truly needs wind?

I look up at her in the sky without shield. Dazzling, beautiful, and so so far away. She must be wise to be way up there amongst the stars. A star herself they called her. The mother. Life's orbital womb. If I could speak with her, I thought. Maybe, she could tell me why I'm here. So up I started. Up I flew.

Up

Up

Up

Past the clouds. Past where I'd seen planes hover. Past where I'd watch rockets shoot. Up up up into the belly of the atmosphere. Near the baby stars and their siblings and finally

Darkness

I'd crossed the threshold between the once-living and the beyond. So roomy. So so dark. The only light guiding me was her and yet she remained a thousand light years away. No use journeying on, I thought. She was definitively unattainable and how unfortunate it would be to get lost up here. Not that there was anything left on the ground for me, but there was certainly nothing past the exosphere. Chasing her was futile. But in turning to leave I honored myself with one last glance. Just one. And after that, I'd leave her be. Clearly, she appreciates her space, and who I am but a chill to interrupt her solar boundary.

But as I faced her golden beauty I grew warm again, this time enormously engulfed by the light. Was I destined to be Icarus? No, no, no. He dies and I wouldn't die because, because

I'm pure in my pursuit, I rationed. And anyway what is death to an element but a mere recirculation of itself forever to infinity and beyond. Unlike the sentients, so weak and nimble and fragile, death would be but a pinch to me, I concluded. Yes, this isn't pride or greed I'm feeling (and I waited a moment to ensure I was speaking the truth to myself) This is love.

What if I could get her to come closer to me? Maybe she's always stayed so far away because of the Icaruses of the earth. Because of the violence, evil, and death. I can show her a new world—one she'll want to see up close.

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I blew past the tree stubs. Two thousand-year-old oak whose roots touched the core of this earth are now decayed cavities, the ground missing its molars and also its gums. This is what I shall fix for her first. Nutrient land with roses, and daises, and tulips for her to sniff. I whirled and twirled. I zipped and zapped. The oak trees grew back like a snap! I flew between their woody limbs, their leaves made music with my wind. And when that was done I had a garden of green. The more I danced in it, the more it would sing.

I will make sentients for her too, I thought. Smaller in scale like a cattle farm. Yes, yes. She'd like that. And so I flew around and around until I heard the chirping of birds. I carried gallons of water from the Atlantic for my sea and in it, fish and sharks and whales and algae. I carved valleys in her name. The more I created, the more excited I grew about the prospect of my Sun being so close. And oh how impressed she'd be with our new world. I couldn't help but think how lonely she must be way up there. Maybe the old world was just too much for her. Too big. But our new world would be beautiful, she'd see.

When she rose the next morning, the temperature peaked. A hug around our growing civilization. This meant she was closer! She had to be!

“Oh my Sun, I’m so glad you can see what I’ve done!” I looked up for a response.

“If you come a little closer, I can show you all the little details! It is quite grand” I shouted into the air. Sun stood staring down at me. Without eyes or a mouth, I couldn’t read her expression.

I waited down in my garden for most of the hot day, allowing her space to get comfortable with the idea. But Moon was peaking in and I feared I would be out of time soon.

“My Sun! I am back! I’ve given you all the time in the day, and I know you’ll be off to bed soon. I was wondering if you’d given my proposition a thought?” I called out to the west and as I spoke she began fading behind the horizon.

“Wait! Please!”

I rushed to the sea. To the painted sky of orange and pink and purple. As fast as I could, I flew. I just needed an answer. But I couldn’t reach her and she was gone another night.

I was never a fan of the night. It was cold and empty and numb. And now, no longer quiet. I was left alone with my creations. Crickets and chirping and croaks and screams. It was all too loud. I couldn’t hold out any longer, and when she awoke the next morning I pleaded with her senses.

“My Sole. I beg of you. I just want to speak. I love you.” The words escaped me before I had a chance to be sure of them. She said nothing back.

“I’ve done everything for you and still you forsake me! Can you not see what I’ve created for you? Can you not see me!” I was rendered invisible by her silence. I felt as though I’d begged her all day. I went up into the exosphere one last time and I found her in the same place I’d left her. I watch her in space, orbiting further from me once more.

I awake as a storm consumed by rage. I am Jack's heart-crushed hurricane. I am huge. I am three times my size- as if I'd crystallized. I did not know my limitations or if I had any at all. I am what I fear. I release my inhibitions.

I whirled through my sea making waves that reached the blue sky and let them swarm and crash, destroying the dry land below them. The flood of Genesis. I took the air around me and winded it up like a carousel at lightning speed. A Tasmanian. I wanted to stop- I did. But I was too far in now. Flames from my wind ignited the trees, spreading their fatality onto my now bleeding garden.

"Look at what you've done!" I roared. And I didn't know whether I was talking to myself or to her. What was I doing, I thought. This isn't right! I swarmed around the flames. Fast fast fast. Hoping to put an end to my destruction. But it was beyond me now. All I could do was watch as my new world shriveled. I looked up. She was looking too. Surrounded by ash and dust, I was tired. Weak. My self-inflicted war had taken its toll.

Ms. Sun came out the next day as usual, except I couldn't very well see her. She was covered by white clouds as if embarrassed to meet my gaze. And yet, she wasn't angry. Because she still shined. As bold and bright as ever, her rays cut peepholes through the clouds and her light lingered on a singular rose. Untouched by the flames that killed its home the night before.

Stiff, it stood, tall in the dirt. Quiet and basking in the warm sun. Still.

5. Madonna and Child

“Okay, just slow down. Breathe.” His voice isn’t in the soothing tone he thinks it is. It hisses in my ears and pulls at the nerves under my skin. But I hear a different voice, the one in my head, telling me to be thankful that he’s still here. It’s more than I can say for the other boys

on my block who'd probably leave as fast as they came in me if I told them what I was telling Dooley.

"Why do you think you're pregnant?" He was calmer than I'd expected him to be. I almost wished he'd yell a little. Be a man and threaten to hurt me. Make me cry. Punish me harder than I'd been punishing myself so I could have a break from it all. If only just for a minute.

"I dunno, Something isn't right. I can just feel it."

"Feel it? You mean the baby?"

"No," fucking dumbass, "not the baby. How the fuck would I feel the baby already?"

"I don't know, okay, I was just..." He trails off and sighs. I imagine his big dopey head in his even bigger dopey hands and I'm guilty.

"I just feel off. I was supposed to get my period 4 days ago and I'm never late."

"Well, maybe I like threw off your hormones or something." He sounds proud of this.

"Oh yeah sure. With your magic dick." I roll my eyes hard as if he can see me through the phone. Then I think that this conversation may have been better in person. It would be better if it weren't happening at all.

"You don't have to be mean. I'm just trying to think of an explanation for this."

"Sorry." All I hear is buzzing and breathing from his end and then-

"What would you want to do if you are? Pregnant I mean." And I resist the urge to say "What else could you have meant"

"I guess I'd have to tell my mom."

"No, what!" He collects himself quickly, "Look you don't even know for sure so why worry her?"

“She’d know what to do,” I say.

“She’d also know,” and he whispers this last part, “that we had sex.”

Dooley might have been the dullest pencil in the box, but he knew how to make me laugh. Even if not intentionally.

“I think we’re past that fear, buddy. It’s alright, she won’t be mad.” But this I can’t say for sure and only hope I’m right for both our sakes.

“When are you going to tell her?”

“She gets home in 20. I’ll let you know how it goes.” I hang up before he can say anything else and wait on the couch like a dog, until the bright headlights of her sedan peer through the windows like a lighthouse lamp. I am fine until I heard her car lock and her feet step up the driveway and onto the porch. My eyes water instinctively as I sense her presence closer to the door. I’m 9 years old again and I’ve scraped my knee. Her keys turn the lock right and I quickly wipe away my fallen tears.

She sets down her purse and lets out an exhausted “Hey”

“Hi, Mom,” I say and I can barely get that out. I’m trying to save face. You don’t even know for sure, I tell myself. You don’t even know for sure.

“Why are you sitting here in the dark, you’re gonna strain your eyes doing that I’ve told you before.” With a swift motion, she hits the switch and I am exposed for what I am.

“Sorry,” my voice cracks. She sees the wet lines on my face and rushes over to sit beside me.

“Oh baby,” she wipes my tears. “Sorry for what? What’s wrong” I’ve scared her- I feel it. I can only wonder what she thinking, but my body won’t allow me to save her from the suspense.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” is all I can muster and I know I’m making it worse.

I close my eyes and when I open, she's looking into them, searching. And I'm small. I'm so small.

"I think I'm pregnant." She's caressing my hand and she doesn't stop.

"Okay." She moves her hand up and wipes above my cheeks. There's mascara on her thumb.

"Did you take a test already?" Her words are slow. I shake my head no.

"I think I'm pregnant." She's caressing my hand and she doesn't stop. She waits to speak.

"Okay." She moves her hand up and wipes above my cheeks. There's mascara on her thumb.

"Did you take a test already?" Her words are slow. I shake my head no.

"Come on. We'll go get a couple and come back. I'll show you what isle they're on."

We pull in and get out. I follow her through the automatic doors trailing behind. It is a quick shop. Isle 14. She grabs the one in the pink package. Then picks up another. Only \$32 dollars and I'll know where my fate lies. The tarot readers on the boardwalk couldn't give me a better deal.

When we're back in the car, she doesn't start it, only staring ahead.

"I'm really sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to scare you."

"No, no don't be sorry! Yes, I was scared but I know you have to be terrified." She takes my hand. "I understand that feeling more than you know."

"You mean like being scared to tell your mom about something fucked." I cover my mouth at fuck. She just smiles and I expect her to tell me how she stole a bra or crashed a car.

“I had a pregnancy scare once too. Except I’d already taken every test imaginable and the result was positive every time.”

“You were pregnant before you had me?”

“Yep. I was your age actually. Maybe a year older, so seventeen. ” Suddenly, I could see the youth in her face. I remember that she’s a person too.

“By a guy named Henry. I called him Mister Henry. He was a family friend on my dad’s side and he was older so I called him Mister Henry.”

“How much older?”

“A lot older,” she laughs, “But I thought he was handsome. I had myself a schoolgirl crush and he thought it was endearing. Before I knew it we were sneaking around in his car. Sometimes he’d pick me up from school and take me walking around the old Benson park. We had a special spot coming off the highway into the woods.” She was smiling at the memory and I couldn’t tell if she missed it or if she was masking the reality of it all.

“I was a late bloomer. I’d never even been with a boy by this time. But Mister Henry wasn’t a boy. He was bigger than life itself to lil ol’ me.”

“Were you ever afraid of him?”

“Only the once. When I told him I was pregnant. He didn’t believe me so I showed him the 5 different tests I’d taken with some money I found in the couch cushions. Then he accused me of being a hoe when he couldn’t deny it anymore. Said I was two-timing him, putting out for the boys in my grade. Finally, he told me straight up that I was getting rid of it. No questions. He said I was too young to have a baby and he was too old to be a father.” She said this all so matter of fact.

“I knew he could do worse than raising his voice so I didn’t argue. Booked the appointment the second he tossed me on my porch back home and that was that. Didn’t tell anyone.”

“Did it hurt?” I ask before I have time to think and kick myself. But she answers anyway. She isn’t upset.

“No, not much. Some cramping. The worst part was walking in the building.”

“And after?”

“After I just went about life. The same way I always had. I tried to, at least.” She seemed to choose her words carefully. It’s quiet for a bit. I don’t know what to say so I don’t pry.

“After,” she finally continues, “I thought God would punish me.”

“What do you mean?”

“That he’d take you away from me. I was so scared during my pregnancy. Always thinking something was wrong with you. And then you came like it was nothing and you were so perfect and beautiful... Too perfect.” Her mouth contorted on her face and brows knitted tight and high on her forehead. She let out shaky breaths and focused her gaze on a pattern she made with her fingers. Touching each one to her thumb and then back again. I waited and watched her swallow.

“So even after I was terrified that I’d wake up one morning you wouldn’t be breathing and I thought that’s what I would have deserved because of what I did.”

“It was all you could do, Mom,” I try to comfort.

“I still wonder sometimes.”

“You think it’ll be like that for me? Where I’ll be wondering what if forever?”

“You don’t know if you’re pregnant yet.” She reassured me.

“Yeah, but still.” I pressed not knowing if I wanted the answer.

“It might.” She says. There is something heavy in the air that we can not name. A guillotine maybe? Ready to crush me from above.

“But to wonder doesn’t mean you’ll regret. You were the only thing I’ve ever wanted.” My phone lights up and the ringer interrupts the moment. It’s Dooley. I decline.

Mom adjusts her rearview mirror, hands me the tests, and kicks the car in reverse. She doesn’t say anything else on the ride back because what is left unsaid, I already know.

6. Nine to Five

I felt as if I'd met him before. Not 'met' like I'd seen him in the same coffee shop and exchanged pleasantries. And not like I held his spot in line at the grocery store while he grabbed another almond milk. I didn't know his name but screw his name. I'd met his soul.

I loved him from the second I saw him. This is not to be confused with love at first sight. Aesthetically, he wasn't someone to fond over. He was stocky and shorter than me. He wore his thin balding hair slicked back and he had stubby callused hands that he used to rub his beard nervously. And yet his presence utterly encapsulated me.

I loved him like I knew him in another life. Like we had something special in that parallel space. Something so honest and natural and soft that it was carried twice over through dimensions and landed us here. In this world. Where we'd be tested by time and law and fidelity. Where I'm the girl who can't keep her mind off her boss.

"Sorry, *supervisor*," Cady rolled her eyes, "either way you do know that's weird, right? Plus he's like 30." He was 37. But it wouldn't be in my favor to correct her.

"What's weird? I'd never *do* anything." But I didn't define 'anything' and Cady didn't ask. I don't think she really wanted to know.

"Besides," I added, "he's married."

"Is that supposed to help?" She scoffed and stuffed a spoonful of Cheerios into her mouth, "So you have a crush on your married boss. That sounds better to you?"

"Supervisor. And I already told you, it's not a crush."

"Whatever you say. If you fuck him, don't do it here." She walked back into her room with her bowl of cereal and gave me another shake of the head.

Cady's opinion of my situation was unwavering and there seemed to be nothing I could say to rectify her perception. She lived to suck the fun out of everything. How unfair. I never said anything about her hooking up with her former TA. But she'd say that was different and I guess it was.

Despite my admission otherwise, Cady had a point. It was a crush and it was a little weird. If I was smart, I'd kill the thought in my head and set my sights on a sweaty, frat coworker. We had plenty at this particular retail store for some reason and they were closer to my age. But they did nothing but remind me how insufferable boys can be.

So I decided I'd keep my crush. I'd come to terms with the fact this one-sided affair I was constructing in my brain would only go so far. And anyway, if thinking wasn't a crime then neither was looking. Or dreaming. Or fantasizing.

Then one random Tuesday, something in his eyes changed. As if he saw me the way I'd be seeing him all this time. After work, I rushed home to tell Cady of this new progress.

"His eyes?" Cady wasn't impressed.

"I can't explain it but when he saw me today he lingered a little."

"Meaning...?"

"Like he waited a little by the door after he held it open for me." She shifted her eyes as if to say "okay...and"

"And," I went on, "he said 'hey' differently."

"He said hey differently." She had a way of making me sound psychotic.

"Yeah like it wasn't a regular hey. It was like 'hey'" I tried to mimic it as if it wasn't the 30th time I replayed the interaction in my head.

“You do realize that you said that in the exact same tone.”

“Look, his demeanor was different okay. It was like he was surprised to see me. But in a good way? I don’t know. But he was smiling at me too.”

“So he smiled at you and said ‘hey’. Yep. He wants you bad. Probably creamed his pants from the sound of it.”

“Don’t be gross. It’s not like that.”

But I bit my lip at the thought that it could be. Like that.

Sometimes, in my free time, I liked to type out my feelings. My therapist said it might help the thoughts be less intrusive.

So I sat in the grossness and I imagined it just like that.

It would be after a long day. We’d get off together. Night shift. I’d overhear some heated phone conversation about something married couples argue about and ask if everything was okay. He’d offer me a ride home and I’d politely decline but he’d insist. We’d sit in his Accord sharing the same air, elbows almost touching on the center divider. He’d park in front of my apartment and just as I am gathering my bag to get out he’d say:

“I think she’s gonna leave me.”

He’d tell me about how they’d been having problems. How he’s been working overtime to afford their home. That she called to tell him she was staying the weekend with her mother.

“She hates her mother.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” I’d say and rub the back of his hand. He’d look at me with sad puppy eyes and he’d kiss me.

“We shouldn’t,” I’d say.

“No, we shouldn’t,” he’d reply. But we would.

It would be wrong but that's why I'd like it. It would make me feel dirty. A dirty dirty girl, I hear him say in my ears. He reaches his hand behind my head and—

“Whatcha writing?” His voice startled in from behind me. I quickly close my laptop. I thank god I hadn't written names yet.

“Just homework.” I was having a hot flash.

And he was looking at me like that again.

“What?” My voice cracks.

“What?” He was smirking at me. Teasing me. Or was it in my head? Maybe this is what I wanted him to do and my brain was turning it into some sick, erotic psychosis. Where I imagine he wants me right here and right now. On the clock. On the table. No. This was a preview of my mental illness genetics passed down from my grandmother. I wonder if she also had perverted daydreams about screwing her boss in the break room.

He takes the seat across from me. He looks at me, waiting for a response and I could've sworn I watched his eyes study my lips for a second.

“I don't know. You're just- don't you have somewhere to be?”

“I'm on my lunch.” He grins and waves a homemade sandwich he held in his left hand.

“Oh.”

“No, it's okay. I'm always surprised when I have time to eat too. Got pretty busy today huh?”

“Yeah” I manage to say. Could he feel my heart beating through my chest too?

“Good job out there though. You really cut down that line. Glad to have you on the team.” He gives me a wink and unwraps his sandwich.

Suddenly I realize we are the only ones here, sitting at the small table between the broken vending machines. I watch him inhale the turkey and tomato and I forget where I am. He looked cuter today. Handsome even.

It wasn't just a lust I felt for him. Or a twinkle in his eyes that made me swoon. It was the thought that this man could like me. Could enjoy my company perhaps.

Mid-chew, he waves for me to open my laptop. "Don't let me interrupt your studying," he says, "Just pretend I'm not here."

7. Blackjack

Whether you like it or not

You're responsible

For pain and all that's in between

You own this house, it's yours to bare

The cards are yours to clean

She'll shame you and you'll take it nice

What other option do you have

You don't make the rules

And, though, neither does she

This game you play on her behalf

You know the stakes—It's why you try

To play to win, but Fail to See

That she'll never quit

And only lose

Her own reality

She'll bet until she's bare and bones

You'll warn her all the same

She'll say No, son! I can take a hit

And you will take the blame

8. Castration

“All the way... are you sure?”

“Yes I’m sure”

“Cause you gotta be sure you’re sure. I don’t want you blamin’ me if you looked chopped”

“I won’t!” and she wouldn’t. She’d blame herself. They locked eyes in the mirror, piercing into each other. Both pairs trying to get the other to concede in the stand-off.

“I don’t think you really want to be that bald, Noa. Look, why don’t we just take a little off the ends. Just in case you don’t like it.”

The tiny peanut gallery who gathered in the door frame of her room gave coos in agreement. Noa thought she’d feel better with the emotional support of her otherwise distant roommates, however, she now regretted making this a group effort.

A frustrated sigh scolded her diy barber’s hesitant hands. “Iris, I know you’re trying to help. But I want it all the way. I need it gone, okay? I’m sure.”

Noa wasn’t sure. She was the furthest thing from it. If sure was Texas, she was Maine. Never had she visited the state. Only flown above it from the clouds, peering down. A distant tourist with a phobia of planes and a deeper fear of landing. “Oh, how high,” she’d whisper and shake from her window seat. Noa was never sure. But she was trying her best now, in this moment of change, to emulate the native tongue of decisiveness.

All eyes were on her as if waiting for a cue to put down the clippers and rip off the beach towel draped on her shoulders. She could do it next month. By a professional maybe. At-home haircuts are always a bad idea. That is what she’d tell herself. And she’d cope. And years would pass. And she’d say, “I sure am glad I didn’t shave my head back then.” And She’d Be Lying.

She didn't lack backbone, but hers was nimble and soft like the car wash inflatable tube men. Most of the time she forced herself to stand straight with a head held high. Her spongey afro adding not much but an extra 3 inches. 3 inches that would soon be floating to the floor. And now everyone was staring at her like her life was over. This chair was the hospital bed and the room, filled with pitiful faces.

"Guys," She gave a nervous laugh and it came out breathy and weird. "I'm sure. It's just hair it'll grow back." Every nerve in her body rejected the words as she spoke.

"Alright. Here I go..." Iris lingered.

"Oh my god just do it," and she turned herself away from the mirror and shut her eyes. No time to back out now.

And anyway, she was born smooth up top. Shiny and slimy and covered in guts. "It's a boy!" her father shouted in excitement as her mother brought her into the world. And then feigned the same tone when he discovered otherwise, mourning almost instantly the son he'd never know. She couldn't hide from the world then and she definitely couldn't now. She wondered what her father would think. She hadn't told anyone that she'd do It. Or her endless thoughts to do It. Or the fact that she'd been having dreams about It and watching videos of other women doing the same thing.

COME WITH ME TO SHAVE MY HEAD

I'M BALD?! STORYTIME ON WHY I CUT MY HAIR OFF

MY BIG CHOP: PROS AND CONS AND WHY YOU SHOULD TOO

Noa had been mentally preparing herself for the grievance. It would come as a shock to everyone when she revealed the graveyard of a scalp she'd be left with. Maybe she should give it one more thought. Just to be sure.

But the snip, snip, snip of the scissors were already making their way up the nape of her neck and into the center of her skull. First, only small curls fell off her head and onto the towel. Soon, whole chunks flew onto the floor. Iris was getting more comfortable with the hedge. Then the buzz of the clippers began. This was the end.

She remembered when she was first given freedom over her head. It was a reluctant shift of power from the hands of her mother to her own. Too much power at 14. She relished in the excitement of not being forced to sit between her mother's prickly legs or getting snapped with a barrette if she put up a protest about how rough the comb yanked through her naps.

"Sit still!" Jaime would curse at her daughter. "And don't you cry, or I'll give you something to cry about."

They'd argue about Noa's hard head. At Noa's insistence on wearing her ponytails much too tight.

"You have to loosen ur bun! Your edges are going to come out!"

"No, they're not! It's not that tight!" But it usually was that tight. Noa would get sharp headaches at the end of each school day. But for some reason, she thought she looked better with the slight facelift it gave her. She'd never admit to anyone, not even herself, that she thought she was ugly. No boys liked her and she couldn't blame them. If her hair wasn't tied up it stretched outward, wild and poofy like cotton candy. She resented her mother's soft, thin curls, a living

symbol that she wouldn't ever understand that the ponytails gave her control. So Noa held her ground against her mother's protests, prepared to fight until she could love herself enough to be kind to herself.

But one day Jamie gave up her position. Waving the white flag in favor of Noa's defiance.

"I'm done fighting with you. If you want to be bald, that's on you."

Noa sat in angry tears on her bed and removed the scrunchie from the grip it had on her hair. She found herself that night in the bathroom mirror, pulling her hair up in her hands, and then letting it fall back down, hovering above her shoulders. Her red eyes, her father's eyes, stared back at her. If she were born a boy, she might not ever think to think of how her face was molded in the womb because it wouldn't matter. Like her father, with enough persistence and manufactured charm, she'd find a beautiful woman to procreate with, tainting the eggs with her beastly yolk. But she was a girl and it mattered what she looked like.

School was a fashion show for hair. If she were white and went to a white school with white girls she might have been judged for what makeup she put on. Or what brand of jeans she wore, she could assume. But at her school, her peers cared more about which way you chose to part your hair. Or what your parts looked like with your braids. Or how well your baby hairs were swooped against your forehead. While Noa felt the intimidation of the girls who were much more in tune with what looked good and what didn't, there was a level of community that existed amongst the judgment.

"Girl," one pulled her aside during lunch, "let me give you my scarf. The back of your head is looking a little rough." And Noa would oblige and let the girl who smelled like vanilla

body spray and heat protectant wrap a purple cloth around her hair. She was grateful through the embarrassment. They were sweet and meant well. But the insecurity of roughness never left her mind or body.

Now that she was older, she'd take sick days anytime her hair wouldn't slick the right way. Missing class due to a bad hair day was, at first, a shameful occurrence. Only out of necessity would she throw back on her bonnet and sulk in class. Or spend hours in the mirror drenching her hair in clumpy gel.

But at a certain point, it became a ritual. A bad habit. And nothing that couldn't be glossed over with a white lie email sent an hour before the start of lecture. She didn't like to lie. Her grandma always told her there was never a good reason to. And her mother agreed.

"Only if your life is in danger," she'd later expand.

And though it wasn't her life that was in danger, her reputation was. She made peace with the sin. After all, what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them. It wasn't like she could say:

Dear So and So,

Please excuse my absence from class today. My hair looks stupid, I keep breaking my scrunchies, and I'm two minutes away from setting myself on fire.

Best, Noa

Her meltdowns bordered on a mental health crisis, she rationed, and anyway, she wouldn't be able to focus on anything because she'd be checking the camera on her laptop every 3 minutes. It was her roommate, Iris, who finally scheduled an intervention after one too many days in bed.

"Do you think you have a problem, Noa?" Iris leaned in and asked one morning.

“You make it sound like I’m an alcoholic.”

“It’s just...you kind of get really down about the way you look and I get it. We’ve all been there. But missing school because of it? I dunno if that's normal.”

Noa didn’t respond.

“Tracy agrees,” Iris added.

“So you guys have been talking shit about me.”

“Not shit. We’re just worried, Noa. And I know we may not understand completely but we can try.” And though Noa didn’t wish to explain she did agree that it wasn’t normal for her to be cooped up. She’d find a solution.

The next few weeks, Noa was back to normal. Her time in front of the mirror dwindled as she spent it doing critical research. Her roommates were pleased with her new attitude and patted each other on the back for they believed their little talk had breathed life back into their dear friend.

“Do you have clippers?” Noa asked them one day as they sat in the kitchen.

“Clippers as in like hair clippers?” Iris asked.

“Yeah like the ones barbers use.”

“I do, I think. Why?”

“I want to shave my head,” Noa said casually.

“What?!” Said Tracy. “Why?!” Gaspd Emily.

“When?!” Asked Iris, “You mean like in theory like ‘ugh, I want to shave my head’ but not like actually, right?”

“Can you do it tomorrow?” Noa blinked at the three girls as they picked their jaws up off the floor.

“Uh... I mean, yeah, if you’re serious I can. Are you serious?”

And Noa nodded. And her heart jumped at the decision to seal her fate.

“I’d kill to have your hair,” Tracy tried to reason. “But it’s so pretty!” Emily almost pleaded. They sounded like her mother.

But soon she was in her spinning chair with her beach towel around her neck. And Iris was doing the final touches of her new do.

“Can you spin me back around?” Noa asked.

“Give me a sec, I’m almost done.”

Noa waited impatiently. Her leg bobbing up and down beneath her. She could feel her heart racing against the sound of the blades.

“Okay. Done.” Iris turned off the clippers.

The room was silent. “Don’t hate me.” Iris teased.

“Great way to start.” Noa turned toward the mirror. Her reflection’s eyes met her own gently. She shift her head left. And then right. Up. Then down. Taking in all angles of her face. She was meeting herself again. Or maybe for the first time. There was something eerie that she couldn’t place.

“You have a nice shaped head,” Tracy said through the door. And everyone hummed.

“What do you think,” asked Iris.

Noa sat in the thought. Trying to think of what to think. Her reflection was waiting as well. She liked it at least she thought she did.

“I like it,” she finally said.

“Good, it suits you.” Iris rubbed her hand against Noa’s scalp.

“You feel like a tennis ball,” and they laughed together like girls in grade school. Noa’s eyes watered through the giggles until she felt tears grow big and strong in the sockets.

“Don’t cry,” Iris quickly ran to the bathroom to grab a tissue and Tracy came behind to rub Noa’s shoulders.

“I’m okay,” she tried to say but the words wouldn’t come out.

“What’s wrong,” Iris dabbed the paper against her cheeks, “don’t cry, Noa. You look so pretty.”

But that was the problem. She looked beautiful. And she thought of all the times when she thought otherwise. And time she wasted hating herself.

“Thank you,” Noa finally smiled. Iris kneeled down to hug her.

Noa enjoyed many firsts with her newly shaved head. First chilly breeze. First deep scratch of the scalp where she almost started kicking her leg like a dog. First shower with no hair.

She let the water run off of her like silk and imagined what it was like in the womb. She tilted her neck around in circles, playing in the water like a kid. She thought of the endless possibilities. Hats and wigs and beanies. Having no excuse for not making it to class on time.

After her shower, the girls had many questions.

“How does it feel?” Tracy’s eyes widened.

“Is your head cold?” Emily giggled.

“So who are you gonna tell first,” Iris asked.

Noa almost forgot she'd have to eventually reveal her new self. She thought of how to break the news to her family. Eventually, she paid them all a visit to bite the bullet at once. Their reactions were more or less what she expected.

Her father laughed.

Her brother shook his head. "All black girls who cut their hair off never grow it back"

Her grandpa smiled brightly and took a photo.

He sent it to her uncle who gave it a heart.

Her grandma sucked her teeth at first.

A week later called to ask if she should also cut her own.

Her mother said:

"I think it looks beautiful," she touched her face and then the top of her head. "I can see your pretty face. You look like you did as a baby," she laughed.

"You were such a pretty baby. I ever tell you that. Everyone thought you were such a doll." Noa rolled her eyes and blushed because she'd seen what she looked like as a baby and she wouldn't call it cute let alone pretty. She chalked it up to maternal delusion, although it made her warm to see her mother light up at the thought of her.

"I absolutely love it, Noa." Jaime kissed her daughter's forehead and gave her head another rub.

"Can I braid it when it grows back?"

9. 6 Month Rule

I sit in front of him at yet another dinner together and I imagine us in an office room. A stuffy attorney's office. Our forks are black pens and our plates are papers and we're signing something that says "divorce" in big letters. I watch him eat and I wonder if I can survive the rest of my life with a man who reminds me a bit too much of my father. People have endured worse. My mother was one of them. I look at him and I remember the words of my cousin Alanah, who told me once that you'd know whether a relationship was going to work within six months of being together. Me and Danny have been together for three. I think now that there was some truth to what she said. A truth I chose to ignore. Too late to turn back now.

Danny is going to propose tonight. And I am going to say yes.

Alanah's advice came to me long ago while we were both in our twenties. We'd found each other later in life when it was safe to befriend the enemy. Her dad and my mom had issues. Sibling stuff. Something about money or grief or both, but neither of us asked. We let our relationship dwindle amidst the war our parents declared with one another. Separate nations, gathering arms and guns and steel, drawing an invisible line down the battlefield with a family I'd grown to love on the opposing side. So while I missed my cousin and my weird uncle Tony, I understood where my loyalties were supposed to lie.

Sometimes, the explosions would stop and the smoke would fade for a moment. I'd see Alanah at funerals, the only place you're guaranteed to see kin who otherwise hate each other. At Granny Gloria's repast, we talked for the first time in 4 years and I cried and made it weird. She was confused as to what caused me to cry and I couldn't tell her it was because I didn't know her anymore and never would. I was grieving someone who was standing in front of me. But I was

14 then, so the adults just rubbed my shoulder and told everyone I was shy. I hid my face in my mom's dress.

When we met again, we were older and in my maturity, I'd made terms with our estranged relationship. I found her one day while scrolling on Facebook. An ad for a new beauty parlor with discounted wash and presses for the opening. The name matched my cousin's, so I immediately booked, hoping it wasn't a coincidence we shared a last name. A security deposit and an hour drive north led me to a skinny shop with yellow ceilings and a screen door that Alanah greeted me at.

"I thought that was you," she said to me smiling. She led me in and sat me in a spinning chair.

There was so much we had to catch up on and I didn't know where to start so I stayed quiet, eyes closed while she worked. She was gentle and began to section and detangle. "So, do you have a boyfriend?" She finally asked. I giggled and felt my face get warm. "Or girlfriend," she added, "girlfriend is nice too."

"Boyfriend. It's new, we've only been together for a few months," I didn't expect her to jump in so quickly.

"Do you love him?" She obviously teased. But I sat in the question for a moment. I'd never even asked myself such a thing.

"Yeah, I think I do," It didn't feel like a lie. But my body rejected the words as I spoke.

"That's really sweet. I'm happy for you." She was blow-drying thick sections of my hair, I smelled the heat as it coated my strands.

"What about you? Are you dating anybody?"

"Not anymore. Ended things a week ago actually."

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I knew it was coming sooner or later.”

“How? Was he a jerk?”

“Actually, no. He was perfect.” She grabbed a hot comb. “He was kind and sweet and thoughtful. He just wasn’t for me. I stayed for way too long.”

“How long?”

“2 years.”

“And when did you know it was over?”

“At 6 months, you’ll know whether or not you want to be with a person,” she told me. “I knew then but I stayed hoping I’d feel differently. Or that he’d miraculously become someone different. Someone more like me.” I thought about Danny. About how I loved him but in a way that made my stomach hurt. Instinct said one thing, and my heart said another. If six months was the time frame I was to decide whether to stay, my time with Danny was coming close to the end. At least that’s what I thought then.

There were things I knew. I knew this was my first relationship. I knew that I loved him despite myself. I knew that he had a type that didn’t comfort me. And I knew we had very fundamental incompatibilities. Some I discovered too little too late. Such as: he placed the toilet paper roll on the inside rather than out, he snored like a grizzly bear, gurgling spit bubbles in his sleep, and he believed in God.

“Do you pray?” he asked me one day, knowing the answer. His real question was why I don’t.

“I just don’t think that the world works like that. That there’s a guy up there who judges us or has the power to control aspects of our lives.”

“He’s not a guy. He’s nothing like us. Of course, you don’t understand him, you’ve never tried talking to him.”

“It’s not really a conversation if the other person doesn’t speak back,” I pushed.

“I think you should pray. You could choose to believe. If you tried,” he offered.

“Are you asking me to?”

“No.” and he's quiet. “I just always thought I’d be with someone who believed in God, that's all.”

“So what does that mean for me?” I asked. And he shrugged. He talked about being yolked and I knew what he meant but all I could think of is Humpty Dumpty’s cracked egghead spilling out of his shell.

I thought to humor him with the God thing, though. It was important to Danny and that meant I could try. I went to church with him and I listened to the preacher and clapped to the songs. Soon we were praying together and Danny would look at me with all the love he had in him. I grew addicted to that look. I rode the high of a love that I knew wasn’t meant for me. I could see his life so easily. A life I just didn’t fit into. Every so often he’d ask me again my thoughts on The Creator and I’d dance around the question so as to not spoil what we were building. What I was building for him. The woman of his dreams.

“God answered my prayers when he made you,” He’d look down at me and I’d melt at words fit for another. I was content living outside myself for him. Sure there was probably someone out there who was a better fit for me. Who I wouldn’t have to shrink for who’d accept me as is with open arms. But to risk a life alone in hopes of finding Mr. Right seemed trivial. I was Danny’s everything. And that made me, if not whole, something.

Alanah was a prophet. At month six, I grew restless. I was tired of living in the facade. Danny bought me a book that was titled “God’s Love For You,” a halfway mark gift, a symbol of his love.

“I don’t need to be saved. I don’t want to be,” He didn’t understand me at all and it was my fault.

“I’m just trying to help you see how great life can be if you accept Him into it. Plus you’ve been going to church”

“I’ve only been doing it for you. Because I know it’s important to you.”

“It’s not just important that you to church, it’s important that you believe too.” And just like that, we were at a standstill. I could wear the costume and play the part, but I couldn’t bring myself to say the lines that would make everything perfect. I could see the curtain closing in on us. We cried together in the car and held each other as if it was the last time. We were star-crossed lovers because of a concept I couldn’t accept. I cursed his God.

But it only took a week to fall back into each other’s arms. Someone had to budge and Danny loosened his grip. After that, he never brought it up again and we pretended our differences didn’t exist. I was grateful. I could feel the topic’s presence looming in every aspect of interaction. The elephant growing bigger, taking up space and air. But I couldn’t let him go. I couldn’t let his love go. I avoided topics that alluded to a higher power. I avoided euphemisms. Didn’t want to give him hope if I said “Thank God” I found a parking space. Danny was a hopeless romantic. Any glimmer of potential he locked onto like a moth to a flame. This is why I loved him. It was also what kept my light dim.

I couldn't imagine myself with anyone else. I couldn't imagine myself at all anymore. I was just a shell. But Danny took such good care of me, thoughtful of my hollowness, careful to drop me or crack me along the edges. He was secure and sturdy. Could I really risk a life in someone else's hands when the ones I was in held me just right?

I visit Alanah again. Danny'd been planning a date and told me to look nice. "You always look perfect but it's been a while since we've dressed up. It'll be fun!" I know he's excited and I want to make him proud so I visit Alanah again in her shop for another hot press. My head is wet in her sink, the salon robe chokes my neck and her yellow ceilings are comforting to stare at while her nails massage my scalp.

"So how's the boyfriend?" She asks, eager to know our fate and I wonder when was the last time I had a conversation that wasn't about a boy. Or even, the last time I wasn't thinking about Danny.

"He's good. Taking me out tonight." I'd never told her about our bible battle though I was curious about what she'd say.

"Ooo exciting! What's the occasion?"

"I don't know. He just told me to dress up." Alanah coos at this news.

"Oh, he's definitely going to propose! Next time I'll be asking how's the fiance!"

I wonder if she remembers her advice to me. Her rule I've thought too long and too hard about. Or maybe not enough. I want to tell her that I remember it and apologize for letting her down. But I doubt it'd do much good. She was already inviting herself to the wedding.

She sits me up and starts to comb through my hair. "Have you thought about accent colors?"

Tonight I stare into the eyes of a man who reminds me a little too much of my father. However in many, many ways he so much more. I have a thought that Danny would have been perfect for my mother if he had only been born a generation earlier. At first, I laugh at how absurd. And then I am sad because I'm right.

Danny is going to propose tonight. And I think I am going to say yes. My hands shake at the thought and my heart beats toward the door. But he's getting on his knee now and in his soft hands he holds a ring. Will you let me be the worst decision you ever make?

Yes, I say. I will.

I do.

I do.

I do.

10. Training Bra

When they were little and scrappy and got dirt underneath their nails, their mother dressed them in black tops with holes and dinosaur underwear. They pushed and played and did cartwheels that exposed their soft bellies. They threw balls so hard it made bruises on their skin. They ran barefoot on concrete and grass, gripping onto trees, and jumping from swings until their bodies gave into exhaustion. And after eating snacks with sticky fingers they jumped into the tub to splash and scrub. Besides a slight difference in private parts, which their mother titled for them “peanut” and “pagina” because she didn’t like the sound of the actual words, Brittney and James lived as if slipt from the same cell in the same womb. Brittney was older by a year but it didn’t seem to matter to either her or James. They were alike in face and shared the same nappy hair and bushy brows. They walked with their heads high and their gapped teeth on proud display.

They were free.

The laws of the world were unknown to them.

This all changed when Brittney got boobs.

Apparently overnight, and neither to her want, wish, or knowledge, she’d grown two small buds of fat on her chest. They reminded her of deflated hacky sacks or maybe two old tangerines after they’d lost their mass and sweetness. The ones she’d find at the bottom of her backpack when she went looking for a pencil, unsure of how long she had left them in there. She tried to ignore them, in hopes they’d disappear. Like when the lights were off and her jacket in the closet looked a little too much like the Boogie Man, she knew if she closed her eyes tight and counted to seven, he’d be gone. Brittany’s trick didn’t work too well with her newest problem.

They weren't something she could ignore. They were attached to her, foreign and alien. And James said: "They look weird."

"How can I cover them up?" Brittany asked.

"You don't," her mother was brushing her hair into a tight bun, "you're just going to have to start dressing differently." Her mother was referring to the thinness of her sheer white button-down which was no longer flat, the outline of her budding breasts peaked uncomfortably through the fabric.

"After school, we'll go to the mall and find you a training bra."

As her mother dropped them off and sped away to work, Brittany realized that she was headed into a boot camp, preparing her for something she didn't want and didn't ask for. James ran ahead oblivious to her doom and she trailed behind, plotting how to blend in.

After all, she only saw her chest because she had to. It was a part of her. What were the chances of anyone else noticing, she tried to assure herself. But when she walked into class, her teacher pulled her aside and asked,

"Would you like to wear my sweater, Brittany?" "Okay," Brittany obliged because to answer no would spark a level of resistance she didn't know was hers to claim. The rules of boobs were being set and she needed to follow along.

"Thank you, Ms. Fife," She slid on the green, itchy sweater that fell just a little too long beside her plaid skirt and made her feel like a Teletubby.

At recess, of course, Brittany stood out like a sore thumb. Everyone wanted to know what was underneath Ms. Fife's sweater.

"It's nothing!" She cried sounding a bit too much like it *was* something.

“We know! We know!” A group of boys teased back as they began pulling at her to take it off.

“Stop it!”

“If it’s nothing, why are you so upset?” The leader spoke up, right in her face. He spit as he talked and a little splashed against her lip. She readied herself for a scrap-up with the freckled kid, Bryce. He was skinny and long but she could take him if she needed. As she stood to face him, she saw James pushing through the crowd. When he made it to the action, he glared at Bryce and the boys and they rolled their eyes and backed away. The dog-like standoff caused the crowd to disperse and without a word, James took Brittany by the arm and led her off to a spot off the playground on the swings. They sat letting the wind twist the metal chains and twirl them in circles.

“You know Mom’s not gonna let you get away with fighting like you usually do anymore.”

“Why do you say that?” She sounded offended. James didn’t want to explain. He found the whole thing strange and kind of gross. If he woke up with boobs he’d never leave his room.

“Cause you’re gonna be like...a woman or something. And you’re gonna start bleeding and laying eggs. And you’re gonna get pregnant and have a baby and you can’t fight like that.”

“Who told you that?!”

“Don’t shoot the messenger. I heard it from around.” But he looked at Brittany. At her sad face and saw his own. And he remembered how much it would suck to have everything change so quickly. “Bryce was saying it earlier during P.E.,” he continued, “but I don’t believe shit Bryce says.”

Brittany smiled small and the bell rang. They hopped off the swings and headed to their last class. Almost as soon as it started, the day was over. At least for Brittany. She heard her name called to the front office and when she arrived her mother was chatting with the desk attendant.

“It's a big day for Brittany!” Her mother was spilling the beans as if it were something to be celebrated. The desk lady waved them goodbye and wished Brittany luck. Except she didn't feel lucky, she felt punished.

“Is James coming?” Brittany asked when buckled into the car.

“No, your dad is taking him to the park or something.”

“But James always comes with us to the mall.”

“Not today, Brit.”

Soon they were parked outside of a Macy's. Brittany closed the gap of the green sweater she'd purposely forgotten to return and crossed her arms, quickly forcing herself into the understanding that she'd walk out of that Macy's changed. She'd never be this Brittany again. And she didn't know if she liked that.

11. Daddy in the Dog House

Papa was not a rolling stone. He was a boulder tumbling down and off the side of Mount Denali. Scratched and bruised and cracked a little on the left side. But solid as a rock. Landing finally at the bottom on wet grass, nestling stoically around the thin green blades. Once stationed he had no qualms about building a new life where he'd been thrown and landed. The wind would blow against his back urging him, begging him to follow along with the breeze. But he could not-would not- be persuaded.

Papa was not easy like Sunday morning. He was the rigid recall of the week, black bitter Monday morning coffee. A temper like the Southern sun. Hot, humid, scalding. His voice struck a thunderball of lightning down on whatever standing crossed his path. He could be a mean man. Hell on wheels. He was a bus driver way way back before I was born, before Daddy was born, before his head was shiny and smooth like a Milk Dud. I picture him yelling at riders and slamming doors closed and coming home after a long day's work. 45 years worth of a long day's work. But he was soft somewhere. I'm sure of it. Underneath the roughened shell was a soul I loved like a father. That's a real man, I'd think.

Daddy wasn't. A rolling stone that is. He wasn't a stone at all. Not like Papa. He was tree bark that wished to be falling leaves, stuck cemented to a trunk in a forest full of saplings. That's probably how he'd describe it at least. Everything he learned from his daddy he found a way to twist and make mean. If Papa didn't curse, Daddy was a sailor. Papa put his hand in his pocket. Daddy threw the punch.

Daddy lived in our garage for twenty years. I watched his evolution, starting from the living room couch. He wasn't a normal man of separation. He counted his cards right and skipped over divorce. No alimony *and* he kept the house? A Success Story he was. The American

Dream. It didn't take long for him to take residence in the backyard. I don't have memory of his walk of shame out the back door. It all happened so naturally. Some bedsheets here, a 15-inch television there and he had himself his own private bachelor pad. Almost like it was meant to be. 20 feet of grass and concrete separating us.

He was a new man back there.

As if he'd been born to live back there.

And I assumed that's where Daddy would die.

Filled with things and things and things, I assumed. We used to store our bikes in the garage. Along with artwork my mom made for him over the years. The bikes were put outside in the grass to be rusted and weathered. Mommy stored her art in the closet. I'd never gotten a glimpse of the inside since he moved in and I couldn't have been more curious.

I couldn't call him a shadow, he didn't float in with the light of the day. He made his presence well and known, stomping through the house in his combat boots or slides or running shoes. Humming hip-hop hits. Forever a teen in the 80s. Here's to never growing up. Most times we'd communicate in single-word phrases. He'd spice it up when it was time for his father rounds of the week.

"Hey." He'd pop his head in, baseball cap first. A red SF.

"Hi, Daddy."

"What you doin'."

"Homework"

"Oh alright." He lingered a bit next to the doorway of my room. I could sense fear like a bloodhound. Maybe he wanted to say more? Maybe he could if I showed him he was safe. But I liked the little power my silence gave me. And I liked feeling him squirm. He'd be gone almost

as quickly as he came. Out the back and into his room or his car. The squeeeakkk of the garage door or the slam of the driver's side door handle. I'd gamble with myself to guess which one it would be.

Maybe I was my father's child. Daddy loved to gamble. The casino was his spa. He'd cleanse himself of stress and sin through slots and sauce.

"Hey Daddy, you know 90% of gamblers quit before they win." My brother would tease.

"That's true. And I win, y'all don't know." He was so proud of himself. He couldn't have smiled brighter at my birth.

"Took home 400 last trip."

"And how much did you spend?" My brother playfully questioned.

And Daddy just laughed and walked outside.

Daddy wasn't broke. But somehow everything we owned was. The bathroom sink. The kitchen lights. The shower head. The front door knob.

"You just gotta turn it slowly to the left and pull." Duh. My brother and I'd watch barefoot on the porch while he'd aggressively jiggle the handle and after fifteen minutes of cursing under his breath, he'd finally give up and let us inside through the back.

"Just don't lock it. He's gonna get a guy to come look at it." There was something in her tone that told me she actually believed this. Mommy always looked on the bright side of the screen door. Even if it meant she was standing outside. I wondered what this Guy looked like. If he'd ever show. Why call a Guy, I thought, when Daddy could call Papa?

"Why you think *he* would know how to fix it?" Once men leave the nest they don't ask their daddies for help. They ask a Guy. Daddy didn't do this either. Daddy didn't ask nobody for help.

I spent a lot of my time in my room Googling 2 bedroom apartments on Zillow. If I felt a little more optimistic, I'd up the bed to three and the bath to two and I'd scroll through the aerial view of the neighborhoods. I fantasized about pretty kitchen cabinets and a sparkly silver fridge. We'd have a heater and window panes without nails and cardboard to cover holes. Maybe a landlord who's a phone call away, that way when the toilet breaks or the hot water stops running, we will only have to wait a couple of hours. Daddy was willing to wait weeks.

Me and Mommy were resourceful. I learned to be a tinkerbell. We'd fill cups, about 10, and microwave each one for 3 minutes. Hot to the touch. We'd pour them in a big bucket while we took turns sitting on the floor of the bathtub. Dipping the washcloth and scrubbing our skin. We had to be quick, quick, quick before the water in the bucket got too lukewarm. During this, we'd hear Daddy's truck start up and leave. Some time would pass and I'd hear his tires roll up the gravel and his engine shut off in the driveway. Through the window I'd see him walk past, whistling toward the garage with a towel slung around his shoulder.

Daddy wasn't the money man. I was never a little princess.

"15 dollars for a field trip?! Are they gonna feed you too?"

"They said I have to bring money for lunch." He pulled out a 10-dollar bill from his wallet.

"This all I got. You're gonna have to ask your mom for the rest." I watched him leave out the backdoor. I memorized the twenty steps his Adidas slides made as he approached his bedroom.

Twenty-one if his shoe caught between a crack in the concrete and made him trip a little.

Mommy scraped up 3 dollars worth of quarters and a 2 dollar bill and I didn't ask for lunch money.

I did have a money man when I was a little girl. Mommy's friend. He was tall and skinny and wore a hat over his long head. I knew he had hair under there, I just knew it, and I would beg and tease and jump real high to try and knock it off. And he'd laugh and tell me that he couldn't take off the hat. If he did bills and bills and bills would start to fly sporadically out of his skull like black bats in a cave and they'd never stop.

"And coins would spill out my mouth," he'd say.

"Out of his eye sockets too," my brother would add.

"Well then, I'd take you to the hospital," I'd say. "So the doctor can sew you shut."

He'd laugh, pat my head, and give me a handsome President Grant. Once he gave me the one with Ben Lincoln and I turned him down.

I remember the day the money man invited Mommy and me and my brother over to his home. I was surprised to learn he also had kids. 2 boys my age. And a wife, pretty, in the center of the family portrait on the mantel above the fireplace. And 3 beds. And 2 baths.

"You guys go play so the grown-ups can talk." He ushered us outside.

I sat on the swing of the treehouse and watched the boys kick a ball around and wrestle in the dirt. I glanced back to the house. It was two stories too. I'd only ever seen a two-story house in the movies with the blonde families and their fluffy dog. The Money Man had it all. It was my Zillow house up close and personal. I couldn't- I wouldn't- leave without seeing it for myself. We were unchaperoned, so it was easy for me to sneak back into the house. Mommy and the Money Man were nowhere in sight.

Good. I walked into the shiny dining room. It was connected to the kitchen, one big open space, with an island and standing chairs. Cream light bulb shades hung high up on the tall ceilings. They had a silver fridge with buttons and an ice maker. Their counters were a smooth

marble, and they even had a bowl of muffins at the center of the table. Untouched by a trail of little worker ants. I had to see more. It was a spectacle. The Money Man was an accountant or a business man or a computer technician. Mommy told me one time but I didn't remember.

Whatever he did, he must be good at it. I tip-toed my way up the carpet stairs and made a right away from the laughs I heard from the other side of the hallway. I came across the boy's rooms. Their blue walls and dinosaur bedsheets. I went in and sat on the bouncy memory foam twin-sized mattress. I put some power into my bounce, testing its durability. A bed frame was sturdier than a row of egg crates. I wondered how I'd decorate this room if it were mine. Pink walls and fairy lights. I'd have a vanity desk and a lock on my door. Then my mind wandered to how I be as a daughter to the Money Man. He'd tuck me in at night and tell me a bedtime story. He'd kiss my forehead and tell me I'm wonderful and smart. His pretty princess.

I needed to see the master bedroom. I stared at the door from the children's bedroom. My palms were getting damp and I felt my temperature rise at the thought of being caught upstairs. I should probably just leave while I'm ahead, I thought. But leaving now would be going to the restroom at the climax of a movie. Before Edward Norton finds out he's also Brad Pitt. I walked slowly across the hall passing a big mirror and another family photo and expensive-looking nick-nacks on the top of a display dresser. As I inched closer to the door I felt as though I was intruding. Up until now in my escapade, I was Nancy Drew. Now, I was more like Nosy Rosie. Just a peak, I thought. I crept up to the small keyhole, putting my face as close as I could to the door. I eyed in.

There was Mommy and the Money Man. Except they weren't laughing anymore. Mommy was holding a baby! The Money Man was a father for the third time, oh what joy. As I looked in more, the image became more clear and equally more confusing. Money Man was

standing behind my mom, caressing the sides of her thighs and lightly kissing her neck. They were smiling and swaying. It was almost as if my mom had given birth just now in that room and they were brand new parents. Brand spanking new. And that little baby was the product of their love. I heard the boys downstairs come in through the sliding doors. Loud and rambunctious. Mommy moved to put the baby back in the cradle and I moved from the door and rushed back down the stairs to join the kids. I thought I saw love there, watching them through the peephole. Such a small perspective and so powerful. I'd never seen Daddy touch my mom like that. They never so much as shared words let alone kisses. Even before the couch and before the garage. I don't know if there was a time before.

Mommy says there was a time before. But it was before, before. Before my mother got off birth control to have me. Before I was thought about or conceived. There was a time when Daddy made Mommy feel like the most beautiful girl in the world. Magic carpet rides and glass slipper romance. He proposed on a red runner with white roses on the sandy beach of Catalina. Their first kiss was on their wedding day. He did all the right things. Said all the right words. I love you. I do. His vows were handwritten and rehearsed. They did it all right. Traditional. Perfect. Almost. They drove home in the Just Married car. He carried her in her white dress into the house they'd later fight and cry and ignore each other in. The truth was- and this was the hard truth that bubbles in your throat to form a rock- Daddy didn't want to be a daddy. He was content with living his life on Easy Street. Pretty wife, happy life, pleasure he didn't have to return. He'd drink until his cup was empty and Mommy'd come by and fill it up again from her own cup. She drank what was left. She grew lonely and sad. She wanted me.

"I want a baby." She said to him one night after dinner and a pillow performance.

“What? Really?”

She rolled over to him and drew stars on his chest. “Yeah. I mean why not?”

“How about next month?”

And she waited till next month. And the month after that.

“Dr. McCann took me off of birth control.” She revealed during dinner one night during one month.

“Oh yeah?” Daddy was disinterested. “I didn’t know you were that serious.”

“Well, yeah. It’d be nice, no?” She was starting to get agitated. She played nervously with the silver band on her left finger. She waited impatiently for his response.

In her anxiousness, he drafted the most romantic phrase.

“Sure, whatever you want.”

A week later she was pregnant and he wouldn’t touch her. But she didn’t care. She had me to look forward to. Me to hold and kiss and cuddle. Who needs a husband when you have a baby. That is the circle of life. Everyone gets replaced.

Mommy wanted to be a mommy for as long as she could remember. All of her dolls were her children. She bottle-fed and diaper-changed and read stories and took them on walks. It was all practice for when she’d have the real thing. While other kids dreamed of growing up to be a firefighter or a nurse or a police officer, Mommy dreamed of being mine. Did you know that at birth, women are born with the amount of eggs they’ll have for a lifetime. I was with my mother for it all. Through the tears and abuse and holes in the wall. She carried me with her the same way I’d carry with me, my future child. Is it comforting or terrifying to know I’ll never truly be alone with myself?

I wonder a lot what Mommy's life would be like if she had a normal dream. Or if she had a baby a little further down the road with a man who cared for her in the way she deserved. Daddy didn't. Couldn't. Never ever would.

Mommy loved flowers. When her brother took his life one February night in his car, she kept every single flower from the funeral. When they began to wither, she tied string around the necks of the stems and hung them upside down from the sides of the window seals around the house. They fell long beside the tattered curtains. When they dried out completely, she'd free them from the string and put them right back into their vases. Dead and crinkly like parchment paper. She saved the ones that stayed intact. She cared for living ones too. She'd admire and sniff whenever we'd walk down the floral aisle with the balloons and the birthday cards.

Daddy never bought her flowers. Not once.

"It's a waste of money."

"Not if I like them."

"They're just gonna die, they're pointless."

Daddy was willing to die on this hill. Mommy lived without her 8-dollar bouquets. Until one day a miracle happened. As if someone had been listening to her and wanted to give her a gift.

"Look! They're blooming right outside our window!" She went outside to get a closer look and he followed behind begrudgingly. "Wow! I don't know what they are but they're beautiful" They were white hydrangeas. She was finally getting her flowers.

"I don't know if I want them right by the window."

"Why not? They're not in the way or anything."

"They're an eyesore."

“Well, I like them.” Mommy snapped a few photos on her phone before walking back inside, happy to have something to look forward to in the coming days.

She awoke one day the next week to a loud mower outside her room. She threw on a robe and rushed outside to confront the noise. She met eyes with a man and his mustache and his mower. White, sad, lifeless pedals lying on the ground next to green shrub and dirt.

That was the last of the marriage. Mommy was pregnant with my brother at the time though she didn’t know it.

“Do you have protection?”

“I don’t think we need it,” He laughed. “I mean you just had one, what are the odds of you getting pregnant again?” Another laugh.

My brother had the last laugh. The odds were in his favor. He was born and we were raised back to back, bump to bump. Daddy let himself fall further and further away from the family he’d reluctantly created. Maybe it was all too real? Fantasy covers shit in gold but this was no longer fantasy. Two babies was a lot of shit.

But Daddy posed for the pictures and he changed a diaper or two. Daddy taught me how to ride a bike and climb a fence and throw a football. He was there for the fun and gone for the pain. Daddy liked us in small increments. I think he mostly liked kids that weren’t his. The ones on our teams for little league or soccer. He could be cool and funny and they’d like him too. And in the end, they’d go home to their parents and he’d go back in the garage. He liked being the coach. If only I liked sports.

The time comes in every girl's life to find a boy to obsess over and then to get her heart broken. Tis was the cycle. A rite of passage. And during this time, Daddy wasn't all useless. Sometimes he gave solid advice.

"Don't get into white vans." Thanks Daddy.

"Boys only want one thing." Really? Gee, what a lifesaver you are, Daddy?

Daddy was there for my first heartbreak. Or maybe second. He was my first.

One morning, I awoke to sounds of girlish laughter coming from the backyard. This wasn't completely abnormal. Daddy was a trainer and there'd always be parents and children in the back talking while loud hip-hop played from a portable speaker. Usually, I'd cover my ears with a pillow and drown out the music and chatter. But something about the cadence in their voices queued me in to listen more intently. Not only was a girl laughing, but so was Daddy! I peered out my window to catch a glimpse of the perpetrator. I couldn't remember the last time I shared a laugh with my dad.

She was my age, give or take. Petite, fit, she definitely played a sport with a ball. They were talking about a new tv show. And then he was asking her questions about her life.

"What's your favorite subject?"

"Do you have a best friend?"

"Oh, she plays basketball too?"

Question after question. Daddy knew more about her in 5 minutes than he did about me since I was 5. My ears grew hot. It was 7 in the morning and my body was filled with envy, rage, coldness. What was it about her? What did I not have?

He picked me up from school the next afternoon. The car ride home was silent as usual after the pleasantries.

“School was good?”

“Yeah, it was okay.”

“Hmm”

He didn’t know my favorite subject. And he’d never ask.

My second heartbreak was with a boy named Ty. We liked each other and by school law that meant we were dating. He’d eat lunch with me and wait outside after school with me. We were a power team at tetherball and handball. We’d hold hands in secret if we happened to be desk partners. We were madly in love. Infatuated. At least I was. One day he ended things.

“You really like playing tether ball and I don’t want you to stop for me or anything. But I’m into basketball now. We’re just on two different paths.”

Fucking basketball.

Daddy picked me up after school that day. I begged Mommy to get me instead but she had to work late that night. I shuffled over to his car, throwing my backpack in first and then my body. Limp and lifeless. I’d spent all of the recess crying in the bathroom and it showed in the thick, puffy bags under my eyes.

“You alright?” He asked this without looking but somehow he knew. He was more perceptive than he let on. Mommy always said he noticed everything. I took this with a grain of salt.

“Yeah.” I nodded. I wanted to elaborate to drive home the lie. *Yeah, I’m okay just tired.* But I couldn’t even get it out without tears beginning to well up in the corners of my eyes.

“What’s wrong, baby girl.” Crying provoked pet names. This made the tears fall harder, leaving heavy droplet stains on my khaki slacks. He didn’t say anything else for the rest of the ride home and he let me sob quietly against the window. I was grateful to not have to speak.

Later that night he tried the Dad thing. Forced into it by Mommy's absence. He began to cook...something. I couldn't tell what it was but it smelled edible in the instinctual way, like I knew it wouldn't kill me. He cycled in and out through the back screen door as if it was revolving and he was playing ping pong tog with the garage door and the stove. I'd hear his slides shuffle closer to the house and take that as a cue to turn down my show a couple of dials on the TV. Daddy didn't indulge in lifetime drama and thought it a waste of time.

"Foods done." He said quickly before grabbing his plate and walking back to the dog house. I was left alone. The quiet didn't feel powerful anymore. I felt defeated and pathetic and rejected and ignored. He wasn't a deadbeat. But I wondered if life would be different if he did just walk out that door and never come back. Or maybe not never. But like I'd see him but only on weekends and every other holiday the way normal kids saw their divorcee dads. And he'd have to take care of us for a whole 48 hours. And take us on fun trips. And speak to us and tuck us in. And maybe he'd want to because then he'd miss us. We wouldn't be 20 feet away we'd be 20 miles. That could change alot, I thought. Or maybe not.

After I finished eating I put my plate in the sink, there was charge of light through the house for one split second and then darkness. The power went out. My brother was sleep, he was unbothered by the change in brightness. Me? Not so fortunate. I was restless and it was getting dark. Daddy would have to press some buttons and reset something. I journeyed toward the garage. Once outside I stood still, looking up at the sky which was a deep dark blue and a single glimmer of light sparkled north of where I stayed on the back porch, the painted concrete cold and damp beneath my feet. I looked back through the screen door, the kitchen light was flickering off and on and off again. If I leave it like this I'll get nightmares, I thought. But nothing was more scary than knocking on Daddy's back door late at night. If it wasn't important

there was gonna be a problem. I gauged the situation and this felt important. I knocked three times on the wood. Tap, tap, tap. I prayed he wasn't asleep. Suddenly, I heard the door squeak open.

"What's up?" He looked at me with half-open eyes, shirtless in shorts.

"The power went out." Smtch. He smacked his lips as if to say *That's why you woke me up. It's night time the lights are supposed to be off anyways.*

"Alright." He turned from me back into the room to get dressed. Usually, he closed his door and I waited like a puppy to hear the squeaks. He'd always close it close behind him. But this time, in his sleepiness, he had left open the wardrobe to Narnia. My eyes widened in surprise. It wasn't a room like I thought. After all these years, Daddy had kept the integrity of the garage. There were piles of things I couldn't name grouped together along the left wall. He had random sets of workout equipment sprawled on the floor. Daddy used faux grass turf as a carpet, an egg crate as a television stand, a towel as a rug, a school desk as...a desk I guess. I wondered where he got that from. Everything was so random, so peculiar. Why'd he live like this? And in what world was my room messy when *he* lived in a pawn shop? He used a withered leather couch as a bed. Creature of habit.

"You got a flashlight?" He finally said. I backed away a little and he followed me out and closed his door.

"Oh yeah, uhh I'll go grab one." It took my brain a second to register where the flashlight could be. I jogged toward the house but something caught my foot on the way and I fell, SPLAT onto the concrete.

Daddy ran over to me as if he teleported.

"Can you stand?"

“I think so.” My hands had gravel crumbs and my knee was bleeding.

“You got it. Here I have bandaids.” We limped together shoulder to shoulder back into the garage. He helped me sit on his bed-couch while he rummaged through papers and books to find a small first aid kit. He shimmied on his knees over to me and began to work on the small scrape. It was the most attentive I’d ever seen. It reminded me of when I scraped my other knee in kindergarten when me and Daddy were racing back to the car after school so I said-

“This reminds me of when I scraped my knee in kindergarten”

“Hmmm.” He was pulling out the alcohol pad.

“Do you remember that? We were racing to your car and I fell and it was really bad and you had to carry me all the way to my seat.”

He chuckled a little. “No, I don’t think I remember that.”

“Oh.” This wasn’t the end of the world. Daddy probably had a lifetime’s worth of memories he kept stored up there, I couldn’t expect him to remember that one time that one day a couple of years ago when he kissed his daughter’s forehead so she’d stop crying. He was always so sweet to her when she cried. She ought to do it more. There was something about men and tears that I’d noticed but hadn’t quite figured out.

“There you go.” Daddy gave me a small tap on my leg and stood back up. “You can go back inside. I’ll look at the fuse box in a minute.” A minute could mean a minute. Or it could mean days.

“Okay, thanks, Daddy.” I walked slowly back up the porch and into the house with the flickering kitchen light.

