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## Through the Cracks

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Through the Cracks

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Kate Kastelein


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2018

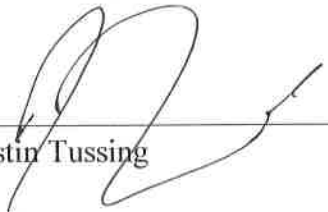
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

June 1, 2018

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Kate Kastelein entitled *Through the Cracks* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
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Accepted

  
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Adam-Max Tuchinsky      Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

## Abstract

This collection of five short stories and two essays shows women, at various stages in their lives, dealing with darkness. Each female protagonist, including myself in the essays, is confronted with difficult truths about the world around them. In the short stories, the darkness includes a supernatural element that is often, but not always, horrifying.

“Inanition” looks at what happens when a woman, who identified as wife and mother for most of her adult life, no longer has a husband or child to care for. A pregnant, newly clean drug addict is the main character in “In the Trap”. When she finds an item that grants wishes, Angela has to decide if she will wish away her problems, to the detriment of people she loves. Two of the stories, “Sap” and “Crisis Ghost,” are about sisters. While the sisters in “Sap” find themselves ensnared in a dangerous situation on their sixteenth birthday, “Crisis Ghost” highlights the strange and difficult time a new mother has asking her sister for help when the ghost of their own mother appears. Finally, “Through the Cracks” is a disturbing tale about a woman who takes children from their mothers.

The two essays, “Cry, Baby” and “Failure to Thrive,” examine Kastelein’s experiences with dark topics. “Cry, Baby” attempts to unearth the complex feelings that arose when the author’s celebrity teen-crush was accused of domestic violence. Kastelein’s daughter was born around the same time that her grandmother began to show symptoms of dementia. “Failure to Thrive” shows the parallels between the growth of her toddler and the descent of her grandmother as well as the disturbing realization that she, too, may someday forget everything about her life.

## **Acknowledgements**

For my husband Michael, and my children Maggie and Michael Jr. Their love, support, and encouragement helped me turn my dreams into reality. I will forever be grateful for such an amazing family, without whom this would not have been possible. I would also like to acknowledge the support of my parents, Stuart and Betsy Mahan, who encouraged my passion for reading and writing from an early age.

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## Preface

My first piece of published writing was an advertisement featuring an alphabetical list of things you could buy in my parents' general store. I painstakingly typed the list on my grandmother's baby-blue Smith Corona electric typewriter, a machine I loved so much that, even now, looking them up on eBay sets my heart pounding. I'm not sure exactly how old I was when I wrote it, but I remember that my feet didn't reach the floor from the kitchen chair where I sat. This ad is not important to my writing career just because it was my first piece of published work. It's also important because what I remember most about it is sitting in the chair agonizing over the keys trying to think of an item for each letter of the alphabet. I was up against my first deadline. This was my first experience as a writer trying to come up with new material while a clock ticked, an experience universally shared by all writers, no matter the age. It is, in fact, what I'm doing right now, though my feet are firmly on the floor. And even though it was agonizing, and I sat in the chair for hours, I remember the elated rush when I finished that ad. The way the paper zipped out from between the rolls of the typewriter, and the way it felt to hold a finished piece in my hands. I was hooked.

Later, in middle school, some like-minded kids and I formed a writing group called "Soon to be Famous Authors." Clearly, self-esteem was not a problem for us. A teacher mentored us, and under her guidance, we had the freedom to write whatever we wanted, as long as we wrote the specified number of pages per week. My greatest work at that time was a children's book titled "Creampuff and Jenny" inspired by Charlotte's Web. It told the story of a young girl, Jenny, and her pet rabbit, Creampuff, who eventually wins a blue ribbon at the county fair. During this time of freedom to write

what I wanted, it should be noted that I was allowed to read what I wanted as well. Since my reading level was assessed at a fourth-grade level when I enrolled in Kindergarten, the tiny school system and my parents agreed that I would be allowed to read whatever I wanted. And as long as I wrote book reports, I could skip the text-book style readers my classmates were learning from. The ability to read and write what I wanted for the entirety of my elementary school education was an extraordinary gift.

It is now that Stephen King must enter the conversation. As a horror writer, I am acutely aware of the long, controversial, and clichéd shadow he casts over the genre. However, I cannot write about my journey as a writer without talking about Stephen King, because his books were my first introduction to horror. I remember reading *'Salem's Lot* around age ten and hiding under my blankets. I recently revisited this book and determined that it's still one of the scariest books I've ever read. But more than my intro to horror, Stephen King's books had a profound effect on me as a Mainer. I didn't know of anyone famous that had come from Maine, and certainly not someone who had grown up here. Along came Stephen King, who was not only from Maine, but wrote about Maine. He had gone to the University of Maine. He and his family still lived in Bangor. I recognized the places he described in his books. And I began to really believe that I could be a writer.

The other major influence Stephen King had on my life was that because of his books, I learned you could get in trouble for reading. The idea of anything but unfettered access to all areas of the library was completely foreign to me until I entered Jr. High School. When I entered the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, English and Reading were divided into two classes. In English we learned about grammar and diagrammed sentences. In Reading we read



and wrote book reports which we then presented to the class. I assumed that as in the past, I would go ahead and read whatever I wanted. Things were fine until after Christmas break when I returned to school with Stephen King's *Gunslinger*, the first book of the Dark Tower series, which I had received the entirety of as a Christmas gift. The teacher blew a gasket when she saw Stephen King emblazoned on the front of the book and confiscated it. I was lectured in front of the class for reading horrible books that would warp my brain. As a nerdy, straight-A student, I had never had so much as a missed recess due to discipline yet had just received a humiliating dressing down in front of my entire class for reading a book. The teacher handed me another book, which I hid behind and tried not to cry. That afternoon she called my mother, who I'm sure she assumed would be on her side. Little did she know that my mother had bought me the books. It was now the teacher who received the dressing down, and though I'm not sure exactly what my mother said to her, the next day I got my book back and she never said another word to me about my choice in books. However, I wasn't asked to present my book reports aloud, like the rest of the class. Perhaps she was afraid I would poison their brains as well. Though the trouble I'd been in was over what I was reading, a seed had been planted – if I could get in trouble for simply reading horror novels, what kind of trouble would I get into for writing them?

In high school I found little outlet for fiction writing and instead concentrated on the long, analytical essays I needed to complete in order to graduate. By the time I took my first creative fiction class in college, it was as an elective, since I had decided to major in business and work at the car dealership owned by my family. However, it was in this class that my love for writing fiction was rekindled. As a University of Maine

student, I attended the Stonecoast Writer's Conference in 1999. I spent a week among other fiction writers immersed in discussions of plot, character, and of course our favorite books. I changed my major to English and in the fall, I filled my spare time with writing stories and poems, and outlining novels.

I had never been a full-time college student and continued to work full-time while I pursued my degree part-time. In the winter of 2000, I moved and decided to take a short break from school, fully intending to return in the fall. That break lasted twelve years. During that break I got married and had two children. But I never stopped writing. I created a fairly decent career for myself as a freelance writer. This was back in the days when the internet was new and there was money to be made writing clear, well-researched articles. One of the best-paying jobs I had was writing articles for a dermatology website. Over the course of a year, I wrote twenty-one three-thousand-word essays about various skin conditions and how to remedy them. I did enjoy getting paid for writing, but I missed writing fiction. Around that time, the bottom fell out of the publishing industry and the dot com bubble burst. Whether or not I wanted to write about skin conditions was irrelevant, because good-paying freelance writing jobs were gone, nearly overnight.

My attention returned to college; I only had thirty credits left to finish my undergraduate degree. One afternoon as I surfed around on the USM website, I discovered that the Stonecoast program I had loved so many years ago had grown into an MFA program. I looked through the offerings, and knew at once that I had to do it. But first, I had to finish college. For two years I took classes, and wrote, and studied – often while nursing my son, who was born a few months before I reenrolled. I was able to

attend the Stonecoast writers conference, a full ten years after the first time I had attended. It was the first time I'd left my son, a year and a half old at the time, for longer than a few hours. Again, it was an amazing experience and I was more certain than ever that I had to get into the MFA program. A few weeks after I graduated, I applied.

Acceptance into the program was met with jubilation, but soon turned to panic and doubt. I was thirty-eight years old and would graduate at age forty. I had two kids. There was no way I could participate as a student. Though I had the full support of my family, my certainty that the program was exactly what I should be doing turned to doubt. Fortunately, after a long discussion with Robin Talbot, I decided to enroll. She reassured me that I would not be either the oldest student or the only one with kids. For two years, my goal had been to complete school so that I could enroll in this program, and now, I'd done it.

When I applied, though I loved fiction, I hesitated before declaring my concentration. I'd spent years writing non-fiction, a few stories here and there for fun, but my focus had been on essays, blogs, newswriting, and articles. But I didn't love it. Next, I thought about fiction. Serious, literary fiction. However, that's not what I wanted to spend my days writing either. I wanted to learn how to write the books I loved to read, and so I chose pop-fiction. For my application, I selected a few chapters of a novel I'd been working on, about a psychic young girl in a family of con-artists. It was a story I'd been thinking about for years and it felt wonderful to put it to paper. After my acceptance, I decided that instead of sending in more of the novel, I would work on a short story. The story, "Inanition," about a middle-aged woman who encounters a malevolent spirit while camping, was equally thrilling to write. For the remainder of the

program, I decided to focus on shorter works, because they gave me the freedom to explore new worlds, characters, and styles.

Despite my initial fear of studying at Stonecoast because of my age and being a mother, I have come to realize that it was actually perfect timing. That is not to say that it has been easy for me or my family. There have been many weekends when I have been locked in my office writing, while my husband and kids have gone off on some fun adventure. My writing and studying hours have been shoehorned into my life as a mother. Last summer, while working on my third-semester project, I took bags of books, papers, and pens to the beach so that my kids could play while I worked. The intersection of motherhood and writing has helped me grow as an artist, instead of holding me back, as I feared.

My first semester, under the mentorship of David Anthony Durham, was spent getting my sea legs. It had been a long time since I set up any sort of regular writing practice. I also had notebooks full of ideas that I'd never explored. Because of this, I spent a lot of time doing exploratory writing and throwing away vast amounts of it. I cut at least half of everything I wrote. I explored some truly terrible storylines. However, by the end of the semester, I'd established a regular writing practice, and begun the process of balancing exploratory writing with a bit of planning, so that I wasn't tossing a novel's worth of words each month. Finally, I learned that many of my short stories weren't short stories at all and were in fact the seeds of novels or novellas, which is probably why I had to cut so much of them out to make them work. It was also during my first semester that I annotated *The Hero with One Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell, a book that I had heard a great deal about but never actually read. I was horrified at the lack of female

heroes as well as the portrayal of women in the book. Though it claimed to encompass all of the great world myths, I noticed that the myth of Demeter and Persephone was not included. This discovery eventually became part of my third semester project.

When I started working with Nancy Holder during the second semester, the first thing I asked her to help me with was to hone in on my ideas more quickly and scale back the exploratory writing. She suggested I read *Save the Cat*, by Blake Snider, a book about screenwriting. It contained a formula for pacing as well as outlining screenplays.

However, it worked wonders for helping me devise a map for my writing. The outlines suggested were detailed, but flexible enough to change as my ideas changed. The day after I finished reading *Save the Cat* I sat down and outlined four novels, finally compiling sticky notes and ideas that had been kicking around my office for decades. I was also able to use the outline process for short stories, and it helped me see whether an idea would work as a short story or not. As Nancy explained, with short stories, you have the time and space to do one thing. If there are multiple story lines or ideas you are trying to convey, it most likely is a longer piece.

I produced quite a bit of writing during my second semester, including two non-fiction pieces. I had begun to notice bits of my real life popping up in my fiction and decided that I might revisit writing creative non-fiction. This time, though, my non-fiction was much more personal than the news-type writing I had done in the past, and I explored some darker issues. I had begun to notice the darkness of everyday life that is often the inspiration behind the fictional frights.

In addition to *Save the Cat*, I read three books during my second semester that I can now say have been the most influential on my writing life to date. During my

semester with Nancy, I wanted to focus almost exclusively on women writers. Though I enjoyed reading horror and suspense, I was woefully unread when it came to women in the genre. And so, I read and annotated *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson, *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter, and *Wylding Hall* by Elizabeth Hand.

Eleanor Vance, the main character in *The Haunting of Hill House*, is wonderfully unstable. At first, I found myself empathizing with her, and at the cruelty of her brother and sister-in-law, but as the book progresses, Jackson slowly reveals that Eleanor is not well. I've read the book twice, and still am unable to decide if the house was haunted, if it was all imagined by Eleanor, or if she possessed some sort of telekinetic powers. It inspired me to try to write my own unstable characters, or at least ones that are not entirely likeable. For not only is Eleanor unlikable, the other characters, Theodora, Dr. Montague, and Luke, aren't particularly likable either. *Hill House* can be read many times to many different ends. It is an ambitious style to emulate and it is an excellent example of how holding things back from the reader can be as interesting and satisfying as a big reveal ending in which everything is explained. I've tried to weave a bit of Eleanor's instability into many of my short works, including "In the Trap". And I played with the idea of holding back or only implying certain information in "Through the Cracks."

I've long been interested in mythology and fairytales, as well as the idea of reimagining fairytales. I lightly touched on an old folktale, the "Fisherman and His Wife," in my story "In the Trap," which I wrote in my first semester, but hadn't played around much with the idea beyond that. I'd had an idea for a long time about a maple tree that produces magical syrup and wrote a draft again with a light nod to a fairytale, this

time Hansel and Gretel. After reading Angela Carter's book *The Bloody Chamber*, I was inspired to go back into the story and rewrite it with a much heavier hand when it came to fairytale allusions. I found two of Carter's stories, "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Erl King," particularly helpful when it came to reimagining Hansel and Gretel. "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" is an incredibly close retelling of "Beauty and the Beast"; the main characters are even referred to as Beauty and Beast. The biggest difference in this story from the original is that it was updated to include telephones and automobiles. "The Erl King" contained gorgeous descriptions of the forest, which prompted me to rewrite descriptions of the forest in my own story and give the setting a much more prominent role. *The Bloody Chamber* is only 160 pages, but for me provides limitless resources on the possibilities of how to approach old tales and make them my own, whether it's simply by updating the setting and time, or a complete reinvention.

Often when writing horror, writers, including myself, become so wrapped up in plotting and figuring out the best placement for scares and details, that we overlook voice as a storytelling device. In her book *Wylding Hall*, Elizabeth Hand structures the book so that it's like reading a script for a documentary film but without the benefit of the questions from the interviewer. Each character is responding to a question that we don't see, and the characters don't know how the others answer the questions. Because of this the book has a curiously unstable feeling, not unlike *The Haunting of Hill House*. I thought that this particular narrative structure was interesting and challenging and wanted to write something similar. My story "Through the Cracks" features a narrator speaking to someone the reader never sees. Unlike *Wylding Hall*, my piece involves only one character, and hints at supernatural elements, while *Wylding Hall* reveals them. *Wylding*

*Hall* will serve as a constant reminder to me that voice, and specifically a unique way to present a voice, can be as effective at creating suspense and unease as a malevolent spirit hiding under a bed in genre fiction.

For my third semester project, I wanted to focus on the representation of mothers in popular fiction. I worked with Theodora Goss on my paper “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone as a Framework for Heroic Mothers in Popular Texts.” My third semester work changed my view of mothers in popular texts and how I plan to write heroic mothers going forward. When I began my journey researching heroic mothers, I focused on texts that fit the following criteria: The mother must be the protagonist, or at least a central figure in an ensemble, and her child(ren) had to be alive for the majority of the text. Soon after I began my research, I noticed that similar patterns emerged in the story lines. At first, I thought it might be the Hero’s Journey, but quickly realized the mythic structure didn’t match. Campbell’s structure consists of the ordinary world, the call to adventure, the refusal of the quest, accepting the call, entering the unknown, supernatural aid, talisman, allies/helpers, tests and the supreme ordeal, and reward and the journey home.

Stories with a mother in the role of hero are quite different from the structure Campbell designed, most often because her call to action is not adventure, but a threat to her child. The stories shared a familiar quality, and I discovered that they mimicked the main plot points of perhaps the most well-known threat to a child story, that of Demeter and Persephone. In the myth, Demeter’s daughter, Persephone, is abducted by Hades the God of the Underworld, and Demeter embarks on a journey in order to save her. Though protection of a child as motivation for a heroic mother is not a new idea, my research



went beyond the surface level portrayal of heroic mothers and identified a persistent pattern in their journeys, one that follows Demeter in the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

I also discussed the graphic novel *Saga*, where the female protagonist is a hero and a mother, and not a hero because she is a mother, which is an important distinction. For although following patterns in storytelling can be comforting for both the writer and the audience, it become detrimental when, as in the case of heroic mothers, it is adhered to so closely that the protagonist is only shown acting in one way. I concluded that there is room in popular texts for both the old way of representing heroic mothers, and mothers acting heroically in different ways.

After writing my third semester project, I re-examined the representation of mothers in my own writing. Beyond the representation of women, mothers so often are portrayed as evil, hysterical, or dead. I wanted to make sure that the women in my work reflected more than the common tropes, and if the story did call for the death of someone's mother, I wanted to make sure it wasn't the only reason she was included in the story. Through my work at Stonecoast, as well as independently, I've noticed a lack of female representation in horror and fantasy, especially women characters written by women writers. The pieces I've chosen for my thesis, six short stories and two essays, represent my attempt to show a variety of women's voices, including my own. My work includes women that are sisters, mothers, daughters, heroes, and villains.

"Inanition" tells the story of Jessica, a middle-aged woman who finds herself suddenly widowed. Her daughter has moved out but is in constant contact with her mother out of worry. Jessica struggles with her identity as her roles of wife and mother

have faded, and as the invisibility of middle-aged womanhood sets in. She decides to go camping to reclaim some of her younger, independent spirit, but is confronted with an actual spirit instead. Despite the spirit's insistence that her life is now over, and it would be better to lie down and die, Jessica fights back and decides to live.

When I first wrote "In the Trap," George was the main character. I decided, after my project, to switch the main character to Angela and also to add a pregnancy to the story. As she is navigating both drug addiction and the prospect of motherhood, Angela receives what some would perceive as the perfect solution, a magical skull that grants wishes. However, the wishes come with consequences. As she and George first decided to wish their reputations back, Angela's best friend, Wayne, swaps places with them and becomes addicted to heroin. In this story, I wanted to show Angela making decisions not only because she's pregnant, though it plays a part, but also because she is trying to deal with the repercussions of her actions, both in making wishes and as a drug addict.

At the end of my second semester, my grandmother, whom my family calls Hibear, suffered what we thought at the time would be a fatal downturn in her health. She has since recovered, but my piece "Failure to Thrive" examines my journey into motherhood at the same time as I witnessed my grandmother's nearly complete loss of recognition of her family, including her children. She has since shown great improvement due to a new diagnosis and doctor, but her memory has not returned.

As I mentioned previously, Angela Carter became a great influence on my work after I read *The Bloody Chamber*, and "Sap" is my attempt at a fairytale rewrite. For years I had an idea for a story that involved maple trees, after seeing huge trees in our local cemetery tapped for sap year after year. I decided that Hansel and Gretel might be

rewritten in such a way as to incorporate the trees. “Sap” doesn’t involve a mother at all; she is absent, and it is the step-father of the main characters, Hanna and Greta, who leaves them in the forest. I decided to leave the mother out altogether, since in the Grimm version it’s the step-mother who convinces the father to take the children to the woods and leave them. I wanted to do a simple flip of the script, a bit like the updating of “Beauty and the Beast” in Carter’s story of Mr. Lyon.

In September of 2015, my brother in-law died suddenly. I wrote a blog post about it called “The Grief Tattoo,” in which I likened the death of a loved one to being abducted and tattooed against your will. That post became the inspiration for “Inked.” In it, Kayleigh experiences the loss of the three most important women in her life: her grandmother, her best friend, and her mother. Immediately before she learns of her loved one’s death, she is pulled from her world into another where she is tattooed with something symbolic from her relationship with the person she lost. After the death of her mother, Kayleigh learns that she is a Pharos, a being that helps guide souls to the afterlife. I decided to include the death of the mother in this story, because it was essential to the plot. Not only was she the first soul that Kayleigh showed the way to, but Kayleigh is now alone, and able to begin her life as a Pharos.

“Cry, Baby” was written before the #MeToo movement swept the country. When I conceived the idea for the essay, I’d heard that Elizabeth Searle was creating an anthology about writers and their teen crushes. Mine happened to be Johnny Depp, who had at that time just been accused of spousal abuse. I wanted to explore the feelings around the building up of a teen crush, and even how that influences the types of boys young women are attracted to, and the realization that the star the crush was centered on

wasn't such a great person. This essay explores the unsettling realization that we truly don't know anything about the celebrities we look up to and have crushes on, and the danger of relying on their public personas for real life relationships.

I wrote "Through the Cracks" after reading an article in the *New Yorker* about a difficult child protective services case. For a few months, I'd wanted to experiment with voice and point of view in the spirit of Liz Hand's *Wylding Hall*, and this seemed like the perfect idea to apply it to. This was the first piece of fiction that I wrote during the program that didn't feature any overtly supernatural elements, though I tried to sprinkle a few throughout. As a mother, one of my greatest fears is something happening to my children and being powerless to prevent it, but I also wanted to avoid the heroic mother model I'd outlined in my thesis. I thought it would be an interesting experiment to write a piece entirely from the perspective of the antagonist. Writing this piece taught me a great deal, both about the nature of frightful elements and using unique voices.

Years ago, a friend told me she'd received a phone call from her mother – who had died 10 years earlier. I filed her story away and forgot about it a bit, until during a discussion in a workshop with Nancy Holder my third residency, the topic of an undead babysitter came up in conversation. I combined the story my friend told me with the topic from Nancy's workshop into "Crisis Ghost." At first this was what I call a "Kill the Monster Story," much like the ones by Stephen King that I'd grown up reading. After feedback in a workshop, Elizabeth Searle pointed out that perhaps this would work better as a story about the relationship between mothers and daughters. In its current iteration, it is still a supernatural tale but now conveys a dark but funny look at new motherhood, sisters, and the loss of one's own mother at a young age.

For years, acceptance into the Stonecoast MFA program was my goal and now, at the end of the program, I find myself looking for a new goal post. I hope to publish the works I have presented in my thesis, as well as a novel I've been working on. And more importantly, I hope to teach a few classes in my community, and perhaps someday, back at Stonecoast.

## Cry, Baby

The entire back wall of my uncle's convenience store was floor-to-ceiling shelves of VHS tapes. Patrons took their selections along with bags of chips and six packs of beer to the cashier, who swapped the Styrofoam-filled cardboard boxes for the actual tapes, each in a brown box with a bright orange "Be Kind, Rewind!" sticker affixed to the front. This was before streaming, before DVDs, and before chain movie-rental stores. Back then, movie distributors sent promotional materials directly to tiny-store owners across the country. There were too many posters for one little store to display, which is how my brother ended up with a life-size cardboard cutout of Arnold Schwarzenegger in full *Terminator* gear, and I with a movie poster for *Cry-Baby*, starring a young, handsome Johnny Depp. I was twelve and too young for *21 Jump Street*, too young for *Cry-Baby*, but when I saw Johnny's dark, broody face, that was the poster I wanted, not *Home Alone* or *Pretty Woman* or *Gremlins 2*.

In the poster, Amy Locane lies on a pink bed with her pink capri-clad legs straight up in the air. On the wall next to her hangs an enormous poster of Johnny Depp. His hair is greased back, the popped collar of a leather jacket just visible around his neck. A single tear slides down his cheek. The words *He's a doll. He's a dreamboat. He's a delinquent*, written in turquoise script fill-space between Locane's legs and Depp's face. The poster for this John Waters film is obviously a send-up of fifties greaser movies, but twelve-year-old me didn't know that. I thought it edgy and profound. I don't remember if I saw *Cry-Baby*, and if I did, it didn't matter; I knew what would happen. It happened in *Grease* and *Dirty Dancing*. Bad boy meets good girl, and they fall in love, and more important, good girl gets bad-girl cred.

I did not want to be a good girl. Around the same time, I put up the *Cry-Baby* poster, I received a scholarship to attend a writers' camp hosted by Johns Hopkins University. I told my classmates I had to go to a special summer school, so great was my despair at being recognized for intelligence. Later, I spread a rumor about myself that I stayed back in kindergarten, and therefore had an extra year to learn things, which was why I won so many awards for high scores on tests. For some reason, it didn't occur to me until much later to sabotage myself by not trying in school. Perhaps what I needed was a bad boy with a heart of gold. I set to work finding my own bad boys: the boys who dropped out of school or hung out in the smoking area in leather jackets. Tall, blond boys with Mohawks, musicians who flicked cigarettes from their porches directly onto their parents' lawns. Boys who played Dungeons & Dragons, who smoked pot and had tattoos. I didn't date all these boys, but I surrounded myself with them, an army of golden-hearted bad boys. My plan worked. I was no longer a good girl.

When I was sixteen, I met a dark-haired, dark-eyed boy with high cheekbones and a soft voice, not unlike Johnny Depp. When I was twenty-two, I married him and remain married to him today.

I saw *Edward Scissorhands* in our tiny downtown theater. I went with my cousin, hiked up the steep steps, and paid five dollars to sit in ripped-up red velvet seats in a flat-floored, un-air-conditioned hundred-year-old building. The air hummed with Spree candies, which kids flicked as hard as they could around the theater by snapping them between their fingers and thumbs. An occasional gummy bear slapped onto the screen, but not too often; the movie would have been shut down if too many got stuck there. I sat transfixed by the strange and beautiful Edward Scissorhands; Johnny Depp transformed

into a monster was still the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen. The scene where blonde-wigged Winona Ryder as Kim danced in tiny ice shards as Edward snips a sculpture out of a block of ice is still one of my favorites. IMDb describes Edward Scissorhands as "a gentle man, with scissors for hands." Johnny was now a man who could slice his girlfriend to bits, but didn't. In real life, he and Winona Ryder dated, and when they split, he changed a tattoo on his arm from "Winona Forever" to "Wino Forever." Edgy and funny, a little dark but not too mean. Bad boys are a social construct, I learned. Even with scissors for hands, their hearts are gold.

My infatuation with Johnny Depp wasn't obsession, as some of my star-struck friends' crushes were at the time. Sure, I had a picture in my locker and the poster on my wall, but I didn't buy all the magazines he was in or rush to see every movie. The interviews I saw revealed what I had dreamed about him to be true; he was smart and weird, like me. He started wearing glasses over his dark eyes, and I wondered if he really needed them. I decided it didn't matter, because he was a man who thought, correctly, that he looked fantastic in glasses. Johnny was not only someone I wanted to date, but someone I would love to hang out with in general.

My crush on Johnny entered a new level when it was revealed he was to play Hunter S. Thompson in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Thompson, the off-kilter author of two of my then-favorite books, *The Great Shark Hunt* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, was as much of an intellectual crush as Johnny was a romantic one. A literary bad boy, Thompson was famous for "gonzo journalism" which usually involved excessive drinking and drug use, and then infiltrating and writing about cultural phenomena like the Kentucky Derby or the Hells Angels. Johnny prepared for the role by moving into



Thompson's basement. He spoke about their friendship at length on the late-show circuit, and in one interview he discussed their similar ideology and Johnny's fear of becoming commodified as an actor. It struck a chord with me; I was struggling with whether to pursue my dream of becoming a writer or go to business school and take over the family car dealership. I took that interview to heart, and though it took a few years, I backed away from my family's path and onto my own. When Thompson committed suicide in 2005, I read that Johnny paid for his funeral, which included Thompson's cremated remains being shot out of a cannon, as instructed in his will. It is rumored to have cost three million dollars and was a very golden-hearted final gift from one bad boy to another.

Johnny slipped off my radar. His movies came out, and I saw some, but none stuck with me. *Inside the Actors Studio* interviewed him in front of their largest crowd to date. He wore beat-up jeans and a Carhartt jacket and smoked hand-rolled cigarettes one after the other, while he shyly peeked out from under a curtain of hair. When the audience clapped or responded positively to various accomplishments that John Lipton, the interviewer, mentioned, Depp thanked them sheepishly. He was a man still uneasy with his fame and had not yet been cast as Captain Jack Sparrow or the Mad Hatter. I was happy to see him, as shy and tough and golden as ever.

When Disney cast him as Captain Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, millions of moms happily took their kids to watch their former teen idol in the lead role. Even that role was quirky and smart, dark but kind. In an interview with IGN, Johnny said Jack Sparrow was inspired by both Keith Richards, guitarist for the Rolling Stones,

and Pepé LePew, the amorous cartoon skunk who wouldn't take no for an answer. Jack Sparrow was a dark and dangerous pirate, but that heart of gold remained intact.

*Do you think he did it?*

*Who did what?*

*Johnny Depp!*

*The dog-smuggling thing in Australia?*

*No. His wife said he beat her up.*

*Shit.*

My best friend texted me first thing one morning before I had coffee, let alone switched on my computer. The text was like a bucket of ice-cold water down my back. Johnny had been in the news more lately. He'd left his partner, Vanessa Paradis, after fourteen years, and started dating his young costar Amber Heard, whom he married. They'd gotten into trouble for bringing their dogs into Australia on their private jet and released a bizarrely staged apology video a few months before. I hadn't paid much attention to the entertainment news in a while. Amber Heard had accused Johnny of verbally and physically abusing her on numerous occasions, and had placed a restraining order against him. Did I think he did it? No way! The Johnny I knew wouldn't do that. He wouldn't hurt anyone, not even with his scissorhands. He was the bad boy with the heart of gold, a pirate hybrid of a guitarist and a cartoon skunk. My reaction to the accusation was immediate. It was obvious to me there was no way he would do such a thing.

I watched a few newer interviews with him. Gone were the long hair and beat-up jeans. Now he wore three-piece suits that reminded me of the Mafia. He flung his arm

over the back of the chair and answered questions without a hint of modesty or shyness. I did not recognize this man. I had never been the victim of domestic abuse but knew many women who had. After the shock of the news settled, my quick response to dismiss the allegations, based only on my perceived familiarity with a celebrity, scared me. I did not know Johnny Depp. Yes, he'd guided me toward the golden-hearted bad boys I'd befriended and loved over the years, and all had been as funny and smart and kind as the boys in the movies. None had grown from bad boys into bad men. But I knew them and drank coffee with them and talked about books and music with them in real life. Just because they were good didn't mean Johnny was. At the least, I had no real frame of reference to make such a strong judgment as to his guilt or innocence. If, based on a movie-star crush constructed out of movie posters and late-night television appearances, I could so quickly discount a woman who said she'd been abused, what did that say about me?

Heard dropped the charges, and Johnny was not convicted of spousal abuse. The couple was legally divorced and released the following joint statement: "Our relationship was intensely passionate and at times volatile, but always bound by love. Neither party has made false accusations for financial gain. There was never any intent of physical or emotional harm." One can spend hours reading the evidence for either side of the story. For me, it's not about his guilt or innocence, but my reaction to the allegations.

Johnny Depp is not the characters he plays in the movies, the bad boys with hearts of gold, though he's crafted a career and a public image to coincide with that persona. The power of his harmless bad boy image carries the weight of adoration from millions of women; some, like me, have had a candle burning for over two decades. When

someone has been in your eye for that long, you feel as if you know a little bit about him. But you don't really.

A few years ago, a frayed wire in my parents' attic caused a fire. The house was saved, but the attic was destroyed. Among the knickknacks that didn't make it was a box labeled "Kate's childhood." Among other things, it contained the *Cry-Baby* movie poster. If it hadn't been lost, maybe I would have retrieved it and hung it on the wall of my office. Maybe it would have been hanging there when the allegations broke, but it wouldn't be anymore. The torch I'd carried in my own golden heart had been snuffed out.

## Through the Cracks

It's easy to take a child from its mother. Focus on the babies. Don't bother with the older ones. They are loud and sometimes bite. I don't need to tell you this, though. The contract requires babies only.

Miss, could we please have two more cups of coffee over here? Thanks. And is it still possible to smoke in this establishment? I seem to remember seeing someone smoking in here the other day.

That's better. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. You wanted to hear more about collections. Yes, collections. I'm collecting children, that's why they're called collections. Anyhow, you want to look like a state government employee. They don't have a ton of money. Nice shoes help. No heels. I'm only 5'2", and the extra height is tempting, but you want to get in and out as fast as possible. Tripping on the way to the car while carrying a screaming baby, and possibly fending off a screaming parent, is not conducive to speed. Which brings me to your car. You're going to want a dark SUV or AWD wagon. A couple of years old. You do want to spring for leather interior, though. All children, no matter how small, are disgusting. You're going to have to change a diaper or give it a bottle at some point, and you do not want any fluids staining your seat. Get yourself a car seat. You do not have time to try to get one from the parent, if they have one, and you certainly don't have time to figure out how to install it. Those things are a bitch. I miss the days when you could hold a baby in your lap or place it in a basinet on the seat or floor. Obey all traffic laws. You don't want to get pulled over. You will not get a ticket, but again, time is of the essence. Most importantly, get yourself a badge. A heavy, shiny, gold badge. Make sure that the agency you claim to be from exists in the

state you're in. Some states use Child Protective Services. Others use Child Welfare Services. Don't let semantics blow your cover. You'd be surprised what people hone in on during traumatic times. And though it goes without saying, never use your real name. Never.

Oh, you want a story? No, I won't tell you my story. But I suppose you're calling the shots, so I'll tell you a story.

#

I was having a soak in the tub at my hotel. That's my one request to the company, book me in nice hotels with big tubs. The kind with whirlpool jets and scalding water. I can't use bubbles in those tubs. I learned that the hard way when I filled the bathroom with bubbles at a famous hotel, you'd recognize the name. Anyhow, I'd settled in with *US Weekly* or *People* or some such magazine when I got the envelope. It shot across the floor from under the door and landed on the bath mat. Still, after all this time, I was startled. I didn't want to pick it up right away. I didn't want to touch it with my wet fingers and blemish the shiny cream-colored surface. I finished my magazine. A celebrity couple got divorced. Another had triplets. Someone held a fundraiser. Always the same. I've been reading these for decades. I find the recurring patterns of celebrity gossip comforting.

I got my robe, dried my hands on it, and picked up the envelope. No markings on it as usual. The envelopes are made out of something thick, like cardboard, but not cardboard. Slightly bendable. I never throw them away, but they find their way back to wherever they came from. Now that I think about it, it could be the same envelope each time. The instructions are on thick paper, like an invitation to a royal dinner would be. They always include the name of the mother, location, sex of the child, and date and

location where to drop off the child. In this case it read: Mary Jones, North Conway, New Hampshire, girl, April 10, Mount Washington Hotel. It listed my alias as Adel Gilmer-Hurst. Not too bad. They've given me some terrible aliases in the past. I'm not allowed to pick my own. It's part of the contract. As always, I had one week. I packed immediately. The drive to New Hampshire would take three days.

Yes, it's always a mother. It's always a baby under one month. Race varies, gender of the babies varies. The mothers are always poor. Most of the time there are drugs involved, but it wasn't always that way. This coffee is terrible. Are you using those creamers? May I? Thank you.

I checked out and consulted my map. This was back in the mid-90s. 1990s. Paper maps were still used. No one except the well-to-do had cellphones. I believe my car at the time was a Crown Victoria. What? Oh, yes. I told you to get an SUV or AWD. That's what you need now. For a long time three-quarters of police and government fleets were Crown Vics. They don't make them anymore. It's bit of a bummer. I loved those cars. May I continue? I went through my routine checklist for collections. First, I circled my destination on the map. Then, I took the car to the nearest full-service gas station for an oil change, rotate and balance, and general inspection. I filled the tank. On my way out of town I stopped at Wal-Mart and picked up an infant car seat, a package of diapers, size 1, some formula, and a warm blanket. I paid in cash. A lot of people hate Wal-Mart. Not me. They are the same everywhere I go, and I can find one on short notice. Plus, I can buy whatever I want in whatever quantity and no one pays any attention to me. It wasn't always that way. And don't get me started on disposable diapers: life savers.

The drive to New Hampshire was uneventful. I drove straight through. I don't need a lot of sleep. No, it's not because I drink too much coffee, but thanks for your concern. Have you been to North Conway? It's sort of a combination skiing town and outlet shopping center. You can see the White Mountains from almost anywhere in town. Quite lovely, I've been back a few times over the years.

Mary Jones lived a bit out of town, I remember the road name, because it gave me a good chuckle. North South Rd. Isn't that the most New England road name you've ever heard? Unbelievable. She lived in a little housing development of tiny, tan single units and larger tan double units. I was relieved that she lived in a housing development. This meant no dogs, and often far less of a fight from the mother. The stigma of having someone from the state show up and knock on your door in front of all the watching, gossiping eyes of the neighbors is a strong motivator for compliance. There was a manager's office on the end of one of the rows of attached units. A sign on the door read, "All visitors must register with manager." I parked outside and walked to the door. A large, bald man in a tank top sat, or rather leaned, precariously in a wheeled office chair. He had one leg on his desk and one on the floor, I imagine to anchor the chair. I have met a thousand versions of this man. None of them pleasant.

He said, "What can I do you for, Ma'am?"

I said, "Adel Gilmer-Hurst. State of New Hampshire Child Protective Services. I'm here to see Mary Jones."

He snapped his leg down from the desk and stood. His eyes scanned the office, hunting for anything I could report him for. His eyes rested on a wall calendar that



featured a nude blonde woman with enormous breasts fondling the enormous breasts of a nude brunette woman. The man's face blanched.

"That doesn't seem like an appropriate choice for an office meant to welcome guests, which I'm sure include children, into a state housing complex." I do enjoy my fake state worker power. I so rarely wield it outside of collections. He pulled down the calendar and stuffed it into the trash. I have no doubt he rescued it later.

"Sorry, Ma'am," he said. "Is there some kinda trouble with Mary?"

"I can't comment on the nature of my business."

"No, I suppose not." he said. "Follow me." He led me to the apartment at the end of the row of units occupied by his office. A small one-bedroom bordered on one side by a row of dying cedar trees. He knocked on the door. "Mary!" he yelled.

"I can take it from here. Thank you." I nodded curtly at him and he shuffled back to his office. I noticed then he was wearing furry green slippers with large googly eyes on the toes.

Mary opened the door. "What?" she half-yelled and stopped, surprised to see me instead of the manager. She was young, a teenager probably. Her hair was long and hung in thick, greasy hanks from her tiny skull. The skin around her eyes was so dark she looked as though she'd been hit. Her jeans and black t-shirt with the name of the band Sepultura on it were both spotted with bits of crud. The smell of sweat and sour milk, a bit yogurty, wafted towards me. "Sorry," she said. "Can I help you"?

"Adel Gilmer-Hurst. State of New Hampshire Child Protective Services. Are you Mary Jones?" I said.

"Yes. I am. Is there a problem?" Mary asked me, getting worried.

I told her, “You have been reported for potential abuse or neglect of a child.”

She was struggling to keep it together. “I’ve been what? By who?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t tell you. I’m going to need to take a look around. Failure to comply will result in immediate removal of the child.” I reached into my bag. “I have papers here.”

The papers? Oh, another part of the contract. She has to sign the child over to you willingly. I might have a copy here, if you’d like to see them. Hold on a second. Here you go. They look legitimate, don’t they? It’s all about nice paper, and an official-looking seal. Did you notice the seal? It has nothing to do with CPS or any particular state. No one has ever said a word about it. Probably because the writing is in Latin and no one wants to admit they don’t know what it means. *Eram quod es, eris quod sum*. Go ahead, read the rest of it. I’m going to smoke. Do you mind?

First Page:

This visit by Child Protective Services (CPS) was precipitated by a report to the agency on behalf of your child. There has been a claim of neglect or abuse in your household. It is the duty of the agency to conduct a full inspection of the premises where the child is residing to ensure that it is a safe environment. Failure to comply may result in immediate removal of the child from the premises.

If you have a complaint against CPS or the findings of the agent assigned to your case, you may file a complaint with the New Hampshire Department of Human Services. The NHDHS will respond to all complaints within 24 hours and

investigated within one month, unless the complaint is in reference to the removal of the child. The processing time for such complaints are at the discretion of the judge and social worker overseeing the case, but every effort will be made to hear each concern within a timely manner.

Second Page:

I willingly relinquish my parental rights until such time that it has been proven I am able to provide a safe environment in which my child may reside. I consent to this willingly and without coercion.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Printed

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Dated \_\_\_\_\_

I took the first page right off of a CPS brochure about forty years ago. The name of the state I took it from eludes me now, but it doesn't matter. The first sheet is what I gave Mary. Behind her, in the apartment, a baby started to cry. When I stepped forward, she held the door open with one arm and let me pass. She held the paper in her other hand.

The apartment was essentially two rooms and a bathroom. The first room was a large and open, with a galley kitchen along one wall. A ratty futon divided the room into a kitchen section and living room section. A TV sat on a couple of milk crates covered with an old tapestry. This area was sparse, but clean. I was concerned that the collection might end up being harder than I anticipated. No overflowing trash can. Not even a dirty dish in the sink. I pushed open the door to the bedroom. The baby was in a small basinet placed on top of the bed. She was tiny. I've never gotten used to how tiny they are. Smaller than a sack of flour. On the night-stand next to the bed I saw a glass pipe. Crack? I picked it up and sniffed it. Marijuana. I replaced it on the stand.

I called to Mary, "I'd like permission to examine the child."

"Do what you're going to do," she said. She was right behind me; I jumped a little at her closeness. I didn't let on that I'd seen the pipe, but she knew it was there and tried to slip it into her pocket discreetly. I picked up the baby, who continued crying. After a few minutes of jostling and shushing, she quieted. I made a show of unwrapping her blanket and gently prodding her arms and legs before wrapping her back up.

"Mary, I've seen evidence of drug use in this apartment," I said.

"It's not mine." she replied.

"No, of course not." It was never theirs. "If not yours, whose?"

"My boyfriend's. He—" I didn't let her finish.

"Your lease with New Hampshire Housing Authority states that you are here alone. Are you telling me you have a man living with you? A man who does drugs?" I had her now. She opened and closed her mouth a few times like a fish gasping for air.

"What's going to happen to her?" She started to cry.

“She will come with me and then stay with a foster family until you have proven yourself able to provide a safe environment for her. Do you have a blood relative she could stay with instead?” They never do. I added this part to sound more official. She shook her head no. I handed her the second sheet of paper and a pen. All you need is the signature; it doesn’t have to be in blood or some other bodily fluid. Honestly, this whole process is much duller than you think. Do you want some pie? I’m going to order some pie. I hear the lemon meringue is fantastic. Fine. Suit yourself.

She signed the contract and handed it to me. “Can I hold her? Can I say goodbye?” Her eyes had no fight. She was so tired. The black circles around her eyes puffed out from crying.

“I’m sorry. It will just make it harder. But you could gather together some of her things if you want.” Mary went into the bedroom and came back with a small denim bag containing clothes and a brown teddy bear.

“Please,” she sobbed, “it was just a little pot. I can’t sleep.”

“You know that’s illegal. You’ve admitted to drug use around an infant. There are no other adults here. You are responsible for her. What if something happened to her while you were high? Now that I know what is going on here, I can’t leave her. It would be irresponsible of me. In a few days, someone will contact you to set up drug tests and another home visit. You will also schedule a visit with your child at that time. Be thankful you aren’t going to jail.” I pulled an envelope out of my bag and set it on the table. It contained a generic business card with the number for Child Protective Services and five hundred dollars in cash. The number for CPS is totally real. I visit the offices in each state posing as a helpful parishioner from a local church and ask for a few cards.

They usually give me a stack. Sure, I've called the numbers before. I'm a curious woman. They all connect to switch boards run by curt operators who don't answer direct questions and keep passing your through to different departments. They refuse to tell you anything, based on confidentiality laws. I'm guessing that if the mothers do call, it takes days if not weeks for them to sort out that the baby was not taken by an actual CPS worker. By then, I'm gone, and so is the baby. Here's another thing. I've been doing this for a long time, right? I watch the news. I know how to use Google. I've never seen a story about me. Or the babies. I saw a long piece about children lost in the system once in that big Boston paper. The *Herald*, is it? The *Globe*, maybe? Anyway, it wasn't about me. And none of the names were familiar.

The cash? It's from me. It's not required or part of the contract. I don't know or care what they use it for. It's like my calling card, I guess. Mary's baby was quiet. She went easily into the car seat latched into the middle of the backseat. I gave her the little bear from the diaper bag and tucked the blanket from Wal-Mart around her. Before I stood up, I leaned close to her and inhaled deeply. There is nothing like the smell of a new baby. Milk and yeast and hay. That smell never changes either.

Do you want a bite of this pie? Oh, come on. I insist. The crust is superb. See? Look at that flake. Fantastic. Is it hard? No, I just told you, the flake is lovely. Oh, the drop-off. Of course. Sorry. No, it's usually at a hotel, sometimes in a car. Mary's baby was dropped off at a luxury resort a few miles north of North Conway. The drop-offs are never more than twenty miles from the collection site. I left her still secured in her seat with her blanket and little bear on the floor of the room. She hadn't made a peep since I collected her and had dozed off in the car. I imagined that she would be hungry when she

woke up and mixed some powdered formula with warm water from the tap in the glass bottle I'd bought with the diapers. I didn't know if it would ever be used, but it was part of my routine. Each collection gets a bottle. I leave the diapers too. On the table was a leather satchel containing my payment. I picked up the bag and replaced it with Mary's contract, and then I left. A month later, I repeated the same process, more or less, in another state.

I can't tell you what my payment is. I can tell you it's not just cash, and that it's worth it. No. I don't know what happens to the babies. I used to wonder, but I stopped a long time ago. I've never been caught. No one has ever come close. I take that back. Because you have, haven't you? Well done, I must say. Brave and incredibly stupid. I apologize for the insult, but I don't think you truly understand what you've gotten yourself into. You've tracked me down. You've guessed my name. Oh, no. I believe you. I believe you have. But before you say it, let me ask you this, is this the job for you?

## Failure to Thrive

My grandmother's descent into dementia coincided with my ascent into motherhood. The feelings I've experienced over the past twelve years associated with both are polar opposites and eerily similar. The joys of celebrating my children's developmental milestones mixed with the sorrows of my grandmother's symptoms marking her descent into the hole of dementia. The guilt of never measuring up to the ideal of mother as sold to me by years of television and magazines mixed with the guilt of mourning the loss of someone who isn't dead.

My family has called my grandmother "Hibear" since my older cousin Alison anointed her with the name in response to the cheerful, "Hi there!" my grandmother exclaimed whenever she saw her. I do not remember my grandmother ever hugging me. This does not mean she was mean or unkind, but stiff, and nearly Puritanical in her demeanor. She worked in the office at the family car dealership for years. More than one grown man told me of their fear of the brutal, stone cold admonishments she doled out. When I was young I loved staying at her house. She wasn't big on cooking. We ate huge stacks of buttered cinnamon toast, or better yet, sugar cereal for breakfast, and sweet, salty cans of Chef Boyardee for lunch.

Throughout my teens and early twenties, my family pretended the quirky behavioral changes we saw in my grandmother were nothing to worry about. Hibear always had OCD-like tendencies, although no one in my family would ever call it that. Her quirky obsessions combined with her staunch New England devotion to propriety, disguised many of the early warning signs of her dementia. That, and the fact my grandfather covered them up for her. She was fixated on her granddaughters' hair. "Get



your hair out of your eyes,” was the first thing she said to almost all of us, before whipping a barrette or bobby pin from a pocket or purse and clipping our hair back. My younger sister recalls Hibear taking her into the bathroom to scrub and cut her nails every time she went to her house. The curtains in her home were snapped open and closed on a strict daily schedule. She could spot a paperclip on the floor of an otherwise spotless room from ten feet away, and would snatch it off the floor, casting a stern gaze at whomever was in the room with her. Her daily routine was timed to within minutes. The silver Timex on her tiny wrist dictated not only her movements, but her happiness and consequently the happiness of those around her.

When she started to forget things, she laughed them off and said, “Oh, my memory isn’t so good.” No one in my family seemed too worried either. How much was a 70-year-old woman supposed to remember, anyway? Besides, she could remember what she was wearing on a bike ride she took with her best friend in 1950.

She started to give up her hobbies. First, she stopped reading. While in high school, I frequently walked to her house to visit after school. She was almost always sitting in her chair knitting or reading when I arrived. One day, I noticed the books on her side table hadn’t changed for a long time, including one I’d bought her for Christmas. My feelings were a little hurt when I noticed the unread book. “Don’t you like the book I got you?” I asked her.

“I don’t like reading anymore,” she replied.

“What do you mean, you don’t like reading anymore?”

She shrugged and said, “I just don’t like it.” I could tell by the set of her lips the conversation was done.

She was still knitting at that time. Intricate color-work and cable-knit sweaters. Soon, though, the patterns became less and less complicated until she was knitting simple, square dishcloths that required no pattern. The squares only required counting, triangles that start with one stitch, then two, and so on until you are at the mid-point when you start decreasing. Stacks of dishcloths flew from her needles. She brought shopping bags of them to the car dealership and gave them to employees. Kitchen drawers in my mother and aunt's house were jammed with them. Church fundraisers found bags of them dropped in the donation boxes. In 2005, when Alison and I were pregnant at the same time, at ages twenty-seven and thirty, both with girls, she knit baby blankets for us, larger versions of the dishcloths. Those baby blankets, made from the ends of soft pink and blue skeins of yarn she'd collected over the years, are some of the last things she knit.

Hibear started having trouble with our names. She often mixed up the names of her grandchildren, but we reasoned at the time, that there were eight of us in total, including five dark-haired girls with dimples. But now when she couldn't remember things, her laughter was replaced by a look of panic.

When I got pregnant with my daughter I worked in the loan department of the car dealership owned by my grandfather and managed by my mother. Hibear still worked there too; she and my grandfather shuttled mail, parts, and contracts between the two dealerships twenty miles apart. My grandfather, who suffered from macular degeneration and cataracts from an injury he sustained as a child—an ice shard had pierced his eye when he picked up and cracked a whip that was on his frost-covered yard—was legally blind, and so she drove. One day, she came up the stairs into the office, took one look at

me in my black dress pants and cotton short-sleeve top, and said, “Don’t you have anything more...discreet?”

“What do you mean?”

“For someone in your, condition. It should be less noticeable. Perhaps a smock?”

I laughed until I realized she wasn’t kidding, and then mumbled something about being fine, thanks. As the months continued, hiding my indecent condition drove her to distraction. After my fingers swelled to the point where I couldn’t wear my wedding ring any longer, she took me upstairs to her jewelry box where she had me try on every ring she owned, searching for one that fit, so that no one would mistakenly think I was unmarried. I’d been married for five years at that point, and in the small Maine town where we lived, there were few people if any that didn’t know this.

Maggie was born in August 2005, and five weeks later, Alison gave birth to her daughter, Evelyn. Hibear loved the babies. She would cradle Maggie on her shoulder and rock slowly back and forth in the Canadian Glider in her living room. My grandparents lived in the center of our small town, where I did all of my shopping before returning to my home in the woods fifteen minutes away. Leaving Maggie with my grandparents for a couple of minutes and walking to the library across the street from their house to pick up a few books seemed like no big deal. I floated the idea to my mother to see what she thought. “Oh no, you can’t ever leave Maggie alone with Hibear. Not even for a minute,” she said.

Apparently, there was a lot more to be worried about than I’d been told. “Why? She wouldn’t hurt the baby,” I said.

“No, but she wouldn’t understand that she can’t leave her on the couch and walk away. Or put her on the backseat of the car and go to the store.”

“Are you kidding me? She would too.”

“Just don’t.”

A few days later I was changing Maggie’s diaper and my grandmother handed me a package of Clorox Bleach Wipes.

“Oh no, I can’t use those ones, those are Clorox.”

My grandmother looked perplexed and said, “They are wipes.”

“Right, Clorox wipes, for cleaning the bathroom and stuff. It’s bleach.”

“They are wipes,” she said and handed them out to me again.

“Bleach wipes. You can’t put bleach on a baby. It would really hurt her.”

She continued holding them out to me.

I had slipped into Bizarro World. “OK, thanks,” I said. I took the wipes and set them on a nearby shelf. “I’m going to use the ones I brought.”

I smuggled the bleach wipes out of her house in my diaper bag.

#

The “dog incident” as my mother calls it, was a turning point in my family’s acknowledgement of Hibear’s dementia. Dementia is strange—sufferers tend to cruise along unchanged for a while and then suddenly experience a change in mood or cognitive ability. Before the incident, my grandfather convinced my grandmother to not only speak to a doctor about her rapidly changing condition, but also to allow him in the room. She was fiercely private about two things: doctor’s appointments and mail. No one could go with her to her appointments, and if anyone opened so much as a Publisher’s Clearing

House envelope with her name on it she'd threaten jail. The doctor had her perform a few tests, after which he told both of them she was fine, and when she didn't know what a fork or telephone was it was time to worry.

A few weeks later, my grandmother ran over a dog on her way to pick up ice cream. The small dog was on a retractable leash and ran out in front of her car. It was a terrible accident that could have happened to anyone. However, her reaction was unlike how anyone else I know would have dealt with the situation; my grandmother merely braked for a moment before continuing on her way to get her ice cream. She returned home and after finishing her sundae casually relayed the incident to my grandfather. He told her she needed return to the scene of the incident to check on the woman and the dog. She refused. Not only did she think it was unnecessary, she couldn't comprehend why anyone would do such a thing. Luckily, my grandfather knew the owner of the dog, called her himself, and paid the vet bills. The dog didn't make it.

When I asked Hibear about it the next day, she recalled getting an ice cream, but not killing the dog. It was perhaps one of the most unsettling conversations in my life. When I brought up the dog, my stoic but loving grandmother shrugged it off with the complacency of a psychopath. This is something people often don't realize about dementia—it's not simply forgetting names or where you put things, it's often a complete emotional transformation of the person suffering.

Maggie was learning about the repercussions of her own actions. Around the same time as the dog incident, she threw a fistful of sand into a friend's eyes during a playdate. After helping her mother rinse sand out of the screaming girl's eyes, I sternly explained to Maggie that we don't throw sand, and we don't hurt our friends. She

nodded, said that she understood, went outside, and immediately threw sand at her friend again. I was mortified. Her friend's mother was furious, and I was certain I was raising a psychopath. More stern talking, and a time out. My daughter finally got it; it takes a while for kids to figure out empathy, I learned. I was scared to also learn that someday people can lose theirs.

#

In 2008 my grandfather underwent a quadruple-bypass and never fully recovered. He eventually succumbed to pulmonary edema and died. Though the entire family gathered around him, including all eight grandchildren, my grandmother refused to visit him in the hospital. Not because she couldn't bear to be there, but because she couldn't understand why anyone would want to. She said she had other things to do. A few months after he passed away, my mother lost the family car dealership in the massive recession that also closed a number of longstanding family-owned businesses in our town. My paternal grandmother died. As my father says, "That was the year everything sucked."

My mother and my aunt moved Hibear from the large three-bedroom apartment she'd shared with my grandfather to a small one-bedroom in the building she owned but was now managed by my aunt. She'd long since stopped driving but could manage to walk the one block to the post office and back. My cousin and his wife lived in the building across the street and checked on her daily and helped her run errands. Hibear liked being on her own. She stocked her pantry with cereal bars and cans of soup. She spent her evenings watching *Little House on the Prairie*. The dementia was sort of a cushion against the blow of losing my grandfather. They'd been married over thirty

years, and she was upset, but didn't seem to quite grasp the enormity of what had happened. The independent life seemed to suit her for a while.

Maggie also grew more independent each day. She no longer wore diapers, and her crib had been traded for a big-girl bed. Meals were eaten with proper utensils. When she turned four she bounded off into preschool without even a backward glance over her shoulder. I pulled over on the side of the road on the way home and sobbed for a full five minutes before I regained enough composure drive home.

#

*Little House on the Prairie* was the one of the only shows Hibear liked to watch on TV. Before she lost her sense of time, she'd rush home and watch it every day. It didn't matter how many times she'd seen an episode. When she lost track of how to turn the TV to a certain station at a specific time, her solution was to leave the TV tuned to the station *Little House* aired on and hope it came on eventually. No longer able to tell time, she constantly asked what time it was. I once overheard her ask my aunt what time it was six times in two minutes. Though she didn't know what time her show was on, time and *Little House* were mixed together in her mind. It was a lot like Dustin Hoffman's obsession with *People's Court* in *Rain Man*. In fact, many of her habits were now extreme exaggerations of her previously minor quirks. She fussed with her window blinds obsessively. In fact, she fussed with windows anywhere she went. Diners at a local restaurant were nonplused when she asked them to move so she could adjust the curtains behind their table three times before we managed to get her to sit and finish her meal.

Our names were completely out of her reach by now. However, she remembered who we were in relation to her; she knew I was her granddaughter, she just couldn't

remember which one. We hung a large photo collage featuring family members labelled with names and their relation to her in her living room. When I went to visit her, she'd say, "Oh! It's you!" Then sneak a look at the photo: "Kate!" It worked for a while, until things took another dive.

The TV was turned to static when my cousin, Joe, stopped by for his daily visit with her one afternoon. She sat in the chair watching it as though nothing was wrong.

"Hey," he said, completely freaked out.

"Hello," she said, and kept her eyes fixed on the static-filled screen.

"So, what's up?"

"Oh, just watching TV."

"Yeah? What are you watching?"

"Some show. I don't know."

He walked to the TV, turned it off, and called everyone in the family. We thought perhaps she'd had a small stroke. She went to the hospital, but they couldn't find anything wrong. However, the hospital insisted that she couldn't live alone anymore. A few weeks later she moved into a retirement home in our same small town. It cost \$6,000 a month. Out of work after losing the business, my mother took a job in the kitchen.

#

I became pregnant with our second child when Maggie was in the first grade. This time instead of berating me for appearing pregnant in public, my grandmother seemed confused by the whole prospect. She asked why I'd gotten so fat, and when I explained that I was pregnant and going to have a baby, she scowled suspiciously at me.



She also had gained weight rapidly. Though she thrived at her new home, it wasn't without problems. The part of her brain that told her she'd had enough to eat had shut down. Within moments of her lunch plate being cleared she would ask the servers when they'd be bringing her lunch. She had no memory of eating, and her body had no mechanism for detecting fullness. Each floor of the retirement home had a snack station with packets of cookies and crackers, as well as fruit. My grandmother would fill her purse each time she went by, numerous times per day. Her bureau and desk drawers were filled with snacks. The home was annoyed because they weren't allowed to put the snacks back out once someone had taken them into their room, so we couldn't return them. My mom tried to remedy the situation by telling Hibear she couldn't bring her purse with her when she left her room. My grandmother just stuffed the snacks in her shirt.

Finally, after attempting to escape and setting off the alarms a few times, the facility told my mother and aunt that Hibear would need to move to the Alzheimer's unit. It was much more expensive, and the majority of the residents required extensive assistance, which she didn't need. Perhaps more importantly, Hibear was not diagnosed with Alzheimer's but dementia of unknown origin. My mother quit her job in the retirement home's kitchen and moved Hibear in with her and my dad.

Again, things were OK at first. Hibear settled in to a new routine. My mom kept her busy with tasks she enjoyed: puzzles, watching TV, going for car rides through various neighboring towns. One of her favorite things to do was organize. She would arrange every magazine and small item on my mother's coffee table until it looked like the cover of *House Beautiful*.

The hitch with my grandmother was that she viewed my parents' home as another nursing home. She referred to my father, whom she'd known for over thirty years, as "That Man." She bossed him around, nagged him to mow the lawn, and shook her empty glass at him when she wanted a drink refill. When asked to help out with a small chore, she refused. Why should she be expected to work? Instead, my parents messed up the coffee table and planted things like extra pens around so that she could organize them on her own.

Her confusion about time grew worse. Beyond clock-time, she now had trouble discerning time of day. My mother woke at three a.m. to find her in the kitchen fully dressed and waiting for breakfast. She'd go to her room, put on her pajamas and robe at noon. The cues of meals, activities, and sunlight were meaningless. She now remembered little, but instead of humor or fear, there was no response. She couldn't remember that she didn't remember. Giant chunks of her life went missing. In 1970, her son, Bobby, was killed in a car accident. Hibear no longer remembered she'd had a son at all. To her, he had never existed.

As a mother, I'd long believed that losing a child would be the worst possible thing that could happen, but I was wrong. What was worse was to never remember you'd had one at all. While I worked to be a great mom, the parenting blogs and articles beating the drum of "making great memories" held less and less meaning for me. I started to concentrate on a much more Buddhist-like philosophy of enjoying the moment—because someday I might not have the memories.

One day while organizing magazines, Hibear looked at a label for a long time. "This name. Jean Strong," she said.

My mom and I stopped talking and looked up at her, waiting.

“Is it me? Is that my name?”

“Yes, Mom. It’s you,” my mother replied.

“Oh good! I thought it was.” Hibear smiled and went back to arranging magazines.

She’d forgotten herself.

#

I gave birth to a bouncing baby boy in October 2012. Neither seven-year-old daughter nor my eighty-three-year-old grandmother was thrilled. Maggie longed for a sister, and six months earlier when we found out we’d be welcoming a boy into our family, she had teared up, but hadn’t allowed them to spill over. Of course, she loved her baby brother, but she had a rough adjustment from only child to big sister. A few days after he was born, she came into my bedroom sobbing. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I feel so overwhelmed.”

Gone were the days of Hibear eagerly holding and rocking a new baby. She smiled at Michael and seemed genuinely happy to see him when we visited—but only if he was quiet. His cries angered her. “Why is it making that sound?” she’d ask. “Make it stop.” Maggie thought it was hilarious. No one else did.

As he grew older and toddled around my mother’s house, leaving a trail of Cheerios and toys, Hibear would follow around behind him picking things up and returning them to where they belonged. He genuinely annoyed her, and this time there was no need to warn me not to leave her alone with him. She’d never shown any

inclination toward violence, as some dementia patients do, but her reaction to him unsettled me on a deep level.

At first having Hibear in their home provided my parents an opportunity to keep an eye on her, and make sure she was safe and keeping busy with her favorite activities. However, after about a year, never being able to leave her alone began to take its toll. One of them always had to be with her, and they had virtually no time alone. Even a few moments unsupervised could lead to disaster. A quick walk to their barn, which took less than five minutes, to let my father know he had a phone call, ended with my grandmother proudly showing my mom the cookie she had found. It was from the compost bin and covered with mold. She'd already eaten half of it. Keeping her from eating garbage wasn't something that had crossed anyone's mind. And that was the growing problem; the things she was doing hadn't crossed anyone's mind.

In my home, my husband, Mike, and I did our best to child-proof our home to protect our busy toddler. Coffee table edges were covered with pool noodles to prevent sharp edges. Outlets were plugged with plastic shields. Occasionally, he still found ways to get into trouble, but Michael was still small and could be whisked into my arms and out of harm's way quickly. Eventually, after hours of repetition and explanation, he slowly learned about safety. My grandmother never could, and there was no chance of either of my parents whisking her into their arms and out of harm's way.

It finally grew too much for my parents to continue to care for my grandmother. Her night wanderings became more regular, and since she could not be left alone, someone needed to wake up with her. Once more, she was moved to a retirement home in our small town. This one was less like a residence and more like a hospital. Again, her

room was set up exactly the same. Each time she moved, she adjusted quickly because she had no memory of the place she'd just moved from. The retirement home became my mother's house and my mother's house became the elder-care facility. The last members of her family whom she remembered, my mom and my aunt, slipped from her mind. She vaguely recognized them when they came to visit and pick her up for family events, but in the same way she recognized the nurses from their shifts the day before. She knew she'd seen them somewhere, but couldn't figure out where.

Dining out had long since been too difficult for her, but now eating in general was a confusing chore. Nothing was familiar; she had to be told what each item on her plate was and how to eat it. Chips were especially confusing. Each chip was inspected, and if it was broken, she scoured the pile of remaining chips on her plate looking for the "piece" to fix it as though they were puzzle pieces. And as the doctor predicted all those years ago, she'd finally forgotten how to use a fork. But the years between those initial memory lapses and that point were filled with so much more than simply forgetting the name or how to use an item.

#

The facility where Hibear lives now is only a few minutes from my house. It is integrated with the community and my kids often visit as part of school trips, singing Christmas carols, trick or treating, or playing music with the local string ensemble. They rush to her and hug her, and she's always a little freaked out that some of the children have gone rogue and are embracing her. Maggie barely remembers Hibear when she could do a puzzle or hold a conversation. Michael never will. She is increasingly more withdrawn,

and often I have to fetch her from her room after noticing she's not with the other residents during events.

I am able to visit less frequently. My days are filled with work and school and raising children. Junior high is around the corner. Pursuits like ballet have given way to computer coding. Shopping for princess dresses has been replaced with shopping for bras. The tiny boy I protected from bumping his head on the coffee table now runs full speed across a soccer field, cleats puncturing the ground. They are growing, beginning that slow journey away from me. I'm guiltily sad about their growth and change, and I'm guiltily sad about the loss I feel when I think about Hibear, for it's like mourning a person who isn't dead. I mourn the loss of her self, of her memories, as you would for someone who lost everything in a fire.

The past few weeks have shown another great decline in Hibear's health. In addition to withdrawing even further socially, she's lost the desire to eat. Though food has been confusing for her for quite some time, once she was shown what to do, and had the process explained to her, she would eat. But, not anymore. Her physical strength has waned. For years, her doctors have been amazed at her general health. If it wasn't for the dementia she'd live forever, they say. At her last visit, after a sudden weight drop (her feeling of constant hunger had disappeared) and increased lethargy, they failed to find anything wrong. Her bloodwork and other tests came back fine. She was diagnosed with "failure to thrive," a general diagnosis doctors give, usually to elderly people, whose health declines for no apparent reason. Her dementia alone doesn't account for all of it. When she went to her appointment, she easily used a walker to get around. Upon visiting her a few days later, the walker had been replaced by a wheelchair, because she could no

longer figure out how to use the walker. Her room is again filled with candy, cookies, and any kind of treat my mother and aunt can think of that she might want to eat. The goal is to simply get her to eat anything. It doesn't seem like it will be long before she forgets to breathe, or her heart forgets to beat.

I look at my kids and wonder what it would be like to forget them. I look at my husband and wonder if thirty years of marriage slip away so easily. I look at my mother and wonder if it will happen to her. I look in the mirror and wonder if someday, I too will forget my own name.

## Inanition

Everyone says that loss gets easier with time, but no one tells you that for the rest of your life, some strange thing—a song, or a smell, will hit you right in the gut so profoundly it leaves you shaking and sweating in the aisle of the grocery store. In my empty house, it's the weird things I notice; like that we made so much more trash when we were a family. Now, it's two, sometimes three weeks before I do the sorting and make the trip to the transfer station. When Hazel was small, we would go to Dunkin Donuts on the way home, a treat I no longer feel the need to indulge in. Bill used to joke that their motto should be, "Everyone gets the runs from Dunkin." Bill. Five years is a long time, and not very long at all.

I was waiting my turn at the #2 plastic recycling dumpster when I spotted a large sign announcing that the transfer station would be closed on Monday for the Labor Day holiday. How had I forgotten that it was a long weekend? It must have been on the office calendar. The man in front of me threw a trio of milk jugs into the dumpster. I smiled widely at him as he passed by, excited by my discovery of the long weekend. He didn't return the smile. Probably thought I was crazy. On the way home I listened to Cheryl Strayed tell someone on her podcast to be more adventurous. She said they should get out and live a little. I decided to take her advice as well. I would go camping.

I hadn't been camping since Hazel was little, but I still had all of our old camping stuff in the garage, including an old LL Bean tent marked as a 4-man, but I used to joke was a "two adults and one kid uncomfortably." Everything was as neat and organized as Bill left it. It only took me twenty minutes to throw the tent, plastic storage locker, and a cooler in the car. I thought hard about what else I would need. Maine in September can



be tricky: cold nights and blazing hot days or vice-versa. I didn't have any hiking boots, but I packed an extra pair of sneakers and twice as many socks as I thought I would need. I texted Hazel to let her know what I was up to. It's weird, the reversal of parent and child that had slowly taken shape since Bill died. Now, I was the one telling her my plans and she was the one anxiously hovering and checking to make sure I was OK.

*—Hey. I'm going camping for a few days.*

*—Good for you! Where are you going?*

*—Not sure yet. I just decided. Somewhere with hiking trails.*

*—Fun! Let me know where you are, if you are close to Portland maybe I can hike with you. <3*

I decided to head away from Portland. East. When Bill and I were young we camped at a place called Tall Pines in Camden. I made reservations through their website; I'm spontaneous, but not spontaneous enough to drive an hour to find that the place I wanted to go was full. They had plenty of spots. On the way out of town I stopped at Hannaford Supermarket and filled my cooler with ice, hot dogs, marshmallows, energy bars, chips, all the indulgent treats a mom takes on a camping trip. I bought two bottles of wine, and a six-pack of Coke. When looking over my items at the checkout, I was embarrassed by the childishness of them. "I'm going camping," I blurted out to the cashier. "That's why I have so many treats. A little vacation for me, you know?"

The cashier, a woman in her mid-twenties had a long, dark braid that swung down her back and a nametag that read "Sheila" nodded slightly and continued sliding my groceries over the scanner.

I loaded things into the car and gave myself a quick once-over in the mirror. My short white hair startled me sometimes, even after wearing it that way for almost three years. I started going gray in my thirties and had always dyed it brown, but after Bill died, I stopped. When the roots grew out and made me look like a skunk I had chopped it short. I smoothed the shaggy ends behind my ears and inspected the tiny lines spidering out from the corners of my eyes. I slid on my sunglasses and started the car.

I pulled into the campground right after lunch. The campground was more rundown than I'd remembered, but I was still surprised there were sites left on their website, after the number of "no vacancy" signs I'd passed on the way up. Then again, it was a pretty bare-bones place. It didn't have tennis courts or pool, or a café. It was a spot for people who wanted to camp but were too timid to just walk into the woods and pitch a tent. People like me. People who didn't go to campgrounds to attend talent shows and meet people.

The tent stank of mildew after being wrapped up for ten years, but didn't have any holes and was devoid of spiders. I gathered some dead sticks from around the site and piled them in the collapsing stone fire-pit. I snapped the table cloth with its elastic corners over the top of the picnic table and rummaged around in the camping locker I'd hoisted into the trunk of the car without even looking in it. I placed two citronella candles in chipped pink and yellow painted glass jars on the table and strapped an LED headlamp around my head. I found one jar that contained dry matches, and another containing batteries that had all burst. After camp was set up, there wasn't much left for me to do at the site. I stared at the water and tried to relax for approximately five minutes before I

decided to check out one of the many trails leading up into the hills surrounding the campground.

When I checked in, the small store was empty. A sign on the counter read, “Family emergency, be back soon. Use the honor system. You’re on camera.” An envelope labelled with my last name was propped against a coffee can with a few dollar bills in it. The envelope contained a hang tag for my rearview mirror, a map of hiking trails around the campground, and a notice from the State of Maine about deer ticks. I slid the papers into the back pocket of my jeans. I started to leave, but noticed a display featuring small bobbing compasses that attach to your clothes with a safety pin. On impulse, I picked one up and deposited \$2.00 into the can.

I fastened the little compass to my shirt, and now it bobbed on my chest as I stepped onto the trail. I decided to hike about a mile up the mountain, as the trail was well-used and easy to find. The map indicated that it ended at an outcropping of rocks that had views to the ocean. Small pebbles came loose as I made the ascent. Due to the hundreds of miles I had logged walking after Bill’s death, my fifty-year-old legs were handling the exercise much better than my thirty-year-old ones would have. The air was warm and humid. Typical for Maine in early September, but I was glad for the thick fabric of my jeans as brush and brambles scraped against my legs. I thought of a documentary I’d seen years ago that showed ticks waiting in a field of grass, their front legs extended, the back ones barely holding on to the stems as they waited for the slightest touch of a mammal walking by glom onto. I’d doused my legs from toes to hips with the bug spray I’d brought. I hope it worked. Lyme disease terrified me, especially after seeing my best friend Amanda deal with it for years. She didn’t even know she’d

been bitten, and suddenly a woman, who'd run the Boston Marathon, twice could barely make it out of bed. It took three years of antibiotics and naturopathic treatments before she could even walk around a grocery store. I didn't know if I could fight through something like that for so long. All those pills and pain.

I glimpsed a young woman on the trail ahead of me. Her long black hair was held back with a red bandana. I realized that except for the woman at check-in, she was the only person I'd seen since I'd arrived at Tall Pines Campground. She disappeared around the next curve under a canopy of trees, and I couldn't help but think of ticks leaping into that long mane of hair. I wondered if I should say something to her if I caught up to her, but quickly abandoned the idea. I was not her mother.

I rounded the same corner she had disappeared around and came to the end of the trail. A stone bench perched on the side of the hill atop a large, flat rock offered a place to sit and take in the view. A vast sea of trees rolled out softly to meet the actual sea, or rather, ocean. The sky was turquoise and the ocean, a rich royal blue, rose to meet it in a hazy line at the horizon. I took my shoes off and shook out the small pebbles that had gathered in the toes. I turned at a sound behind me. The girl I'd seen earlier was leaning against an outcrop of rock. Her matching white shorts and shirt were dirty and worn, as though she'd been hiking for a long time.

"Hi," she said.

"Oh, hi. Sorry," I said. I was embarrassed for staring.

"What are you sorry for?"

"Interrupting your quiet enjoyment of the view," I said, although sorry was more of a verbal tic than an apology. I sorried everyone, from waiters to car mechanics to

doctors. I was constantly apologized for eating, needing my car fixed, my health. Bill had said it was very British of me.

“Don’t be sorry. I’ve seen this view tons of times.”

“Do you come here a lot?”

“Yeah. I like hiking.”

“Me too.”

There was a long silence as we both stared out at the ocean. Seagulls drifted on the air lofts. They were so far away they looked like the little white Ms that represent seagulls in paintings.

“Are you staying at Tall Pines?” she asked.

“Yes. It’s simple but I like it. Are you staying there too?”

“No.” She turned and walked back up the trail leading away from the campground.

“Well, that was weird,” I said aloud into the empty clearing.

On the way back to my site I decided to wake up early the next morning and take a thermos full of coffee and a pack of powdered donuts up to the top for a sunrise breakfast. I remembered I hadn’t texted Hazel yet to let her know where I’d ended up and made a mental note to do so. I worried about her worrying about me.

It was approaching 5:00 p.m., and with the sun nearing the horizon, the temperature dropped. The tent had lost most of its musty smell, and I mashed the sleeping bag and egg-crate mattress into it. I lay on my back for a few moments, staring up at the trees through the mesh top of the tent. “I need to put on the rain fly” was the last thing I thought before waking up three hours later in the pitch dark. I heard the high-pitched

whirring of a few mosquitoes buzzing around the inside of the tent, but other than that the campground was silent. Where were the other campers? I expected to hear the boisterous laughter associated with too many Budweisers, and the delighted squeals of kids eating gooey toasted marshmallows.

I climbed out of the tent and zipped it shut. I strapped the LED headlamp to my forehead. I located the lantern and switched it on. No cranky old oil lanterns for me. This one was also LED. I unscrewed the top from one of the bottles of white wine chilling in the freezer and dug out the package of hot dogs. I realized I had no way to cook them. I'd left the camp stove in the garage, and the metal fork we'd used when Hazel was little had long been repurposed as a trident for an Ursula the sea witch Halloween costume. I walked to the edge of the campsite and snapped off a green stick the length of my arm and width of a pencil from one of the saplings. Silence all around. I didn't see light from any other sites either. I snapped off my headlamp and peered into the darkness. Nothing. No flashlights, no campfires through the trees; it was though the campground had been abandoned.

I burnt my hotdog over the hot coals and ate it in a squishy white roll with mustard and ketchup. I dug into a bag of ruffled chips and devoured a pickle before deciding on a second hotdog. I'd forgotten how wonderful a junk binge could be. I finished a red solo cup of wine and had just poured another when I heard the sound of footsteps on gravel behind me. I turned and the girl from the trail earlier held her hand up in front of her face to shield her eyes from the bright light of the headlamp which I'd forgotten I still had on. I switched it off.

“Sorry.”

“I’m the one surprising you in your campsite. You should really reconsider your apologies.”

“I thought you said you weren’t staying the campground?”

“I’m not, but I just came down from the trail and I saw your fire.”

“How did you know it was me?”

“I didn’t. Sometimes I meet cool people by stopping by their fires.”

I removed my second hotdog from the fire; it was charred even worse than the one before, and was dry and wizzled. I pulled the dog off the stick and was about to toss it into the fire when she said, “Don’t waste it. I’ll eat it.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I should offer you something to eat. Let me make you another one. This one is a charcoal briquette.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I’ll put a lot of condiments on it.” She pulled the hotdog from the stick and jammed it into one of the buns and doused the whole thing with ketchup and mustard. She ate the entire thing in three bites like an anaconda swallowing its prey.

“Are you hungry? I can make another one.” I said.

“No, I’m good.”

I hesitated for a moment, unsure of her age. She looked so young, younger than Hazel, but Hazel was thirty now. “Do you want some wine?”

“Sure.”

I poured some into a cup and handed it to her. She took a tiny sip. We sat and stared at the fire.

“Is this place always so empty?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t book up like the other places. Most I’ve ever seen is fifteen campers at once, and there are like fifty sites here.”

“Oh. I guess people like campgrounds with pools and tennis and things.”

“Probably. What brings you to this place?”

“I didn’t want to spend the whole long weekend at home by myself.”

“You don’t have a husband or kids or anything?”

“My daughter is grown. My husband died.” I refilled my cup with wine. “Hey, I didn’t get your name? Mine’s Jessica.” I extended my hand.

“Serene,” she said, but didn’t take my hand.

I lowered my palm and rubbed it on my pants, as though I’d stuck it into something dirty. “You must have some friends to hang out with,” Serene said. “I think it would be fun to be your age and be alone. You could, like, start your life over or something.”

I didn’t want to start my life over. I wanted to keep it going in the same direction. “I don’t have a ton of friends. I used to have a best friend. She was my friend almost my whole life, but I haven’t talked to her for a long time.”

“What happened? Did you have a fight?”

“It was more than a fight. My friend, she had Lyme, and she— “

“Lime? Like the fruit?”

“No, Lyme, the disease. You get it from ticks. You don’t even know you’re bitten and then months later you have these symptoms like MS. I’m surprised you don’t know about it if you do a lot of hiking. There are posters about it all over the state parks.”

Serene shrugged, “I must have missed them. I don’t read a lot of bulletins and such. Anyhow, your friend had this Lyme?”



I swallowed more wine and said, “Yes, and she was very sick. For a while we thought she might die. One night I went to take her a casserole and some flowers, and she told me that she and my husband had been sleeping together for almost twenty years.”

“Damn. What did your husband say?”

“Nothing. I never brought it up. He died two weeks later.”

“Whoa. How did he die?”

“He had a stroke.”

“Did your friend die?”

“No.”

“Do you wish she had?”

“Sometimes.”

Serene moved a little closer to me on the bench. “Do you wish you had died?”

“Sometimes.” I clamped my hand over my mouth as soon as the word slipped out.

“That’s really messed up,” said Serene. “Well, I gotta go.” And without further discussion she slipped off into the darkness.

I picked up her nearly full cup of wine and drank it in two gulps, then moved on to the rest of the bottle. When the wine was gone, I threw a few cups of water on the embers of the fire and crawled into my sleeping bag.

In the night I woke and Serene was in the tent with me. Crouched with her face next to mine, not in a sensual way, but in the way I imagined a cat would position its face to steal your breath, as my grandmother had warned me my cats would do to Hazel when she was a newborn. I sat up with a start, and she was gone. I pressed the button on the

headlamp and the tent was empty save for a few mosquitoes I hadn't killed earlier. I squished as many as I could before I pulled the sleeping bag up over my head.

I slept way past sunrise but decided to hike up to the overlook with some coffee and donuts anyway. It was almost noon by the time I'd started a fire, percolated the coffee, and dumped it into the thermos with a liberal pour of cream. I changed my clothes and attached the little compass to my shirt. I wasn't in any danger of getting lost on the short trail, but the bobble was comforting. Once at the top I sipped my coffee and made my way through the package of donuts. When I stood to brush the powder from my jeans, I saw Serene leaning against the rocks, where she'd stood yesterday. She wore the same clothes. Her hair was pulled back with the same red bandana.

"You're very quiet," I said.

"I didn't want to bother you. You looked like you were enjoying your snack."

"I was just about to head back." I'd decided that talking to this odd woman was probably not in my best interest.

"Your story was very sad. You must be super lonely now. No best friend, no husband. Camping by yourself."

"It was a long time ago. I've gotten over it."

"Too bad your daughter couldn't come with you."

"She's busy and happy. Besides, I enjoy doing things by myself. I spent a long time doing things with other people. You're by yourself, you must like it also."

"I get terribly lonely sometimes. That's why I'm always eager to meet interesting new people, like you."

“Oh, thanks. Maybe you should camp where there are more people if you are so lonely.” I said.

She shrugged and slipped back up the trail, leaving me alone at the top.

When I got back to the campground I finally texted Hazel, but received no reply. I crawled into the tent and fell asleep.

I dreamed I was running through the woods, the sun high in the sky. The branches of the trees clawed and whipped at me as I ran by. I tried to steer clear of them, but I stumbled, and one caught me up in its long branches. Instead of ripping me to shreds, it enclosed me in a tight embrace. “You will never be alone with us,” it said.

I woke up crying. I brushed the tears from my eyes and sat up. The sun was still out but it was low in the sky. My breath turned into small wispy clouds when I exhaled. I lit a roaring fire and sat as close to it as I dared while I read a few trashy magazines before dinner. Hot dogs again. I wouldn’t eat hot dogs again for a year. I decided against opening the second bottle of wine that night after the strange dreams I’d been having. Determined to see the sunrise on my last day, I ate a few marshmallows, brushed my teeth, and went to bed bundled in every piece of clothing I’d brought. The campground was completely silent, and I slipped into a dreamless sleep.

I woke up early. My campsite was shrouded in a thick mist. I made coffee, hopeful that I would be able to see the sunrise from the lookout, that the mist would dissipate when I was above the tree line.

I knew Serene was there before I saw her. The hair on my arms prickled when I sensed her. On my way up, I’d realized that she always came from the top of the

mountain, past the sign noting the elevation and a warning from the park service to take your trash with you. There were no trails beyond that sign, only craggy granite cliffs.

“Hello,” I said without turning around.

“Good morning.”

“Here to watch the sunrise?”

“Yeah, I like to catch it whenever I can. It’s pretty cool. You’re leaving today?”

“I am.”

“Why?”

“That’s a weird question. Because I have responsibilities, and I can’t live at a campground, obviously.”

“Are you sure? Are you sure you want to go back?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Aren’t you afraid?”

“Afraid of what?”

“Afraid that all your best days are used up.”

“Nope,” I said. But her words were a punch in the gut.

I stood and started down the path. She started after me, but I didn’t speed up. I wouldn’t let her know I was scared. I tripped and stumbled into a bush at the side of the trail. When I righted myself, I was covered in ticks. Hundreds of them in all sizes. I tried to brush them off, but they just stuck to my pants and shirt with their tiny black legs. I could feel them on the back of my neck and behind my ears, crawling through my hair. I ran. I should have taken off my clothes right there, but I was still wearing nearly everything I’d brought, and didn’t want to slow down. I thought I heard laughter behind

me, and when I glanced over my shoulder, Serene grinned. Her smile was much wider than I remembered it. I burst into my campsite, stripping off my clothes as I ran. The majority of them landed in the still smoldering fire pit, including my shoes. I ran to the pond that I'd deemed too slimy to swim in yesterday and jumped in. I frantically scrubbed every inch of my bare flesh, but the ticks were gone.

I bolted from the pond dove into my tent. Nude and huddled in my sleeping bag, I took a few deep breaths. OK, I had stumbled into a tick nest. I'd read about them before. Everything was fine now. They were gone. I was cleaned up, and in a few minutes I could be on my way home. When I popped my head out of the sleeping bag, Serene was crouched next to me, just as she had been in my dream. I drew my head back in and popped it out again just to check and make sure I was really seeing her.

She rolled her eyes. "Still here," she said.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to stay. Just think about it. You could just stay here. Stay here with me. Take hikes. Meet new people." she said. She studied me with silver eyes.

"No."

"But, Jessie. There is nothing left for you. Your husband is gone. Your best friend is gone. They lied to you for years. You are nothing but a burden to Hazel. Think how much better off she'd be without you. You should just stay, and rest." Her voice was a soft coo, like a mourning dove. The temperature in the tent plummeted. My body shook uncontrollably, and I felt my eyes starting to close.

"Jessie, you know your best moments are over."

There it was again. That phrase. Maybe she was right. Maybe my best moments were over. I could say for certainty that my best days all lay behind the wall I'd erected separating my life into the periods before and after Amanda's confession. I started to drift off, and it felt like I was floating in a warm sea even as my body convulsed with cold. A sharp pain penetrated my outer thigh, as though someone had poked me with a needle. I reached down to find a hard ball with a pin attached. I turned it over in my fingers, trying to figure out what the gumball-sized object could possibly be, and realized it was the compass. It must have fallen off my shirt when I'd gone to bed, fully clothed, the night before. Serene continued cooing her cruel lullaby. "They betrayed you, for years, right under your nose. You will never have peace. Their dishonesty will haunt your days." She was probably right, but I didn't care. I bent the pin on the compass until it was straight out, and clutching the tiny globe in my fist, I took a deep breath and burst out of the sleeping bag.

Serene was crouched in the same position as before, her head and face now a blinding white. Her breath unfurled from her mouth like serpents made of ice. I'd been so sure up until a few minutes ago that she was a run-of-the-mill psycho. I lunged forward and drove the pin deep into her eye. It shot a stream of deep blue blood, which turned into thick, ropelike icicles that encircled my arm from bicep to wrist. Serene screamed in agony and whipped her head from side to side. She screamed and covered her eye with her hand. I worked the door zipper a quarter of the way around before Serene grabbed me by the shoulders and threw me backwards. Ice dripped from her eye and onto my shoulder, where it left tiny burns.

I plunged the compass into her other eye. Her screams followed me out of the tent as I dove past her through the small opening I'd made in the flap and pulled it all the way open. I wriggled out, my naked torso instantly covered with dirt and pine needles. I pulled myself up and lunged for the car, only a few steps away. The locks snapped into place when I pressed the power lock. I shoved the keys in the ignition and tore out of the campsite. I caught a parting glimpse of neighbors. Tattered tents made of old green canvas. Winnebagos caved in by fallen trees and rusted-out beams. Frozen husks of other campers were propped up in grotesque tableaux around dead campfires and rotting picnic tables.

The skin from my wrist to my elbow, where the ice-snakes had wrapped themselves turned a deep purple and itched furiously. I switched the heater on full blast and turned up the heated seat so high I could barely sit. I stepped on the gas and didn't slow down until I hit Camden, when my phone, left in the console, made the chirp indicating I had text messages. I pulled over and watched the little bubble click up: 20, 30, 40.

*—Mom, where are you?*

*—Mom, I'm worried.*

*—Mom?*

I swiped the phone on and typed:

*—I'm here.*

*—I'm OK*

## **In the Trap**

When Angela pulled the skull out of the water, she'd been clean just shy of twenty-three days. She figured she'd been pregnant about twice that long. Angela hadn't even seen the skull at first. When the rope had gone taut in the pot-hauler and she hooked it with the gaff and hauled it onto the side of the boat, what she saw was a trap full of lobsters. The next thing she noticed was how they all scrambled to one side of the trap once it had been laid horizontally on the rail. They piled up in the corner on top of each other, claws extended. Lobsters are not creatures that group together, and definitely don't scramble around in a crustacean herd like these were doing. They were racing to get away from something.

She pulled the lobsters out quickly and tossed them into the holding tank. All hard-shells, which was also a little strange for the warm July waters. Then again, she was fishing in a new spot tucked into a cove near a little island right off shore. Larger boats stayed away from it, due to the craggy ledges just under the surface. But Angela's small center-console boat was light and easy to navigate. Hell, she could row out of there if she needed to. She had almost saved up enough for a down payment on a larger boat when heroin chewed up her savings, her arm, and much of her mind.

She pulled a large, barnacle-encrusted rock out of the trap, and tried to figure out how it had fit through the netting for lobsters. She didn't think the rock was a prank or a warning from another lobsterman, who tended to be fairly obvious with both their jokes and their warnings. A few years back, her neighbor had pulled up a trap to find his own dog inside it. The dog was safe at home when he'd left for the morning, but he'd been



fishing in someone else's spot, and that someone else sent him a clear message about what he'd thought about it. And besides, this didn't feel like a message. No one else fished here, there were no other buoys anywhere near the shores of the island. When she turned the rock over she finally noticed the eye sockets and grinning teeth through barnacles and algae. "Jesus!" Angela shouted. She dropped the skull and it bounced off of her left foot. A wave of nausea bubbled from her stomach to her throat when she bent to pick it up. She tried to flick some of small snails off the skull with her thumb and said, "I wish I had a bigger boat with a damn hot-tank." There was a sudden green flash and Angela's small skiff was transformed into a gleaming new 23-foot lobster boat. Beeps and blurps emanated from the wheelhouse, indicating fish finders and GPS. A shining steel pot hauler hung off the port side, and on the starboard side was a steaming hot-tank. Next to it was a bubbling holding tank filled halfway with lobsters.

"Shit," whispered Angela. She started to sweat. All that work getting clean and she'd lost her mind anyway. The new boat was worth well over a hundred grand. She knew because it was the exact boat she had priced out a few years ago. Back when she was only on a few pain killers here and there.

Angela evaluated the situation. Either she was hallucinating, or she was actually standing on the deck of a brand-new boat. She put her hand on her belly, a new habit she'd picked up after her positive pregnancy test two weeks ago. *OK, Angela. Keep it together. Stress isn't good for the baby.* She took a deep breath. Angela had been able to hold her composure through nearly anything life threw at her. Except for that one time after the town meeting last year, and she didn't like to think about that. Besides, that was mostly due to the drugs, and she wasn't on drugs anymore.

She walked over to the hot-tank and dropped the skull into it. Angela remembered that it took about five minutes to boil buoys clean when she hauled traps with her dad, so that's how long she boiled the skull. It came out smooth and shiny and had a yellowish patina like it was made from old wood.

The tide was running out of the cove fast. Angela carefully maneuvered the big boat out into open water. The skull watched her from the dashboard, where she'd placed it after its bath. Angela opened up the throttle and zoomed back towards the co-op where she sold her lobsters and docked her boat. That would be the true test of this insanity. What would Wayne say when she pulled in? Wayne, her former best friend and current dockhand at the co-op, would notice the extreme upgrade from the boat Angela had left in a few hours before. But when she got to the dock, Wayne wasn't there. She loaded her catch into holding crates and threw them over the side of the dock. He probably wouldn't have spoken to her anyway. He hadn't since he drove her home from the hospital following the town meeting incident. That night he told Angela he would never speak to her again, whether or not she got her shit together, and he'd kept his word.

She missed Wayne terribly, even though she was with George, whom she supposed she loved. Angela and Wayne had been best friends since middle school, and at twenty-six he still had the same chubby, dimpled cheeks he had at twelve. His hair always seemed to be the same length, just long enough to curl out underneath his baseball cap. He almost always smiled, and seemed like a harmless little butterball; many of the older lobstermen treated him that way. But Wayne had spent six days a week from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. hefting crates weighing a hundred pounds each from boat to dock to holding tank since he was seventeen. Angela figured Wayne was stronger than any of the

fishermen he weighed lobsters for. Once, she saw Wayne throw a guy overboard at the local bar, which happened to be located on a long pier. Wayne had caught the guy attempting to coax a drunk woman into his car.

Angela took her time cleaning the boat, so she could figure out what to do when she got back on land. Was her small boat from that morning real or this new, large one? Which was more likely, that she'd completely blacked out huge chunks of her life, including buying a new boat, or that she'd pulled a wish-granting skull out of the Atlantic? At this point, it was a toss-up. Angela picked up the skull and placed it gently into her Igloo cooler. It fit perfectly. She closed the lid. "Sorry, Captain. I have to get you to shore, and this is the safest way." She always called people Captain when she couldn't remember their names. Male or female. Generally, people didn't mind. She rowed a small dock boat to shore and tied it with the crowd of others. She walked up the steep hill and got in her ancient Ford Ranger. It had once been blue, but over the years various body parts had to be replaced, which she bought used and never bothered to repaint. It had a red quarter panel on one side and a white one on the other. The hood was black and the tailgate was dark green. The mismatched paint resulted in a patchwork quilt effect. Her boyfriend George had stuck a "Don't laugh it's paid for" sticker on the bumper.

She opened the lid of the Igloo, lifted the skull out, and put it on the seat. She put the truck in gear and rattled up the road to her trailer. It was less than a mile from the wharf. She could have walked, and she used to before everything happened. She thought maybe she would again now that she was mostly straightened out. Exercise was supposed to be good for pregnancy, wasn't it? She pulled into her dooryard. It had been her grandmother's house once. Angela moved in after she graduated high school and Gran

had moved into the retirement home. For years, she kept it as neat and tidy as when the old woman had lived there. Now, it needed a lot of work. It was amazing how quickly a home could fall apart. After a year of neglect, weeds were growing up through the walkway, strips of siding hung off at odd angles, and seedlings poked out of the gutter over the front door.

The door flew open as soon as she turned off the engine. George stood in the doorway. Her golden retriever Ernie bounded out past him and jumped up on the door of the truck. Ernie's long nails fit into grooves he'd made by doing the same thing almost daily for three years. Angela didn't open the door. "Hey!" George called from the door. "What are you doing?" His hair, once a soft dirty blonde, was now dark brown from dirt and grease. He wore a pair of jeans, a grey sweatshirt with sleeves cut off at the elbows, and a pair of green Converse All-Stars. Angela took his outfit as a good sign, especially the shoes. When she'd left that morning, George had been in the same clothes he'd worn for three days, stained black sweat pants and a ripped Rolling Stones t-shirt. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him in shoes. At least a month ago. The sobering up process wasn't easy on either of them. Her heart lifted a bit. Maybe George could start writing again, or maybe he would finally agree to go fishing with her. It was hard being the only one to keep them from drowning in bills, and how long could she keep fishing alone and pregnant? Or fishing at all, for that matter. George walked over to the truck and noticed the skull immediately.

"What in the hell is that thing?"

"What does it look like to you?"

"It looks like a goddamned human skull."

“I hauled it up in one of my traps this morning.”

“Why are you riding around with it? Why didn’t you throw it back, or call the Coast Guard?”

“Well, here’s the thing, George. What kind of boat do I have?”

“I don’t see how this is relevant?”

“Just answer the question.”

“A little shit-box center-console. You’ve had it for years.”

“Yeah, well. Not anymore. I pulled this thing up, and next thing I know, I’m in a brand new 23-foot boat. Same one I priced out before all the trouble.”

“What? Are you high? I thought we were both done, because of you know.”

George motioned towards her stomach with his lit cigarette.

“Get in the truck. And put that out.”

Angela put the skull back in the Igloo. George opened the passenger door, let Ernie in, and climbed in after him. They rode down to the dock in silence, George completely sure Angela was using, and Angela completely sure she’d lost her mind. They walked down to the dock, Angela with the Igloo. They got in the skiff and George started rowing out into the harbor. “It’s that boat right there.” She pointed out the new boat.

For the first time, Angela noticed the name, *Old Man*, painted on the stern. George rowed up next to the boat. Angela tied the skiff to the stern and started to climb aboard.

“Angela. What are you doing? You have lost it. You can’t commandeer someone else’s boat.”

“It’s mine. I don’t know how, but it is. Did you see the name? *Old Man*. That’s the name I picked out last year when we were looking at boats. You know, from *Old Man and the Sea*. Come aboard. I have the key.” She started the boat and the diesel engine roared to life.

#

Some couples have a song. Angela and George had a book. They had met at the used bookstore. They were both looking at Hemmingway. “What are you looking for, *Old Man and the Sea*?” George had teased her, referring undoubtedly to her grubby jeans, t-shirt advertising a bait company, and rubber boots. She laughed, but didn’t respond. Instead she grabbed the collection of short stories she was looking at and went to the counter. He followed her with an armload of books. When the elderly woman behind the counter rang up Angela’s books, George attempted to pay for them.

“Oh, no. I don’t let strangers pay for my books,” she said, and stopped him from handing a \$20 to the clerk.

“I’m not a stranger. We went to high school together. Plus, it’s for charity,” said George.

“Did we?” She raised an eyebrow. “I don’t remember you. At any rate, I can pay for my own books, thanks.” Angela pulled out her own \$20.

“Alright, how about I use this \$20 to buy you a coffee at Lil’s Diner?”

“Are you going to murder me?”

“I wasn’t planning on it. I have a lot of shit to do today.”

“OK. You can buy me a coffee.”

George leaned over to pick up the pile of books Angela had bought, scanning the titles as he did so.

“You’re not walking me to my locker, are you?” Angela grabbed her books and said, “I’ll meet you over there.”

“Suit yourself.” He made sure not to hold the door open for her.

By the time Angela had dropped her books into her truck and made her way to the diner, three doors down from the bookstore, George had gotten them a booth and ordered himself a cup of coffee and an egg sandwich, although it was well past noon. Angela slid her large black sunglasses onto the top of her head to hold back her shoulder-length blonde hair before she scooted into the seat opposite him. Dirty snow dripped from her rubber boots onto the floor. “I see you already ordered,” she said.

“I estimated the odds of you showing up at 50/50, and I’m hungry.” He poured four containers of cream into his coffee, one after the other. “So, Angela Baxter. You really don’t remember me?”

“Yeah, I do. George Avery, class of 2009. I wouldn’t have agreed to coffee if I hadn’t recognized you. I don’t go out with total strangers, just medium strangers.” She flipped over her menu. “What did you get? I want an egg sandwich if it’s not too late.”

“Not too late. I just ordered one.” He sipped his coffee.

She stared at him for a moment and eased a little in her seat. Sometimes all it took was the same order at a diner to change a relationship entirely.

“Anyhow,” he continued, “let’s start this off right. Hey, Angela. I’m George. Nice to re-meet you.” He set down his coffee and stuck out his hand. She shook it.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in New York? Weren’t you going to school there?” she asked.

“Oh, you really do remember me! More than my name, I mean,” he said.

“I do.”

“I like it here.” His story was that New York sucked, and he’d much rather be a big fish in a small pond. And that he was much happier at the Coastal Reader, where his name accompanied a mind-boggling number of articles about everything from car accidents to corrupt local politicians to school spelling bees. He left out the part about how he’d flunked out of Columbia Journalism School, unable to keep up after too many nights out.

Coffee at the diner turned into drinks at the bar next door. Drinks turned into an overnight at Angela’s. Within a week, George had moved in.

#

Neither George or Angela spoke a word as they took a lap around the harbor, or as they moored the boat, rowed back to shore, and drove home. In fact, neither of them said a word until they were back at home in the driveway.

“What the hell is going on?” George asked.

“I’m telling you, I pulled up that skull and I said something like—I wish I had a hot tank, and poof! New boat.”

“Tell it you want a new truck.”

“A new boat isn’t enough?”

“Look, if you have a skull that grants wishes, I don’t think a new truck is too much to ask for.”



Angela picked up the skull and held it in her hands. She cleared her throat and said, “Hey, Captain. A new truck sure would be nice.” Nothing happened. Angela looked over at George “Maybe it’s a one-time thing,” she said.

“Say you wish. You wish you had a new truck. Magical things are always really particular about grammar, in books anyway.”

“I wish. I wish I had a new truck.” There was an almost imperceptible flicker in the air, like a blink that lasted a second too long, and Angela and George sat in a new truck. A full-sized Toyota Tundra they had looked at around the same time they priced out the new boat. George clapped both his hands to the top of his head.

“I need a drink,” George said. He flung open the door and started walking to the trailer. He turned around before he reached the door and called to Angela, “You coming in?”

She put the skull back into the cooler and shut the lid before she slid out of the seat and followed him into the house.

George went directly to the fridge, grabbed a beer, and drank it straight down. Angela stood in the doorway. The fingers of her right hand were so tightly wrapped around the handle of the cooler that her knuckles shone white. Her stomach felt like a balloon with a rock tied to it. Ernie slinked into the house after her. The dog acted like he did when a bad storm rolled in.

“So,” George said, “what’s next?”

“What do you mean what’s next?”

“I mean what do we wish for next? A million dollars? A mansion?”

“I don’t know, George. I don’t think we get to wish for shit without repercussions. That’s not how the world works. Every action has a reaction and all that.”

“Yeah? Well, the world apparently contains magic skulls that people haul up in lobster traps.”

Angela had gone waxy pale, and her skin was covered in a thin sheen of sweat. She sat down in the chair opposite George and nearly knocked it over.

“Are you OK?” George asked. He was half-way out of his seat when she stood up and ran to the bathroom. The sound of her puking filled the silence of the trailer.

#

Three weeks earlier, Angela had walked out of that same bathroom with a small plastic stick in her hand. “Look!” she said, and thrust the stick at George.

“Shit,” he said. There was no mistaking what the large, blue plus- sign displayed in its center meant.

“What do you mean, shit? This is like, a miracle or something. I’m not supposed to be able to have kids.”

A year before she and George started dating, her menstrual cramps, which had always been terrible, had landed her in the hospital. She was diagnosed with endometriosis and informed that because of the scarring there was a less than 1% chance she’d have children. She’d come home with her diagnosis and a prescription for OxyContin.

“I just. I mean, this isn’t great timing, right? Look at this place. Look at us.” George swept his arm in a wide arc that stretched across the trashed kitchen as well as the two of them.

“OK. I know this is a lot and totally unexpected, but I’m having this baby. It could be my only chance. I’m going to quit with the shit and hope it all turns out alright.”

George stood and then sat back down. Angela knew he would stay. He had nowhere to go and no way to get there. The trailer was hers. The truck was hers. She had both of them before they met. His car had been scooped up by the repo-man’s wrecker six months ago. When she let herself think long enough about it, she supposed his addiction was hers too. After all, she was the one that suggested he take a couple of her Oxys when he threw his back out. She’d only taken a few herself at that point, and hadn’t known about the tidal wave heading in their direction.

“Goddammit, Ange!” he said, “What are we going to do?”

“We have to quit. Cold turkey. I can’t go to the doctor pregnant and addicted to heroin. They’ll put me on the list for child protective services, and they’ll just put me on different drugs.”

“This seems like a really bad idea. Shouldn’t you at least call someone?”

“I can’t risk it. I want this baby, and I want it to be born clean and to clean parents. I don’t want even the smallest chance it will end up in the system, like I did.” Angela crossed her arms in front of her. “I think I’m about six weeks along. If I stay hydrated and take it easy, everything should be OK.”

In the end, George had agreed to both the baby and the detox. When it came down to it, they had to clean up anyway, baby or not. As far as going through it at home, Angela was right—neither had much of an option to do otherwise. No health insurance, no family except for each other, and their friends had stopped calling a long time ago. Angela filled the fridge with Gatorade and the cupboard with cans of chicken soup. She’d

read that both helped with hydration during detox. The next day the two had retreated to the master bedroom at the end of the trailer and took turns running to the bathroom. For a week, they stayed in bed, shaking, sweating, and swilling Gatorade. Rock, paper, scissors determined whose turn it was to go to the kitchen and heat up Styrofoam containers of Cup-a-Soup and let Ernie out for a run. Angela's paper had lost to George's scissors on the afternoon of the eighth day when she entered the kitchen and realized, for the first time, how bad they'd let things get. Disgusted, she called George into the kitchen.

“I have to clean this. Can you help me?”

“Yeah. I think so. I feel a lot better today. I ate a bunch of crackers earlier when you were asleep. How is...everything?”

“I think I'm OK. I feel kind of nauseous, but I don't know if it's from the drugs or the baby. I mean, I haven't had any cramps or bleeding or anything. That was probably more than you wanted to know. What I mean to say is, I think the baby is fine. I have a bunch of extra pregnancy tests, I'll take one later.”

“Extra pregnancy tests? Why?”

“The one I showed you wasn't actually the first one I took. I took one that morning and didn't believe it, so I went and bought a ten-pack. The one I showed you was actually number three.”

He shook his head in disbelief and then said, “You are a real piece of work.”

“Yeah, I know. So, how about you take the kitchen and I'll tackle the living room? Do as much as we can today? I mean, I think we should probably throw away a lot of this stuff.” The sink contained a mountain of dirty dishes, some so nasty they'd grown black mold. And, as suggested, George threw the majority away instead of dealing with

them. They could survive with two of each for a while. After he'd thrown away most of the dishes and pots and pans, he scrubbed the entire kitchen with bleach. His hands peeled for days afterward. When the kitchen was cleaned to gleaming, he flopped down on the couch and slept for ten hours straight.

Meanwhile, Angela took on the trash-strewn living room. She vacuumed up nearly everything in sight with a Shop-Vac: overflowing ashtrays, whole cookies, and old socks. She didn't care. It all disappeared up the hungry nozzle of the vacuum. When Angela finally finished, she took one look around and burst into tears.

#

"Ange, are you OK in there?" George called from the kitchen.

The door opened, and she shuffled into the kitchen. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and then onto her jeans.

"Yeah. I need some water. I can't deal with this right now. I already feel like—" She stopped speaking and pointed at the skull. "Why is that on the table?"

"I thought maybe I would...you know...see if it worked for me too?" George said. He didn't look her in the eye, but instead focused at the calendar hanging on the wall just over her shoulder. It showed a scene of the harbor, in mid-winter, since they hadn't flipped the pages since February.

"And did it?" she asked.

"Nope."

"What did you wish for?"

“A million dollars. Cash. But it doesn’t matter, does it? It would appear that you are the only one that can make it work. It must be bonded to you or something,” George said.

“Or something,” Angela replied. “I’m exhausted and starving. I’m going to eat something and go to bed. I’ll deal with all of this tomorrow.”

Angela made some grilled cheese sandwiches. She ate a few bites, then coaxed Ernie out of his hiding spot next to the couch and fed the rest to him. He took it between his front teeth, widened his eyes when he saw the skull on the table, and ran back to his spot between the coffee table and the couch. It was close to 7 p.m. but the sun still shone in the July sky. Angela pulled a heavy flannel blanket over the small window in the bedroom, which made it dark as midnight. George took a shower and by the time he was done, she was fast asleep, or at least appeared to be. Despite her racing mind, her body felt hungry for sleep. That night she slept more soundly than she had in years. Since she had started using she’d been plagued by nightmares. Drowning, falling, burning alive, every night she experienced a new horror. She’d wake up, sweating and afraid, feeling like she’d slept for hours only to check the clock and see it had only been twenty minutes since she’d last woken.

At 5 a.m. the alarm blared and she sat bolt upright in bed. George was already awake. He looked over at her and said, “I feel so much better today. I almost feel, I don’t know. Good, I think.”

“Yeah, I actually slept the whole night. Haven’t done that in a while,” she said.

“Maybe things are looking up.”

“Hope that’s it,” she said. “What should we do about the skull?”

“Maybe we could...I mean, we could ask it for anything, right? So, why can't we ask it for drugs with no repercussions?”

Angela got up without replying and walked to the kitchen. The front door was wide open, and Ernie was gone. She stood on the front step and called for the dog, her voice high and urgent. It wasn't like him to run off, and she tried not to panic. Ernie was her baby. She'd picked him up from the animal shelter a few days after the doctor said she'd never have babies of her own. She loved that dog more than anything. It was already hot and muggy, and the sun was barely over the tree line.

“What's the matter?” George asked.

“The doors were open. Ernie is gone.” Angela put two fingers to the corners of her lips and whistled. The doors had been closed when she went to bed. Hadn't they? It was part of her nightly routine. Shut the doors. Lock them. George pushed past her and ran down the steps, wincing as his bare feet hit the gravel. Ernie never left the yard. They didn't even need a fence or a leash. They let him out, and when he barked, they let him back in.

“Ernie!” George yelled. He crouched and looked under the truck before circling over to the falling-down woodshed at the corner of the driveway. It was filled with bottles and cans; there wasn't any room for the dog even if he had tried to squeeze in. George started walking down the driveway and out onto the road. Angela came up behind him, grabbed his hand, and squeezed it before she started whistling again. They went as far as the co-op driveway, and then circled back to the house. No sign of Ernie. Angela left the door open when she went back inside the trailer. Ernie's food and water bowls were left

untouched. Nothing in the trailer was missing or out of place. The skull grinned from the table.

Angela sat down at the table and started to cry. George put on a pot of coffee.

“Where could he have gone?” Angela said from beneath her hands, which were over her face.

“He’s probably chasing a squirrel or something,” George said. But Angela could tell from his tone that he didn’t believe it. She remembered the way Ernie had slunk into the house the night before and avoided being anywhere near the skull.

George poured two cups of coffee and added half-and-half to both. He set one in front of Angela and sat down across from her. She still looked tired and a bit grey despite the long night of sleep. Angela sipped the coffee and set it down. “I don’t think I’m supposed to have coffee anymore. I thought maybe things were getting better. I felt so good this morning. And now,” she motioned towards the skull. “I’m scared, George.”

“Don’t worry, Ernie will come back.” George said. He scooted his chair towards hers so he could put his arm around her.

“No, I mean. Everything has been so shitty. We really fucked things up. I can’t even go to the store. I feel like everyone is looking at me all the time, you know?” She leaned further into his arm. “I want to fast-forward through all this. Maybe like a year or something. I want to feel better and have this baby, and just be normal.” She didn’t mention George’s suggestion that they ask the skull for drugs.

Angela had been the one to introduce pills into their lives, but George was the one who suggested they try heroin. Pills had gotten extremely expensive, and he brought up heroin as casually as if they were switching from cable to satellite to save a few bucks a



month. Angela hadn't needed much convincing, and besides, they were in it together. However, when George loaded up the needle and shot it between his toes, Angela suspected it wasn't his first time at the rodeo. It wasn't a big deal at first, just a weekend thing. They both knew how dangerous it was. George covered an overdose death per week at the paper. But soon it was more than weekends, a day or two a week. Then both of them started using daily and hiding from each other. And then came the infamous town meeting incident. Angela and George had both collapsed and required shots of Narcan at the annual town meeting. A spectacular public display of horrific judgment they weren't likely to live down anytime soon, if ever. Wayne had brought her home from the hospital and left George there. She had cowered in the corner of his truck while he screamed at her. "Goddammit, Angela! What is wrong with you? You could have died. I told you to leave that loser months ago."

"It's not his fault, Wayne. I'm the one—"she started.

"I don't want to hear it. I don't care which one of you idiots started it, but you both have enough sense to end it, or you should anyway."

"Just take me home and leave me alone."

"Oh, I plan to. I'm the last person in this town that actually gives a shit about you, and I'm done."

"Fine."

"You know I love you, Angela."

"I don't want to hear this," she said.

"You're going to, because it's probably the last time I'm going to talk to you, so I might as well get it out in the open. I've loved you since high school, and I think you

know that. Why else would I put up with so much shit from you? And now, I have to watch you throw everything away for what? For George? What are you going to do, support him by fishing while he finds himself? I'm going to offer you one last chance. Let me help you, come home with me. You know I can get you through this. After everything we've been through."

Wayne was wrong. She hadn't known how he felt about her. She thought he was being a good guy, being her friend. Her heart shattered. Angela was convinced it was her fault that George was such a mess. She couldn't leave him now, in the state he was in. In the state they were both in. Maybe she could fix everything. Get George cleaned up, get him on his feet and let him down easy. Then she could tell Wayne that she felt the same, and she'd loved him since she was sixteen. But until then, those feelings had to remain buried. "Wayne," she sobbed, "I can't."

And that was it. He helped her into her house and left her sobbing on the couch next to Ernie. He'd kept his word not to speak to her again. Until the moment when the pregnancy test turned positive, Angela had hoped that someday, she could turn it all around. Now, magic skull or not, she didn't think she ever would.

"Maybe you can put it all back." George looked at the skull.

"What do you mean?"

"You could wish that people forget everything that happened."

"I don't know. Wouldn't that change other stuff too? Although, I suppose erasing our misdeeds for the past year would be a priority. I mean before we wish for anything else even. Who wants the biggest house if everyone thinks you're the loser with the biggest house?" she said.

“Now you’re talking. Plus, I like it here. I want to raise our child here. We don’t need people judging him based on our mistakes.”

“Or her,” Angela said.

“Or her,” George said and smiled.

“And you aren’t going to try to get me to wish for more drugs? I mean, you understand why I’m not going to do that, don’t you? We can’t. We have to be responsible now, and we are going to be parents, George.”

“I know. I was having a moment. I’m sure I will have more. Hey, maybe you can wish for Ernie to come back too?”

Angela took a deep breath and picked up the skull. “Hello. I have a couple more wishes. They aren’t very big ones, so I hope they can be accommodated without any, um, trouble. I wish everyone would forget about the mess we’ve been in. As far as they are concerned, I’ve been fishing and George has been writing for the paper. Same as always. Also, I wish Ernie would come back. And, I wish George would get over his cravings.” She looked over at George, who scowled at her. She set the skull on the table where it continued its ceaseless grinning. “Sorry about the last bit. I thought maybe it would help you feel better.”

Angela walked to the door and looked out. No Ernie. She heard the chair legs scrape on the floor, and George’s soft footsteps down the hallway. A minute later the sound of the shower running floated from the bathroom, and then she something she hadn’t heard for a long time. George was singing.

#

That afternoon George sat on the couch and watched the Red Sox, and smiled when the familiar smell of chocolate drifted into the living room. Angela was baking. It had been a long time since she'd had the energy or cared enough to open a box of cereal. He didn't even mind that the heat from the oven boosted the heat in the already sweltering trailer. "Sorry about the heat," she said. "I had a wicked craving for some brownies."

"Do you have any ideas about what we should do while they cool?" George said and pulled her onto the couch.

They kissed for a few minutes, but when George unbuttoned her pants, Angela untangled herself from his embrace, buttoned her jeans, and stood up. "I'm sorry," she said. "I can't. I'm still not feeling myself. And it's too hot in here. I need a glass of water. Do you want one?"

George didn't answer her. Angela walked into the kitchen and filled a glass of water from the tap. She took a long drink, and felt something hard hit the back of her tongue. She leaned over the sink and spit out a tooth. She picked it up and looked at it. It was a molar, roots and all. She spit out the blood that filled the empty hole, and took another long drink of water. "Holy shit. Hey, George?" she called.

He didn't respond. She stepped into the living room. He was stretched out asleep on the couch, with his hands under his cheek. Angela looked from the tooth in the palm of her hand to George's chest rising and falling with his deep, even breath. Angela walked back into the kitchen and threw the tooth in the trash. The skull on the table looked even shinier than it had that morning, almost moist. Angela reached out and touched the top of it. It was cold, but dry. She pulled her hand away and noticed a small, silver fish scale on the tip of her finger. She wiped it on the front of her jeans. She went

into the small, closet-like bathroom and took a pregnancy test. When the plus sign popped up again, she silently promised to stop wishing and to get rid of the skull. She spent the remainder of the afternoon sitting on the front steps, calling for Ernie and eating brownies.

When George woke up, he convinced her that they should go out to eat, despite her protest that she was full of brownies. He argued that they should celebrate, and also test out the wish to see if anyone remembered their troubles. And now that they had the skull, they didn't need to worry about money. Angela didn't tell him about her decision to get rid of it. They went to a local brew pub, one they'd frequented in the past. The hostess, a former classmate of George's, greeted them warmly. "Oh hey, George! Haven't seen you for a while. Still busy at the paper?" George looked at Angela out of the corner of his eye. His arm was around her waist, and he gave her a light squeeze.

"Yes, there's always a lot to keep up with around here," he said. "Those planning board meetings keep me on my toes."

They were seated near a window that looked out over the harbor. The sun was just starting to set, and a few boats were still making their way in. Angela pointed out her new boat to George and shook his head in disbelief.

George looked around the restaurant and said, "No one is looking at us."

"Should I jump up on the table? Shake my ass?" Angela teased. "It is weird though, right? I didn't notice that stuff before, like how people would do that thing where they looked at us without looking?"

"At least we are OK now, right?" George said. The waitress came and took their orders, so Angela didn't have the chance to answer. Were they OK? Not even a month

sober. They hadn't even hit the magical twenty-eight days the addiction groups talked about all the time. Then there was the whole business with the skull. If she hadn't found it, how OK would they be? What would happen if she got rid of it? And how OK was the baby going to be, considering it had spent its first few weeks dividing cells in heroin soup?

"Hey, Spacegirl, come back." George grabbed her hand for a second. "Bread basket is here." They ate the best meal they'd had in a long time. George drank a bottle of wine and two Irish coffees. Their conversation was about movies they had heard about, the Red Sox, and baby names. They did not talk about heroin, or the skull, or Ernie.

Ernie still wasn't back that night when George got a call from his old boss. Angela heard his surprised voice when he answered the call and then heard it pitch low and smooth, what she called his reporter voice. She loved it and eavesdropped on him as often as possible when he used it.

"Hey, so that was Sam. He was going over my schedule for the week. Like nothing happened. What if I he thinks I've been there..." He ran down the hall.

A few minutes later he came back into the kitchen. He had his laptop flipped open in front of him. He said, "Look. Oh my God. Look." He turned the computer to face Angela. The browser was open to the Coastal Reader's archive page. George pointed to the headline that read, "Double OD Cuts Town Meeting Short."

"Look at the byline. I wrote this. Who OD'd if it wasn't us?"

Angela scanned the story. No names were given. "*Two residents required emergency care after a drug related incident at Farrisville Town Meeting. Chief Miller said it was the first time the drug Narcan was administered by an officer.*"

“I have to figure out who this is about. Maybe I have notes on here somewhere.”

George began typing. Angela went to the front door and called for Ernie one last time before she locked it and went to bed. George was still working when she drifted off, her tongue stuck in the hole left by the missing molar. She woke up at five a.m., packed her lunch and the skull into the Igloo, and was on her way out the door when George stopped her.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Going lobstering. We still need money, you know,” she replied.

“One, it’s Sunday, so you can’t fish. Two, you don’t have to do that anymore. Just wish for money. I don’t know why you’re dragging your feet on this.”

Angela set down her cooler. “I forgot it was Sunday.” She decided not to address the rest of his statements.

“Anyhow, I figured it out. It was your beloved Wayne and Jen Fairchild that OD’d at the meeting instead of us.”

“No. There’s no way. Wayne would never touch drugs. Never.”

“Yeah. Well, it’s all in my notes. Or the notes on my computer, that apparently I wrote.”

“What do we do? We can’t let them take our place. Maybe I should wish it back again.”

“Hey, I’m sorry your boyfriend is affected by this, but we have other shit to think about. Have you forgotten that you’re pregnant?” George unleashed his carefully guarded jealousy of Wayne and Angela’s friendship.

“Don’t be such an asshole. This is our fault. You know it. We were the ones that OD’d at that meeting. We have to fix this.”

“And do what, wish them back to normal too?” said George. “What happens when we fix them and someone else ODs? Or you lose the baby?”

Angela started to cry. She said, “I can’t make them suffer because we fucked up. And stop using the baby against me. I’m aware of the potential consequences.”

“What a goddamned mess,” George said. He went outside and slammed the door shut behind him.

Angela picked up the skull. “What is your deal? Can’t you just help me out without messing stuff up for other people? And what did you do with my dog?” she asked. It didn’t respond. She set it back down on the table. Three glimmering fish scales shone on her palm. She wiped them onto a paper towel. She inspected the skull to see if she could find any more. Not a trace of scales anywhere. She sighed and stood up. She knew what she had to do, even if it meant making one last wish.

“I’m going to Wayne’s to check on him, and also to see if Ernie is over there. Maybe he went over there to play with Wayne’s dog.”

“Are you taking that with you?” George pointed to the cooler, which Angela held at her side. He said, “I think you should just leave that here. We still have a lot to talk about.”

“I’m sorry, George. I can’t let him suffer like you and I did. We went through a lot together when we were kids.”

“What about me, now? What about our lives?”

“We were going to be OK before I found this thing—”



George cut her off, “I wasn’t. I lost the only job in this town that would let me do what I love. You just don’t get it. I’m going to be stuck here with you, doing what, raising a baby while you go fishing? I don’t even know if I want a baby, Angela. We never talked about it. We never talked about any of this.” He stopped and realized the magnitude of the word-storm he’d unleashed on her head. Angela walked out the front door without responding. He followed her out to the truck

She rolled up the window. “Angela!” he yelled, “I didn’t mean it. You know I love you. There’s too much going on. Come on.”

She pulled out of the driveway. Wayne lived only a half mile up the road from Angela. She could tell things were bad as soon as she pulled into the driveway. Wayne’s truck listed to one side with a flat tire. The front door to the house stood open, and a mountain of black trash bags oozed cans and garbage onto the lawn from splits in their sides. She put the truck in park and got out, but left the AC on and the engine running. The trap barn where Wayne stored and repaired his lobster traps, as well as those for half the fishermen in town, was empty. It was completely cleaned out; not even a roll of trap wire remained. She didn’t see any dogs either; not Ernie, or the two old basset hounds that usually flopped onto the cold cement during sweltering summer days. Angela felt sick to her stomach as she shut the door to the barn and turned to the house. Every ounce of sense she had told her to return to the truck, but she’d had a year’s experience of pushing away common sense, and did so now. She pushed the door the rest of the way open and stepped inside. She had to lean against the doorframe, she was so overwhelmed with déjà vu. But not déjà vu really, it was plain old memory. Three weeks ago, she had been living this way: overflowing ashtrays made out of beer cans cut in half, moldy

dishes, ankle-high garbage covering the floor in some places, all of it. It was like someone had brought the Shop-Vac over after she'd cleaned her trailer and set it to blow instead of suck.

“Hey, Wayne?” she said from the doorway, “you around?”

“Hello? Angela, that you?” Wayne said. He emerged from the hallway to her left and shuffled toward her. “Hey! Long time no see.” This was not the Wayne she'd seen a few days ago. The Wayne that could hoist a seventy-pound lobster trap and toss it onto the dock like it was a five-pound bag of flour. This Wayne looked like shit. Angela wondered if she looked like that when she was using. Maybe it wasn't the OD that had tipped everyone off to how bad she and George were. They had all known just by looking at them. Wayne's hair had grown down past his ears and stuck together in greasy clumps. He was shoving his arms into a flannel shirt with nothing underneath. He'd easily lost thirty pounds and his strong muscular arms were now sticks. Deep hollows had formed under his eyes and cheeks. Apparently since the OD hadn't happened to her, the conversation between them afterwards hadn't either. “Yeah, been busy and all that,” Angela hastily replied. “Hey so, have you seen Ernie around? He took off night before last. Thought maybe he was over here?”

Wayne shook his head. “Naw. I haven't seen him. Are you going by the co-op?”

Angela hesitated. “I wasn't planning on it. It's Sunday.” Wayne looked so crestfallen she quickly added, “but I can drop you there easy enough. Are you still working down there?”

“Not for a while.” Wayne stared at her like she was nuts.

Angela swallowed hard and asked, “Hey, where's Jen?”

“Rehab. We split, anyway.”

Angela didn't probe any further. Wayne's house made her palms tingle. Her mouth dry. She knew he had a fix on him. She regretted not asking the skull to cure her cravings too. “I'll wait for you in the truck, OK?” Angela walked as fast as she could without running back to the truck, though she doubted Wayne would notice if she ran. Wayne's eyes had the plasticky sheen of contacts, but she knew he didn't wear any. She flipped open the top of the Igloo and took out the skull. “I wish Wayne better. I wish that he never touched drugs.” she said. A tsunami of nausea rolled up through Angela's stomach into her throat and she was barely able to open the door before a stream of vomit and four of her molars landed on the cracked tar of Wayne's driveway.

Wayne opened the door and stopped for a moment, taking in the scene. He shook his head slightly and then looked back at the house with a dazed expression. Angela spit twice, ran the back of her hand over her mouth, and leaned back in the driver's seat. Moments before Wayne opened the door to the passenger side, she stashed the skull beneath the driver's seat. Wayne took in the scene and climbed into the truck slowly. “Jesus, Angela. Got napkins or something in here?” he said. He popped open the glove box, and inside on top of the owner's manual was a brown leather dog collar with the name “Ernie” embossed on it. Wayne held it out to Angela. “You didn't say he slipped his collar.”

She leaned out the door and threw up again.

“Are you sure you're OK? Want me to ride home with you? Otherwise, I think I better stay here. This place is a disaster. I don't know how I let it get so bad. I'm kinda embarrassed you saw it like this.”

“Yeah, I think I ate something bad. I’ll talk to you later.” She put the truck in gear. “Sorry about the mess in your driveway.”

“I’ll hose it off. Not the first time someone’s puked in this driveway.” Wayne laughed and gave Angela a half wave as he walked back towards the house.

She took Ernie’s collar and stuck it in her back pocket. She ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth and winced each time it popped into one of the craters left by her molars. Three on the bottom and two on the top. She flipped open the mirror on the back of the visor and opened her mouth. The holes weren’t too noticeable unless you looked for them. She shut her mouth and squinted at herself. One of her eyes had a bright red splotch, a broken vein from throwing up. Her blonde hair showed long fine streaks of silver that hadn’t been there a few days ago. She put her hand on her stomach, as though she could somehow use her palm to determine the health of the baby. She left the skull under the seat of the truck and walked into the trailer. George sat at the table reading old newspapers. She could tell from the moment he opened his mouth that he was high.

“You’re back soon. Look, I wrote a ton of articles over the past month.” He opened the paper and motioned to at least a half-dozen stories highlighted with a yellow marker. “Some of my best work, from what I’ve read.” He looked up through glassy eyes and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Angela tossed the collar onto the table. “It was in the glovebox of the truck.” she said.

“What do you mean? Why would it be in there?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think he’s coming back. Is there anything you want to say to me,” she hesitated a moment, “like about what you said earlier, or about how you’re high right now?”

George shrugged. “You know how I feel about Wayne. You go running over there to save him, maybe screw up our lives. I figure if anything happens, you can save me too.”

“George, I told you. I’m not using this thing for drugs. In fact, I don’t think I’m using it at all anymore.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that, right before you ran over to save Wayne.”

“You don’t know what I did.”

“I do. You went and fixed him up. And you can’t fix everything, anyway. Look.” He pointed to the headline, which now read, “Area Woman Dies in Parking Lot During Town Meeting.”

“This is like the goddamned genie in the lamp. What are we supposed to do?” Angela said.

“It doesn’t matter what we do, so you might as well wish a good life for us.” George stood up.

“I can’t be happy if I know Jen’s life is totally ruined because of me. It’s as bad as before.”

Wordlessly, George walked down the hall to the bathroom. Angela heard the door click behind him. She sat and stared at the paper, going over all the possible solutions she could think of that didn’t involve making any more wishes. The trailer was still and quiet.

Something wasn't right. Her heart fluttered in her chest and she knocked on the bathroom door. "George?" she called. There was no answer.

She pushed open the door and there, slumped sideways on the toilet seat, was George. A half-filled needle stuck out of his arm. How could she have been so stupid? Of course he had more. She ran to get the skull from the truck. She flung open the door and pulled it from under the seat. She turned back to the house and a brown blur streaked towards her from the woods. It took Angela a few moments to realize it was Ernie. His fur was covered in mud and burdocks. He jumped up onto her and she stumbled backwards. The skull flew into the air and landed with a sickening crack on the cement pad where she had parked.

"No!" she cried and ran to where the skull had landed. It had exploded on contact. The ground was covered with what looked like silver dust but upon closer inspection she saw were actually fish scales. She scooped up a handful, "I wish George alive. Please. One last wish."

She ran inside, her hands still covered in scales. The bathroom door hung open, as she'd left it. She pushed it all the way open, and saw that George was still there slumped onto his side, just as she'd left him.

#

Angela parked her truck at the top of the hill in her usual spot. She slid out of the truck carefully, her large stomach in front of her. Ernie ran to the end of the dock. "Hey!" Wayne called from the bait shed, "I hope you don't plan on going fishing in your state. You don't want to have that baby on a Coast Guard Cutter."

“No,” she said, “I just came down to check on you.” Angela smiled weakly, and then discretely ran her tongue over the spots where her molars had been.

## Sap

The blinds rattled open and spilled bright light across the dingy brown couch where Hannah and her twin sister Greta slept foot to face.

“Get up. We have a job today. Eat some breakfast.” said Gene, their stepfather. He tossed a box of week-old Easter Peeps onto their sleeping bodies.

“But we have school today,” said Hannah. She sat up and yawned.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t today your sixteenth birthday?” Gene replied.

“Yes, sir,” said Hannah.

“Well, then. This shouldn’t be a surprise to you. Your school days are over. If you’re living with me, you’re both going to work. Look at all these ads I’ve circled in the paper,” Gene said. He held up the paper in his left hand. It was turned to the classified section and covered with red circles. “Jobs that you two can do without having to resort to any, um, unsavory practices. But we can go over those later. I met a nice fellow at the café this morning. He said he was looking for a couple of farm hands to help him empty sap buckets. Apparently, he still does it the old way with horses and buckets, instead of running hoses to the shack. He was what you two would call real old-school.”

The twins untangled themselves and sat up, careful not to spill the Peeps onto the dirty carpet. Gene opened the front door and whistled for them to follow him. They left the apartment dressed identically in the jeans and sweatshirts they’d slept in.

“This is a good opportunity,” he said. “I tell you what, since today’s your birthday, you can keep half.”

“Thank you,” said Hannah.



In the back seat of Gene's giant Oldsmobile, Hannah mouthed the words, "Happy Birthday" to her sister.

Greta rolled her eyes toward Gene in the front seat before she whispered, "Happy Birthday."

The car sped down the main road out of town, and soon entered forested hills. Tires crunched down a gravel road. The nose of the big car dipped and scraped over huge potholes. The forest broke open and revealed sloping fields covered with matted flesh-colored grass. A farmhouse crouched next to an enormous red barn. The siding on the house was spotted with black and brown dirt. Loose sheets of clear plastic stapled over the windows flapped in the light breeze.

A man in a red-checkered hat with earflaps stepped out from the shadowy maw of the open barn doors and flicked his hand in a slight wave. Gene turned to the twins in the back seat and told them to stay put. Then, he slid out of the car and slammed the door. The men spoke briefly, and Hannah saw Gene gesture toward the car with his thumb a few times. The man nodded and disappeared into the barn. He returned with two horses. Each was pulling a wood-sided cart filled from front to back with fifty-five-gallon drums. The man placed a brown paper bag into each cart. Gene shook the man's hand and returned to the Oldsmobile.

Gene heaved open the back door of the car. "Here's the deal. We get paid based on the number of gallons collected. It's simple: take a bucket from the hook on a tree, dump it into the drum, replace the bucket on the tree. Repeat. Got it?"

"It's not like we have a choice," Greta said. It was the first thing she'd said all day.

Hannah glanced nervously from her sister to Gene. She'd been worried about Greta's silence, and afraid it was building to an outburst. Greta had been acting braver lately. She thought she was brave, at least. Hannah thought she was foolish. Greta had been sassing Gene, rolling her eyes when he spoke, and drawing out his anger. Hannah remained more diplomatic. She believed strongly that their lives alone and homeless would likely be worse than their lives with Gene.

"That's right! You don't have a choice! If you're going to live with me, you're working today, and tomorrow if I say you are. I expect you to meet me here at sundown with a full cart. You hear me?" His face was red, and his voice trembled with rage. He pointed his shaking finger into each girl's face. "I'm going this way, and you go that way." He swung one finger towards the south and the other north. "Now, get going."

The girls slid out of the car and stood on either side of the horse. Gene stomped off with his own horse and cart in the opposite direction. When he was out of earshot Hannah said, "You shouldn't have said that. We have to be careful now that we are sixteen. He really could turn us out, you know." She looked over her shoulder and saw that Gene had stopped and was looking back over his own shoulder, watching them. "He's watching us," she said to Greta.

Greta shrugged and changed the subject. "The horse's name is Clarence," she said.

Hannah decided to go along with her sister and dropped the subject of Gene. She said, "How do you know that?"

"It's stamped on this leather thing over his nose," Greta said. She pulled the horse's large muzzle towards them and pointed at the name embossed on the bridle.

“Good thing I had that job cleaning stalls for a while. At least I know a little about horses. Enough to lead him into the woods.”

“And how to clean up his poop,” Hannah teased.

#

The woods melted around them. Snow slipped from branches onto rocks, and ice turned back into tiny streams. A sucking mud squished under the hooves of the old horse on the well-worn path. He was strong enough to pull free of the muck, but Greta and Hanna took care to walk along the path’s rocky edges. Clear, penetrating sunlight filtered through bare trees. The only green in the grey and brown landscape came from the moss that carpeted the forest floor, which was dotted with bright red lichen that looked like droplets of blood.

The girls fell into a rhythm. Hannah retrieved a bucket from a tree and handed it to Greta in the cart. Greta carefully poured the sap into a funnel in the large metal drum and returned the bucket to Hannah, who hung the bucket back on the hooked spigot. Soon, the air around them was filled with the tap-tap-tap of sap droplets hitting the bottoms of empty buckets.

“I wish I had a phone,” said Hannah.

“Why? Who do you want to talk to right now?” Greta emptied a bucket into the drum and returned it to Hannah. Then she hopped down and walked to the front of the cart where she took a long drink from a water bottle, burped, and wiped her mouth on the back of her sleeve.

“I want to listen to music, not dripping sap and your burps,” said Hannah.

“Too bad, so sad,” said Greta.

“Maybe we will make enough today to buy a phone,” Hannah said. She returned to the cart with another full bucket.

“Oh yeah? How much are we getting paid?” asked Greta.

“Gene said we could have half,” said Hannah.

“Half of what?” asked Greta. “Half of what you and I get paid combined? Half of what we all make? Half of the profits after he deducts his expenses?”

“Crap. He never said. I thought maybe since it’s our birthday—” Hannah sighed.

“I don’t know why you still trust him. He never tells the whole truth. We’ll get half alright, half of the truth,” said Greta.

They walked deeper into the forest until the sun was high in the sky, and then stopped for lunch. They pulled out the brown paper bag the man had placed in the cart. It contained two sandwiches, two apples, and a bag of potato chips. Greta sat on the edge of the creaky cart as she ate. The soft white bread of her sandwich squished beneath her fingers. Yellow mustard dripped from the end onto her jeans. She rubbed the blob into her pants with her palm.

“Gross, Greta. Are those bologna sandwiches?”

“If you don’t like it, don’t eat it. I’ll eat yours.”

Hannah sighed, sat next to her sister, and took a small bite of her sandwich. She said, “I guess it’s pretty good. I kinda forgot about bologna.”

The girls ate in silence. Greta opened a bag of chips and they passed it back and forth until nothing remained but greasy crumbs. Hannah carefully wiped her hands on the empty paper bag. She said, “I guess we should get back to it.”

Greta picked up an empty bucket. “You can stay with the cart. I’ll run buckets this

time.”

Hannah pulled her coat out of the cart and put it on. The temperature had dropped since they stopped for lunch. She looked up. The sun shone through the branches, but a stiff north wind had picked up.

They fell back into the rhythm of emptying and replacing buckets. The sound of birds twittering back and forth echoed through the woods.

The calm was pierced by a screech from Clarence. Greta and Hannah jumped and yelped with surprise. On the path Clarence reared. He bolted and the worn straps attached to the cart broke. It tipped over and lodged between a tree and a rock. Sap gushed from the overturned drum and soaked into the ground.

“Oh my God! Clarence!” Hannah screamed. The horse galloped into the woods. His bellows faded as the forest swallowed him.

“What are we going to do? We have to find him. We can’t leave him out here,” Hannah said. “We have to go back to the farm and get help.”

“No freaking way I’m going back to get Gene. He’d kill us,” Greta said. Her eyes were wide, and her voice had an urgency that hadn’t been the before, betraying that her devil-may-care attitude about her step-father covered her deep fear of him.

“I guess you’re right. We can’t go back without the horse. We will already be in trouble for the broken cart and spilled sap,” Hannah said. “I have an idea.” She reached into the pocket of her coat and pulled out a handful of dayglow, bunny-shaped Peeps. She broke them into thumbnail- size pieces and dropped a few on the ground before she shoved the rest in her pocket. “We can use these to find our way back.”

The girls jogged into the woods. A trail of hot-pink dots snaked out behind them

as Hannah flicked Peep pieces onto the ground. An hour later there was no sign of the horse, the path, or any identifiable mark to indicate if they were heading in the right direction.

“Are you sure this is the right way?” Greta said.

Hannah noticed a tremble in her sister’s voice. The horse’s sudden departure had changed something in Greta. Her fearless sister was afraid. She was going to have to take charge if they were going to come out of this OK. “Yes, I’m sure it is,” Hannah lied. They were no longer in the well-tended maple grove. Dead pine trees with orange needles reached up from the ground and raked at their legs.

“Poor Clarence. What happened? Why did he run off like that?” Greta asked.

Hannah didn’t answer. She kept walking.

An hour later they stopped again. “It’s getting dark. What time is it? Do you think Gene will start looking for us soon?” Greta asked.

Hannah rolled up her sleeve and looked at her arm. “My watch stopped.”

Greta sat down on a rock and put her head in her hands.

“Don’t cry,” Hanna said and hugged her. “If you cry I’ll cry. And if we both cry no one is thinking of a plan. Come on, we should find a place to make a shelter before it gets dark. At least we can keep warm if we have to sleep out here.”

The mention of sleeping in the woods made Greta cry harder.

“Hey, do you smell that?” Hannah stood up and inhaled deeply. “I smell smoke.” She grabbed Greta by the shoulders. “We have to go check it out. We can’t stay out here. We have nothing. No food or water, no lighter. Nothing.”

The girls walked in the direction of the smoke, and for the first time in as far back

as either could remember, they held hands. The heavy grey sky burst open and spit fat wet snowflakes onto their bare heads. The flakes clung to everything and covered the ground, including the trail of Peeps. There would be no way to find their way back to the clearing. The wind picked up and made talking impossible. They crested a hill. At the base sat a one-story cabin with windows that glowed with a warm yellow light. Next to the cabin stood a structure comprised of a low, pitched roof held up by four stacks of concrete bricks. It provided shelter for a massive fire pit, above which was suspended a pot the size of a refrigerator. A man came out of the house as the girls approached. He held a large battery-powered flashlight that looked like a small spotlight with a handle. His huge green coat came down to his knees, and his tall brown boots crawled up his shins to meet its hem. A checkered hat with earflaps concealed his hair. He was clean-shaven, and his wide mouth broke into a friendly grin when he saw the sisters.

“Are you the girls from Old Wood Farm? I just heard over the radio you was missing,” he said. “Name is Frank.” He held out a gloved hand. Hannah shook it, and then Greta. Hannah thought there was something familiar about him, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

“We are so glad to see you. May we use your phone?” asked Hannah.

“Don’t have one. If I need to talk to someone, I head into town. When this snow lets up, I’ll give you two a ride back to the farm” He surveyed the flakes cascading from the sky. “Why don’t you two come inside and warm up.”

Hannah nudged her sister and pointed at the huge maple trees behind the lean-to. The trunk of each tree was as big around as a VW Beetle. Together, the branches were wider than the tiny house in their shadow. In the growing dusk and storm the branches

touched in some places, like sisters holding hands. Each tree sported a ring of spigots around the middle at regular intervals.

The one-room cabin was lit by the deep orange glow from a glass-fronted woodstove and a collection of oil and battery-powered lanterns scattered about on various surfaces. A deeply grooved but well-oiled wooden counter and small sink occupied one wall. A grimy yellow curtain obscured the shelves beneath. A round wooden table with two chairs and an overstuffed sofa comprised the rest of the furniture. The floor of a loft created a low ceiling over half of the cabin, and the other half was open to the roof. Exposed beams were used as shelving and hundreds of bottles of dark maple syrup lined each wall. The girls sprinted to the woodstove and stood as close to it as possible without getting burned.

“I was raised to take my shoes off before entering someone’s home,” Frank snapped. His tone was markedly different than it had been outside. The girls had left muddy wet tracks across the floor.

“Oh! I’m sorry. We’re so cold, we forgot our manners,” said Hannah. “Do you have a towel or something? I will clean this up.” She and Greta took off their soaked sneakers and set them by the fire.

“Use the one by the sink,” Frank said.

Hannah grabbed an old, tattered dishrag and wiped up the footprints. “We lost our horse.”

Frank arched an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“He sort of freaked out and ran off,” Hannah said. “The cart broke free and we’ve been chasing him ever since. Have you seen him?”



He took off his coat, then sat down and unlaced his long boots. “Nope.”

Greta cleared her throat and said, “Do you think it will be long before we can go home?”

Frank looked up and shrugged. An angry gust of wind shook the small cabin as if in response. Branches raked across the roof and sides of the house like a huge animal trying to claw its way in.

“You girls must be hungry. I was fixing some pancakes for dinner. Want some?” Frank didn’t wait for a reply. He set a large iron skillet on the woodstove and dropped a large scoop of fat from a jar into the pan. In a few moments he had cooked a massive stack of pancakes using a bowl of batter waiting on the table. He walked to the wall, selected a bottle of syrup, and placed it on the table along with plates and forks. The girls, who were ravenous, sat and began to eat.

“Don’t forget the syrup.” Frank unscrewed the top and poured a judicious amount over each of the girls’ pancakes.

“Thank you,” said the twins. The syrup was dark and sweet, and had a strange aftertaste that reminded Hannah of pennies.

“So? What do you think?” Frank eyed them from across the table. He opened a separate bottle of syrup and gulped it down.

“It’s really good. Thick and sweet, and there’s a hint of something interesting in the aftertaste.” Hannah tried to her best to sound like someone from the cooking segments she watched on TV.

“Yes,” said Greta, “I like it a lot. It’s unique.” She took a huge bite to emphasize her point.

Frank leaned back in his chair. “Glad to hear it.” He took another drink from the bottle of syrup. “This storm doesn’t show any signs of letting up. I think you should stay here for the night. Sleep on the sofa. I’ll be tending the sap boiler all night. As soon as the snow lets up, we’ll head into town.” In the flickering light of the lanterns, his face seemed to flicker too, undulating between unlined and full-cheeked to wrinkled and sallow.

“I’m sure our stepdad is freaking out. The sooner we can leave the better,” Greta said. “I think weeeee sh-sh ...” Her words slurred together as she slumped over in her chair. Her body thumped to the floor.

“Greta!” Hannah screamed and jumped back from the table. “Greta! Greta! Wake up!” She shook her sister but couldn’t wake her. Moments later she collapsed onto the floor.

#

Hannah woke up tied to a kitchen chair next to the sap boiler. The sound of digging came from somewhere in the dark near the trees. She squinted her eyes against the bright firelight and made out a dark shape across the clearing. Frank had dug a large hole at the base of one of the trees. Greta lay on the ground at his feet, still asleep. Hannah wiggled her hands and feet to test the strength of the rope. She had to get out of there. She had to save Greta. She slid her wrists back and forth against the ropes in an attempt to loosen them.

Frank strode across the clearing to her. He said, “Didn’t expect you up so soon. Guess you didn’t eat as much as your piggy sister.”

“Please, let us go,” Hannah begged. “We won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

Frank leaned on the shovel. “We both know that’s not going to happen. I don’t want to do this. But I have to, if I’m going to keep living. Notice anything about those trees?”

“They’re huge, so they must be really old, right?” Hannah said.

“Anything else? Here, I’ll help you.” Frank shone his flashlight on one of the spigots. The sap running out of it was bright red.

“It looks like blood,” Hannah said.

Frank blinked at her and said, “Bingo! You know, I haven’t had anyone around to talk to in years. Though I talked to your stepfather today, of course. I mean no one regular to talk to, on a day-to-day type basis.”

At the mention of Gene, Hannah realized why Frank seemed familiar. It was the hat with the ear flaps. The man at the farm had been wearing the same hat. “You’re guy from the farm! Did you kill your own horse?” she cried.

He laughed until he gasped for breath, “Of course not. Old Clarence has helped me for years. I trained him well.” He looked at her for a moment before continuing. “I suppose I’ll let you in on my little secret. It’s the syrup. It keeps me young. As long as the trees have fresh fertilizer every year, they keep making the sap that keeps me alive. Trees don’t like animals much. It’s people they want—live ones. They’re going to love you two.”

Greta stirred beneath the tree, but Hannah kept her eyes on Frank and hoped he didn’t notice the movement behind him. “What, I mean—who have you been, um, feeding them?” she asked.

“Mostly girls like you. I buy ‘em. I come to an arrangement with a family

member. You'd be surprised how many people will part with a young'un for five grand. Your step-father did. I didn't even have to double it for two."

"You're lying," she said.

"Think about it. You know I was back at the farm. Do you think that transaction was for a day of collecting sap? No one is looking for you, and no one is going to either. Seems I took care of a lot of your stepdad's problems at once. No more mouths to feed, and cash in hand." he said. "Besides, you drank the syrup, you must feel it working. All it takes is a little bit. I like to give folks a little booster syrup before I feed 'em to the trees. It counters the effects of the knockout powder I put in your pancakes. You girls sure did load up your pancakes with syrup. I suppose I should have cut you off. Anyhow, you can't live without it now. Gotta have the syrup every day or you'll fall apart. I drink about a bottle of the stuff a day, but you won't need that much for a long time."

Across the clearing, Greta strained against the ropes that tied her hands to her feet. The harder she pulled, the tighter they became.

Hannah tried to keep Frank talking. She figured that if he was talking, he wasn't killing them. "Why do you boil the sap? Why can't you just drink it from the tree?" she said.

"Same reason you boil regular sap, makes it stronger. Concentrates it." Frank stooped and poked the fire beneath the kettle until the coals glowed red. He put on a pair of leather gloves and removed the lid from the pot. Great clouds of steam billowed out. He peered over the edge and assessed the contents before he grabbed an oar repurposed into a massive stirring utensil.

While Frank tended to the syrup, Hannah managed to free one sweat-slicked leg.

She slowly inched the rope down her other leg and to the ground with her bare toes.

Hannah stood up, her arms still behind the chair. Stooped over with the chair behind her back, she ran straight towards Frank, her head down like a linebacker. The full force of her weight connected with the middle of his back before he had a chance to turn. He flipped head first into the boiling sap. Hannah threw herself on the ground, away from the fire. The force of the fall loosened the ropes binding her wrists. While on her side, she wriggled one hand free, untied herself from the chair, and stood.

Frank had managed to sit up inside the kettle. He screamed unintelligible sounds through non-existent lips. The skin on his face hung in wet slimy flaps. He tried to grasp the side of the kettle, but the skin slipped from his fingers and he fell back into the sap. Hannah grabbed the oar Frank had dropped on the ground when she pushed him into the kettle. When he came up again, she smashed him across the head with it. Frank's eye popped from its socket, flew across the clearing, and landed in front of Greta.

Greta screamed and struggled to free herself. The ropes cut deep welts into her wrists and ankles. "Hanna, untie me!" she yelled.

Hannah ran to Greta's side. "We have to get the lid on that pot. I don't think he's going to go down easy."

Frank emerged from the syrup again. His hair sloughed off in chunks, and gleaming white skull showed in patches. Hannah smashed him directly on top of the head with the oar. The remainder of his scalp came free and bobbed in the boiling syrup. Together, Hannah and Greta grabbed the huge wooden lid and slid it over the top of the kettle. Hannah grabbed the largest rock she could find and heaved it on top of the lid to hold it down.

“Do you think it will hold?” asked Greta. The lid shook and rattled, but the pot remained closed.

“I hope so,” Hannah said. “Oh, God. Look.” She pointed to the tree, which had encircled Frank’s eyeball in tiny hair-like roots.

Hannah shivered. “Did you hear him, about Gene, and about the syrup?” she asked.

“Yeah. Do you think it was true?”

“Look at your wrists,” said Hannah.

Greta looked at her wrists, which had been ringed with deep maroon rope burns seconds earlier. The burns were gone.

#

They heaved off the lid of the kettle. At the bottom was a skeleton encased in syrup. Its fingers twitched. Using the oar and a large branch, they tipped the kettle onto its side, and the skeleton tumbled onto the ground. It moved a bit more, but was hindered by the syrup, which had rendered down to tar-like consistency. Greta and Hannah used the oar and shovel to push the skeleton into the hole Frank had dug for Greta. By the time they finished filling in the hole, morning sunlight streamed through the trees and melted the snow around them.

They went into the house and explored it thoroughly. Tucked into a drawer, Hannah found what looked like a ledger.

“Greta, look at this,” she said. The pages of the old, leather-bound notebook were filled with lists of names. Next to each name was a date. The last two names listed were Hannah and Greta Phillips. The date had not yet been entered. “All these names. There

must be over a hundred,” she said. “And check out the dates. The first one is April 9, 1847.”

“What are we going to do now?” Greta said.

“If we’re going to live, we’re going to have to tend the trees,” said Hannah.

Hannah and Greta collected as many bottles of syrup as they could carry into two old backpacks stashed in the loft. They found a bottle of chloroform and took that too. Hannah slipped the ledger into the front pocket of her pack. Greta opened the door, and they stepped onto the driveway leading away from the house.

“Are you ready?” Hanna said.

“Yeah, let’s go find Gene. We only fed one of the trees,” Greta replied.

The girls joined hands. A light clinking sound from the bottles in their backpacks followed them down the path.

## **Crisis Ghost**

By the time my mother appeared, I was exhausted. I didn't know how hard having a baby would be, but I should have figured it out on the drive home from the hospital: Lizzie and I both cried the entire ride.

Lizzie arrived two weeks before my forty-second birthday, which was one week before her due date. I was signing a stack of checks when my water broke. I'd had mild cramps all morning but thought nothing of it. Labor was supposed to be horrible, knock you on your butt pain. My sister told me it was like the pain of hitting your head on the corner of a cabinet, but in your stomach. When I felt a pop, and a flood of warm water gushed down my legs, I paid attention. I stood up from my desk, the front of my dress soaked, and the office went wild. I backed them down from calling an ambulance, but my assistant, Melissa, insisted on driving me to the hospital. I called my sister Madison, but she was in upstate New York, six hours away. There was no way she'd get to Massachusetts in time. I ended up giving birth with Melissa as my birth partner. She received a hefty bonus and raise the following week.

My friends who encouraged me to have a baby on my own knew how hard it was going to be, and yet they all told me to do it. "It may be your only chance," they said.

Everyone but Madison was under the impression I went the route of IVF. Not so. It was the result of a one-time encounter at the annual Certified Forensic Accounting conference in St. Louis. It wasn't planned, but I wasn't sad. I told Lizzie's father I didn't expect him to be involved, but I thought he should know. He was relieved. He'd told me he wasn't married at the convention, but of course that was a lie. I was alone, but I was



undaunted. How hard could it be to take care of a baby on my own? Millions of women do it every day. My own mother did it with two of us.

I envisioned days filled with walks and playgroups and trips to the park. Lizzie had other plans. She was hungry all the time, and I barely had time to put her down and go to the bathroom before she wanted to eat again. Sometimes, I couldn't put her down and had to figure out how to pee while she was in the baby carrier. She took three or four naps per day, and once she was asleep it was a disaster if I woke her up.

Whenever I thought I had figured out her patterns, they changed. She wanted more food and less sleep, or more sleep and less food. Parenting books piled up around the house. Each was heavily underlined, and had dozens of bookmarks sticking out from between the pages. I researched as though I was investigating the accounts of a questionable casino. Could it be that every parent I knew was chronically exhausted and on the verge of tears every day like I was?

At the risk of letting on that I wasn't perfect, I called my sister. "Do you think I should consult my pediatrician about Lizzie?"

"About what? Is she sick?"

"She's upset all the time. She eats and sleeps and cries. That's it."

"And?"

"According to *Peaceful Parenting*, she should have at least a few hours of quiet alert time each day."

"Quiet alert time is crap. She's not even two months old. She eats and sleeps and cries. Sometimes she poops. Don't worry about it."

I was quiet. "Caroline?" Madison asked, "are you still there?"

“Do all parents feel like this?”

“Like what?”

“Underwater. Like they fell through a hole in the ice and when they grasp the edge to climb out, it breaks off and they fall back in.”

“Are you depressed?”

“No. More like exasperated. Exasperated and exhausted. As soon as I start to understand Lizzie, she changes. I can’t get seem to get a handle on what she wants. And I can’t get anything done.”

“Yeah. That’s how it goes. Derek throws me for loops all the time, and he’s seven. He’s been eating PB & J every meal for like two months, and yesterday I gave one to him for lunch as usual, and he freaked out and told me I was stupid, and he hated peanut butter and jelly.”

“Jesus.”

“Kids are awesome, and also tiny psychos. Try not to overthink it.”

“Have you forgotten with whom you are speaking?”

“Ugh. Are researching this like a case? You can’t do that, Caroline. You’re going to drive yourself insane. People are different. Lizzie is a person: you don’t expect all adults to act alike, and you can’t expect kids to either.”

“I suppose not. Thanks for your help. Love you.”

I hung up. It had not helped. No wonder Facebook was filled with memes about moms living on coffee and wine. They didn’t seem so funny anymore.

#

I began working from home. Melissa dropped off stacks of spreadsheets for me to review and checks for me to sign, and picked up the previous day's pile each morning. That was the original plan anyway, but I barely had time for that. The second morning Melissa arrived, I ignored her arched eyebrow as she glanced around my kitchen. I was aware that it was in the same state it had been the day before, which is to say, terrible. The sink overflowed with dirty dishes. The counter was littered with tin-foil pans from casseroles friends had stocked my freezer with when I first came home with Lizzie. I kept meaning to call and arrange for a cleaning service, but I never quite seemed to get around to it. It had gotten to the point where my house was so dirty that the thought of cleaning enough so that someone else could come in and clean was overwhelming. Besides, I'd always done everything myself. I'd find time soon, I was sure of it. Mom had raised both Madison and me without needing extra help. Surely, I could raise one child on my own. I handed Melissa the envelope containing the contracts from the day before. She flicked a Cheerio off it.

“I am so sorry about that,” I said, mortified.

Melissa shifted her weight from one of her nude pumps to the other. Her blond hair was perfectly swept back into a soft up-do and her makeup was expertly applied to look like she wasn't wearing any. I wondered how long it would take to wash baby vomit out of her soft gray cashmere sweater. I glanced down at my stained yoga pants that sagged around the middle. When I'd been at the office, I'd looked exactly like Melissa; now I looked like the mom from a bad sit-com.

I waited until she pulled out of the driveway before I sat down on the kitchen floor and sobbed. More than anything, I wished my mother was alive. I knew that she

would know all of the answers to my parenting questions. She would have helped me keep up with life. But she was dead. Killed in a car accident when I was fourteen and Madison was seventeen. From the living room Lizzie screamed in her playpen. I rushed into the next room and scooped her up. Thick strings of drool ran down her chin onto my shoulder. Two red bumps welled up from her bottom gum.

Teeth.

That night she was up every hour. As soon as I had her soothed and back in the co-sleeper attached to my bed, she started screaming again. Nothing helped, not even baby Motrin. I was returning from the third trip to the bathroom for a cold, wet washcloth, and was halfway down the hall when she stopped crying. I heard a soft murmuring. When I entered the room, I saw a woman near the co-sleeper. From the light of the window I saw she wore a grey blazer and skirt. The same outfit my mother was wearing the last time I saw her. She had my mother's hair, a frizzy blond halo wrestled into place with copious amounts of Aquanet hairspray.

The connective tissue in my joints turned to jelly and I collapsed to the floor. Panic coursed through my body and I felt that I was observing the room from a great height. I had to get to Lizzie. I struggled to my hands and knees and crawled towards the co-sleeper. My mother held her outstretched palm towards me and I stopped moving. She flattened her hand horizontally and thrust it toward the ground. I flattened like a bug under a giant swatter, arms and legs splayed on the rug. I struggled to make sense of what was happening. I had to be dreaming. I'd had dreams like this before, nightmares filled with monsters where I opened my mouth to scream and nothing came out. It couldn't be my mother. She'd been dead for twenty-five years.

#

I slept until the sun streaming through the window woke me up. It took a few moments to remember where I was. My eyes were crusty and dry, and my face bore the imprint of the carpet pile. I sat up with a start. Lizzie hadn't been awake for hours. I crawled over and stared at her through the mesh side of the co-sleeper, my face inches from hers. She was on her stomach with her butt sticking up in the air, her lips in a bright red pout. Her back rose and fell slowly with each sleepy breath. She was exactly as I'd left her. A little wet puddle of drool darkened the pink sheet under her cheek.

I reached into the crib to pick her up, but she was so peaceful I decided to let her sleep. The dream from the night before floated around the edges of my memory like cobwebs around a window. When I reached the kitchen, I sat down in the nearest chair. The sink, which had been full the night before, was empty. The empty cereal box and milk jug I'd left on the counter were gone, as were the crumbs from around the toaster oven.

One of the dishrags my mother compulsively knit while watching TV hung over the faucet. I never used them and had stored them away in the attic. I looked in the cupboards. Everything was neatly put away. All of the boxes and cans were neatly arranged with their labels pointing out. The dishwasher was empty. It reminded me of my mother's obsessive organization, which she said was the key to running a successful household. I remembered the strange vision I had the night before. It was clearly the result of exhaustion and hormones, I reasoned.

I made a pot of coffee and sat down to think. I'd heard stories of people doing all sorts of things while they were sleeping. Madison once drove to McDonald's and ordered

six Happy Meals for herself while she was on Ambien. She woke up surrounded by fries and Hello Kitty stickers, with no idea how they'd gotten there. I hadn't taken any Ambien, but perhaps severe sleep deprivation had the same effect on people. The explanation was satisfactory enough for me to sit and enjoy the clean kitchen and cup of coffee while Lizzie slept.

"Lizzie," I whispered.

She woke up as soon as I said her name. She opened her brown eyes and gazed at me a second before breaking into a wide grin. Two small teeth stuck up from her bottom gum. Poor girl, it must have been a huge relief when they both broke through. I sat down in the rocking chair, and she nursed like she hadn't eaten in a week.

Around one in the afternoon, I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep and woke up when it was dark. Lizzie was awake and sucking on her thumb. Now that she'd slept all afternoon, bedtime would be thrown off schedule. I poured a glass of wine and called my sister.

"Guess who just woke up from a four-hour nap?" I said when she answered.

"Bedtime is out the window for tonight, I'm sure."

"You never know. Kids are weird. She could be going through a growth spurt. Didn't you say she's teething?"

"Yes! She has two new teeth. They came through last night." I looked at Lizzie in her swing.

Lizzie smiled and batted at the flower-shaped toys rotating above her head just out of reach. I sipped my wine and thought about telling Madison about the strange dream and cleaning my house in my sleep. If she thought for a moment I was cracking

up, she'd be on a plane in a second. I couldn't tell her. Her sons needed her more than I did.

"She's just like you," Madison said. "You got your teeth really early too."

"How do you know that? You were only three when I was born."

"I have an old baby book that Mom put together. Plus, I remember that you cried a lot."

#

My mother's voice drifted into my sleep. It was the strange meandering free-formed humming I remembered from nights when I was sick with fever and she stayed in my room and placed cool washcloths on my forehead. My breasts were huge, painful and leaking from hours without nursing. I bolted upright. Lizzie never slept through the night. I reached into the co-sleeper. She was gone. I should have put her in the bed with me, but she slept so much better in her own little spot. The blankets were tangled around my legs, and the harder I tried to push them off, the heavier they became. The duvet felt like it was filled with lead instead of goose down. "Lizzie!" I cried.

"Ssshhhhhhhhhh," was the response from the other side of the room. It reminded me of my mother's hushing Madison and me when we interrupted her while she was on the phone. It was a combination of an angry librarian and a huge snake.

I heaved myself upright and the blanket folded forward. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, and made it as far as getting my feet to the floor. After that I was stuck. The humming that had soothed me my entire childhood, that I'd longed to hear for the past twenty years, made me sick to my stomach. Bile rose in my throat and I fought the urge to throw up.

“Don’t hurt her!” I screamed at the shape.

“I won’t hurt her. You know I’m here to help. Cleaning and helping with the baby so you can get some sleep. Didn’t you want that?”

I didn’t know how to respond. It was my mother’s voice.

“Don’t you want her to spend some time with her grandmother?”

I froze. Yes. Yes, of course I wanted Lizzie to spend time with her grandmother. I’d held that wish in my heart the moment the pregnancy test showed a +. I’d thought about my mother every single day since Lizzie was born. How they had the same eyes, how I longed to ask her if I did the same things when I was a baby. Was it possible, that was what was happening right now? Here she was helping me, like I’d wanted. My mind swirled around every possibility, unable to land on anything other than the ghost of my mother was standing in front of me. I was struck with a sense of vertigo and fought the urge to lie down, though I wasn’t sure if I could anyway. My body was completely frozen from the neck down but thrummed with energy. I clenched my fists and screamed in rage and terror. My vision tunneled, and I sank into darkness.

#

My head pounded like I had a terrible hangover. I looked at the spot where I’d seen my mother with Lizzie the night before. Nothing seemed amiss. I stood up to go to the bathroom and collapsed back to the bed as nausea washed over me. Lizzie stirred but did not wake up. Was I losing my mind? It seemed much more likely than my dead mother showing up as a night nurse.

Finally, I snapped on the baby monitor and went downstairs. Again, the entire kitchen was clean. I used the last bit of cream in my coffee and went to throw away the



container. There, in the recycling bin, was an empty wine bottle. I threw open the fridge. The bottle I remembered opening and pouring one glass from the night before was gone. Was I drinking at night as well as cleaning while asleep? It would explain the hangover.

This couldn't go on. I had to call Madison.

"What's wrong?" she asked before I had a chance to say hello.

"Why do you think something is wrong?"

"No one calls before nine in the morning or after nine at night unless something is wrong," she said.

I told her all of it. When I finished, there was silence on the line.

"Hello?"

"Do you think all this is actually happening?" she asked.

"Do I think Mom has returned from the grave to watch Lizzie and clean my house? No, but something strange is definitely happening."

"At least that's something. I'm coming to help you. You need to call your doctor today. You're having some kind of weird episode. Probably a post-partum hormonal thing."

"I don't want to call the doctor. I don't want to take anything. They will just put me on drugs. You know it."

"You don't know it. Where is your forensic accountant brain? The one that gathers each piece of information before coming to a conclusion? You remember Jane Hall? From next door?"

"I guess."

“She had to be hospitalized last year for having a complete breakdown. She was totally convinced she had incurable lice. Shaved her head, shaved her kids’ heads, shaved her pets. Threw away all of her furniture – “

“This is not helping.”

“Let me finish! Anyhow, her husband, Bill, was completely at a loss. Finally took her to the hospital because she was taking three or four scalding hot showers per day, I mean dangerously hot. When they ran tests on her they found out she had a massive Vitamin B deficiency! They gave her a couple of shots and put her on a supplement you can get at Walgreens. She’s fine now.”

“You think I have a vitamin deficiency?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m telling you this story because you don’t know what the cause is, and you may not have to take anything stronger than a vitamin. It’s not that strange you’d have dreams about Mom. You never talk about that day. You guys were fighting, I remember. I know you do too. After the cops came to school and told us about the accident, you shut down. I am worried, but not about a ghost. I’m worried all this stuff is coming to the surface and you’re going to melt down. Can you go to the doctor today?”

The thought of going to the doctor alone terrified me. Everything terrified me. What was happening to me? I’d gone through all the ob-gyn visits myself, even though there were a ton because of my “advanced maternal age” or “geriatric pregnancy” as they so nicely called it. Now, the thought of going to my doctor’s office by myself sent me into a cold sweat. “I can’t.”

“Whatever else you have going on, reschedule.”

“No, I mean I can’t go. I can’t do it.” I started to cry.

“I’m coming, right now. I will be there in a few hours. I’ll take the kids to John’s mother’s house. She’s always talking about how she wants more time with them.”

Madison hung up without saying goodbye. I don’t know what scared her more: the story, the crying, or me not objecting to her coming to my aid.

I had to think of something to do, or else I’d pace around all day waiting for Madison. Driving was out of the question. I couldn’t risk getting behind the wheel in my current state. Lizzie acted a little more like her regular self. She kicked poop all over the changing table and resisted putting on her sweater. I was happy despite the inconveniences. I thought a walk in the spring air might clear my mind. I laced up my sneakers and headed out the door with Lizzie strapped to my chest in her carrier.

Outside, I discovered a perfectly landscaped lawn. Jim, the kid next door, who dragged his dad’s rusty push mower back and forth across my lawn once a week for \$20, couldn’t be responsible. The hedges next to the street were cut back into perfect lines. The cheerful beds of tulips in front of the house were freshly mulched with dark, rich-smelling cedar. My eyes crept up the side of the house. The old wooden gutters had been replaced with new ones, and if I wasn’t mistaken, the entire house sported a fresh coat of paint. It was as though someone had found the long list of things I planned on getting to someday and checked them all off. I was afraid to step down off the front stoop, but more afraid of going back inside. My life had been taken over by a supernatural Martha Stewart, or had I turned into a Martha Stewart sleep-walker?

“Hey, your house looks great!” Jim called from next door.

“Thanks!” I called, trying to sound as normal as possible. Then I realized what it meant that he could see the changes. “You really think it looks good?”

“I do! Who did you get to do it?”

“Um, a friend owed me a favor. Don’t worry, you’re still my lawn guy.”

Jim could see the changes! What did that mean? There was no way I could have done that work myself. Where and how would I have gotten mulch in the middle of the night? I decided to skip the walk. I turned around and went inside. I put Lizzie in the playpen and opened my laptop.

#

Someone pounded on the door. The light in the house had grown dim, and I banged my shin against the coffee table as I rushed to answer it.

Madison stood on the steps with her phone in her hand. “Where have you been? I’ve been pounding on the door for twenty minutes.”

“Sorry. I’ve been researching. I think I figured something out.”

“Is your phone off too? I’ve been trying to call you all day.” She pushed her way into the house. “Are you OK? Have you seen anything else weird? Did you call your doctor?” Madison lobbed questions at me as she surveyed the contents of the refrigerator.

I hesitated, then I told her about the lawn. I swung open the front door. “Look.”

Madison stuck her head out at first and then stepped down onto the lawn, so she could survey the house.

“And you are sure you didn’t hire someone to do landscaping and forgot about it?”

“I’m sure. Besides, what landscapers come in the middle of the night? Someone would have complained. You know how it is around here.” We walked back inside. I flicked on the lights. “Look at this place. It’s cleaner than it’s ever been. It’s clean-the-grout-with-a-toothbrush kind of clean, like Mom’s house.”

“I agree. It’s clean. Your lawn and house look amazing. That still doesn’t mean you have a helpful ghost.”

“It sounds like Mom and it looks like Mom. I really think it’s her.” I set a frozen pizza on the counter and preheated the oven.

“Caroline, you’ve moved on from psychological break to supernatural phenomenon. Classic rationalizing.”

“There is something at play here more than a psychosis. No way I could have done all of these things myself in the past few days. I’ve thought about this harder and longer than you. Look at this website.” I turned my laptop towards her and read aloud, “One of the most often reported spirit experiences is that of helpful ghost. Often the ghost of a parent or relative will appear during a time of crisis and attempt to aid the living. It is especially common if the living and dead have unresolved issues.” I snapped the laptop shut in a self-congratulatory way.

“I don’t see how any of this is relevant.”

“Mom and I were fighting when she died. I have a new baby. Unresolved issues, relative in crisis – it’s exactly like what I just presented to you.”

“So, what I’m hearing is that you accept a ghost as a more likely scenario than you being unstable. If you won’t let me help you, why am I here?” Madison’s face reddened and she clenched and unclenched her fists to fight back tears. I felt terrible.

“No. You don’t understand. I’m glad you came. I’m grateful. I’ve been terrified for days. I thought I had lost my mind. But signs are pointing away from that. I know I’d feel the same way you do if the tables were turned. I guess I want you to try to consider all possibilities.” Lizzie squirmed in my arms. I felt the weight of her diaper. “I need to change her.”

“Here, I’ll do it.” Madison held out her arms and took Lizzie upstairs.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and pressed the screen. It had full power and the ringer was on. One missed call and one voice mail. The missed call screen showed no number, no caller ID, nothing. Same with the voicemail. Whatever the message was, it was a long one, over five minutes. It didn’t show a time stamp either. Madison walked back into the room.

“Check out my phone. It isn’t showing any missed calls from you, just this weird message with no number or time stamp.”

“That is bizarre. I’ve never seen that. My phone does weird stuff all the time, though. It deletes messages or downloads them days after they are left. Probably no big deal. Play it.” Madison said.

I turned on the speaker and pressed play. The room was filled with a crackly static. A voice that was loud yet muffled at the same time, like someone yelling into a pillow, could be heard through the buzzing. After a few minutes, the buzzing dissipated, and my mother’s voice came through in broken chunks.

“*Caroline and Madison—Proud of You—I love you. Helping. . . Mom*” It faded back to static before ending. Madison’s face had gone white, even her lips.

“What the hell was that?” she squeaked.

“I think it was Mom. Should we listen to it again?” I picked the phone up from the counter. “Shit. It’s gone.”

“Of course it is. I don’t think I could listen to it again anyway.” The oven timer beeped and we both screamed.

“This is really low,” Madison said abruptly. “I don’t know how you did it, but that call is beyond creepy. It’s cruel.”

“It wasn’t me! I would never do something like that to you. And besides, I don’t know how to make something like that. It was Mom. Please, Madison, you have to believe me.”

Madison stared into my eyes for a moment. Then she said, “Why? Why should I believe you? There’s no ghost, Caroline. You need help.” She poured herself a glass of water from the tap and took a long drink. “Suppose I humor your ghost idea for a moment. Let’s apply some logic here. Let’s say it is Mom’s ghost. Why now? And why wouldn’t she have come to help me after the boys were born?”

“I think she’s here because we were fighting that day.” I said.

Madison’s face softened. She said, “I remember. You’ve never told me what that fight was about.”

“It was about everything, really. I mean, now that I’ve had 25 years to go over it. But it started when I got my nose pierced, remember?”

“How could I forget! You were only a Freshman in high school. Trying to be so cool.”

“Cooler than my big sister.” I smiled at her. “Anyway, the nose ring kicked off the fight, but then it devolved into my general disobedience, disorganization, and

disruptive behavior. The three Ds. She said I was trying to make life harder for everyone, myself included. She could be so tough.”

“I wish you’d told me sooner. It explains so much about how we were back then, and how you are now. The hyper organization and adherence to rules. I’m glad you told me this, but I still don’t believe in ghosts. “Madison stood and walked to the bathroom. A few minutes later she entered the kitchen holding a large pink can of Aquanet. “Is this yours?”

“No. It’s not mine. But it’s the kind Mom used.”

“Yes, I know. I haven’t seen it in decades. What are you trying to do, Caroline? I know you’re having trouble. You need help. I’m here for you. Stop with this ghost Mom crap.”

“It’s not me. It’s really not. How do you explain the renovations outside? The super clean house? The dishrags that were in the attic?”

“I think you are responsible for all of it. Here’s the deal. I’m staying in your room tonight and will prove once and for all there is no ghost here. I’ll sleep right in your bed, like when we were little. If you get up and wander off during the night I will know about it. We will get through this, but you have to let me help you.”

There was no use arguing. The ghost was real. She had to be. The other prospect was too terrifying.

#

I lay awake in my bed, Lizzie asleep in the crook of my arm. Madison was on the other side of the bed curled up in a ball with her back to us. I was thankful for the huge king-sized bed that had seemed extravagant for one person when I bought it. I wasn’t sure if



the ghost would come back while I was awake, or with Madison there, but there was no chance of me falling asleep.

Around three AM I heard a soft scraping sound. The glider rocking chair in the corner of the room started sliding back and forth as though someone was sitting in it. Under the blankets, I jabbed Madison hard in the ribs with my thumb. She rolled over and jabbed me back. Slowly a form took shape in the rocker as though emerging from an old Polaroid picture. In the chair sat my mother. Her face, which sported the same deep red lipstick and brown eyeliner she wore in life, was framed by teased out and sprayed blonde hair. She wore the same tailored, gray suit she had worn the last time I'd seen her alive, before her car was crushed to an unrecognizable blob under an eighteen-wheeler.

“How are you doing this?” Madison whispered directly into my ear.

“Are you kidding me? I'm not!” I hissed back.

Lizzie wiggled in my arms and started to whimper. The ghost, which looked as solid as a regular person, rose from the chair and walked toward the bed. “Hello, girls.” said Mom, “It's been a long time. Now, Caroline, please don't make me knock you out like the last few nights. It exhausts me, and I don't like doing it.”

“Mom?” said Madison. I could feel her shaking in the bed next to me. “Is it really you?”

“Yes, Madison. It is.” Mom reached her arms toward Lizzie, “Caroline, let me hold her. It brings me so much joy. I haven't felt anything at all in so long.”

I held Lizzie closer to my chest. “Why are you here?”

“You needed me. You were here, all alone with this baby. I could sense your despair. We will always be connected. That bond, mother and child, stretches beyond the veil of death. I could feel you reaching out for me, and so here I am.”

“Why didn’t you come for Madison?” I asked. I’d started to cry and my tears mixed with Lizzie’s as they fell onto her tiny face.

“Because she didn’t ask me to. You did. She had help. You don’t.”

“You aren’t here because of the fight you had, the day you...left?” Madison said.

Mom kept her arms outstretched towards Lizzie while she spoke, “I suppose that’s part of it. Yes. Caroline and I have unfinished business. Caroline, let me hold the baby. Don’t make me take her from you.”

The firm tone chilled me. I remembered how, for the past two nights, Mom had firmly frozen me in place while she held Lizzie. Bits of my life with her bubbled to the surface of my memory, and a more complete picture of her emerged. Yes, she had been a frazzled, single mother of two who supported us on her own, but she had also been a strict disciplinarian who tried to mold her daughters in her image. I had put her on a pedestal for years, but I remembered now that she hadn’t been perfect.

“Mom. I’m sorry we fought. I know how hard it is to be a mother now. I understand. But, you can’t stay.” I held Lizzie tighter to my chest. I didn’t know if she could take her from my arms, but something told me she couldn’t restrict my movement and take Lizzie from me at the same time.

“You need my help,” Mom said.

“I did need help. Thank you. But I can do this. I have Madison to help me.”

Madison cleared her throat and said, “Yes. I’m staying for a few days and we are going to get a support system set up for —“

“Hush!” Mom held up her hand and Madison stopped speaking. “Support system? What better support system is there than me? Your own mother?”

Madison opened her mouth to reply but nothing came out.

“Mom. I can’t have a ghost caring for my daughter and my home. Think about what the neighbors would say.” I reached deep and pulled out one of her favorite arguments. In fact, it was the first thing she’d brought up when she saw my nose ring on the day she died.

“I suppose I hadn’t thought about it that way,” she said.

“And it can’t be good for you to be manifesting yourself like this.” Madison was able to speak again.

Mom turned to her. “Why do you say that?”

“There would be a lot more ghosts. You’re some sort of anomaly. People aren’t supposed to come back from the dead.”

“I have been feeling sort of strange. Angry and electrical.”

Madison and I shared a terrified glance. I said, “I think we are in uncharted territory, Mom. You need to go. We will be OK. Lizzie and I have Madison to help us, and she will.”

“I meant what I said on the phone, on the message. I love you both and I am proud of you.”

“We know, Mom.” I said. “Thank you.”

She started to fade. Madison grabbed my hand. “Goodbye,” she said. “Remember that organization is the key to running a household!” And then she was gone.

“I’m sorry, Caroline,” Madison said. “You understand why I didn’t believe you, though.”

“Of course. What happens now? Do you think she’s really gone?”

“Now, we try to sleep. And I don’t know if she’s gone. I’ve never dealt with a ghost before.”

“I’m so scared I will get overwhelmed again and she will come back,” I said.

“I know.”

The next morning Madison and I set to work. She called every one of my friends that had been at my baby shower and got recommendations for child care and house cleaning services. I let her tell everyone that I’d been overwhelmed and needed extra help. I was amazed at how quickly friends and co-workers came to my aid.

That was nearly two years ago. Lizzie finished getting all of her teeth and learned to love sleeping in her own bedroom. I transitioned back to the accounting firm and arranged for a flexible schedule so that I could spend time with Lizzie. I haven’t seen my mother again, but every so often one of the colorful dishrags she knit finds its way from the attic to the kitchen.

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