

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

SPLIT SKIN

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SPRING 2015

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in English
with honors in English

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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of a compilation of short stories and personal essays in which characters—both real and imagined—explore questions of self and situation. Included are four works of fiction and one work of nonfiction. Each story has its own unique narrative arc, but all share similar themes: loss, guilt, redemption, a sense of time passing by without our permission. The characters thus laid out must come to terms with who they are and what they want. They must make compromises and reconciliations. They must, in other words, do the best with what they've got.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Penn State creative writing faculty, especially Charlotte Holmes. I would also like to thank my extraordinary cohort of BA/MA students (2015). Without their dedication and friendship, these stories would be half as good.

Chapter 1

Split Skin

We hit it on the way to the Walmart in Butler, just past the WELCOME TO MISSOURI sign. The Ford thumped, spun out. A crack like gunshot, gravel crunching, and Larry spitting, “Mother of Christ.”

He kicked the truck door open and hocked tobacco juice, brown and tangy, toward the asphalt. Miles of road stretched ahead and behind us, shimmering in the dull summer heat. Somewhere far up, the back of another car glinted, a short little wink, then vanished over a dip in the landscape. Larry hung off the door for a moment, one hand cupped under the brim of his hat, then dropped to the ground. He walked to the side of the highway and stood still. In the passenger’s seat, I clutched the shoebox on my lap so hard its edges dug into my skin.

“We should call someone,” I said, quiet, so he didn’t hear me, and watched his back tense, black shirt strained. Hands on hips, he cocked one leg and stood silhouetted in the late evening sun like some kind of cut-out—a shadow man, hat low on his head, dip spit pocketed away somewhere tender. A tendon in his jaw jumped.

“We should go,” I whispered, watching my reflection in the windshield open its mouth and say the words. If I squinted just the right way, I could focus Larry and myself in the same shot. If I closed one eye, he disappeared. If I closed the other, I did. The Ford thrummed like an oven. Sweat beaded along my hairline, made the shoebox wilt where my hands touched it. A gamey smell rose from the box, a musk so deep it crawled down my throat and stuck there. I closed both eyes and the last rays of sun turned the blackness red-hot, made it glow.

The deer sprawled on the road's shoulder, its side heaving like fire bellows, desperate but slowing, each breath less wild than the one before. A doe, brown eyes like syrup, she brayed deep and low in her throat, huffing violently. One hind leg dangled from the hip joint, broke almost clean through. Blood, near black, matted the fur there. She kicked hard once, twice, flopping on her belly with a sticky, full sound.

Larry bent down out of sight, then re-emerged, his hands dark. He stepped over and tapped on my window.

"It's hurt," he said through the tiny crack I rolled down for him. His gray eyes glinted harsh in the sun, the eyelashes fanning out, catching these last rays and shining like blades.

I could see my reflection more clearly in the passenger window with Larry's black shirt as a backdrop. I looked pale and scared. My long brown hair looked wet, as if I'd just climbed out of a pool. Something drowned, almost. *We should call someone*, I wanted to say but didn't. *We need to go*. I swallowed hard and the box's smell hit me fresh, made me gag.

Larry reached down and clicked my door open. His face close to mine, he nibbled the side of my neck, hands reaching lower, prickling my side into gooseflesh until the seatbelt popped loose. I scrabbled with the shoebox, tucking it under the seat as he pulled closer. He smelled like sweat, dirt, Old Spice. Cinnamony, like rust. The blood from his hands glistened on my dress, a thumbprint above my left nipple, the lines of his palm imprinted on the outside of my hip.

"I need you to hold it down," he breathed into my ear and pulled me from the truck.

There's something calm about seeing frantic things, like you're underwater where time moves slower. The deer's tongue lolled toward the pavement, cutting shiny swathes along its dusty surface. It reminded me of the kitten, back when I was twelve, recovered from underneath

the wheel well of Matthew's truck. Button was from a litter of strays left in an old toaster box off the highway. Mom brought her home for the baby not born yet: her and Matthew's first child. The day she miscarried, I found Button at the end of the driveway in a broken heap, her tiny skull crushed. Like now, the air felt heavy. I moved as if in slow-motion; I saw the cat but didn't cry.

Larry rounded the back of the Ford and returned, a hammer hanging from his left hand.

He stopped, looked at me. Ran one tight fist across his forehead. Hocked deep again and spit so close to me that a hot speck of tobacco landed on my bare leg.

"Hold it like this," he said, squatting down so that his body was flush with the deer's, his arms pinned on either side of her neck, laying like lovers almost. She twisted, brayed harshly, rolled her eyes in panic, but he stayed—adamant. "Hold it like this and I'll finish the job."

"Daphne," he shouted when I didn't move. "Get your fucking ass down here."

This morning, he'd been gentle. There was a sharpness first, in my belly. Then a warmth between my legs. The sheets darkened with blood and sweat. In the middle of it is where she lay, fish-eyed and buggy, little body curled in on itself. Small, smaller than a kitten even.

Don't touch it, he'd snapped, eyes wide, hands already rummaging underneath the bed for the shoebox, something to contain it. And then, seeing my face, softer—*We'll bury it nice, okay, Babe?* He took my hand, rubbed a circle in the palm with his finger and whispered, *We'll bury it nice, okay? We'll go to the nice park in Butler.*

I bent down slowly and the warmth came again between my legs. It spread down my thighs and dribbled onto the asphalt, bright splotches of blood pooling into miniature lakes. I crept a hand over the deer's fur. The skin rose and fell underneath the light weight of it, meeting

it, losing it, meeting it again. She brayed once more, the sound less edged, gobs of spittle frothing at her lips as if to mute the agony, make it softer.

“Like this,” Larry said, softer now too, and positioned my hands carefully around her ears. He held his own hands over mine for a moment before stepping away. One of the doe’s eyes blinked below me, and with my weight on top of her own, she calmed slightly. The eye rolled back. We looked at each other.

It took three minutes to bash the skull in. It would have taken less than ten seconds to slit her throat, but Larry insisted he didn’t have a knife. He loomed above the deer and me, outlined against the bright sky, his face blacked out. Blood ran thick and hot over my hands; tiny flecks spotted the side of my cheek. I could even taste some on my tongue, but couldn’t tell if that was hers or mine. My arms shook.

Larry paused and a sun spot haloed his head. His chest shuddered with the effort of his task, and the sweat dripped from the curls of his brown hair.

“Goddamn,” he whistled, low, and punched the hammer down for one last blow.

She’s dead I wanted to say but couldn’t, the words stuck, whirling like syrup at the back of my throat. *I lost her.*

“I lost it,” Mom had said, real low, the day I found Button at the end of the drive. When I came inside, I heard whimpering down the hall. I followed the sound to the bathroom and found Mom slumped against the toilet, a trail of blood spattered along the tile. I stood in the doorway, cradling the cat. Mom looked at me and held out her hands.

I placed the cat at her feet so that its paw stuck in a puddle of blood. “Button’s dead.”

“Matthew’s going to kill me,” she said, and stroked one finger down the length of the cat’s broken back. “I lost it.”

Larry's going to kill me is what I'd thought, too, with all the blood on the sheets. What do you do with an unborn baby? What had Mom done? In the end, Larry found the shoebox and promised a little plot in Butler's nicest public park with a wreath of silk carnations, a cross maybe. We got in the Ford for Walmart, for the flowers. The sheets we would probably burn, later. I didn't wash the blood off my thighs well enough, though. Faded streaks of red crisscrossed my skin. In the back of my mind, I thought the words *doctor* and *help*, but the flowers would be enough. More than enough. Larry had offered them. The flowers would be fine.

Now the blood on my thighs flowed wet and thick. Larry flung the hammer away when the deer stopped shuddering, breath hitched up high in his own throat, face and cheeks ruddy. The deer lay hot and still beneath me and its stillness seemed to settle over us all like a blanket. No release from this smothering heat, not even in death. I saw the deer, its bludgeoned skull, but didn't cry.

"Come on, Daphne," Larry snapped, already taking its front legs in his hands to drag it forward.

"We can butcher it," he said, softer, when he saw my face, how I wouldn't meet his gaze. His hands found my shoulders and pushed so that I rolled off the deer's body. A piece of gravel dug into the soft flesh of my upper knee. It hurt. "Help me get it in the back."

My stomach cramped so that I thought I might pass out. The blood gushed in short spurts, falling to the ground in clots. I imagined the rest of my insides slowly peeking out from under my dress, oozing toward the road and leaving a trail. Larry scowled at the butt of my dress and the blooming red stain but didn't say anything. We managed to heave the body into the truck bed before another car winked on the horizon and crawled toward us. The wind from its passing

ruffled dust in my eyes and swayed the Ford. I imagined thumbing that car for a ride and hitchhiking out of Kansas, west to the coast. I imagined leaving a trail from here to there, slowly leaving bits of myself behind. First the baby, then the deer, then, finally, Larry. I imagined leaving myself for last. I leaned against the Ford and seeped, head resting against the cracked window.

“Get in the damn car, Daphne. I don’t want it to spoil.” He slammed his door shut.

“Wait,” he snapped when I made to open my door and climb in. He pulled up the floor mat from underneath the glove compartment and placed it roughly on my seat. “Now get in.”

So I got in the damn car and we U-turned in the middle of the highway. The right front wheel walloped a bit. The tendon in Larry’s jaw twitched in time with the revolutions. What started this whole mess? I felt under my seat until I brushed cardboard, then gathered the shoebox into my hands. I hugged it against my chest, making sure to keep it level.

Mom had wrapped her baby in a clean dishcloth. She had gotten the bleach from underneath the kitchen sink and scrubbed her blood from the bathroom tile until it sparkled, good as new. She had balled the bloodied sheets and burned them in the garbage can outside. She had used dryer lint to kindle the fire and a capful of gasoline to make it stay. She had done all of these things meticulously. She had not cried.

“What should I do with Button,” I had asked, her back turned from me. She stood beside the garbage can so that the leaping flames put her body in silhouette, arms crossed in front as if to ward off chill, head bent low as if in prayer.

“Put it in the fire,” she’d said, real low. “Matthew won’t give a damn.”

Did Larry give a damn? He was used to doing these things, gutting dead animals and leaving the carcasses up to dry during hunting season. Peeling the skin slow and sure, cutting the

hide, discarding it for the meat inside. When we parked outside the house, the dog scabbled at the screen door, barking raucously. Larry grinned at him, then turned his face toward me. The stubble on his chin caught in that beautiful light from the spent sun, dipping finally below the tree line and making our shadows good and long. He grinned, leaned over, and kissed my cheek.

A deer's hide tearing sounds like an old carpet splitting at the seams. The dog barked and wagged its yellow tail. Larry sawed off the deer's broken leg with a knife from the garage and threw it to the dog. The dog gripped the bone in his mouth, its weight pulling his head toward the ground. Larry drew his knife in a smooth line from the base of the deer's neck, across its belly, and stopped at its asshole. The carpet split. He reached inside and rolled out the lungs and heart first. The rest of its guts followed smoothly. He worked in the light off the garage roof and placed the organs on a square sheet of old blue tarp. They looked like gray water balloons and stunk like shit. Larry cut notches around the three remaining hooves and another around the neck. He bit his bottom lip as he pulled the rest of the skin off, his brow furrowed in concentration. He worked meticulously, pulling the skin like he was pulling down a blanket, or taking off a dress.

"Put it in the fire," Mom had said. "Matthew won't give a damn."

I watched Larry roll the discarded hide. I watched him bend low over the skinless body of the deer and gently lift it in his arms. There were hooks in the garage where he hung his kills to dry. He walked there now and hung the deer from its head. It dangled like a broken puppet. The dog trotted over and licked the naked hooves. Larry brushed the palms of his hands against the seat of his pants, leaving long finger-wide streaks.

If I hadn't met him, I might still be with Mom. I might have finished school. Twilight settled over the yard, and I slipped around the back of the house with the shoebox. The heat

lifted. The air felt warm, at least less heavy. With that weight went the sun. A lighter, cooler world came to take its place. I felt lighter, too.

Mom had wrapped her baby in a clean dishcloth, so I did too. Bundled the sheets and barreled them deep in the garbage can to burn later. Left to bury the baby in Butler. Hit a deer on the way. Watched Larry beat the deer to death. Came home. Watched Larry skin it, watched him cradle it, watched the dog lick the dangling hooves.

Didn't cry.

Instead, I hugged the box close to me and imagined myself thumbing a ride with that car on the highway, hitchhiking somewhere far from here. My stomach cramped again, and that feeling came, of my body shedding itself from the inside out, reverse-skinned—my guts lying on a blue tarp like water balloons, trembly and full and quick to spoil.

From the corner of the yard I could just make out Larry tugging at the bone in the dog's mouth, playing with him, hat still low on his head and face tired but open, relieved almost. I would burn him soon in the way hot blood does when it soaks the sheets in morning, when it gushes out of deep wounds.

"We can go now," Mom had said, weeks after Button died, when I came home from school to see the boxes in the living room, the empty spaces on the walls where the pictures once hung. Matthew was still at work and wouldn't be back till late. There were boxes for my stuff, too. I looked at her and she held out her hands. "There's nothing keeping us."

I watched Larry play with the dog. I closed one eye and the dog shifted in my focus. I closed the other eye and Larry did. I pressed the shoebox tight into my chest and closed both eyes. The darkness settled deep over me like a second skin, a blanket that covered me completely, one that could, if I let it, peel off come morning with a sound like seams splitting.

Chapter 2

Rotten Wooden Tracks

I hadn't talked to Rex Lilly in a long time, but when I walked downstairs to find my mother slumped at the kitchen table with the phone clutched, death-like, in her hand and the dark circles under her eyes drawn darker, my stomach swooped as if I had missed a stair on a long flight down.

She muttered a few indistinguishable words, nodded her head with each one, then finally hung up. Her hand lingered on the phone as she returned it to its cradle. I hovered in the doorway and waited.

"Have you heard from January Lilly recently?" Her voice caught on the name as if her mouth had forgotten how to form it; slippery and awkward, it fell to the floor.

Jan Lilly? The last time I had heard of January Lilly, his name had circulated the halls of Park High and not for good reasons. The two Lilly boys, Jan and his older brother Rex, lived across town on the other side of the railroad tracks. Our mothers had met seventeen years ago in the doctor's office, one each pregnant with the both of us: Rex and me. They had exchanged niceties in the waiting room during regular checkups, but their friendship had solidified indefinitely when they went into labor on the same day; we were inseparable for a while, my family and his. But that was a long time ago now.

"Not recently, no," I said, a cold lump of dread curdling in the pit of my stomach.
"What's happened?"

My mother's hand fluttered absently over her mouth. She looked like she was kissing her fingertips, in deep concentration, staring somewhere far off but not really seeing. "His mother...on the phone. I haven't talked...He didn't turn up last night. He's missing."

On the last word, she refocused her gaze and our eyes locked.

It wasn't a question of how long, or why not, or how so; it wasn't a question at all. The silence that had stretched between our childhood friendship and now, this moment, broke outside the corner gas station when I saw Rex, dark-haired and sallow, exit the smeared glass door with a pack of Camel Lights. His face looked hollowed out, the skin stretched taut over the bones, and I wondered when was the last time he'd slept. The Lilly boys were always a little drawn, with dark shadows under their eyes that made them appear constantly punched, but today Rex's pallor glowed in the air like a beacon. He looked like shit.

I don't think I ever meant to go to school that day, after hearing of Jan's absence. My car seemed to pull into the gas station parking lot of its own accord. I parked beside the payphone where Rex leaned, sucking in a long drag. I was mildly surprised, and not, at the same time: Rex was a star soccer player, but his mother had a nasty smoking habit, with the lines around her mouth that looked drawn on.

His eyes brooded, and his shoulders slumped, and he dragged on that cigarette like a pro, but I could still make out the dimples in the side of his cheek, the ones I had simultaneously made fun of and envied when we were younger. I had the strangest urge to reach out a finger, right through the windshield, and softly poke one.

Instead, I got out of the car and closed the door hard enough for him to acknowledge the sound, turn, and see me standing there like an apparition from preschool days: the birthday twin,

the old best friend, and for today at least, the fellow high school truant. His eyes widened slightly as he took me in through the hazy cloud of smoke. I could immediately place that look. It was the same look he wore the time when we were ten and playing in the old drainage pond behind his house, when I had stripped down to my underwear in order to swim in the stagnant water. It had taken him a moment to adjust then as it was taking him a moment now, and I could see it in his face as if it was trip-wired to show his feelings before he himself could process them. It was like watching a process, the quick-fleeting slideshow from jarring disbelief to gradual, even giddy, acceptance. Yes, it had taken him a moment longer to peel off his own t-shirt and shorts, too, and fall, fumbling, into the muddy water, but he had done it.

“A-Annie?” he asked, sounding incredulous. He pulled the stub of the cigarette out of his mouth and dropped it to the ground in the same instant, grinding it out with the heel of his shoe as if getting rid of this latest marker of the difference between him and me. What a waste, I thought but didn’t say.

I walked up until I was even with him. My eyes came up to the level of his shoulder. His hoodie was tight there and faded almost to the point of worn. I breathed in the faint smell of mingling sweat and Ivory soap; he still used Ivory soap. The cheap, chalky kind, the kind his mother would sing about while bathing Jan in the sink each evening, her voice soft and quiet and sad: “When I was young and full of hopes, I used to wash with Ivory soap...But now I’m old and have no hopes, I just wash with any old soap.”

I had another urge to get really close to Rex and touch him, the outside of my arm with the outside of his. “Is it true? About Jan, I mean. Your mom called this morning.”

His eyes immediately narrowed at the sound of Jan’s name, but he nodded. “I didn’t know she called you.”

“Not me. My mother,” I corrected automatically.

“Same thing,” he muttered under his breath.

“Not the same thing.”

He glanced at me sideways, sizing me up, and we squared off like that for a solid minute before he finally broke form and withdrew the Camels from a back pocket. He tapped one loose and held it out toward me. I didn’t smoke, I didn’t know how, but I took it with a straight face and waited patiently for a light; he obliged.

I sucked in my first drag, and trapped it in my throat, and tried really hard not to cough, and failed miserably. My face felt hot as hell. What was I trying to prove? “Jesus Christ.”

“Smoke much?” But there was a smirk in his words that hadn’t shown up till now and I didn’t have the nerve to say Fuck off; my scrunched face probably said it all anyway.

“Where do you think he is?” I asked, and to hide my discomfort I took another drag and quietly thanked Whomever for letting it go smoother than the last.

A school bus trundled past, spewing exhaust fumes. A crow cawed from a power line overhead, and we stood there like statues—but cool ones, with cigarettes.

Rex inhaled deeply, and then breathed out slowly, with gusto. The noise was like a balloon deflating, defeated. “I don’t know, Annemarie. He didn’t show up for dinner last night and he wasn’t around this morning. You know how he gets.”

And I did, despite everything. We had been born together, Rex and I. Our mothers, shiny with sweat and relief, had peered simultaneously down their separate bundles into our scrunched and indistinguishable baby faces. We had grown up together, friends united by fate or destiny or town lines that crossed in the neutral space of hospital lobbies. His mother, the work-a-day waitress with the lazy eye and sick husband; my mother, the lawyer with the pearl anniversary

necklace throbbing on her heart like a tiny, cold, white heart. Jan came three years later, an afterthought. And by the time he was old enough to actively participate in our mutually concocted schemes, my mother had ended our play dates with the kind of abruptness that stings. The kind of abruptness that instantly divides and leaves gaping chasms a million miles wide.

But I did know Jan. He was the quiet baby, bathed in the sink as Meryl Lilly sang softly under her breath about Ivory soap, about her hopes and dreams; they seemed to culminate with his tiny body in that tiny sink, breaking apart like suds. That quiet baby grew up into a quiet boy, solemn-faced and alone. He sat by himself at lunch. I passed him often on the way to my own table, on the way to my own friends chattering loudly, smacking their food, laughing with mouths open. Rex was in the other lunch period, but Rex was always okay at school. He played sports and smoked cigarettes and skipped class. He held an aura of carelessness, the kind cultivated by ultimate care, and nothing bad ever touched him. Jan was different. Jan could never pretend to be something he wasn't. Underneath Rex's façade of ennui lived something darker, sadder—something too real. Jan never had that luxury; everything about him was unapologetically open. Raw, even, like a wound.

Cool Statue Rex pulled out another cigarette and lit up, but his hands shook. Bad.

“I mean, some shithead's always picking on him. He's always running off and crying about it.” Rex carefully avoided my eyes by averting his own. “He's probably up the railroad tracks somewhere slitting his wrists.” I could hear the façade at work now, the real fear wrapped delicately in humor: the difference between Rex and Jan made manifest.

Fourteen year old January Lilly with his too-short jeans and grass-stained New Balance sneakers, the cowlick at the back of his hair forever stuck up and bobbing with the rhythm of his young and awkward step—Two weeks ago it had gotten around school that Jan Lilly was a

faggot, poor and weak and too stupid for his own good. I had seen him emerge from the boys' locker room after last period gym, his eyes rimmed red. He had held a hand gingerly over his right eye, looked down, and hurried away before I could say anything. But the words had been lodged in my throat like ice. I stood there silent as stone and didn't move when two older boys came out five minutes later with their fists stuffed into the pockets of their jackets and their eyes glinting in the harsh fluorescent light. It could've been the cafeteria all over again, the image of me walking past without more than a second glance.

A feeling like stones falling settled in my stomach, and I asked Rex for another cigarette. He handed me the whole pack so I could pick for myself. I lit up and took a huge drag and relished how light-headed it made me.

“Do you think...” His words trailed off and hung in the air between us like smoke.

A slight rain started to fall, more mist than actual substance. It dotted Rex's forehead with little beads of water. Or maybe it was perspiration. In any case, his hair clung to the damp skin. Underneath it, his face blanched.

“Will—will you help me find him?”

A feeling like bile rose in my throat.

“Of course. Of course I will.”

Our bodies seemed to know where to go, instinctively. It had been years since I had balance-beamed the rails beside his gray-faced and dilapidated neighborhood, my feet walking a perfectly straight line on the rusted metal as Rex stepped on the wooden beams in between. Yet here we were, on the same tracks, years later. I walked on the outside this time.

Rex's shoulders hunched under his thin hoodie as we walked forward, his hands thrust deep in the pockets to ward off the chill. The slight drizzle had picked up, coating our skin with a fine layer of mist, at once freezing and incredibly electrifying. I felt lined from the inside out with an energy I couldn't explain, propelling me forward so that I stumbled on loose gravel, kicking bits of rock and pebble ahead like the beginnings of an avalanche.

We had left my car behind, the unspoken agreement reached after coming to the end of the gravel street where the neighborhood left off and the railroad picked up. This was old hat for us now. We had roamed these tracks for hours back when we were younger and knew their layout better than the park's; we had forgone those warped sidewalks for these rotten wooden paths ages ago. In a few yards, we passed the drainage pond, fenced off now but in vain; what water had been there years ago had dried up, leaving a desolate patch of swampy grass and trampled thistle. The summer mosquitos must be wicked here, but in the damp cold of autumn the patch was devoid of all life. I remembered the sludgy water against my skin and how violently sick I'd been for two weeks afterward. But mostly I remembered how Rex and I had laughed so hard at each other, bordering on that edge of nervous dread—if our mothers found us, they'd kill us...

Our breaths ripped from our heaving chests as we moved, filling the silence that had bricked up like a wall between us. But there were no words to say, only quick-spurring thoughts that kept us going, faster and faster, constantly moving, constantly following the line of the tracks until the right time. We would know it when it came. We had known all along. It was the same path, after all, we'd followed all those years before.

I didn't notice we had started running until the icy cut of the rain began to hurt on my face and my breath swirled around my head like a shroud. The slap of our feet on the ground

reverberated through the air, the thump of my heart threatening to strangle me. A stitch in my side throbbed dully, the pain of it tucked somewhere far and away as we looked for the gap in the trees, the turning point, somewhere soon, had to be soon, yes, there, ahead and gleaming like a gap-toothed smile. I was beginning to regret those cigarettes. How does he do it, smoking and soccer...

But we were there, finally, scrambling down the embankment, scuffing our knees, making our palms bleed on the way down, breaking through to the path beyond and the old, abandoned shack that sat, half-hidden, at the back of its throat, a childhood haunt, like the drainage pond, seen once again.

To that point, hurry was the unsaid thing that moved us forward. Now, we both backed off, tried to slow down, stop time, make everything double back on itself. The broken door hung from broken hinges and the broken eyes of the shack glittered in the frozen rain. This had been a haven, once, long ago—back then its glass wasn't cracked.

Something white and soft lay in the narrow space between door and frame, and I willed it to move as Rex stopped completely on the worn path, unable, it seemed, to step further. He made a faint sound then, like a kitten mewling; hungry or lost, I couldn't tell which.

Please don't be Jan, please don't be Jan.

I hovered beside Rex, completely immobile because I didn't know what to do or say that would make anything better. A heavy stillness wafted down on us. I couldn't see Rex's face, but I could imagine what was written there. A minute passed of pure inaction, and I wondered whether I could ever put into words the dull ache of my heart.

I'm sorry, Rex.

I hung back as he padded softly to the door and pulled it open as if he was taking someone's hand, or shutting someone's eyes. The rain pounded harder, too, and my head suddenly felt strangely muffled, like I had swum a great distance underwater where the sound echoed deeper. A chill started from the core of my body and radiated outward so that the cold rain met cold skin. Maybe my skin was turning the rain cold. There was ice in my throat again, a giant piece lodged like a tumor, and I knew, instinctively, the only way to melt it was the warmth of tears. But I couldn't cry. I was stuck at the edge of the tree line.

After we had dived into that dirty stagnant water all those years ago, stripped down to our kid underwear, Rex and I had run here, to this shack, and that was where my mother found us, towing Jan behind by the hand. He had been crying because we had left him out, his eyes rimmed red and his nose dripping snot. My mother promised to help him find us, and she did, both of us near-naked in the shack, hiding out. She had been furious, she had grabbed onto my arms with Indian burns and jerked me away, face purple with a kind of rage I had never seen before but that had filled me with shame. I had passed Jan on the way out of the door, his stupid face still crying. I had wanted to hide my embarrassment in anger, mirror my mother in that way. I had the incredible urge to punch him. Did I punch him? Did I do it? I couldn't remember the actions, only the feelings that burned like heat in my veins.

I tilted my face upward and let the cold drops sting at my eyes. I felt so small. I felt so incredibly small as I heard the beginnings of Rex's mourning, in the background there, muffled as if heard from a great distance. A million years between us.

A tiny glint caught my eye on the ground: the foil from Rex's abandoned cigarette pack. I reached down slowly and picked the pack up, sliding it carefully into the front pocket of my jacket. The tiny rectangle pressed through the jacket's fabric so that I could feel a sharp corner

against the edge of my ribs, digging in. My heartbeat seemed to radiate from that point. I took a step forward, then another, and pressed the jacket closer to my body and with it, Rex's cigarettes.

Maybe our lax communication over the years was a result of something deeper than just "losing touch." Maybe it had been easier to pull away, to stop connecting, until the most words exchanged were the stuff of impersonal Christmas cards sent methodically every year—an awkward, quick chat in the supermarket, unplanned, that ended in the inevitable "Have to go, appointment soon. It was good seeing you." Empty words, the lies and the promises together... The time I saw Jan Lilly emerge from the boys' locker room with a bruise under one eye and pretended I hadn't noticed, for what I thought was his sake; or the time, earlier on, when my mother ended our weekly play dates because of the cold I had caught from wading in the drainage pond.

But was it just the cold?

No. My mother was not a bad woman. She worked hard and came home exhausted, with perennial dark circles under her eyes and lines around her mouth like tiny incisions. Every night, she heated up a casserole, or unearthed a frozen dinner, set the table, asked about our day, and then retreated into the sitting room with its low light and the evening paper—a ritual of settling down. She was busy, always, and well-intentioned. She had struck up conversation with a sore-footed and very pregnant woman when she herself felt the dull ache and swollen pressure of a baby in her belly, had offered her acquaintance to this woman whom she wouldn't have picked out in a crowd nine months earlier had it not been for this miraculous of coincidences, these two babies developing at the same time... And I wondered, coming inside from the longest day of my life and watching through the crack in the door as she tucked a flyaway strand of hair behind her

ear and rustled the pages of the paper slightly, turning them...I wondered whether a pocket of guilt bubbled at the bottom of her stomach when—or if—Meryl Lilly crossed her mind.

I thought of Rex's face when we found Jan, the horror and relief twisting his features into that new, unrecognized emotion—the thing unnamed, intensely felt. The cold rain stung our faces and made us numb to the bone, but we had stayed—horrified and transfixed in equal measure until something snapped inside Rex and he had run the remaining space between to lift up Jan, to make it better.

We were too late.

An indiscriminate noise broke from my throat. It was enough to make her look up from her paper, the small print there, and turn in her seat, catching my face slivered in the crack of the door. I had startled her. She immediately set down the paper, took off her glasses, and made to sit up, a concerned expression slicing the space between her eyebrows. Slowly she got up, slowly she crossed the room, slowly she pulled the door open. I wondered vaguely, as the lamp's weak lighting settled on my face, what my own expression looked like. I thought I could see it gleamed back in the dark of her pupils: white and scared, bloodless.

Had I punched him that day? Was it just the cold?

“Annemarie, what's happened?” her voice catching on my name and breaking apart on the way to me.

I wondered if she could see it on my face, whether I had to say it, anything at all—

“Oh, Annie,” and her arms pressed around me with a crushing kind of weight.

Chapter 1

The Most Real Thing

Sylvie's tractor-trailer waited under bright fluorescent lights that buzzed like drones. Huge semis rumbled to stops near the gas pumps. Doors slammed shut as drivers clambered down, stretching their legs in the perpetual dance of the long-road trucker. Inside the truck stop's unisex bathroom, she scrubbed blood off her hands in the cracked sink. The warm water burned.

Sylvie looked like a girl who loved horses: long brown hair in a single braid down her back, wide-tackle shoulders, faded denim overalls. If her brothers could see her now, they'd nod their heads in silent approval. She avoided the mirror because she didn't want to see what she already knew—her sagging face, eyes defined by sharp shadows, skin pallid as sun-bleached hay. The thought crept up her like the cold water in Brown's Pond during a midnight swim, slow but sure: there was nothing so unforgivable as the light in a truck stop's bathroom, nothing so unnerving as catching your own eye in its splotched mirror, gaunt and sad and flecked with something else's blood.

Someone jiggled the bathroom's handle, rapped sharply, then backed off when Sylvie ignored the sound. She ran her tongue against the gap between her front teeth and scrubbed harder, squeezing her eyes shut. Tiny worms of nervousness wriggled in her belly. She clicked off the light and stood there in the settling gloom, listening to the toilet tank gurgle, breathing deep the cloistered smell of urine and Dial soap, feeling her heart chirrup like a caught moth against the walls of her chest.

Brown's Pond loomed dark and dull in her mind's eye and she wondered what she'd do even as, deep in her gut, she knew.

Edith had stressed the importance of slitting its throat first. In '89, she saw the sky split open on the far side of her ranch. The night bloomed as if God had taken a picture. Dressed in a cotton nightgown, feet shoved haphazardly in her son's boots, Edith followed the stream of light to its end, a pulsing globe at the edge of her property where the rolling land hitched up into the first start of mountain.

Fear churned her belly something fierce, the slick summer wind making wisps of her graying hair. Still, she approached the light which dulled now like iron just pulled from a hot furnace. It belonged to a metal pod that looked, she thought as she trembled to her knees, like an egg, smooth and oddly beautiful as its glow slowly faded into the velvet night. It cracked like an egg, too, as Edith's weathered hands burrowed into the long grass and took hold of its root.

A dark, thin figure slowly extricated itself from the metal egg, one leg extending, followed closely by another. Edith gripped the cold ground. She yearned in that moment for her husband to come back, for Billy Jr. to not be lame as he was, sleeping oblivious through the night. The wanting was strong within her, something physical tying knots down her throat. She found she couldn't move, could only stare open-mouthed with eyes that gleamed in the last of the pod's dimming light.

Years after the incident, no one truly believed her. When Sheriff Thompson found Billy Jr. limping down Highway 90 at six the following morning, a young man with the mind of a child screaming for his mother, puckered head bend to the fierce Montana wind, he drove them both back to Brown Ranch with the sirens whirling. There, he found the old woman curled in on herself, nightgown soaked through so that it clung to the contours of her body. She didn't so

much shiver as convulse, eyes wide and staring blankly ahead, lips quivering with words she hadn't strength to say.

Billy Jr. clucked his tongue as Sheriff Thompson cradled Edith and led her back inside. She clutched at his jacket, her mouth still working furiously. "Ehhhhh," she gasped. "Ehhhhhhh."

Sheriff Thompson, alarmed, lowered his ear until she seemed to kiss him.

"What was that, Mrs. Brown?"

"Egg," she murmured, gripping her icy hands around his jacket sleeves.

"It came at me as a clone," Old Edith told anyone who would listen, years after she recovered from that shivering vigil by the foothills. "Have you ever tried slitting your own throat?"

Those words pounded through Sylvie's head as she opened the bathroom door. A woman stood waiting, dressed much like Sylvie. Her hands were dirty, too; the tops of her nails grinned black with grime. "'Bout time," she muttered, shouldering her way into the cramped space before Sylvie had fully left. The metal clips of their overalls clicked against each other.

Sylvie closed her eyes again as the bathroom door slammed shut.

"It came from the sky," Old Edith insisted when questioned in her hospital bed. "It was an alien."

An alien pulled itself from the metal egg, dressed in a thin cotton nightgown. It raised itself to full height, five feet four inches, back bent slightly from years of hard, backbreaking work. In fact, it mimicked Old Edith in almost every way: pouchy under-eyes, varicose veins like roadmap lines up her shins, sleet-gray hair bound in a fraying bun at the base of its neck. Edith

felt she was in a dream when it reached out with hands that looked like her own and tried to touch her face.

Sylvie smelled gasoline, sharp on the air. A fellow trucker had overfilled his diesel tank. He swore loudly and pulled the nozzle out, still streaming the clear, pungent liquid. She passed him without comment, envious of his plight, its simplicity. Her truck loomed at the edge of the lot, a stark white silhouette against the darkness beyond. Fifty yards away, the steady shush of the highway could have lulled babies to sleep. An exhaustion as thick and real as heavy wool stole over her body and she wondered, briefly, what would happen if she simply stopped everything.

In Edith's story, she fought her alien sleeping in the stables, in the very stall where her son's life had changed years ago when he spooked the mare, long since put down, and it kicked him, almost fatally, in the head. He was never the same afterward, and neither were his parents. The horse was led by Bill Sr. to the ranch's sole pond and shot, point blank, between the eyes. In Old Edith's story, she took care not to spook the horses, afraid that they'd lunge out in fear and all would be done. She saw the alien as herself, hunched in the corner of that marked stall, still dressed in the same cotton nightgown, now stained beige with mud instead of its original eye-hurting white. Its head was turned into the stall's corner; it seemed to be sleeping.

"It took all my guts," Old Edith whispered, solemn. "Took them all to slit its throat."

Sylvie, too, made sure not to spook the horses. Ever since they were kids, Daryl and Ben scorned her for being scared of their glistening black eyes. They understood, in their way, her

fear because they felt it themselves. But they were older, rougher. The twins kept the fear reigned in like a bit, gnawing on it. Sylvie didn't have that kind of grit.

Her family owned the ranch next to Brown's, had known the Browns for years. Daryl and Ben had played with Billy Jr. in the days before his head busted. Together, they mucked stables and forked hay and rode hard around the edge of the sloping land, each boy jaunting on the backs of the families' best fillies. Sylvie, younger and smaller, cantered at her own slow pace. She was very young when Billy changed, was tucked into bed that night by her mother with a kind of forced calm as Bill Sr. cocked his gun and pulled the trigger. The cracked sound echoed in her tiny, pink-curtained room. She remembered her mother's face when it happened, the tight lines at the corners of her eyes, the way she wouldn't answer when Sylvie asked, matter of factly, if Mr. Brown had gotten his revenge.

She was still young when Mr. Brown's heart stopped, leaving him dead at his tractor. Edith collected his body as if it were a matter of course. Sylvie stood, thin and pale, at the fence that divided their property, riveted by the old woman's impossible strength, the way she grabbed her husband's wrists and simply dragged him away. Sylvie's mother placed a warm hand on Sylvie's shoulder and tugged her backward as Sylvie's father, dressed in his customary Wranglers, vaulted the fence and lumbered over to help. Together, they wrestled Mr. Brown's weight and started toward the faded blue house where Edith would begin the process of mourning, of adjusting to life without a husband and all that entailed.

Sylvie imagined the hugeness of that responsibility. She felt her palms slicken with sweat. She remembered Edith's face, standing over her dead husband, blank as paper, nonplussed almost, as if she expected nothing less from a life that had kicked out hard once already and struck her Billy dumb. Sylvie wondered what her own face looked like after her

mother's accident. She wondered if her face, too, had blanched bleak and open like Edith's, had shown acceptance as cold and inevitable as the season's first snow.

She pulled herself into the dark cab of her truck, let the door shut with a satisfying *snick*. The worn vinyl material smelled like cigarettes even though Sylvie didn't smoke. Its familiarity comforted her. She watched as the other woman emerged from the bathroom and waddled to her own tractor-trailer on the far side of the lot. From the back, she looked even more remarkably like Sylvie. The thought clenched another fist in her belly. She turned the keys in the ignition and the engine rumbled to life. The last dregs of Bob Dylan's *Girl from North Country* filtered from the cab's speakers as she gunned the truck into gear and began the last leg of her journey. She switched the music off.

Sylvie didn't ride anymore, so when Daryl said he'd seen her on the ridgetop, mounted to Star, he gave her a queer look. She fumbled with the dish she'd been drying; it dropped and shattered on the ground. Their mother, bedridden in the next room, called out feebly at the noise. Daryl frowned, accusing Sylvie of something she didn't possess, something almost like courage. She hadn't ridden in years, not since what happened. The subtle glint of approval in Daryl's eyes forced her own downward. He helped her clean up, his strong hands brushing at the sharp ceramic pieces as if they were cotton balls. She nicked her thumb and let the blood ball up before sucking it clean.

Their mother called again. Daryl and Sylvie exchanged pointed looks. He still frowned, confused, as if seeing Sylvie for the first time in a long time, like she had emerged from the kitchen a new kind of sister, one that could still surprise him and his twin. But his face was soft,

almost apologetic. Sylvie would see to their mother and that knowledge sat between them like a physical thing.

Billy Jr. sometimes helped Sylvie's father paint the fences. He followed Daryl and Ben around on their various chores. He let Sylvie read to him under the ash tree by Brown's Pond, picking at the long blades of grass and making whistles of them. The accident that had blunted his intelligence had left his physical body intact. He maneuvered the paintbrush with a slow, meticulous grace. He rolled replacement tractor tires with ease. He stretched under big gray skies as nimbly as a cat, letting Sylvie's voice rush into the silence of the day like a quiet river.

Sylvie's mother sat upright in bed, the big motorized chair bulking off to one side. "I'm ready for the day," she said when Sylvie came all the way in, starting the late morning ritual that had dominated both their lives since the day Patricia fell off her favorite horse and landed wrong.

"Like Superman," Sylvie's father often murmured under his breath, in the kitchen peeling potatoes for supper, passing shingles to Ben while repairing a leaking patch on the barn roof, waxing the wheels of Sylvie's tractor-trailer on her down weeks. In these small moments of busy work, life on a horse ranch keeping things together, he'd stop long enough in his chore at hand and mention his wife's disability with a mild edge of surprise as if still unsure of its realness.

It didn't seem real until these mornings happened, when Sylvie began the process of getting her mother out of bed. Then, it became the most real thing in the world.

She peeled the bedspread off her mother's narrow, deadened legs to find them soaked.

"I thought," she whispered, not unkindly, "you were ready for the day?"

Sylvie spied it for herself later that evening. The sun slowly sank below the first stretch of mountain, casting the land in long shadow. Next week, Sylvie would start her journey west,

reviving the tractor-trailer now sleeping beside the barn like a giant's pet. She had begged for the job, for her father's blessing to leave this blessed ranch long enough to get some peace of mind.

"Let Ben wake her up some mornings. Let Daryl clean her," she'd pleaded. Weren't they around enough after all? Two bachelors set to inherit the family's work, well dammit they could inherit this part of it as well.

Tired, she trailed a hand over the splintery fence, letting it bite at her palm. Summer wind hugged the edges of the mountains, the tang of manure wafting toward her. She followed a well-worn path, thinking of the week ahead, of her escape via long-haul trucking, of the glistening Pacific Ocean she hoped to see when she stopped off at California, at the edge of everything she knew and loved.

When she saw the giant egg, it came to her as a bright glint in the brush by Brown's pond, its smooth metal surface reflecting the dying light like a jewel. She approached it cautiously, as if sneaking up on a dozing animal, one she had no business nearing—a coyote, docile looking enough when asleep but once woken, mean to the bone and ready to bite. What she expected to find, she didn't know. Another version of Old Edith waiting to emerge? Or perhaps something worse? Her heart dropped at the thought of Daryl's fixed stare, his eyes suggesting just the hint of pride. She imagined what he claimed to see, herself on the back of a horse, silhouetted against a burnished sky on the ridge top, conquering her fear, being something better, something more than she was. A feeling hot and fast coursed through her, a hate so big it lasted less than a second.

She peered over the cracked lip of the egg.

Billy Jr. lay curled inside, fast asleep with chin tucked into chest. The hairs on the back of her neck bristled. She felt numb again at every extremity. So, Billy then? Like mother, like son.

It was hard not to acknowledge the lift in her chest, the sudden relief that unpocketed itself and made her fiercely happy that maybe Daryl had seen wrong.

Billy Jr. opened one eye, squinted, then opened the other. His forehead was a washboard of confusion. “Another book?” he asked eagerly.

Sylvie moved her body so that it shielded Billy’s face from the sun’s violent last throes. “What, Billy?” she asked softly; sweat beaded along her hairline and the first of many fists grabbed her stomach and took hold.

Billy smiled and mimed his hands into a book shape, snapping it open and closed.

“Was I reading you a book earlier, Billy?”

Billy slapped his hands together again, his shadowed face now solemn. “You let me stay in your egg. You promised another book.”

Her skin turned cold as she looked around, afraid but also eager to see a familiar shape lingering in the darkening land, a figure to mirror her every move. She thought of Star, her bead-black eyes, and shuddered.

“I had to kill it,” Old Edith urged whenever prompted, whenever someone stooped low enough to ask. Her eyes widened, the whites of them making miniature islands of her pale blue irises. “It wanted to take over my life.”

Sylvie drove hard through the thick night, the highway flashing underneath her. Taillights glowed in front of her like angry red eyes. Behind her, in the closest reach of the tractor-trailer, she imagined the body sliding gently from side to side with each curve of the road, the sound rhythmic and good.

She licked her dry lips.

It was hiding in the stables, just like Edith's, face pressed against a stall corner. And like Edith, Sylvie crept toward it armed and ready. Her heart hammered against her throat so hard she felt she would choke.

Earlier that day, she carefully changed her mother's soiled pants. She put them in the hamper to deal with later, grabbed a bucket and sponge, and cleaned the sour smell away, wiping down her mother's legs in smooth strokes. Patricia sat limp and cold, unable to move anything below her neck. Sweat dampened her brow; Sylvie gently brushed the hair off it. Patricia started crying.

Sylvie continued to clean. Dipping the sponge, wringing it out, wiping it along the sickly-smooth skin.

"Sometimes," her mother whispered, not looking at her. "Sometimes when I get like this, I wish there was a clone of me who was healthy and could hug me."

Sylvie dipped the sponge, wrung it out.

"I hate relying on other people. I know I could take care of myself."

She looked up at Sylvie then, watched her wipe the sponge down the inside of her thigh. Her face shone wetly in the dim light. "Sometimes I wish that there was a clone for you, too. I know I'm like this Sylvie. But you—you have to stop feeling guilty for wanting something different."

Sylvie dropped the sponge into the bucket. Without meeting Patricia's gaze, she kissed the top of her head, breathing in deep her smell of sweat and talcum powder.

Had Edith stopped before nicking her clone's neck and slicing clean through it? Had she wavered a moment, knife in hand, and wondered what would happen if she didn't commit? Sylvie watched the alien's chest rise and fall, watched its eyelids flutter in fitful dreams. The cheeks were high and rounded like her own, the lips pale and small. Sylvie knew if she parted them, she would see a tell-tale gap between its front teeth; it made her feel like crying.

The night closed in. Soon Ben would come to the stables to collect her for supper. It was now or never. It was kill the thing that looked like her, or let it take over. Sylvie stepped forward and grabbed the alien by its long, single braid. Its eyes flashed open instantly, as if it had been waiting for precisely this moment.

For a second, they stared at each other. Sylvie had the peculiar sensation of looking down a deep well and seeing her reflection ripple back to her in the murky water below. Familiar, like looking in a mirror, but also not—something essential obscured.

The alien smiled slowly, sticking its tongue between the gap in its front teeth.

Sylvie jerked its head back and sliced below the jut of its chin. On the other side of the stable, Star leaned her sleek head over the edge of her stall. The blood glimmered in her eye like dark water.

"Fucking bitch," Sylvie breathed as the alien's blood gushed warm over her hands and up her arms. "Fucking bitch," she kept repeating as it gurgled beneath her, its neck still snapped back, its mouth still curled upward. "Fucking useless piece of shit."

Sylvie turned into the dirt lane that led to her family's ranch, swinging the huge tractor-trailer wide. She had left in a manic fit, calling from the road to tell her father urgent business forced her to start westward immediately. Now, she crawled the truck back as if she were a

teenager again, trying to sneak in after curfew. Her watch ticked the time, after three in the morning.

She felt it, all the fatigue of the day flushing through her system and settling at the soles of her feet, turning them to lead. She meant to push on to California, see that film of blue ocean and dump the body there. But something held her back.

She gripped the body under the armpits and heaved it closer to the edge of the truck wall. She had never seen herself from behind, not even in pictures. The part of her hair came to a point at the back of her head that swirled out in ripples like a stone swirls out ripples of water on the surface of a lake. She pressed the pad of her left index finger against the point, softly, as if her touch could make the skull crack. It wouldn't really matter; the alien was already dead. But it had her face after all, it had this swirl of hair. She didn't want it to crack.

Gently, she cradled the alien and walked to the edge of Brown's Pond. The water glistened in the faint moonlight like a huge vat of black ink. She thought of Edith doing the same thing years before, spattered with blood, shaking in fear, in relief and triumph.

The first thing Sylvie did after her mother came home from her accident was take off the older woman's shoes, so Sylvie unlaced the alien's boots now. Her mother had desired a clone, a healthy clone, to hug her when she could have desired anything in the world. A slight wind tugged at Sylvie's braid. She set the boots on the grass, stacked neatly together.

The second thing she did was take off her mother's shirt. The alien's shirt whipped away on the breeze, made a sound like snapping and landed ten yards away. It crumpled like a fallen flag, something vibrant put to rest. Her mother had desired a clone for Sylvie, a version of herself

that could deal. The black water of the pond shushed like the highway, like the blood coursing through Sylvie's ears.

The third thing she did was take off her mother's pants. Sylvie unbuckled the alien's overalls and slipped them off the prone body until it lay completely naked. When her mother could have desired health, she didn't. She had desired instead another version of herself that could take better care of her, better care of her than Sylvie.

Sylvie held the limp body and waded out into the pond. The cold water inched slowly up her calves, then her thighs, then her waist until she stood chest deep, hugging her clone whose long braid wafted behind them in a ghostly trail.

What she wanted, Sylvie didn't know. All she knew for sure was the heavy weight in her arms. She let go and the body, skin white as snow under the dark water, drifted. The day her mother came home, Sylvie bathed her. She would continue to do so as long as she could.

The alien's face sunk below the surface and Sylvie got that feeling again, of looking down a well. She placed both hands on the alien's shoulders, shoulders that curved like her own, and pushed it down and away. Little bubbles sputtered from its slightly opened mouth. The neck wound flapped like gills do on a fish. She dipped her face to the water and opened her eyes. Darkness pressed against them save for an oval of palest yellow—her reflection staring back out of the gloom where she couldn't reach.

Chapter 2

The Chimney Bandit

Dean saw the figure on his roof from a block away. He eased the car into second gear and let it coast the rest of the way home, headlights opening up the night like a roll of film unwinding. The figure paused at the sound of the oncoming vehicle, limbs tensed in a stillness that begged not to be noticed, but Dean's retired pilot eyes—older now, sure—didn't miss a beat. He carried on as usual, rolling over the curb in a smooth, short jerk, accelerating just enough to make the incline, punching the garage door on and up to fit the car snugly inside like a foot into its shoe. As usual, he palmed a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket and lit it outside, looking up and down the quiet, dark street and actively avoiding the mysterious figure clutched at the chimney like a real-world version of Peter Pan: slight yet solidly, definitely there.

A pale half-moon cast the figure's shadow on the driveway in a spidery salute; Dean avoided that, too.

Inside, he placed his newly-bought groceries on the counter, put the kettle on for tea, greeted Monty the cat with a scratch under her chin, and flicked on the evening news to see if he couldn't catch something about chimney bandits. He'd seen much in his days working for United; a potential chimney theft felt laughable. The kettle whistled over the nightly weather forecast, trickling a thin line of steam. Clear night, zero percent chance of rain. Cooler temperatures toward the early hours of morning, but now a balmy seventy two. He turned off the stovetop and pulled a mug from the cupboard. After a moment's hesitation, he added another.

Overhead, faintly, came soft thuds. Monty twined around the legs of a kitchen chair, green eyes flashing upward. She flicked her tail as Dean steeped teabags, dipping one in each mug so that the hot water slowly blossomed into clouds of darkness. The color was rich and made him think of deep things—the inside of a mouth, the bottom of a freshly-dug hole. He stirred in milk and sugar with a small spoon and wondered, as he clinked it dry against the rim of the sink, how the bandit felt about honey.

Something clattered against the back of the house. There came a sound like skittering stones, then a whispering from hands sliding down wood. Dean grabbed the Mag-lite from underneath the junk drawer and turned to Monty, one hand on his hip and the other thumbing the Mag-lite's switch. He placed it under his chin and clicked it on. "Boo," he whispered, face suddenly thrown in sharp, scary relief. Monty glared back, blinking slowly one eye then the other, nonplussed.

Since Marta died, Dean had kept busy. The garden out back now boasted a corner of corn as tall as himself, squash, leafy heads of broccoli, tomatoes splinted upright with the help of yardsticks, a small but brilliant patch of sunflowers, their big dopey heads drooping like old men. There came another scrabbling against the house's siding, followed by a dull thump—the bandit landing. Dean imagined him tumbling butt-first against the cornstalks, the gentle snap as some of them broke.

He clicked the Mag-lite off, shuffled to the junk drawer and hefted the only weapon available amid its amalgamation of old batteries and loose change: a Philips screwdriver. Upstairs, in a glass-fronted cabinet at the back of his closet sat his Ruger M77, but he doubted he'd get much use of it now; it was a kid he was dealing with, at best. A sliver of a person. No rifle then, but still he tightened the screwdriver in his right fist as if holding a small dagger,

taking pains to move as quietly as his old joints would allow—just in case—out the side door and back into the garage.

Trouble on a plane, before 9/11, meant Dean's business. He was trained to handle inflight emergencies: altercations, unruly passengers, threats to the safety of everyone onboard. He remembered, once, a passenger locked in the bathroom; she'd been in there for an hour on a trans-Atlantic flight, Heathrow to Newark direct, and the mounting complaints had forced Dean out of the cockpit and into economy. Marta was his head flight attendant at the time, just at the beginning of their affair when things between them were as crisp and exciting as Dean's pilot uniform. She touched his arm and let her hand linger there a moment too long as he made his way to the back of the plane, to the woman barricaded behind the flimsy plastic door of the aircraft's toilet. A line of passengers waiting to use it grumbled as Dean passed them and he wondered, at that moment, whether any of them thought to be concerned instead of disgruntled at this mild inconvenience. What if the woman was hurt in some way? How would these tired-eyed people feel then?

Dean couldn't shake the feeling that he was slipping into *déjà vu*. The half-moon had risen, spilling a silvery light not just over his driveway now, but creeping into the side yard as well. He waded through this light as if wading through a pond, breath steady and focused, eyes sharp as ever toward the backyard and his target, hidden somewhere in the garden's dark foliage—he was sure of it. Marta would have insisted he call the police, but Marta wasn't here. Dean swatted the thought away, squeezed the screwdriver's handle, waded onward.

He was right—a slight movement in the corn, sheathed ears swaying. Beside them, the sunflowers, faces dark, looked downward as if afraid they'd be found guilty by association. Just as the last cornstalk slowed to a standstill, Dean clicked on the Mag-lite. Its beam cut a hole in

the night and settled on the bandit's anxious face, striped twice by the vertical bars of cornstalks. Dean loosened his grip on the Mag-lite, lowering the beam; the screwdriver tumbled from his limp right hand. His first thought, crazily, was of Marta, how much he missed her. His second bloomed from the first: *The bandit is a woman?*

“What were you doing on my roof?” he called softly, the need for intimidating gruffness folding in him like flowers at night. It was replaced with the feeling he sometimes got when Marta woke up before him to start the coffee.

The bandit's small white hands twisted together in the Mag-lite's lowered beam, her face hidden once more by leaves and shadow. “Is this 234 Windemere Drive?” she asked in a small voice, the question tilting upwards so much it got lost, trailed away uncertainly.

“This is 236,” Dean answered. “234's next door. Bryan Graham's place?” He couldn't help thinking of someone arriving at the wrong gate, waiting for the wrong plane; he wanted to adjust the Mag-lite to see her expression, but resisted. From the way her hands kneaded each other, like she meant to fuse them into one, he knew Bryan's name had struck a nerve.

“236,” she muttered, barely audible.

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the faint hush of the cornstalks rustling in the night breeze. He thought of approaching the plane's bathroom all those years ago, of trying to coax the woman out. How she wouldn't respond, how he could hear her fumbling inside, flushing something. The growing alertness that made him stop being nice and start pounding on the door. The exchanged looks of the waiting passengers, now tinged with the first hints of alarm. Marta coming up behind him and placing her cool palm on the back of his neck. Six months ago, Dean came home from his wife's funeral and lay down on her side of the bed. He stayed there for a long time, his eyes closed but not sleeping. He was listening for sounds—the

steady *chick chick* of the wall clock, the whoosh of wind against eaves, the slow-clunking refrigerator hum. They filled his house as they had for years. The normal-ness of it, the sheer mundanity of a ticking clock, made him cry for the first time since accepting that Marta's cancer had metastasized beyond help. He cried hard and silent. Everything continued, that was the thing. Everything continued when it should have stopped with her.

Corn rustled, sunflowers shushed, an owl zipped through the sky with a sound indistinguishable from bedsheets thrown over a clothesline—the way Marta pinned them up in summer despite the new dryer in the basement.

Dean's throat clicked when he swallowed. His tongue hung on the edge of a thousand questions. "Are you hungry?"

The bandit's hands stilled. He couldn't tell for sure, but he thought he saw her give the tiniest of nods.

She followed him inside where, in the bright kitchen light, he got his first good look at her—brown, shoulder-length hair, eyes to match that reminded Dean of the tea he'd made earlier, now edging on lukewarm. Her hands never stopped fidgeting, even when she took a seat at the table and placed them firmly upon its surface. She seemed young on the cusp of getting out of it, crawling toward her early thirties, perhaps. Had he children, Dean expected them to be about her age. Grown, but still not sure about it.

He warmed the mugs of tea in the microwave, then took out the eggs he'd purchased earlier and started fixing a good old-fashioned breakfast for dinner: Marta's favorite. "Scrambled or sunny-side up?" he asked, throwing a side-eye the bandit's way, three eggs palmed in one hand with the deftness of experience, of many nights played out like this one: a man and a woman, their omelets, together.

“Sunny-side,” she said and Dean cracked the eggs accordingly.

When the table was spread with food for both of them, the toast popped and the eggs wobbled and the tea re-steeped—those clouds of darkness again—Dean and the bandit tucked in with a concentration that bordered on mechanical. Monty joined them, pawing at bare ankles for scraps; she was ignored.

Dean snuck glances at the bandit between mouthfuls. Bags underlined her eyes and her skin, pale for summer, seemed particularly sallow in the otherwise warmly-lit space. She scraped at her plate methodically, wiping up the last of the split yolk with a piece of toast.

He waited till she stopped chewing before settling back in his chair, his Let’s-see-what’s-this-about pose. Monty chirped and rubbed against Dean’s legs, but instead of leaping into his lap like usual, padded over to the bandit and jumped into hers. Startled slightly, the bandit stroked Monty’s head and the old cat closed her eyes, lifting her chin to anticipate the bandit’s next move. The bandit ran her fingers slowly down the length of the cat’s throat as Dean watched, his face softening.

“Why do you need in Bryan Graham’s chimney?”

The bandit didn’t look up from Monty. Dean noticed her mouth tighten into a thin line before she answered, quietly, “I haven’t seen my kids in months.”

Recognition sparked in Dean’s mind. Bryan Graham moved in a year ago, a good neighbor with two small boys he took care of himself. When Marta died, it was Bryan who had sat with Dean as the paramedics shrouded her in medical equipment. That night, he brought over a bottle of Jack Daniels and drank with Dean until the old man, bleary-eyed for the first time in years, threw up in Monty’s cat bed. “So you’re the crazy ex-wife?” he joked before he could stop himself.

His words were enough to lift the bandit's gaze from the cat, and Dean was sorry for them. Her eyes bore into his and he looked away. Not for the first time, he wondered what Marta would have said if she were here now. He felt for sure, not this.

“He won't let me see them, but I'm clean now.” She bit her lip and Dean saw she had a sore at its corner, red and pulsing and ready to bleed fresh. His stomach looped looking at it. He wracked his brain to remember what Bryan might have mentioned about the bandit, what she could possibly be clean from. Nothing. All that came to mind was whisky and Dean knew that couldn't be right.

Drugs was what he thought, then, pounding open the airplane's bathroom door. A mule getting scared, attempting to dispose of the evidence. Maybe something worse. At the time, he didn't allow for other options. He hoped for drugs. And when the door's lock finally busted and the force of his effort toppled him inside, Dean was unsurprised to find the woman—stocky in the small space—pumping furiously at the toilet's flush. What did surprise him was her age—she looked to be in her mid-fifties, with a mass of salt-and-pepper curls arranged carefully, even meticulously, around her pink face. She had been crying; runny mascara ringed her eyes and a single drip quivered at the tip of her nose. In her hands and in the toilet bowl were not tiny baggies of powder, as Dean expected. They were what looked like bits of paper, torn into many pieces. The woman hunched over the bowl to hide its contents, the strips floating like soggy confetti on the water, but Dean pulled her back gently. He cupped a handful of strips out from the toilet and rearranged them on the palm of his hand, staring at them silently. Parts of a picture. He could just make out the side of a man's face before a jagged tear ripped it into obscurity. Half an arm reaching around half a shoulder. A tuft of graying curls. No face. A patch of radiant blue sky. Behind him, the flight attendants were urging passengers to remain seated and calm. All

except Marta, who crouched in around Dean's stooped figure, bypassing him, and placed her cool hands on the crying woman's back as if to say it's okay, you will be okay, everything continues.

Inexplicable, and yet solidly, definitely there. Dean started clearing the table. He suddenly didn't know what else to do. Marta would know what to do. Think about the little boys, she would have said. Think about what this bandit has gone through.

All Dean could think about was Marta, how her hand would have found the back of his neck and pressed gently, but firmly, in.

Dean rinsed the plates at the sink so that he didn't have to look at the bandit or her sore. "You were going to break in through the chimney? Why didn't you just break a window, get in that way?"

She looked up again from Monty, suddenly, as if the idea of breaking a window was more ludicrous than sliding down a chimney. "I didn't want to ruin anything. Besides, I read somewhere about someone doing that. On the news." Her voice sounded defensive.

"What stopped you?" he asked.

She was quiet for so long, Dean began to wonder if she hadn't heard him. Then: "I didn't fit."

Dean nodded, as if she was talking about a new pair of pants, or a ring. They just didn't fit. He felt like laughing, but he swallowed it back, afraid it, too, would come out wrong. A few minutes passed before he noticed he had been rinsing the same plate all this time; it sparkled up at him. He turned off the faucet.

"Are you going to call the police?"

Dean wiped down the counter. "Whose ladder did you use?"

She cocked her head. “What difference does it make?”

He stopped wiping and finally turned back to look at her. It almost broke him. She had lost whatever steely glint had taken her this far; all her resolve puddled at the tips of her fingers, which were back on the table again, twisting together. What quiet desperation had spun this woman onto his roof and then into his house? What strange monster was she trying to keep at bay, even as it threatened to pull her back? She was clean now, so she said—the effects of withdrawal showed in her withering limbs, in the flesh under her eyes that sagged as if pulled by a gravity outside the normal laws. At what cost, though? For how long?

“Why didn’t you just call Bryan?” he asked gently, and she began to cry.

When Marta was alive, she’d try to get up before Dean to start the coffee. He woke to the rich, deep aroma and felt warm with a contentedness that was to him, on those days, the same as love. He missed his wife very much.

He came around behind the bandit and placed his hand on her shoulder. It trembled underneath with the rhythm of her crying. He carefully escorted her up and out of the house again, the cat following right up until the door closed in her face.

The night had chilled considerably. To the right of his house sat Bryan Graham’s, dark and presumably empty. Dean willed it to stay so for at least another twenty minutes.

He swept the street, both left and right and saw what he had dismissed before: a parked Honda Accord with a hanging rear bumper, two blocks down, dark and empty like Bryan’s house. When he started walking in its direction, the bandit trailed behind and he knew he had guessed right; it belonged to her. She sniffled harshly, in the way people do when they are trying very hard not to make any noise and are failing miserably.

She blinked the car unlocked a block away. It beeped once, its back lights flashing. When they drew level to it, the bandit paused at the driver's side door and, instead of getting in, leaned her back against its dirty surface, facing Dean. She crossed her arms and pushed a loose piece of asphalt with her left foot.

"It's your ladder," she said, not really meeting his eyes. "You should lock your shed."

Dean nodded again as if she had commented on something as equally trivial as pants and rings—the nightly forecast, for instance, cooling up as promised.

The bandit looked up once, hesitated as if about to say something else, then abruptly turned away, pulled open the door, and clambered inside. The interior lights made the ends of her hair look like they were electrified. She started the engine but sat idling, staring straight ahead. She was still crying.

Dean leaned on the still-open door and remembered the crying woman in the bathroom, shredding pictures, flushing them away. "Do you think it's possible to be okay again?"

The bandit opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it. "Again?" she mouthed, as if to herself. She looked at him, eyes heavy and swollen. "Please don't call the police."

"Please," Dean said softly. "Tell me your name."

The engine revved. Her face blubbered with tears. She sniffed violently, touched the volume button on her dashboard as if considering turning it on, decided against it, then faced Dean one last time, eyes locked. "Hannah," she whispered, voice clogged. "Hannah Brent."

Then, the door closed, the interior lights faded off, and Dean stepped back to make way for her sudden lurch forward and away.

He watched the car drive to the end of the street and disappear at the next turn. Hannah Brent. The name sounded solid like a piece of wood. Dean stood in the street, holding the name on his tongue.

Hannah Brent.

Dean shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers and started home, stopping by his garden before relieving Monty of her boredom inside. There was a noticeable gap in the corn, marking where Hannah had been. He stood there quietly thinking about the night, about this garden, Bryan, his boys, Hannah Brent, what Marta would do if she were here. The moon rose high over him so that its light silvered the edges of sunflowers, their heavy heads folding in on the night.

Chapter 3

Dawn

My mother walks like a drunk by the time I'm in the sixth grade. She has a cane, but refuses to use it in public. She leans on my shoulder when we go out. Tall at twelve, I am the perfect height for her hands to claw into my neck. I match my step with her awkward one, and we circle the mall like this for hours, interlocked, moving together but slightly apart, me straining away to create distance where there is none. I hate these painstaking middle school summers before my mom stops driving, when we kill whole afternoons wandering through the Bon Ton and Bath and Body Works, not buying anything, just walking and looking. Her fingers feel like spiders on the nape of my neck—insistent—as she stops at make-up displays, at alcohol-based skin washes. I scowl at the cylindrical tubes of lipstick lined up like gun shells, at the inexplicable compact discs with their built-in mirrors, and feel my acne-blistered face redden in defiance. She pinches every few feet, wobbles, pulls me forward. “Sammy, stop that,” she hisses, digging into my skin, but I don't know what to stop, or how.

This is my mother, refusing the cane to bear her limp like a badge. She loves bringing it up to random people—in line for cookies after church, at the annual neighborhood block party, at my sister's high school musical—how her dragging left foot isn't the result of a bad sprain, but of a chronic, debilitating illness. MS sounds dire in her mouth, makes the lips pucker, gives her face gravity. When she says it, you can't look away.

“Someone's had something good to drink,” the cashier at Arby's jokes on one of our many fast-food binges, when my mother stumbles against me on her way to the counter.

“*Actually*, I’m not drunk,” she snaps. “I have MS.”

“You poor thing,” the bewildered woman says.

My mother doesn’t answer; she leans harder into my side.

Multiple Sclerosis is a chronic disease of the central nervous system, targeting the brain, spinal cord, and optic nerves. Symptoms range from mild—numbness in the limbs—to severe—paralysis. People diagnosed with MS experience the disease differently, on varying cycles of pain and relapse. It is an illness predictable only in its acute unpredictability.

My next door neighbor, Chris, spends his free time perfecting his yard’s landscaping. Every Saturday morning, he can be found squatting next to his precision-trimmed bushes with a pair of hedge clippers, carefully grazing the tops for a rogue, most times nonexistent, branch. He gardens well into the afternoon, crawling on his hands and knees around prized maple trees, digging into the soft ground below to readjust flowers, solemn-faced statues, stone fountains. Sweat-stained and tired, knees black with mulch, he ends each day at the end of his drive with a long, slow drag from a cigarette. True to ritual, he nurses half of the cigarette before tossing it down the sewer grate, letting the last lungful of smoke curl into the evening light before retiring inside his immaculate home. Chris has been living with MS for as long as I’ve known him.

My mother spends Saturday mornings—and every morning of her life—on the furthest cushion of our three-cushioned sofa. She sits propped against two small pillows and a special memory foam butt pad. Her cushion is threadbare, the once-vibrant red and gold pattern stained brown with a perpetual water mark. Cat hair lines the arm rest and the place where she lays her neck, and when my dad lifts the cushion to clean underneath, the hose from our vacuum sucks up crumbs crystallized by time, discarded pen caps with nibbled ends, and enough Double Bubble

wrappers to paper the walls. She has a stash hidden in the pocket of her motorized chair to help with dry mouth; she chews them two or three pieces in one go. My brother, sister, and I constantly steal them. They turn her vomit ultra-pink and make her speech doubly slurred: Dawnwinese, we call it—a language of dripping vowels and rolling consonants we've learned to decipher.

Her day begins at 4:30. And so does my dad's. He wakes her up before the sky lightens and sets her, sitting down, in the shower. After she is clean, he towels her dry, picks her up, and plops her on the bench before the bathroom counter where she spends the next hour selecting the perfect shade of foundation to cover her complexion: competing shades of ivory—bone-white. She takes care to shadow her eyes—usually in brown—and daubs blush along the apples of her cheeks until they burn red. If she is feeling especially down, she also applies a dark shade of lipstick. We know to come home on dark lipstick days and tell her how nice she looks. After her make-up is done, she blow dries her hair. When the whine of the blow dryer stops, my dad returns and dresses her in a different variation of the same outfit: bulky sweater, cloth pants, heavy-duty hospital socks, and granny panties with built-in maxi-pad liners because she refuses adult diapers. It is the idea of Depends for Women that irks her most, not the actuality of shit in her pants.

After all of this, two hours have passed. My dad hoists her into his arms, locking his hands just below her butt, and thuds down the staircase, her short hair wafting in the breeze of their descent. After a quick breakfast of Mini-Wheats (she is on a Mini-Wheat kick this month), he settles her into the furthest sofa cushion where she will stay for the remainder of the day, save for the occasional bathroom trip and a stop at noon for lunch (eggs since she is also on an egg kick—sunny side up, always, two slices of toast). My dad leaves for work shortly after today's

aide shows up—Katelyn or Alicia or Sheryl—and together, she and my mom turn on the first round of a marathon of Judge shows and soap operas. It is seven o'clock in the morning. The horizon gleams green with daybreak and birds shriek outside. My mother watches the flashing screen, window blinds drawn against the new light.

In old pictures, she has a signature pose: legs crossed, hands in lap, tongue stuck against the gap in her teeth as if to say *Bite Me*, contorting her face into something ugly, taking away your chance to say it first. She exists like this in my memory, in a clean gray T-shirt tucked in the waistband of denim cutoffs, white Keds gleaming; a young mother. She plans secret trips to the Erie Zoo, she starts Christmas morning at 4 a.m., she goes to pet stores looking for Betta fish and comes home with puppies, with kittens. She throws away those gleaming new Keds after stepping in dog shit and buys a fresh pair. This is Dawn Marie Mitchell; she doesn't think twice.

I am eight years old when my father sits the three of us down—me in the middle, my brother and sister flanking either side—and explains how Mom is sick now and will be for a while. I feel giddy with a sick dread. My heart clenches when Amanda, my thirteen year old sister, asks: “Will she die?”

It relaxes when he answers, “Not for a long time.”

We can breathe easy. She will have trouble walking and waking up and staying active. She will grow tired sooner. Her brain, my dad explains, will stop functioning like our own. Some days are going to be very tough. She might, he says, have to use a wheelchair later on down the road. But she isn't going to die.

My ears perk up at the mention of a wheelchair. A wheelchair would be cool. No one I know has a mother in a wheelchair. “How long until she needs one?” I ask.

“Fifteen, twenty years?” my dad says, lifts his hands. “Hopefully longer.”

This is one day in a life:

Her groans balloon in the air, and that’s what I imagine as I turn up the volume on my computer—word bubbles slowly popping out of her mouth to hover in the space above our heads. It’s hard to ignore, but I try my hardest. The TV downstairs goes up another octave, the house suddenly filled with a cacophony of competing sounds: the force of my brother’s and my resistance mingling with my mother’s drawn-out bleating. She never articulates her need, she just makes noise. It settles in the background like an itch at the back of my tongue, a metallic taste in my mouth like my teeth are on edge. A broken tap, dripping methodically—incessantly—until I snap.

I hold my breath, close my eyes, try to concentrate on my laptop screen. My ears perk for the telltale signs of Nathan’s resignation. He will break first; he always does. It’s like a battle of wills, a waiting game designed to root out the worst members of a family: who is the better child? Who is not, in other words, a complete piece of shit?

As if on cue, the TV snaps off, leaving a hole where its static was, and Nathan’s heavy step ascends the staircase. The word bubbles grow larger and press against my door, squeezing just under the frame to fill my room with the impetus for guilt. My brother’s footsteps are to blame, but I don’t move. My back is ramrod straight, tensed as if for flight, and I wait to hear the damage.

“Goddamnit, Mom.” He doesn’t scream it, or yell it, or even say it. He whispers it, softly, the God and the damn and the Mom soft as wool in his mouth. The sigh that follows breaks form, too. It is not exasperated or desperate or frustrated. He gathers up a deep breath and lets it

go as if showing her how it can be done; how one can stay calm amidst chaos. I do not see his face, but I can hear the frown between his eyebrows in the way that he breathes.

“Nathan, please help me!” is her response, the words breathless and flailing, hidden among choking sobs—the whole waterworks. I know her face scrunches like a newborn’s, that her mouth gapes in a cartoon-frown and thick slobes of drool spill out from her lip onto her shirt—a tragedy mask in the flesh, and just as ghostly pale. She has fallen on her way to the bathroom, wrapped around the thin-metal legs of her walker, and now she can’t get up: the classic Life Alert story. Except my mother is too young for this.

I am too young for this.

“Sam, please help,” my brother calls and my mother picks up on my name.

“Sammy, help! Me! Get! Up!”

“Mom, please calm down! Calm down!” A thud resounds and Nathan swears and my mother’s heaving sobs crescendo into wails.

“No! I will not calm down! I need—to get up—I need to get up—I need to get up—I need to get up—I need—“

The itch you can taste but not scratch, the slow soft devastating echo of a single drop of water hitting hollow sink, the space it takes to forget your senses when frustration is piqued and your mother is yelling and you hate yourself.

“Shut the fuck up!”

I do not open my bedroom door so much as rip it aside. I let it bounce against the wall and hit me on its inertial destination to stay in motion unless stopped by its equal and its opposite. I do not walk down the hall so much as dig my feet as hard as I can into the carpet to make myself seem bigger, heavier, more substantial in my unadulterated rage. For a second,

there is stillness once again in the house, as if my anger has popped the bubbles and we three are now just realizing we're covered in mist; obscured.

My mother stops wailing, but her eyes are bloodshot with tears. Gobs of snot slide along the funnel of her lip. She is frail on the ground, prone, and her feather hair shines slick with sweat. Her cloth pants swallow tiny limbs and her knees stick out like knives. She lies there as if her shoes are anchors, blocks of stone, and the first thing I do is lean down and slide them off. My brother crouches on her other side, the muscles in his arms flexed, ready to react, but the mist has sobered me. My anger crashes inside my chest like a bridge collapsing. As quickly as I stormed out, the charged feeling dissipates and I'm worrying about the mark on the wall from the swinging bedroom door, the snot on my mother's face. Silent tears roll down her cheeks—huge, tumbling pearls—and I rub her feet between my hands as if this will make up for my outburst. She smells sickly sweet—of talcum powder and bruised apples and urine—and my brother and I exchange looks.

You're the girl his eyes say and I nod him out of the room before slipping off her pants for something new and clean. By now, her tears have stopped. At first resistant, her stony face cracks open and she yields to my care with the kind of inevitability I expect kittens have when they're just born, their eyes milk-crusting and blind. *Take care of me*, they say and we do.

"I'm sorry, Mom, I just get so angry. You know you can't go to the bathroom without help. Why do you try? Do you realize that it means we always have to get you back up? You're like a sack of stones!"

I try to assuage my overwhelming shame, try to make cold the burning in my cheeks. My mother shakes her head and sniffs admirably. She coughs out a laugh and says *take off my sweatshirt* and I take off her sweatshirt and use its sleeve to wipe her face.

“Nate, come help me.”

And Nathan enters the room again, takes his usual position at my mother’s head while I take mine, grab her thin ankles in the curls of my hands as easily as if grabbing bicycle handles and on the count of three, lift once, readjust for dead weight, three again, lift twice, she’s hanging in the middle like a hammock, readjust one more time, lift again, yes, finally, she is back on the bed, knees together, arms outstretched, face uplifted.

My brother, sweat glistening along his hairline, his face red from exertion, takes a step back. A laugh bubbles out of his mouth, crystal clear in the dim-lighted room.

“Wha’s so funny?” Our mother slurs even as her lips turn up and her eyes brighten.

“You look sort of like Jesus like that, on the cross,” he says and laughs again.

My own back is aching from the weight of my mother, and my face drips sweat. I roll my eyes and touch Nathan’s shoulder as our mother gasps her own version of laughter, a kind that wheezes up and out in wisps.

It’s true, she does look like Jesus. Her hollow cheeks curve inward and her knobby-knees knock to one side and her hands stretch palms up as if waiting for someone to pierce them. New tears blossom in the corners of her eyes, but I don’t stick around long enough to find out if these ones are good or bad. I slip out of the room, lean against the staircase bannister, and cry.

At the dentist office, embarrassment deepens in my body, pools like sludge along the arch of my back and oozes toward my toes with a sad warmth. I lie stiff under the hot white light so much like a giant, disembodied eye. The dental hygienist—a brisk, nondescript blonde—scrapes into my mouth as the first sounds of my mother’s conversation next door seep through the accorded partition. She launches into the heroic tale of our family, starting with the stillborn

son. I know the words by heart: “He came out with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. He kicked once the day before I went into labor and that’s when I knew he had died.”

The dental hygienist taps a metallic mirror in my mouth; I catch glimpses of bloodstained teeth and feel sick. My mother talks about Nathan next, the boy soldier. Nathan is famous around these parts, from the tiny family-run practices to the sterile folds of major hospitals. His battle with pediatric cancer turns him into gold. I would hate him for it if he wasn’t so goddamn good. “Amanda was his bone marrow donor,” my mother says. “They have a special bond.”

My cheeks burn and the dental hygienist has to pry my jaw wider to reach the molars in back. “Stop tensing up,” she orders, voice muffled by the paper mask bound around her ears. Can’t she see I’m trying? I’m an ant under the sun, smoking at the edges. I want my mother to shut up, but the show goes on. Her dental hygienist plays into the bullshit: “How’s your MS doing, hon?”

I close my eyes and the electric tooth cleaner sparks into action.. I concentrate hard on the dull roar, let it echo in the cavern of my mouth all the way into my brain until nothing exists apart from the white light and its buzzing.

Three years later, after a slow but steady progression from cane to human-cane to in-house walker to store-loaned wheelchair, my dad finally purchases a wheelchair for my mother all her own. Two years after that comes the motorized chair, and with it her precipitous decline. She eats little, and her fingers curl in on themselves. She falls asleep in the middle of conversations. She can no longer read; the tiny print escapes even her magnified glasses. We buy her Word-Seek puzzles and she circles the hidden words until the pages are black with ink. We buy her new ones. We buy her the same ones. She never catches on.

The routine of her life settles in. We get used to bringing extra clothes with us on small trips to Wal-mart. My dad refills her pill boxes every night, four or five pills to each square— Sunday through Saturday, four times a day. She watches Judge Judy after *Days of our Lives*, these shows running the clockwork to her time at home. She wears sweatshirts year round, even in summer. She doesn't move. Her skin shrink-wraps around bones so sharp you wonder how they don't break through. Her mouth gapes open when she isn't talking. She drools. When she's feeling okay, she lets me change the TV channel. And when she's not, anything can happen at any time. She bursts into tears, seemingly out of nowhere, and her face crumbles inward.

"Mom, what's wrong?" I ask, alarmed.

She shakes her head, her mouth drooping, emitting no sound until she can find her voice, buried deep. "I'm depressed, Sammy. I don't want to be here anymore."

I'm eleven, and she takes the car—license long expired— and disappears for hours, driving aimlessly.

I'm nine, and she pulls a knife from the kitchen drawer, hovers it over pale wrists. "I'll fucking do it. Watch me."

I'm five, and she tears out the air conditioner from the second-story window. The curtains flutter in the wind from her anger. Sharp red splotches bloom across her face. She cries violently, chest shuddering in spasms. "I just won't be here then," she whisper-shouts, voice breaking. "I just won't be here anymore." She claws at the window frame, tries to pull herself through. She doesn't get far before my dad's hand grips her shoulder, pulls her back. I watch from below, in the driveway. I'm playing at something, drawing chalk mansions, pretending I am flat enough to live in them. Colored dust, crooked lines; they crisscross the blacktop in my five year old

manifestations of wistful, inarticulate desire. My mother's voice rises on a new surge of frustration, peaking at a dull shriek until the sound cuts off; the window slams closed.

She is emergency hospitalized on two occasions, once when I am a junior in high school and once when I am a junior in college. The first time, my grandmother notices welts on my mother's stomach; angry red gashes that liquefy to yellow and bubble with pus. She self-injects medication into the soft skin there three times a week and now the entrance points swell with infection. She grows ill, despondent. She doesn't make it downstairs in the mornings. Instead, she lies in bed. A multitude of pillows surrounds her small head, making her smaller. Slanted shafts of sun crack through the blinds in her room; dust motes float in the air. The cat kneads her paws between the folds of the covers and perches on top of my mother's knees, her languid eyes glinting like needles, blinking slowly in our direction when we peek in. My mother stays there for three days, not talking, until my dad finally admits her to professional care.

I don't tell anyone. Not the girls on my soccer team, not my friends. I go to school as usual. Afterward, I log miles for cross country. My muscles stretch taut on the last 800 meters. My chest aches with the cold autumn air, each breath like a knife slicing in and out. I sprint faster than what my pace should allow, pounding into the hard trail, finishing off an eight miler with relish. I fold into myself at the end, hands on knees, my heart threatening to jump out from my chest through my throat; I can almost taste it there, rich and red and full. I leave cross country for soccer and do it all again, run through drills until I can't breathe. I run so hard I can't think.

The official word is staph infection. The slow grind of the garage door rumbles the floor of my room at night, and my dad creaks into the house, the screen door slamming shut behind.

Lights click on and off. I lie on my back, staring upward until the stucco of my ceiling swirls out of the gloom into distinguishable shapes; I trace them back into ambiguity as he climbs the stairs to an empty bed. There are leftovers in the fridge for him that he ignores, pot roast and mashed potatoes delicately folded in tin-foil containers, brought by a woman from church; they've been stopping by all week, members of my mother's prayer group, leaving dishes on the porch when we don't answer the door or else transferring elaborate Tupper-ware meals into our arms as if passing off a many-tiered, strange plastic cake. The last time we've gotten so many cold cuts was at my grandfather's funeral. The food came in hordes then, too.

My sister returns home from her new town on as many weekends as possible. She and Nate visit our mother in the hospital. I go elsewhere, to my friend Erin's house. Our dads work together and when I walk through her door, he grabs me in his arms and squeezes tight. His cologne stings my nostrils. The light stubble on his face grazes the top of my forehead. I want to pull away, but can't. Finally, he releases me and stands back. "Why didn't you tell Erin your mom was so sick?"

"She's not that bad. It's just a staph infection," I mumble as Erin materializes beside me.

He gives me a solemn look. The cross from his leather necklace rests too close to his Adam's apple. I'm terribly distracted by the way it twitches every time he says a new word.

"You need to tell your friends important stuff like this. That's what friends are for," he says and the cross moves up and down. "They're there for you."

Erin grabs my hand and leads me away. "Shut up, Dad. Come on, Sam."

I follow, backing out of the tiny kitchen. I want to say that I try. I want to say that I know, that I agree. But it's not that bad. It's only an infection. The words catch in my throat; she isn't going to die.

She comes home a week later, bedridden. Her face has turned gray in the intermittent time. I quietly open her door one day and peer around its edge. The muted light makes the room one big shadow. I feel like I am stepping across some sacred threshold when I finally enter, met with the soft rustles and quiet stirrings of a sanctuary. My mother sits propped in bed, eyes half-closed, but she turns her head slightly to meet my gaze. This is the first I've seen her since before she was admitted. I push the door closed and lean against it; a faint smile stretches her mouth.

“How're you feeling?”

I can see the struggle to speak starting at the base of her throat and working its way up. “Ah right,” she manages, swallowing hard on the last syllable.

My dad tells me that they caught the infection just in time, that with her poor immune system, had they been even one day later, she would have died. I don't know whether this is exaggeration spurred on by the miracle of recovery, or if it's something else: a truth I won't grasp. Either way, I believe it in the moment when she blinks at me, her jaw trembling with effort. She looks on the verge of something, either speech or sleep or poofing right out of existence and it's all the same, settled on her expression with a quiet, even peaceful, indifference.

“Were you afraid?” I ask, because the room is too still and solemn for small talk.

Her hair rises in little tufts; it is the same color as mine. I take after her, everyone says it. I have her hair and her hands and her attitude. I watch as she shuffles her knees under the afghan, how the material ripples with her movement. She remains silent for a while, getting up the strength to talk again, and I look at her and I think how I take after my dad in some ways, too. I have his eyebrows, and his mouth. But of course, I had my mother's smile before braces pushed the gap in my front teeth together indefinitely. My expressions are hers.

“No, I don't think so,” she says and her voice is barely more than a whisper.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come see you.” I want to explain myself, to dig out the lead feeling in my stomach and expunge it from my body. I want to turn my feelings into words, and have them justify my actions. I want the words to be able to do that, but I flounder at *sorry*; it isn’t big enough. It isn’t anything to the weight in my stomach.

My mother closes her eyes. “It’s okay, Sammy.”

A silence takes over. She wants to sleep and I should let her. She must be exhausted. “I love you, Mom.”

She doesn’t answer until I’m already out of the room, closing the door behind me:

“I love you, too.”

The second time, my dad finds her after returning from work, sprawled on the kitchen floor, convulsing. He wastes no time in calling an ambulance, but he waits two days after the event to call me. I’m in my fall semester of junior year, fresh out of poetry class when he tells me the news. I take a seat on a stone bench outside the library and let its coldness seep into the butt of my jeans.

“Why didn’t you call when it happened?” I demand after my heart has slowed, is no longer raging in my chest.

“Because,” his voice crackles over the phone, “You have midterms.”

“Dad,” I sigh. “I’m an English major. I never have midterms.”

I clasp the phone shut after he says his goodbyes and walk back into the library, book the next Greyhound out of State College. I shell out sixty bucks for a ticket to Johnstown. The bus shudders out of the station a little after 6pm on a Friday night, and I watch the hillsides flash by in staggering colors of red and gold, lit from above by the slanting evening sun. The time of the

trip doubles because of the stops and the girth of the bus, and the sky blackens to pitch by the time we enter Johnstown's city limits.

Grinning ghosts bob in the distance, and fire engines run their lights without sound, the absence of the sirens eerie. The bus stalls just minutes from the downtown stop and the other students rustle themselves from makeshift pillows and look around, confused. Hordes of people line the streets, dressed in over-sized sweatshirts and holding out bags to catch falling pieces of candy, like so much confetti, as sagging floats stumble by, snaking their way in a long procession through the major streets. I can already feel my feet warming with embarrassment as the other riders click open phones, their exasperated faces lit up by tiny screens.

It's the Johnstown Halloween parade and I want to punch every goddamn balloon because a two hour trip has suddenly morphed into three and my sister won't stop calling me from the terminal. I pick my way to the front of the bus and ask to get let out.

"Why didn't you warn me the parade was tonight, huh?" the driver smiles, his bushy mustache threatening to engulf what's left of his exposed mouth.

I laugh humorlessly, shrug my shoulders. "I didn't know."

He opens the door and I walk the remaining two blocks to my sister's car, double-parked because of the parade.

She holds up her phone to indicate the missed calls undoubtedly on my own, all from her.

I ignore her pointed look and shove my bag into the trunk of her Honda civic.

"How's Mom?" I ask before she can say anything, knowing that by her over-bright eyes and flushed cheeks she's ready to complain.

"She's better now, but God Sam, she was a total bitch in the hospital."

“She’s out already?” Did I come home to blow smoke, or what? I climb into the passenger side as Amanda slides in behind the steering wheel.

“Yeah, she got out last night.”

“Well, how bad was it?”

“Bad, like nursing-home-option bad. Apparently she tried to go to the bathroom, fell out of her motor chair, and started seizing. And Dad didn’t find her until hours later. He’s looking into homes, but Nana is freaking out.”

Amanda eases the car onto the next road and then merges with the highway to take us home. We manage to avoid the tail-end of the parade, which glimmers in the opposite direction, the sweat-shirted people like ghosts themselves in the dim light of the streetlamps. I lean my head against the window and watch the circling lights of the fire engines beam across pillowed faces, the skin distorted from this distance into something saggy and sad, unreal. I think of Nana, our mother’s mother, and her stern face etches into the backs of my eyelids when I close them. She will be pissed about the nursing home thing, but that knowledge is common between Amanda and me.

“What do you mean she was a bitch?”

Amanda flicks on her turning signal and passes a slow-moving car in the left lane. “You know, the usual. Tried to go the bathroom by herself *in the freaking hospital*. Couldn’t even press the button for the nurse. And of course, whenever the nurses were around, she was so mean.”

The hum of the car propels us forward as my sister’s words sink in. The night settles down in the crisp, cold way of October, the stars impossibly bright overhead, growing even brighter as we leave the orange hue of the city behind for the rolling suburbs. When we finally

turn down the old farm road to our neighborhood, the street itself is cloaked in an undisturbed stillness. Chris's maple trees sway in a slight breeze, but other than that nothing moves. Cars parked in driveways stare at us with blank, empty eyes and the houses look alive as well, only sleeping. I wait to shut my car door, wary of the sound, but Amanda wastes no such time. It is our turn to make the house shake with the opening of the garage door, our turn to break the calm bubble of this crystal-clear night. Amanda presses the button and the door rumbles into hiding.

Everyone is asleep. One light burns bright over the kitchen sink, to welcome us home. Shadows envelop the rest of the house. Our cat pads into the room and her eyes loom at us, flash once, then disappear. The bulky silhouette of the motorized chair rests in the background, a black smudge on blackness that slowly sharpens in form as my eyes adjust.

My sister heads for her room, but I linger behind. I paw through a box of doughnuts on the table. The white powder sticks to my fingers and I lick it off as I make my rounds. Empty pill boxes litter the counters and the dishes threaten to spill over in the sink. A gummy yellow stain on one plate catches my eye; she's still on an egg kick. I take a deep breath and let the familiar smell of my house coat the back of my throat. It is a good smell, a good taste. I lick the pad of my thumb, eat the last bit of powder there and walk upstairs.

I open the door to my room, untouched since summer, and a shower of dust breathes out and into my face and with it the smell of my house made stronger by closed doors. The cat returns and rubs her body around my ankles, purring deep in her throat with a kind of buzzing. I pick her up and plop her on the bed, but don't join her. Instead, I sit at my desk with the light off, suddenly too drained to do anything but rest my head against the back of the chair and stare at the ceiling. Again the stucco swirls into shapes like clouds do, but I don't distinguish them. I let my eyes unfocus, let my mouth gape open, let my limbs hang limp at my sides. For the first time

in days, I let the fear out. I let it gnaw away at my insides like a slow, parasitic worm, eating blindly through stomach matter until it breaks skin. I do not want to die. I don't want her to die. I want to distill every moment of my life and re-do it, take away all of the shame and embarrassment and insecurity and start fresh. But I do not want to die. I want what's easy, what's manageable. I want rebirth without the hard part. I do not want to die.

The cat's throat buzzes and I turn to her. "Penelope," I say in the darkness. "We're all gonna die someday."

Penelope blinks, gives me her best bitch face. *No shit, Sherlock* she seems to say and I can't help but laugh.

I take her into my arms and we sit like this for hours as the house settles in on itself, the hidden beams in the walls creaking. I am no longer fifteen years old, anger surging through me like surf. I have reached a calm sea, I have cast lines in dark waters, I have found I can float. I'm not going to die today. And neither is she.

The light outside my window grows grayer until a faint gleam of green stretches over the horizon, spiked by the scraggly tips of pines in the background. It is not the first all-nighter I've pulled, but the first in a while. The fatigue drags at my eyes, fills my bones until I'm heavy with it. I should sleep before the birds start, or else it'll never come. I should, but I don't. I sit up in my desk chair, pull the cord to my blinds. I watch as the street lamps outside fade in and out of morning mist. Slowly, outside becomes less dark. The first birds start racketing, the sound fresh in the air, sharp, as down the hall a door opens, closes, a shower tap turns on.

ACADEMIC VITA

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Education

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA May 2015

Schreyer Honors College

Bachelor and Master of Arts in English

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Honors/Awards

Schreyer Honors Scholar

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Honorable mention in The Cincinnati Review's 2014 summer contest (fiction)

Winner of the 2013-2014 Edward J. Nichols Memorial Scholarship in Creative Writing

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Professional Experience

Penn State University, University Park, PA August 2014-May 2015

Graduate Teaching Assistant

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Optimum Marketing LLC, State College, PA June 2013-August 2014

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Kalliope Literary Magazine, Penn State University October 2012-May 2014

Mid-State Literacy Council, State College, PA Feb. 2012-December 2012

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