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IN DIM LIGHTING

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis consists of a selection of short stories that explore themes of identity and self-discovery. The title of the collection “In Dim Lighting” references the various protagonists of these pieces who all seem to be denying a key component of their identities. These stories, written in the literary style, chronicle the struggle of young adulthood while invoking many coming-of-age themes.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## Chapter 1

### In Dim Lighting

I was half-learning how to calculate the number of ions in an atom and half-wondering how to tell the guys about Amber when my phone vibrated in my pocket. *Buzz*. I kept my eyes on the blackboard, littered with math symbols and long words ending in -on, and carefully slid my phone out of my jeans and onto my lap.

The text was from Ricky. A Code Blue.

Ben, who was sitting next to me and actually taking notes, looked over and nodded slightly. He'd gotten it too.

It had been a while since Ben and Ricky explained the Code system to me. I knew it was established "before my time" as Ricky calls it or "before I moved from somewhere actually cool to bum-fuck Pennsylvania." Code Blue, I remembered, was second in severity only to Code Red, which Ricky said we can only use if someone had a picture of boobs. The drill was simple: if someone issues one of the Codes, the three of us have to convene in The Lair as soon as humanly possible. This was perfect: a distraction from Chemistry *and* from thinking about Amber. I spent the rest of class making up ridiculous Code Blue scenarios in my mind, knowing Ben would give me the notes later.

As soon as the last bell rang, Ben and I rode over to Ricky's house. We dumped our bikes on his front lawn and plowed inside so he could fill us in.

“But here’s the problem. Dickface Dan Selton already *asked* Jenny Carr. He asked her a whole two days ago and she said yes and the little shit kept the entire thing to himself. Didn’t tell a soul. So I come strolling up to her locker after third period, like fucking Romeo or something with the whole thing planned out, my hair gelled, shirt tucked in and everything, and *I* ask her to Semi. God, I looked like such a pussy. I can’t even think about it. And of course she’s gotta say no because she already told Dickface Dan she’d go with *him*. I couldn’t believe it. Now there aren’t any shy ones left! And the not-shy ones are all taken already. Goddamnit guys I’m so *fucked*.”

Ricky picked a plastic duck off of the nursery floor and threw it at the pale yellow wall behind my head, adding emphasis to his last statement. Blood rushed to his face, creating splotches on his freckled cheeks that looked like a cluster of islands I saw in Geography: Indonesia, the Philippines.

“*This* was the Code Blue?” I asked, feeling slightly cheated that my *I made alien contact* fantasy from earlier wasn’t panning out.

“You blowing it with a girl is pretty standard,” Ben added. He was straddling a forest green bouncy ball, bobbing up and down, alternating hands periodically to push his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“Shut up, man.” Ricky picked another toy off the carpet and threw it in Ben’s direction. “And stop bouncing on that thing. You’re driving me insane.”

Ben smirked at me. I let my head sink between my knees, my shoulders rising and falling in silent laughter. We knew why it drove him insane: if Ricky got on the ball, it would pop.

“Sorry, Rick.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? When we’re in The Lair, you’re supposed to call me The Blade.”

“Uh, sorry, *The Blade*,” Ben conceded.

Ben and I listened to Ricky’s ridiculous rules every once in a while. We saw it like this: being the fat ginger kid in an ninth grade class is basically like being Mrs. Cheddar, the pregnant rat that our biology teacher kept in a incubator all last year. Sure, you’re around kids all the time, but mostly because they want to watch you get fatter, and sometimes when the girls get too close to you they run away screaming *ew!* It’s a rough existence, but Ricky was my first real friend in this town, so I still loved the kid.

My parents moved me from Chicago to Wissahickon at the most inconvenient time to uproot a human’s life: the summer before eighth grade. Three weeks into school, we were herded into the school gym and instructed to form groups for the “candid photos” section of the yearbook. *A graduating class privilege*, apparently. Groups began forming, breaking off, planning their poses. Considering most of my classmates and a few teachers still thought my name was “new kid,” this was a new form of cruelty. Needless to say, I froze.

*Chicago, love your pizza man.* Ricky came out of nowhere and pulled me in front of the photographer. He draped one thick arm around me and the other around Ben. *Your mom make pizza like that?* He asked after the picture had been snapped. *Sure*, I told him even though she didn’t. Ben looked weirdly small and I looked like a deer in headlights, but later on we hung a copy in The Lair. It’s a good picture. Anyway, Ricky’s good at making you feel like something. So I called him The Blade every now and then (“because I slice through them bitches.”)

“Ricky! RICK-AY!” The three of us shuddered at the sound of Mrs. Durso’s shrill voice approaching from the stairwell. Before we could brace ourselves, the nursery door flung open.

“Why do you and your friends always hangout in here?” Her voice flew through the room like a sturdy gust of wind. “Ain’t you got anywhere else to go?” Ricky’s mother was an amazon. Upwards of six feet tall, full-figured, and the personality to match. She didn’t merely enter a room; she flooded it. Whenever she appeared, I wanted to slither to the nearest wall and suction my body against it like a tiny, malleable slug.

A baby hung from her hip, dressed in a yellow and white striped onesie and a matching cap. Babies were like an extension of Mrs. Durso’s body. She always had one dangling from somewhere. Ben and I were baffled by it. We had never seen Ricky’s father, never even heard a mention of him, but the babies kept coming in a sure and steady flow. We never knew its gender until Respective Baby outgrew the onesie stage of baby-hood. I stared at the child: round creamy cheeks, light brown eyes and a perfect spit bubble dancing on its lips. *Girl*, I thought. *This one’s a girl.*

“Mooooom, this is our laaaaair,” he whined. Whenever Ricky’s mom yelled at him he reverted from foul-mouthed big shot to cranky toddler in a matter of seconds.

“What the-lair? What do a buncha thirteen-year-old boys want to use this as a lair for? Not uh. Move along. Now.” She rotated her free arm in a windmill motion, propelling us out the door. Ben and I rose to our feet and scuttled away without a question.

“I’M FOURTEEN!” Ricky puffed furiously before slamming the door behind us.

The baby cried.

We walked to the Rite Aid down the street. There wasn’t really anywhere else to go now that we had gotten kicked out of The Lair. Ben never liked us coming to his house, and my mom never liked Ricky coming to our house (“a fourteen-year-old kid with a mouth worse than a



sailor! Sweetie, I wish you would make other friends.”) But we were happy to buy a pack of Double Bubble, sit outside the convenience store, chew until our jaws hurt, spit on the pavement.

“Logan, you’re- so lucky you have- a girlfriend,” Ricky said between large mouthfuls of *Tutti Frutti*.

“Yeah,” I said reluctantly. “I mean, having a girlfriend isn’t everything though.”

“Are you retarded? Of course it is.” Ricky blurted, before recoiling. “Er- sorry, Ben. I didn’t mean retarded like *retarded* I just meant like, dumb. You know.”

“It’s cool man.” Ben balled up a gum wrapper and threw it at Prius parked in front of us. I shot Ricky a dirty look.

We always knew Ben had an older sister, but we didn’t know she was mentally challenged until last year. Ricky, as usual, had been bombarding Ben with all of these foul questions about her: when can he come to Ben’s house and “get some of that”, etc. The usual Ricky stuff. Ben always got really shy about it, but Ricky was relentless. He demanded pictures of her, details about her. Now that we were in high school, shouldn’t he see her in the halls?

We were sitting in the The Lair one day when Ben told us that Dana went to Horizons, the special education school. For Autism, he told us, *because she learns differently, or whatever*. Even Ricky didn’t have anything to say to that. We sat in silence for a while, on the yellow carpet bordered with ducks, before muttering awkward apologies. We weren’t sure if we should be sorry but “sorry” is what you say when you don’t know what else to say, so we just kept saying it until Ben told us to shut up. Then he asked us if we wanted to walk to Dave and Busters to play foosball, which we did. We haven’t talked about Ben’s sister since.

“Er...No, I’m serious, guys. There’s definitely more to life than having a girlfriend,” I pushed.

“That’s easy for you to say, you twat,” Ricky countered. Ben hocked a spit wad on the ground in agreement.

Amber dumped me three weeks ago. It was right before school started. She had spent the summer at one of those sleep-away camps by a lake where you ride in canoes and eat Sloppy Joes and usually lose your virginity. The day before she left, I rode my bike to her house with one hand, clutching a bouquet of sunflowers in the other. Mom had given me the idea, and I thought it sounded like a good one. So I rode over and handed her the flowers and told her I couldn’t wait for her to come back from camp because without her here it would always feel cloudy because even though she had dark brown hair and didn’t really look anything like the sun, she was like the sun to me because whenever I was around her I felt really warm.

She giggled at my speech, in a small way, and then tears started sliding down her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. It made me really worried, so I tried to take it all back and make her forget the whole thing. Then she whispered in my ear that she would miss me a lot too. Her breath was hot and minty. After that, we started making out. I gripped her around the waist of her pink t-shirt. She traced circles in my hair with her rainbow-painted fingernails that looked like Skittles. I thought it went really well.

When the summer was over, I rode my bike to her house again. This time I used both hands because Mom said the flower thing would only have the same effect once and if I wanted to surprise her, I should try to think of something new.

When she came to the door to let me in, her smell practically punched me in the face: sweet like Dove soap with a hint of summer sweat. I wanted to hold her, to place my nose behind her ear and inhale all the way down the side of her neck. To feel her softness, the pressure of her

boobs against my chest as I hugged her, the taste of her wet lips, her salty cheeks. I wanted to know everything that she had done since I held her last, how cold the lake water was, what cool hand-games she learned, who her best friend at camp was and why. I wanted to tell her everything too, how much Manhunt sucked without her because Ben and Ricky are both so slow, how much I missed that squeaky sound she makes when she holds in a sneeze.

But I didn't get to do any of that. We were sitting at her kitchen table when she told me we were done. The wooden chair felt severe; a stray limb seemed to be digging into my back. She sat directly across from me, as far away as possible, so I lost her sweet scent. She told me that we were going into high school now, and that a lot of big changes were going to happen. She had matured over the summer, she said, and I wasn't right for her anymore. I told her she was getting confused, because she already matured last summer when she grew her boobs. She said *this is different, Logan, that's not the only way a girl matures*. I didn't say anything. She told me to think of it like this: she had finally grown into her Allie and I just wasn't her Noah Calhoun.

I told her I understood, but I had no idea what it meant.

I couldn't break the news to the guys. I was the first one to get a girlfriend, which was a huge achievement for the whole group, not just for me. *Not even a year here and you've killed it, my friend*, Ricky praised after I asked her out in late March. Dating her for the next five months gave us something to talk about, to think about. I wasn't the best boyfriend according to Ricky's standards ("if you haven't seen nipple, you're doing it wrong), but there was something exciting about seeing Amber in the hallway with her jean-jacket and white Converse and knowing I could just go up and kiss her if I wanted. I could fall into step next to her on our way to eighth period French and interlock my fingers with hers.

It hasn't been easy keeping the breakup a secret, especially when all involved parties go to the same school. Luckily our high school is a lot bigger than our middle school, so the social groups don't interact as much as they did. Now, the only time I see Amber is when she passes by me in the halls. Ben and Ricky asked me a bunch of questions at first: Why don't you and Amber sit together at lunch anymore? Why don't you and Amber talk any more? Why don't you walk together or even look at each other anymore? How come when I said hi to Amber yesterday she told me to eat shit?

Panicked, I handled the situation in the only way I knew how:

"Uh, she's into the whole stranger thing. She likes to pretend we don't know each other at school so then after school it's like BAM- make out sesh. It turns her on or something. I don't know. Girls are weird, man."

They accepted this instantly, completely fascinated by it. They didn't understand it at all, so they thought it was awesome. Now when Amber walks straight past our lockers, shoulders hunched and eyes glued to her shoes, Ricky and Ben throw me a wink. Pat me on the back. Tell me I'm the man.

But now that Semi was approaching, the freshmen fall dance that is rumored to make or break your reputation for the rest of high school, the whole charade was about to come to a life-ruining halt. I've tossed and turned for weeks picturing this night: walking into the decorated school gym in my Dockers and pinstripe tie. Seeing Amber, breathtaking as usual, wearing a dress she spent weeks picking out and subtle sparkly makeup. Watching helplessly by the punch bowl as she dances with Tim Bateman or Jim Dunleavy or whoever had the privilege of slipping the corsage around her tiny wrist, holding her waist in the pictures. Then the questions from my friends: *Dude...why is Buttface Bateman all over Amber....*

And then the inevitable: I'll have to tell them the truth.

The thought was horrifying.

I tore another piece off of my roll of Double Bubble and shoved it in my mouth. They weren't talking about girlfriends anymore; they were arguing over whether or not Jenny Carr was actually hot. Well, Ricky argued. Ben just chewed and nodded.

I rose to my feet. "I forgot I-I have to go home. My Mom wants me to do a thing. See you guys."

"See you." They muttered without looking up.

After three bowls of Count-Chocula, one rerun of *Bill Nye the Science Guy* on CBS, and a good night's sleep, I had an epiphany. I should tell Ben the truth before Semi. Ben, the level-headed one, the quiet one. The one who doesn't judge people. Ben would understand; Ben could *help* me. He could keep Ricky in line so he doesn't make a huge scene and blow my cover to the whole grade. Yes, this was a good idea. I would feel much better once Ben knew the truth.

No Codes had been issued that day at school, so I was free to go anywhere I wanted after the last bell. I told the guys I was headed home and I would catch up with them later. I watched as they turned their separate ways out of the parking lot. As soon as the coast was clear, I grabbed my bike and pedaled over to Ben's.

I had only seen his house a handful of times, but I remembered where it was. Sometimes the three of us would bike this way and drop him off in his driveway. He never invited us inside, mostly because of Ricky I assumed, but I knew that he would make an exception today. Once I explained the direness of this situation (easily a Code Blue) he would have to invite me in.

His mom answered the door. She was a scrawny woman with extra skin that hung underneath her neck like old, stretched-out elastic. She reminded me of a turkey. Her eyelids were smeared with an unnatural blue color and she reeked of Listerine, or something like it.

“Hi, Mrs. Eldridge. I’m Logan, a *really* good friend of Ben’s. Is he home?”

She turned her head, slapping me with a whiff of old-lady perfume, and called out for Ben without answering my question.

“Who is it? Who is it? Who is it?” A blonde girl skipped over to the front door with such momentum that she had to grab her mother’s shoulders to stop her body from pummeling out the door and into the street. Her smile was enormous; her eyes were wide and bright. I stared at her in shock. Was this Dana? It couldn’t be. This girl looked like all of the ones at my school: dark jeans and soft skin and curled eyelashes. She could have been one of them, walking through the hallway, pulling textbooks from the locker next to mine.

“Dana! Stop that, stop that! That is not how you act in front of guests!” Ben’s mom stomped a high heel on the ground three times, before turning back to me with a smile. “He’ll be right down, Sweetie.” She hooked a veiny arm under Dana’s armpit and pulled her away from the door. Dana grew smaller as she was dragged down the hall, still smiling. I stared as the house swallowed her.

“You can come in, dude.” Ben emerged in the doorway out of nowhere. I jumped.

“Uh, no man, it’s okay actually. I don’t want to like...intrude.” I was still staring down the hallway where his mom and sister had disappeared. Ben nodded solemnly.

“Want to walk to Rite Aid?”

“Sure.”

We shuffled our feet and kept our hands in our pockets. I didn't know what to say, but suddenly Amber was the last thing I felt like talking about with Ben. It just felt stupid suddenly, like it wasn't even that big of a deal. I wondered if I lived in Ben's house, or if I *was* Ben, if girlfriends and Codes and Semi would ever feel like a big deal. I felt like a dick for showing up to his house like I had terrible news for him. I felt like a dick for actually *believing* my news was terrible.

"I'm gonna bring her to Semi," Ben said after a while.

"Lily?" I asked. Ricky told me that Ben had been laying groundwork with Lily Gambone.

"My sister."

"Oh."

"I want to get her out of the house for a night, and I think she would like it a lot. She likes lights and dresses and all that stuff."

"That's...really, really nice. Seriously. Good for you, man. "

"Yeah."

"I could, uh, take her," I heard myself offer without really processing the words. "Ya know, so you can finish what you started with Lily Gambone and everything," I added quickly.

Ben just shook his head and kicked the gravel.

"You have a date, man. And besides, I...I don't really want to start anything with Lily Gambone. I'm not into that stuff."

"Oh." We walked in silence as I tried to decipher what that meant. Not into what stuff? Lily Gambone? Semi? Taking girls to Semi? My mind raced with the possibilities as we turned into the Rite Aid parking lot, greeted by the familiar navy block letters hanging on the white stucco.

“I just. I’m not like you and Ricky. I don’t think about girls like that. I don’t know,” he stammered, face flushing red. I thought back to our conversations about girls in The Lair; how frequently they occurred and how infrequently Ben participated. My pulse quickened as I began to understand. I had heard of it, sure. But I never actually knew someone like that. I thought about trying the “sorry” thing again, but it didn’t feel right this time.

“It’s nice because like, Dana covers for me and I cover for her kind of. That’s why I want to take her. It’ll be good,” Ben finally said, filling the empty space between us.

“That’s cool with me. Like, I don’t care. At all. Seriously.” I really didn’t care, but for some reason everything I said made it sound like I secretly did care.

“I’m *never* telling Ricky, though. Can you imagine?”

While I took a second to process this, Ben began hysterically laughing beside me. I fought the urge at first, keeping a concerned look on my face, before losing it and joining him. The two of us bent over, bellowing as we pictured Ricky’s reaction to this news. What the hell *would* he do? There were so many possibilities and all of them were hilarious.

“He would just punch you dude.”

“He would sneak protein powder into all of my drinks.”

“He would soak your dick in protein powder.”

“He would show me a slide show of boobs. On a never-ending loop.”

“He would let you touch his mom’s boobs if he had to.”

We shuddered at the last image as we walked up to the convenience store.

“Okay Ben, speaking of things we are never telling Ricky…” I pushed the door open and we both went inside.



We agreed to meet in The Lair before the dance. The three of us: gelled hair and collared shirts, sports jackets and pointy shoes that scrunched our toes. We all looked ridiculous, but none so much as Ricky, whose tie looked like a tiny garden snake trying to strangle him.

“Check this out.” Ricky lifted the mat of his brothers’/sisters’ crib and pulled a small metal flask from beneath it. He unscrewed it, cupped his hand over the nozzle and wafted the scent of the liquid dramatically into his nose. “Stole it from my mom’s stash. This is the good stuff. Cheers, boys.” He tilted his head back and took a swig from the bottle. He grimaced the way a hard, exhausted man does when he takes a shot of whiskey. I drank next. It was some kind of fruity wine. Practically juice. I didn’t say anything though, because I was in too vulnerable of a spot to be making fun of anybody else tonight. I passed the bottle to Ben. He drank too.

“Tonight, my friends, we become men.” Ricky draped his arms around us so that the shoulders of his jacket rose up and brushed against his ears. We had no idea what he was talking about.

As sudden as ever, Mrs. Durso flung open the nursery door. “WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING WITH MY ARBOR MIST?” She lunged towards Ricky, a baby nuzzled safely in her arm like a running back’s football. “GET OUT OF THE DAMN NURSERY!” We sprinted down the stairs and to the front yard, mounted our bikes and shouted promises that we would see each other in a few.

The gym was decorated: streamers were draped like garland across the bleachers, the lights were dimmed, and there were small clusters of balloons stationed at every corner. It was nice, but it still looked like the gym. I walked over to Ben and Dana who were standing in the way back.

“You look really nice, Dana.” I told her. She really did. There were white flowers pinned across her blonde hair like a halo. Her dress was white with gold sparkles, and a lot longer than most of the other girls’. Theirs were mostly form-fitting, the hem hugging around middle of their thighs. Dana’s flowed away from her legs, past the caps of her knees. It was the kind of dress that would puff out like a parachute if she spun around in circles. She looked like the sun.

I asked her if she wanted to dance and she did. Ben placed her hand on my arm and stood back while I walked her to the dance floor. I rested my fingertips on the edges of her waist. She grabbed onto each of my shoulders with a much firmer grip than most girls would. I didn’t mind. She smelled like milk and strawberry jam.

“Thanks, er, for dancing with me,” I said, because I felt like two people that are clutching each other’s bodies and swaying back and forth should at least exchange a few words. She nodded shyly and looked down at her feet.

That’s when I saw Amber eyeing me from behind Dana’s head. Her dress was deep purple, tight and short. She wore her hair down in ringlets, an orange wrist corsage and a snide grin on her lips that I couldn’t read. What was she thinking? Maybe she knew how much it killed me to see her here, all dressed up and with someone else. Maybe she was thinking about how stupid I looked in this jacket; Mom was right, damnit. I should have worn the grey instead of the blue. Or maybe it was worse than any of that.

Maybe she knew who Dana was.

It was possible, of course. Ben and Amber had gone to school together since kindergarten. They didn’t live that far apart. Their parents probably talked at some point; they might have even carpoled. I pictured Mrs. Eldrige in her clown makeup, pulling up to Horizons

with Ben and Amber waiting for their stop in the backseat of a mini-van. I pictured the Amber burying her face in her hand, giggling as Dana hopped out of the car.

I looked down at Dana, her messy, imperfect makeup. The crown of tiny flowers pinned in her hair like a child. She was pretty, but not like Amber. She was *not* like the girls at my school.

“Let’s get more punch.” I grabbed Dana’s wrist and began trudging off the dance floor, my eyes darting right and left, making hasty mental notes of anyone who’d seen us dancing. She tugged backwards before we got anywhere, sliding her wrist out of my grip. I scooped my arm towards myself in a *let’s go* motion, but she just shook her head and turned away from me.

Afraid to draw even more attention to us, I dropped my arm and walked to the back of the gym. Ben was right where I’d left him.

“What’s wrong, dude?”

“Nothing’s wrong. But she’s your date for a reason, isn’t she?” I breathed heavily. Angrily. Ben’s face dropped, mortified. I looked down at my stupid dress shoes, realizing the weight of what I just said but too proud to take it back.

Ben looked from me to the dance floor. People had begun to stare at Dana, who was making careful circles around herself like a practiced dance routine. Ben looked at me for one more moment, open-mouthed. It looked like he was about to say something, but he didn’t. He just turned towards Dana and plastered a smile onto his face. A fake smile, one that quivered at the edges. Without looking back, he walked to dance floor where the music had just picked up.

I took my jacket off and sunk into a fold-up chair. Felt the cold metal against my back through the thin fabric of my collared shirt. I opened my palms and looked into them. What the hell was wrong with me?

The music grew faster. The songs were popular, recognizable. People poured onto the dance floor. Most stayed in couples: Jenny Carr and Dickface Dan. Amber and Tim Bateman. I watched the way her hair bounced in curls over her small shoulders. She seemed so simple right then. Harmless; her face flushed with heat, sweat glistening at her temples. She smiled at Tim, grabbed his hand, spun around. She looked happy, in an innocent kind of way. Almost like a child.

A mosh pit formed; Ben and Dana were on the outside. She jumped up and down. He step-touched off the beat, hands at his side.

“Loge-man!” Ricky emerged from somewhere behind me and tried to pull me onto my feet. His tie was wrapped around his head ninja-style and he seemed to be faking drunk. When I refused to stand, he galloped onto the dance floor. He tried to latch onto a few different girls from behind, all of whom stopped moving, turned around, and rejected him. After awhile he joined Ben and Dana.

Sometimes they raised their hands in the air, and if they knew the words, they sang them. I studied how they looked, bobbing around like maniacs, faces flushed with exhaustion and masked by the darkness. I looked at the others, too. Everyone who’d walked the same halls to the same classes. Who spent time picking outfits, picking dates, looking forward to this night, whatever it meant to them. I thought how if a stranger were to look at them in this moment, they would never know that Dana goes to Horizons or that girls aren’t Ben’s thing or that Ricky’s mom doesn’t know how old he is. They’d look just like all the other kids, like everyone else dancing and sweating in the same gym, hidden by the same dim lighting.

## Chapter 2

### Spitting Image

The night that she is taken into custody for shoplifting a *Fredrick's of Hollywood* bustier from the local strip mall, Mom uses her one phone call on me.

“Tell the boys, Denise, will you?”

I say that I will.

“Tell them to get their mother out of this shithole.”

My breathing slows and eyes glaze over as I stare at the bathroom wall. I hold my face inches from the white tiles. My expression mirrors their blank-ness.

“I’ll tell them.”

I picture my mother: straight knees and quickened steps rushing by storefronts and pretzel stands. Security guards receiving intel from walkie-talkie’s and trailing after her. Onlookers gawking as they grab her wrists, turn her around, cuff her. People dispersing when it’s over: adrenaline in their veins and the beginning of a story on their lips as they prepare to share this snap shot of my mother with coworkers and friends, parents and significant others.

“You know why I called you, right, and not the boys?” she whispers each word in a soft, deliberate jab.

“Because you know I’ll pick up?”

She laughs, maniacally. I hang up on her. Compose a message to my twin brothers, eight years my senior. *Mom's in again*. My phone buzzes as they haggle over whose turn it is to pick her up. I set it to silent before leaving the bathroom, then place it on my nightstand face down.

I slip off my pants and slide into bed next to Aaron. I pull my nose to his neck and inhale his scent: tobacco, skim milk, lavender detergent. This delicate balance has only changed slightly since we were eleven: heavier on the tobacco now, and a different kind of soap. Our foster mom always used something fruity.

He rubs the sleep from his eyes and waits for the report.

“A bustier. But a nice one. The cop said it was worth \$150.”

“Damn, Carla’s got big plans for someone. Does she need a ride?”

“It’s Landon’s turn.”

“Well, she had a solid run. What’s it been, 4 months?”

“Three and a half.”

I roll over and he follows me. Cocoons me in body heat and comfortable silence. Our chests rise and fall in unison.

“You know what I was thinking?” He says after awhile, “We should have Thanksgiving.”

I prop myself up on my hands to look at him.

“You want to have Thanksgiving here?” I move my neck around, gesturing to our studio apartment with my nose. A stray cat nearly falls down our rain-slicked fire escape; I watch through the window behind his head. “This isn’t a Thanksgiving place. This is a saving-money-for-our-wedding place.” I plop down on the pillow with finality.

“Why can’t it also be our look-how-poor-we-are-give-us-money-for-our-wedding place?”

He nuzzles his head into my neck, buzzed hair prickling my skin.

“Who would we even *invite* to Thanksgiving?” I say while I conjure a full guest list in my mind.

“Well Denise, I *really* think our parents need to see this place. I just think they’d be so proud of us.” He’s smirking but we’re spooning again; I can’t see.

“You’re right. I bet my mom and your dad are sitting in their respective jail cells right now wondering how their little angels are doing.”

“Worried sick,” he adds.

“I’ll call my mom back and let her know.”

“Tell her she can wear the bustier!”

I reach back to smack him but he dodges my arm and flips me over. He runs his fingers down my sides, tickling me until I squeal and beg him to stop. When he relents, I grab his face and kiss him, long. Toothpaste and cigarettes. Lips as familiar as my own.

“Why don’t you have one of those? A *bustier*?” Aaron asks when I pull away.

“Aw, did someone learn a new word today?”

He grins.

“Now you’re in trouble,” he whispers, half of my earlobe in his mouth. He laces our fingers together and pulls my arms up above my head. I exhale until my diaphragm is empty, until my breath circles Aaron’s nose and eyes, warms the skin of his face. He kisses down my shoulders and I squeeze our united fist against the headboard, tracing the tiny white scars on his knuckles, refilling my lungs.

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The scars are my first memory of him.

I was eleven years old and newly plucked from the “neglectful, unorthodox, and emotionally harmful” living arrangement with my mother. A social worker named Mr. Meechie came for me in a white sedan. The buttons of his shirt were mismatched and his collar was sloppy, but he had long stalk eyelashes that made him look kind. On the drive over, Mr. Meechie looked at me in the rearview mirror and asked me if I thought his name was fun to say. The kids usually do, he told me. I just shrugged.

The Harboro’s house wasn’t any bigger than my mother’s. A woman with a blonde bob and a floral cardigan opened the door and crouched down on the welcome mat to face me. *We are so happy you’re here*, she said in a way that felt both rehearsed and genuine. Mr. Meechie handed some paperwork to the woman and a small white card with his name and phone number to me.

Mrs. Harboro helped me take my duffle bag to the bunk bedroom, where I would stay for a couple of nights until the guest room was ready. Then she led me to the kitchen *where they were all ready to eat!* She placed her hand lightly on my back and introduced me to her husband, their daughter Cassie, and Aaron, whose hands were resting on the table, wrapped in puffy white gauze like mittens.

I hated Cassie immediately. She was older and prettier than me and she reeked of familial normalcy. I wrote her off because of her birth-claim to that table, that food. Her belonged-ness offended me.

But Aaron, this small boy with scared eyes and pillows-for-hands, seemed okay. I remember asking him to pass the butter at that meal, just to see if he could do it. He made a pincer with his hands and hoisted it over to me but the knife slid off the top and crashed loudly on the floor. I picked it up for him and he smiled.



“What happened?” I asked him that night while hanging upside down from the top bunk. Strands of hair dangled in my face as I pointed to his hands. He scooted out of the shadows to the edge of the mattress and peeled the adhesive tape away. Big, red lesions tic-tac-toed his knuckles.

His dad made him play games with his buddies from the Shop, he said. They’d sit around in the basement, throwing playing cards and money on the table, smoking and drinking until the room was foggy and they all spoke like they had marbles in their mouths. The game this time was called Bloody Knuckles, but there were others too. Sometimes there wasn’t even a game. His mom knew but didn’t stop it. Eventually, some neighbor called it in. He’d been at the Harboro’s for three weeks.

I didn’t know what to say, so I asked if I could give him a hug. He said no thank you.

He told me it was my turn to show scars and I told him I didn’t have any. He asked me why I was there then. I told him it was because my mom stopped loving me.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you do something?”

“I don’t think so.”

“How long will you be here, do you know?”

“Not long. My big brothers are going to get me soon.”

“Oh. Did your mom stop loving them too?”

“No, just me.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

That was the first night Aaron and I fell asleep in the same room, the first time the question *why just me* hung heavy in the air between us.

\*\*\*

The next morning, I drive over to Landon’s to be debriefed on the latest Mom-incident. He greets me with an awkward side-hug, a cup of coffee, and a copy of whichever Stephen King novel changed his life most recently.

I thank him for the latter two.

His house was our house: his, mine, and Nigel’s. The two of them lived here alone for seven months while I was at the Harboro’s, before they got the clearance to come get me. The state allowed it because they had gotten stable jobs, an approved living space, and there were no other options. Our one uncle, Dan, my mom’s older brother, refused custody of me. I know that Nigel called him continuously, asking for his help or hospitality. He received nothing but firm denial on a few occasions, and then nothing but voicemail.

At thirty-one years old, Landon lives a life that looks aesthetically similar to two nineteen-year olds raising their pubescent little sister: mismatched and without much of a plan.

“Where’d you take her?” I ask him, leafing through a photo album of his recent trip to Maine. Gray-blue water. Lobster bibs. Landon smiling on a rocky beach, wearing sneakers.

“I just dropped her home. She was blubbering all over me, saying she was sorry and that she won’t ever leave me again.” He shuddered. “It was gross.”

“What was the bustier about?”

“Didn’t ask.”

I roll my eyes.

“Seriously? A concrete clue into our mother’s tortured psyche and you don’t even ask?” He shrugs.

“I don’t want any clues. I’ll take my turn picking her up and dropping her home every third time she ends up in jail, but other than that I don’t want anything to do with her. I don’t understand why *you* do, of all people.”

My face burns.

“Aaron wanted to have Thanksgiving at our house,” I offer, changing the subject. Landon raises his eyebrows, crumbles an empty Splenda packet, flicks it on the floor.

“Yeah? Tell St. Nigel now before he drowns his house in cornucopias.”

“I told him we shouldn’t. Nigel loves having it.

“He loves having it so he can invite mom every year.”

“It’s not like she ever comes,” I shrug. “And it makes him feel better to offer.”

“She *shouldn’t* come,” he says firmly, leaning towards me across the coffee table. His look is intense and familiar. Suddenly, I’m hyper aware of the space we are in.

When they first brought me to this house, Landon and Nigel took turns checking on me throughout the night. They had draped a sheet, white with pink stars, around the pull-out couch like a canopy. On the nights I cried for Mom, one of them would always hear me, push the curtain back and sit beside me on the mattress. It was hard to tell which brother had joined me under the dim lighting of the canopy until he started speaking. Nigel always bowed his head and

talked to me about illness. Landon always made me look him straight in the eyes and told me that all the family I needed was right here, in this shitty apartment in Queens.

I pull my eyes away from him and look down, taking note of the couch beneath my legs. *Okay okay*, I say. We drop it, talk about work and school. Landon shows me the website of the travel magazine that just gave him a great freelancing offer. I tell him *officially one semester left of grad school!* He pats me on the back, Google searches for a “World’s Best Social Worker” mug.

We say we will see each other next week.

“Tell Aaron to bring his football. We *are* playing this year.”

Fine, I tell him. I head out, clutching the book under my arm.

\*\*\*

My mother loved reading. I remember her sitting in our small living room most evenings, devouring page after page under dim lamplight. There were times I would come downstairs the next morning and find her still in the same floral recliner, head tilted back and drool pooling at the crease of her lips. Until I was about nine-years-old, I could go over and wake her if Nigel or Landon hadn’t already gotten to it. I could whisper *Mommy it’s morning* and she would come to, laugh, palm her forehead and mutter *where did the time go?* She would give me a kiss and ask what I wanted for breakfast.

Her book taste was very specific. The walls of her bedroom were lined with stacks and stacks of paperback novels with half-clad couples on the front. They all had titles like “Dark Lover” or “Sweet Longing” etched across them in bubbly, dramatic cursive. She read these novels quickly, hungrily, sometimes finishing four or five in a week. When we didn’t have

enough money to buy new ones, I would see her reading the same books over again and slipping spare change in a glass jar that we were all instructed not to touch.

There was one evening, when my mother had taken up an extra shift at Outback Steakhouse, that my friend Tara and I snuck into her bedroom to ogle the books. We were eight. She had been bragging to me that her parents have this *huge* bookshelf in their living room with *millions* of books I wouldn't even believe it. I told her to *just wait*, to *watch this*. We stole away from my babysitting-brothers, pretending we were on a secret mission. We held our index fingers together in the shape of guns and glanced fervently over our shoulders: left, right. Left again.

Tara gawked at the collection like I had expected. Her shock satisfied me; *I told you so*. She conceded that I was right, then reached for a book.

We leafed through the pages of "Wallbanger," reading graphic scenes that made our stomachs tingle, encountering word after word that we had never seen before. Words we didn't recognize at all.

The first time my mother called me a slut, I was ten. I had come home from school one day in October. I was wearing black leggings and a long-sleeved shirt with a smiling Jack-o-lantern stitched on the front; it had shrunk slightly in the wash and was form-fitted to my body, revealing my skin-and-bone ribcage and tiny, mosquito bite breasts.

*You little slut*, she snarled from behind the kitchen counter where she was sitting with a magazine. Her face was disgusted and different; I thought of the Halloween mask Landon had picked out at the mall the previous weekend.

I asked her what she meant and she told me to go to my room until she said otherwise. Hours later, I could smell sizzling meat and cheese downstairs. I could hear the clanking of plates.

*Slut.* I could not feel the word when she hurled it at me. I could not place it in my life or take offense in a personal way, the way I could when Landon and Nigel called me butter fingers every time we had a catch in the backyard. But I could see it in a memory, typed in small black letters on a yellowing page.

\*\*\*

Our Thanksgiving always begins with an annual visit to the Harboro's. Some of our friends find it unconventional that we have stayed in touch with a temporary foster family after all of these years, but Aaron and I just laugh, point at each other, and ask our well-meaning but frustratingly privileged friends to please define convention. They never have an answer.

"Denise! Aaron! Oh, come in, come in." We grin and hug Mrs. Harboro, hand her a covered dish of caramel-almond teacakes that we know are her favorite, and step inside.

The house is a difficult memory. When I enter, it feels like I never left, like my eternal reality is confined to this living room, that staircase, this leather couch with this boy by my side. It also feels otherworldly, like the person that stands here now has never entered these walls before in her life. I breathe steadily, wondering how I could possibly feel both things at once.

We settle in and Mrs. Harboro dotes on us, asks us *how many months until the wedding?* Seven, we tell her, but we know she already knows. Our save-the-date hangs proudly on her refrigerator next to Cassie's college graduation picture.

Mr. Harboro claps Aaron on the back in his big, burly way and asks him about various sports teams. Mrs. Harboro hands us an 8 x 11 of their latest family portrait and lukewarm cups of Earl Grey. Aaron and I bask in the warmth of the exchange; we smile and chuckle and appreciate every moment, pretending to be well-adjusted children visiting with uncles and aunts.

While the men toss around baseball statistics, Mrs. Harboro whispers to me that she has a surprise. Tells me to wait just a second, flutters over to the kitchen and returns with an old, folded photograph. She hands it to me with an expectant smile.

Aaron and I, age eleven, sitting at the kitchen table. Pre-algebra homework spread on the desk, two green Juicy Juice boxes. Aaron has smaller bandages on his hands than the day I first met him; he holds the pencil funny. I have red lips and a bad haircut. Neither of us smile.

My stomach drops and tears form in my eyes.

“Um. Thank you, Mrs. Harboro. This is...great.” She asks me to please call her Kathy and as usual, I refuse.

I try to refold the picture and stick it in my purse before Aaron has a chance to see it, but I’m not quick enough. His body hardens beside me as he catches a glance over my shoulder. He excuses himself, heads to the bathroom.

Tension fills my body, and suddenly the house feels more familiar. I want to go after him but I know it will only provoke his anger. I have made that mistake during instances like these. Similar old pictures or a too-close-to-home news story that make his memories resurface. When I try to hold him in these times, to stroke the sides of his face and tell him *it’s okay, relax*, he punches walls. He tells me to get away, that I don’t understand. Sometimes he leaves and won’t come back for hours. Most times, his scars are red and reopened when I see him next.

I look down at my lap and twiddle my thumbs; a faint film of sweat forms at the back of my neck. The Harboro's don't notice a thing.

"Denise," Mr. Harboro interrupts my thoughts suddenly, his voice in a whisper. "Since we have you alone, we wanted to let you know, in case you didn't already, that Aaron's father passed away in September. He died of liver failure; his parole officer found him. We weren't sure whether or not to bring it up, especially not in front of him."

"Oh, okay." I sputter, taken aback. "How do you know?"

"Well, the agency gives us names and backgrounds of the parents whose children we take in. Kathy and I take it upon ourselves to stay updated, especially for ones who've really made an impact on us, like the two of you."

I nod, processing the information. Slowly comprehending what it means.

"Sorry about that," Aaron returns, looking shaken yet composed. He tugs at the ends of his shirt the way he does when there is too much adrenaline in his arms to let them rest.

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Mr. Meechie visited the Harboro's every once in a while. His meetings only involved me for a few minutes, just long enough to make sure I was well fed and bruiseless. After a couple of questions, I'd be dismissed to go play with Aaron in the yard or upstairs or wherever he was waiting for me.

On one occasion, a couple months into my stay, Aaron and I were playing tackle-tag out front when Mr. Meechie pulled up in his car. The game was my invention. Aaron always agreed to play because I was a girl and he assumed that gave him the advantage. I played because I was faster and stronger and usually beat him. That day, I tripped over the untied laces of my sneakers and landed face-first in a patch of crab grass in front of Mr. Meechie's sedan. Aaron leapt on top



of me like a sugar glider, landing with his elbows in the dirt. It wasn't painful, but for tackle-tag the move was fair game.

At the meeting later, Mr. Meechie asked me questions about Aaron. What types of games did we play together? How close of friends had we become? The Harboro's chewed at their fingernails, clearly unsettled by this new topic of focus. I didn't see why I should be afraid though; I answered without thinking twice.

Mr. Meechie stayed longer than usual that day. By that point, Aaron and I had uncovered the best eavesdropping spots in the house. We sat down on the fourth step, the closest you could get without being seen from the kitchen, and hugged our knees to our noses. We were only able to pluck a few words from their muffled conversation. Something about my mother. Something about sex. Concerned. Inappropriate. Aaron. Denise.

After that, Mrs. Harboro took me shopping with her and Cassie a lot. Aaron and Mr. Harboro went to baseball games at the local high school, cheered for no one in particular. They put a desk lamp on the kitchen table so Aaron could do his homework there; the desk in the guest room was for me. For a while, Aaron and I only saw each other at dinnertime. I'd stare at him across the table as he ladled peas and rice and whatever into his mouth. I tried to match his pace, picking the utensil up and putting it down whenever he did. After awhile he caught on and tried to throw me off, picking a spoon up just to drop down again for no reason. When the Harboro's asked us why we were laughing, we looked down at our plates and said nothing. We couldn't risk being honest; it was the only game we had left.

One night when I couldn't sleep, I slipped out of my bed and tip-toed to the bunk-bed room. Aaron wasn't asleep; he lifted his head when he saw my shadow through the doorway. He didn't say anything, just sat up watching me until I lifted his blanket and climbed in next to him.

The warmth under the comforter shocked me; I couldn't remember the last time I shared someone's body heat, the last time I noticed another person's scent. We slid our heads down to the pillow and faced each other, closed our eyes, started kissing. I took his hand and put it between my legs, moved it up and down over my checkered pajama pants. We did that for awhile: left static kisses on each others lips and cheeks, felt the blood in our faces, the drumming in our necks and wrists.

It was never any more than that: sloppy kisses, groping over our clothes. We memorized one another, reaching for what we weren't meant to touch, hungry to break some rule together.

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I hold Aaron's hand on the car ride home, rubbing the pads of my thumbs in gentle circles against his fist. I don't ask how he is, but offer the same comforting silence he gave me the day my mom called.

Tomorrow, I will watch the way he wakes up. Does he jolt at the sound of the alarm, being pulled from a nightmare? Does he sweat? I will wait for a morning he kisses my forehead and makes eggs with his coffee; then I will tell him about his father. He would want me to wait for this.

We have mastered these roles, he and I.

Nigel and his wife greet us at the door; our noses are overwhelmed by the smell of rich gravy, our eyes by the many holiday knick-knacks that Suzanne has stashed at every corner of their rancher. We walk over to Landon who is watching the game and drinking a Miller. He sets it down on a cornucopia coaster.

"So glad we could do this!" Nigel exclaims. Aaron and I agree. Landon raises his beer.

“Is Mom coming?” I ask, suddenly, before the thought fully forms in my mind. Nigel looks down, contemplative.

“I extended the offer, but I doubt it. It’s a real shame.” He speaks like a 1950s television character. Sometimes I find myself waiting for an *aw shucks* or a *gee willickers*.

“Yeah, it’s a damn tragedy.” Landon doesn’t break eye contact with the television. Aaron and I smirk. I always forget how similar they look: Nigel and Landon. They acted similar for most of their lives too, but when the hard times came we all changed. We clung to different things: I had Aaron. Landon had travel, his writing. Nigel found Lutheranism and a capacity for forgiveness that intimidated us all.

We make our way to the table and pass heaping plates from hand to hand. Nigel and Suzanne bless the meal; the rest of us bow our heads uncomfortably and wait. At that moment, I’m glad Aaron and I didn’t have Thanksgiving at our house. It feels good to have a holiday at Nigel’s, surrounded by cheesy decorations, observing a prayer I’ve never heard before.

When the meal is over, we all bring our plates to the kitchen. I help Nigel and Suzanne cover dishes with tin foil while Aaron and Landon head outside with a football. As we work, Landon bangs his palm against the kitchen window periodically, telling Nigel to *drop his apron and come play*. As usual, Nigel waves him off.

We are halfway through cleanup when Suzanne announces she is tired. She stands on tiptoe to kiss Nigel’s cheek, then disappears down the hall.

“Everything was great, Nige,” I say to fill space. Nigel and I love each other, but we both know I’m closer with Landon. Sometimes when we’re alone, there isn’t a lot to say.

“I’m really glad you came,” he says while scrubbing a pan with a sponge. “Denise,” he turns the faucet off and faces me, “can I tell you a secret?”

“Um, yeah. Sure.”

“Suzanne’s pregnant.” He drops the sponge and turns to me, smiling.

“Oh my god! What!” I scream in disbelief. “Nigel, that’s amazing!” I lunge into him for a hug.

“Yeah, thanks,” he dismisses. “We haven’t told anyone yet. She said it was okay to tell you, though.” I squeeze him tighter, touched that he would choose to tell me first.

“You are going to be the *best* dad. I would know.”

He pulls away from me, smiling weakly.

“There’s something else,” he says. “You know that I’ve reached out to Uncle Dan a few times over the years,” he turns to rummage through a kitchen drawer. “I sent him a card for Thanksgiving. I usually do. But he wrote back to me, finally.” He picks up an envelope and massages it between his fingers for a second.

“There’s not much to the letter, just an update on where he’s living and everything. It’s the picture I thought you should see.”

I extract a piece of loose-leaf from the envelope; my eyes scan the short note beneath my knitted brows. It isn’t much.

I stare at the photograph. A girl and a boy. The boy is older by about four years, maybe five. He has brown hair and an intimidating stare; his arm is wrapped tightly around the small of the girl’s back. The girl has my same hair and eyes, the same blank expression from the photograph I’d received at the Harboro’s. My breath slows markedly as I stare back at this little girl with my face, this girl who isn’t me. I turn the photograph over in my hand and find a hasty inscription on the back in blue ink: *Daniel and Carla, 1971.*

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I wait three days before I call her. I wait until Aaron is at work, until the apartment is empty, until my racing thoughts have cleared and settled. I sit cross-legged on the floor of the bathroom, surrounded by white tile. I've never felt more like a child.

"Mrs. Harboro? It's Denise." I speak softly as we exchange greetings. *A nice surprise*, she tells me. I smile weakly.

"You told me on Thanksgiving that the foster agency gave you background on the parents. The parents of the kids you took in." I push each word from the back of my throat. "Mrs. Harboro, can you tell me about my mother?"

*Oh, Sweetie.*

I bring my knees to my chest and listen.

*Sexual abuse. Ten, maybe eleven.*

I hug myself, rock back and forth. I remember a rocking horse in our family room, wooden and strong, my mother pushing me back and forth, smiling. Smiling.

*Someone very close.*

Pressure at my temples, warm liquid down my cheeks, sticking to my face in streams. Cold air. Goosebumps.

*Always blamed herself.*

Flashes of pictures. My mother, me. Uncle Dan, Aaron.

My mother. Me.

I stagger to my feet and lunge towards the mirror. Puffy, red face. Wet. Swollen. Reminder. Reminder. My face. Me.

Scream. Punch. Shatter. Clank.

Heartbeat in my hand. Bloody knuckles.

\*\*\*

*Don't forget me*, Aaron whispered on the last day, dragging soft, small lips against the side of my ear. Both of us sat in the shadows of his bottom bunk, palms open in our laps.

*I won't*. I promised. I kissed him on the cheek.

We carried my things down the stairs. My duffle bag and pillow. A folder of my artwork: every drawing and painting from the past seven months. My toothbrush, hairbrush, winter jacket. A braided gimp bracelet Aaron and I had both made, exchanged. We fumbled these items to the front door where Mr. Harboro stacked them in a neat pile: *all ready to go*.

I gave my hugs and thank yous. Made my promises to keep in touch and cried soft, confused tears into warm shoulders.

When the doorbell rang, Mrs. Harboro opened the door and greeted Landon and Nigel with big smiles. They picked me up, each of them. Rubbed their hands through my hair, called me twerp. Said I was too skinny, that I was going to love the new house, that they couldn't wait to be a family again. They pointed to Aaron and said *this guy better visit soon. We've heard so much about you, buddy*. They patted his back and made him smile.

The little girl who looked like my mother left the Harboro's that day. Her spitting image, but with two big exceptions.

Landon and Nigel each grabbed my hand and walked me to the car. Safely, my brothers took me home.

## Chapter 3

### Thin Air

As soon as my parents ask me to come sit down on the couch, I know someone is dead. Parents always ask you to come sit down on the couch before they tell you someone's dead.

"Spencer, will you come sit down on the couch, sweetheart?" Mom peaks her head into my bedroom to ask the question. Her voice is sing-songy. I can see Dad standing behind her, a shadow in the hallway.

"Sure," I say. I press pause and Corporal Scott Riley freezes mid-battle. He has a grenade in his hand that I was planning to detonate, but it can wait. I trail behind them down the stairs.

Parents spend a lot of time *thinking* about how they are going to tell you someone is dead. They drive themselves crazy over it. They argue about how to phrase it. They argue over who should reveal what. In the end, you'll always end up on some couch with a parent at each side of you. They'll always stutter a little, having abandoned the script. They'll always push the words reluctantly from the back of their throats and watch the way your face moves in response, sizing up your reaction. When it's over, they'll always cry more than you do. They'll replay the moment when the words left their lips, wondering if they had the inflection right, remembering that as the moment you realized the deadness of a person.

Not recognizing the true moment, the couch question.

"Honey, we wanted to talk to you."

"Okay."

They wring their hands together, scrunch their eyebrows. Pick invisible particles out of the corners of their eyes.

“You know Mr. Mortimer, from next door?” Mom takes the lead here. Her question isn’t really a question. Mr. Mortimer has been to our house for dinner a few times. One summer, we spent the fourth of July watching fireworks from his porch. We don’t really go to his house in the winter, though. He never turns his heat on so Dad says we’d freeze our asses off. I usually see him chopping wood in his yard when I got off the bus in the afternoon. If he sees me, he waves.

“Yeah,”

“He had a stroke, sweetie.” My parents exchange glances. “He’s been paralyzed.”

“Oh,” I say. “He’s not dead?”

Dad jumps in here.

“He’s a fighter, Spence. They have him over at Einstein Medical.”

“Okay,” I say because I don’t really like when people say stuff like *he’s a fighter*, *Spence*.

“We thought it might be nice for you to go see him. I’m sure he’d love a visitor, especially someone young!” Mom says quickly so I know it’s the rehearsed part.

“I don’t think I’d be a good visitor. I wouldn’t know what to do with him.” I tell them. Mr. Mortimer has always been more of my parent’s friend. He never said much to me or Jackie.

“Oh, sweetheart. There are plenty of things you could do! You could play games, do puzzles.”

I don’t say anything.

“Your father and I would really like you to do this, Spencer.” Her voice stiffens here.

“We think it would be good for you.”



I look from Mom over to Dad. His lips are pursed, mimicking hers. He doesn't have to tell me *I agree with your mother*. His face says so.

"Okay," I say. "I guess I'll go tomorrow after school then."

They blubber *thank yous* and wrap arms around me, hold me between them for a while. I concentrate on not squirming, on accepting their hug. I picture them exchanging triumphant smiles above my head.

Eventually, I ask if I can go back to my room now. They say yes, I can.

I leave them on the couch and walk back up the stairs. Flop onto my bed. Press play. Blow up six troopers with one shot.

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Jackie loved science.

That was one thing about Jackie; she got *really* excited about science. On the weekends, before she started going out with friends on the weekends, she would Google experiments and try them in our kitchen. She was always making a mess, blowing something up. Mom was always buying more baking soda.

Sometimes, she would call me over to *come watch!* I'd follow her outside and stand back while my big sister catapulted hardboiled eggs across our backyard, launched balloon rockets across the sky.

By the time she died in a drunk driving accident, Jackie hadn't done an experiment in months. Mom and Dad were always nagging her about it, telling her to *not let go of her passion*. Had she tried the one with milk and the dish soap? They'd search ideas online and buy all of the ingredients, trying to get her excited about them, but it never worked. Sometimes I'd see Mom in

the kitchen, taking bottles and boxes that she'd set up on the table and putting them back into the cabinets, unopened.

When I asked Jackie why she didn't like science anymore, she told me that seventeen-year-olds didn't do that kind of stuff and that I should get out of her room.

Since then, I've tried a few experiments of my own.

If you pour rubbing alcohol into an empty water bottle, you can make your own cloud. You have to pour in just enough liquid, put the cap on, and turn the bottle in all directions, so the alcohol coats every side. Then you hold the bottle with both hands, one stacked a few inches above the other. You have to twist in opposite directions as hard as you can, creating enough pressure inside so that you can feel the cap about to pop off. When you're ready- and here's the tricky part- you have to unscrew the cap slowly, slowly. You have to aim the bottle somewhere safe and watch the cap soar away: a tiny flying saucer.

Then you have your cloud: white, feathery, swirling magically in the top portion of the bottle. You can get close to it. Put your face inches from something that normally floats miles above your head. Watch how it dissipates in layers, peeling off like tufts of cotton candy and exiting through the bottleneck. The color fades quickly: from opaque white, to grey, to nothing.

You only have it for a couple of minutes.

Mrs. Feldman passes around empty Aquafina bottles, vials of rubbing alcohol, aprons and goggles. She reads the names of our lab partners off a sheet of paper. Mine is Erica DiPetro, she says. Erica grabs her books and walks over to me. She puts her goggles on and smooths her curly blond hair behind her ears.

"Have you ever done this before?" I ask her.

“No, but it sounds cool,” she says.

“It *is* cool,” I tell her. “I’ve already done it on my own.”

She picks up the water bottle, throws it up in a spin and catches it with the other hand.

“Cool,” she says.

I raise my hand and Mrs. Feldman motions me up to her desk.

“What’s the problem, Spencer?” She has the classic teacher voice.

“I was just wondering if I could work alone for the assignment. See, I’ve already done it on my own so it would be a lot faster if I didn’t have to slow down and explain it to a partner.”

She scowls at me.

“Your parents made it clear they want you to socialize in class.” Her voice drops to a whisper. “Why don’t you try working with Erica?”

“With all due respect, Ma’am, I am going to socialize today. I’m visiting a dying guy after school, and I’m going to be very social with him.”

She scowls again, a sad scowl. A scowl that says *I know what this is actually about. God, you’re only twelve. How awful to have gone through something so hard at only twelve.* I’ve grown used to this scowl in the past eight months. It’s a good sign, usually. It means I’m about to get what I want.

She hands me an extra bottle and vial, motions to a workstation in the front. Erica stares at me from the back of the classroom before Mrs. Feldman goes over to her, tells her to join Todd and Riley in a group of three.

I put on my goggles and follow the steps. Turn the alcohol into something pressured, something beautiful, something gone.

\*\*\*

After school, Mom takes me to the hospital. She's not staying, she tells me twice on the drive over. She's just going to come in and help me find the room. Mr. Mortimer is a good man and I shouldn't feel worried about anything. He's going to appreciate my visit, she tells me. She'll pick me up in an hour.

Once mom finds the right entrance, we park the car and go inside. She talks to some lady at a desk while I look around. I know I'm supposed to hate hospitals, but I don't really. They get a bad reputation because so many people die in them, but no one acknowledges the little things that are nice about hospitals. Like, there are always trays of food being brought right to your bed. And a bunch of people who are just trying to cheer you up all the time. Plus, they always have the lights on in the hallway. Even late at night, it's never *really* dark in a hospital. You always know somebody's awake.

"Okay. B72. Right in there, Sweetie." Mom crouches down to face me and takes both of my hands in hers. "I love you so much. You're doing a good thing." I nod and she kisses me on the head.

Then I go into Mr. Mortimer's room.

"Hi," I say to him.

"Who's that?" He starts adjusting himself in the bed, hoisting his body into a sitting position. His voice is grizzly and his beard is untamed. I've only ever seen him outdoors before now, always wearing thick flannel shirts and black gloves. He looks so out of place in the little white bed. Like a captured animal, tranquilized and brought here as the subject of some experiment.

"It's Spencer Ivory, sir. Your neighbor. My mom said you knew I was coming."

“I know who you are, Spencer Ivory.” He takes his right hand and sweeps it over his eyes, down his beard. Then he waves it towards the leather chair by the window. His left arm stays motionless.

I sit.

“Remind me kid, how old are you now?” Mr. Mortimer winces when he turns his thick neck to face me.

“Twelve.”

“Twelve.” He nods his head up and down and closes his eyes, like he’s being hit with a bunch of memories. “You got a girlfriend then?”

“No, sir.”

“Why not?”

“I guess I’m not very good at being social, sir.”

“Yeah? No kidding. Hey, you can cut the ‘sir’ shit.”

“Sorry, sir. Do you want to do a puzzle?”

Mr. Mortimer cocks his head to the side and bugs his eyes out.

“Let me try to understand this, Spencer Ivory. You came all the way out here to do a puzzle with me?”

“No, well. My parents want me to do puzzles with you because they want me to spend time with someone who’s dying.”

Mr. Mortimer doesn’t say anything for a minute. He just looks at me and heaves big breaths in and out, loudly enough that I can hear them.

“Maybe you should check another room then, kid. I ain’t dying.”

“Actually, sir, we’re all dying,” I tell him.

Mr. Mortimer laughs like there's gravel in his throat.

"Who told you that?"

"A man on TV said it," I tell him, but I don't tell him who. It was on one of the late night programs that my parents don't know I stay up watching when I can't sleep.

"Sounds like some pessimistic glass-half-empty bullshit."

"You look like an empty-glass kind of guy, sir." I say.

"The hell is that supposed to mean?"

"That you drink."

"Oh yeah? How do you figure?" He raises his voice.

"It's obvious. You're always taking swigs from a metal container when you're chopping wood or you're sitting on your porch. You even smell like alcohol now, but I know you haven't had any recently because you've been in the hospital. That means it's so deep in your pores that you're still sweating it out. And you had a stroke. A lot of alcoholics have strokes."

"Well then. Aren't you a perceptive little shit? Why don't you just get the hell out of here?"

"I'm supposed to stay an hour, sir."

"You can stay in the goddamn hallway for an hour!" Mr. Mortimer yells. He's sweating a lot. He runs his right hand up and down over his face again.

"If that's what you want." I stand up to go. "My mom's going to want me to come back and see you again," I tell him. "I think it would be best if we just did a puzzle next time. I have three, so don't worry. I'll bring one with me."

Mr. Mortimer doesn't say anything; he just grunts.

\*\*\*

Alcohol is an organic compound.

Mrs. Feldman writes this fact on the black board in white chalk. I copy it down. She asks the class if we remember from our textbook the common, every-day uses for alcohol. Students raise their hands, give answers. She writes them down in bullet-points.

Perfume. Sweeteners. Certain medications.

Erica asks if science experiments are a use for alcohol too. Mrs. Feldman laughs, says *very good, Erica*. She writes “experiments” down under “mouth wash.”

No one mentions any drinks.

After school, I tear the page of notes out of my copybook. I think about adding some things, facts I’d read on the internet. Like, ‘alcohol impairs cognitive functioning, emotions, and perception.’ Or, ‘alcohol is a depressant.’

“Depressant.” I whisper the word. Feel how the sound mimics its meaning, how it seems to slow down in my mouth. I cross out “organic compound” and write “depressant” in its place. I fold up the paper, stuff it in the pocket of my windbreaker.

Mom drives me to the hospital again. When she asked about my last visit with Mr. Mortimer, I did not tell her I spent 45 minutes playing *Zombierville USA* in the hallway until my butt fell asleep. I smiled and told her it went well. She smiled and told me she’d bring me back Thursday.

“Hi, Mr. Mortimer.” I say when I enter his room. I’m holding a puzzle of South America and the sheet of chemistry notes.

“Back so soon?”

“I brought you something.” I hold the box out to him.

“I hate puzzles.”

“Why?” I’ve always loved puzzles. Neat, tiny pieces. No holes.

“The wife loved them.” Mr. Mortimer’s right shoulder rises, a lop-sided shrug.

“Oh. Did your wife die?”

“She left. Any more wounds you want to open, kid? They’ve probably got a scalpel ‘round here you could use.” He motions around the room.

“No, sir,” I say.

I stare at him. Burly and sweaty. Uncomfortable in the stiff white bed. Did she leave because of his drinking? I want to ask him. Or did he start drinking because she left?

“What’s with the paper?” Mr. Mortimer changes the subject. I look down at the page littered with pen-marks, torn at the edges. I wonder, when Mr. Mortimer was in school, if his chemistry teacher taught him that alcohol was an organic compound or a depressant.

“It’s nothing, sir.” I put it back in my pocket. “I’m really sorry about your wife.”

He leans back and thinks for a moment, palming his beard.

“It’s my own fault Terry left. That’s no tragic event,” he says slowly. “I wanted to tell you, though, kid, I am sorry about your sister.” Mr. Mortimer looks me in the eyes. “I am very, very sorry about that.”

\*\*\*

Jackie’s last big experiment took her to the county science fair. She wanted to know which liquid evaporated at the fastest rate. She set up four beakers by the windowsill in her bedroom: water, vinegar, oil, and nail polish remover. For a week she sat on her bed, chewed the cap of her pen, recorded the results.



Nail polish remover evaporated first. I remember her screaming down the hall to me when she got home from school one day: *it's completely gone!* Her hypothesis was water, but getting it wrong was always more exciting. I rushed over to gawk at the empty beaker. Jackie and I spun around, imagining nail-polish particles circling us in an invisible cloud.

*I'd be nail polish remover, if I had to choose,* Jackie confided as she stared into the bottle before thrusting her arms in the air like a magician.

When she came into my room that night, she smelled like the empty beaker.

It wasn't unheard of. She did this a few times during those last months: kneeled at the edge of my bed, cried until watermarks appeared on my navy blue comforter. Sometimes she would see them and start laughing, apologize. Try to cheer me up by finding animals in the random shapes of moisture. Sometimes she would just keep crying. *Depression.* I learned the word in whispers. Researched it. Took notes. Felt the way it quickened my blood, the way it slowed down on my tongue.

When she opened my door that night, Jackie did not mean to stay.

"Cover for me? I'm going to Christine's." Her voice sounded like snow that was leftover on the ground, stomped through by numerous pairs of boots. I couldn't see her when she asked me this. She didn't turn the lights on. She didn't get too close. I made out her outline, heard her request, agreed.

I was awake when the phone rang hours later. I was awake when my parents screamed from their bedroom down the hallway. I didn't get up and go to them. I didn't tell them that I'd seen her, what she told me, how she'd smelled. Instead, I pulled the navy blue comforter over my head, laid as still as possible and counted my breaths.

*One, two, three...* breaths I would take that I somehow knew Jackie wouldn't. I had to count them. Take inventory. Keep a record in case, somehow, she came back to check what she'd missed.

I got to four-hundred-eighteen before my parents came into my room, pulled the blanket away, brought me to the couch.

\*\*\*

"Is it boring being in here all the time, sir?" Mr. Mortimer hands me an oblong puzzle piece.

"There," he mutters, motioning to an open spot in the middle of Argentina. "'Course it's boring."

"So you like it when I visit?"

"You're alright," he chuckles, "how is it spending time with someone who's dying, anyway?"

I've been coming to the hospital for weeks now and Mr. Mortimer hasn't asked me to wait in the hallway once. I asked him if he forgave me for that first day. He grunted and told me that I *ain't all bad*. Then he told me to open the puzzle. We're still working on it because Mr. Mortimer is pretty bad at puzzles. He brings each piece up to his nose and squints at it for a while before he figures out where it goes.

"It ain't all bad," I say, mimicking him. Mr. Mortimer always laughs when I mimic him.

"Won't be too much longer, anyhow. Doctor says I can go home pretty soon."

"Really?" The piece of Ecuador I'm holding falls back onto the table.

"Yeah. Next week I think."

I try to picture it: Mr. Mortimer outside again. Slumped on his front porch. Bringing his flask up and down from his mouth, right-handed.

“How are...I mean, what are you going to do at home, sir?”

“Same I always have.”

“But it’ll be harder now.” I feel my brow crinkle, my voice soften in concern.

He sighs like he’s been waiting for me to say that.

“Look. You’re smart. I get it. But ya know what? I’m smart too.” He drops the puzzle piece he’d been examining.

“I know, but-“

“And this,” he points to his arm, “can’t stop me from doing things.”

“Maybe certain things -“

“I don’t mean *certain* things.”

“I don’t understand, sir.”

“I know.” He says sadly, a confession. “It’s like this. I messed it up with my wife, right? But I had the house. Hell, I had a small business. I kept going. Now, I messed up my health. But I can’t just stop doing things because I messed my life up. That would be even worse than the first mess-up. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.” I agree slowly, my eyes on my shoes. I’m lying, we both know. I don’t know what he means. We let our difference hang between us for a minute.

“Ah, just forget it.” Mr. Mortimer dismisses. “Here, right there.”

He reaches across the lifeless side of his body to hand me a small piece of Chile. I take it and set it down on the half-constructed picture, slide it on top of the empty space where he had pointed. I turn it every way, try to jam it into place, but it’s the wrong piece. It doesn’t fit.

The hospital sets Mr. Mortimer up with a nurse: Jeanette. She comes to his house every day to do a lot of little things and a few big things. Sometimes she massages his arm, gives him special exercises. Other times, I see her sitting with him on the porch just talking. He doesn't hold a drink when she's there.

I usually go over when Jeanette leaves. I was worried at first, that Mr. Mortimer and I would stop hanging out when he went home from the hospital, but that hasn't been the case. He has a lot of stories, he told me, so he wants to make sure he gets them all out. He especially likes telling me stories about when he was twelve; the ruler-wielding teachers, the schoolyard fistfights. I do little things for him while I listen: sweep stale bread crumbs from his kitchen floor, dust the glass of his picture frames. He's outside in most of these pictures: holding a large fish from the end of a line, standing on the top of some mountain he scaled. I point to them sometimes to ask who took the picture. *My buddy Pete*, he usually says or *my pal Dan*.

"It sounds like you have a lot of friends, sir," I told Mr. Mortimer one day.

"Yeah," he trailed off, looking at me kind of sad. "I did have a lot of friends."

"Where are they now?"

"They're around," he said in a way that made it clear he didn't want to talk anymore.

Sometimes when Mom comes to bring me home for dinner, she drops off a covered dish for Mr. Mortimer. He always tells her she shouldn't have done it, and then starts eating it immediately. He's usually scarfed down at least half before we even leave. Mom always beams at this.

"I had no idea you guys would hit it off like this," she tells me often.

\*\*\*

We learned the word ‘regurgitation ’ last year in Biology. When Mrs. Feldman uses it now to explain our new lab assignment, everybody *ews*.

The dissection of owl pellets is a retroactive study of life, she tells us. When we dissect these regurgitated pellets, we can reconstruct the whereabouts of the owl. We can learn about their habits and patterns, construct an image of the creature even if they are completely out of our reach.

“We can learn *who* they were. Pardon the pun!” Mrs. Feldman grins and some of the nicer kids giggle. Then she tells us to find a workstation with the same partners as last time.

I look over at Erica DiPetro. She’s facing Shannon Klein and has two fingers pointed to her temple like a gun. Shannon covers her mouth, but I can still hear her laughing when Erica pretends to pull the trigger. I gather my materials and walk over to her.

“Have you ever dissected anything before?” I slip my goggles over my head.

“If I say no, are you going to tell on me?”

“No,” I say simply. “I haven’t either.”

Erica doesn’t respond. We slide our hands into latex gloves and pick up the teasing needles. The pellet is mossy grey, the size of a sleeve of quarters. She attacks it first and I join in, separating tiny bones from clumps of hair.

“I think that’s a mouse or something.” She points to a miniature pelvis.

“No, it’s too big to be a mouse,” I tell her. “It could be a gopher. Mr. Mortimer has tons of gophers under his porch. They’re bigger than mice.”

“Who?”

“Mr. Mortimer, my friend.” I tell her while leafing through our textbook. *Gophers are most commonly consumed by Barn Owls*, I find.

“See?” I slide the book over.

By then, Erica is mouthing something to Shannon; she doesn’t hear me.

\*\*\*

I’m not supposed to go in Jackie’s room. My parents never actually dictated this, but I know that it’s a rule.

Sometimes when my mom’s having a good day, she talks about going in there and sifting through her clothes. She’ll say she wants to give some things to charity, some things to Jackie’s friends. Spread out the pieces of her so she can cover more ground, touch more people, change forms.

On the best day I’ve seen, Mom started talking about Jackie’s room at nine in the morning and didn’t stop until three. She walked up to the closed door seventeen times that day, and seventeen times she turned back on her heel. There have been other days like that, too.

When I pass Jackie’s room that day after school, I think about dissection. *The retroactive study of life*. I press my palm against her door and wonder if there’s such a thing. I close my eyes and rest my forehead against the wood, picture her room. The bedspread, the beakers. All of the objects she left.

My sister loved science, but she never talked about dissection. Jackie only mixed, combined, created. She *made* things; she didn’t bother to pull them apart.

I let my palm slide off her door and step away.

My sister is not dissectible. She's dead. If she were alive, maybe I could have pulled her pieces apart. I could have figured out how they were working or why they weren't working or which pieces didn't fit. I could have dug the problem out and researched it, corrected it.

*Dissection. Depressant. Depression.*

The words slow me down, but they don't give me answers. Only Jackie had those. All I have is the cloud of what she made.

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"Mr. Mortimer, would you consider us friends?"

He pauses the movie we're watching, an old western on TV Land, and looks over at me with narrowed eyes.

"Why do you ask, kid?"

"No, reason," I say, reaching towards the remote to restart the movie.

"Hold up, hold up just a minute there." Mr. Mortimer moves the remote away from me. It isn't out of my reach really, but it's as far as he can move it, so I stop trying and just let him hold it out there. "Ya know, I've been thinking. Jeanette thinks I'm doing better recently. She uh, thinks I should test myself to be well, you know, more independent." Mr. Mortimer's red eyes circle his living room.

"That's great!"

"Yeah, it is. So anyway, you don't need to come around here as much. Maybe once a week, something. Help me out with groceries, you know."

I don't say anything. He looks down at his watch.

"Actually, pretty late already. Why don't you get going, kid?"

“But it’s only-“

“Don’t fight me on this, okay? Just go home.”

“I really think you need me to stay, sir,” I protest as.

“I don’t. So you can go, okay?” Mr. Mortimer takes his right hand and rubs it up and down over his face, spreading his sweat evenly. When I don’t get up to leave, he barks “Get the hell out of here!”

I stand up and find the door, my vision growing misty. Slam it behind me and rush down the hand-painted stairs of Mr. Mortimer’s front porch. It’s not that dark yet but everything’s blurry. I make out a stack of logs in front of me, a hand ax resting on top. Without thinking, I pick up the ax. Feel the weight of the wood and the metal in my hand, my arm. Every muscle reacting. Every tendon, feeling.

I put a log down and raise the ax above my head. My back tightens, my breath quickens as I let it swing down with force I’ve never felt in my own body. Gravity. Velocity. A satisfying *crack*. Breath enters and leaves me violently as I stare at the severed log, my hands still gripping the ax’s handle. A small light catches my eye and I see Mr. Mortimer watching me from his window. I think I see him smile before he turns away, draws the curtain.

I pull out another log, raise the ax, breathe deep.



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## ACADEMIC VITA

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