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A Sister's Mythology

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A Sister's Mythology

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

Robin Baudier

B.A. Tulane University, 2003

May, 2014

Acknowledgments

I'd like to dedicate this thesis to all my sisters by birth, marriage, and friendship, but especially to my little sister Kaitlin, without whom I would be as unacquainted with my worst qualities as I continue to be with my best. Also, to my older sister Brynn, who made a reader of me by dint of being someone I wanted to imitate. Thanks are due to all people who accept writing as an acceptable reason to put off social engagements, arriving to work, and chores. Especially to those foolhardy enough to marry a writer. The Creative Writing Workshop at UNO is rich with talented faculty, including my committee members M.O. Walsh and Fredrick Barton, who give more of themselves and their time to their students than they probably should. Barb Johnson, thank you for your insight and frighteningly organized mind; both are an inspiration to me.

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Mermaid

The first time Nate saw the Mermaid, she was climbing into bed. It was a narrow hospital bed with railings on the side that were raised as a protocol to keep the study's subjects from rolling out and injuring themselves. He'd just walked into the observation room, hidden from her by the two-way mirror and sound-proofed walls. Jason, the medical intern who'd attached her sensors, handed Nate her clipboard, said, "Congrats, you've been assigned Ariel," picked up his Redbull and Fritos, and left the room.

The "congrats" made sense, since the woman was a lot nicer to look at than the study's average participant—90% of people with REM Sleep Behavior Disorder are men and most of them are over 50—and she had long, strong legs that were worth a second look. But this was a double-blind study. Unlike Jason and the other medical administrators, Nate, like the other psychologists partnered in observing, wasn't supposed to know anything about the subjects except the number designation written on their clipboard and what they observed. Nate considered saying something to Jason about the name slip next time he saw him, but he looked at the ring of condensation and Frito crumbs Jason had left next to the expensive monitoring equipment, and it just didn't seem worth it. Nate switched off the fluorescent lights in the subject's room.

The dim blue glow of night observation lights turned her pillow blue and her blond, wavy hair splayed across it a surprisingly pleasant green. Nate always felt uncomfortably voyeuristic watching subjects settle themselves in bed, so he leaned back in his chair and opened a book. It should have been his laptop he was opening, either to work on an overdue peer review or start compiling some of his own data he'd been collecting. Publish or perish as they say, and Nate's position as a postdoc was an inherently temporary position. But Nate took out a book to read because that was what he wanted to do. And he'd been so numb from exhaustion lately, wanting to do anything was a relief.

It took the woman a while to fall asleep. This was not uncommon considering the unfamiliar surroundings, the sensors stuck to her forehead and chest, and the knowledge that someone was sitting behind the "mirror" in her room watching. In the end, it was only a little over a half hour of tossing and turning before her face went slack and her breathing shallow. Nate glanced up at the EEG screen every couple of pages to monitor her progress. Early on, the swells of sleep spindles showed her thalamus working hard to keep her asleep, but after a little more than an hour, the delta waves of her deepest sleep looked normal. If she were a sleepwalker, this would have been the point of interest, but this study was focused on parasomnias who lacked muscle atonia in REM sleep. They didn't get up and walk around, but there was no paralyzation to stop their bodies from acting out their most vivid dreams. All told, it was only a bit over an hour and a half before her brain waves resembled those of her waking self, indicating she'd reached REM. He'd known it was coming soon so he'd been watching the screen, but he needn't have bothered. He never would have missed what happened next.

In the room's blue glow, the woman straightened her right arm next to her ear then stroked it downwards as she started the same motion with her left. She was swimming, Nate

realized. The movement of her body was graceful, but strange; it wasn't the measured, regular movements of someone swimming laps. It was languorous, like she was relishing the motion rippling through her torso and down her legs. Her face didn't have the focused look of an athlete, and there was no turning of the head to gasp for air. Her smile was beatific. She undulated onto her side, twisting into a breast stroke and the sheet flapped around her legs as they moved together through imaginary water. Together, as if her legs were joined.

"Mermaid," Nate said, finally understanding Jason's comment. He stood up and walked to the glass, barely noting the dull thump when his book hit the ground.

Elia took a swig of beer. "Tell me another one." Her bare feet were propped next to Nate's shoes on her porch railing, socks balled up in her clunky nurse sneakers under her chair. It was just after dawn, but still gray on their street. Nate could barely make out his satchel sitting on his steps next door.

The first time he had come home at dawn to see his scrubs-clad neighbor drinking on her porch, it had seemed like kismet. But then he considered that he lived 15 minutes away from the University of Florida Hospital complex where his Health Sleep Center was located, and 15 minutes in the other direction from the North Florida Regional Medical Center where Elia was an ER nurse. When he looked at it that way, it felt more like a coincidence that they were the only two nightshifters out on their porches at dawn.

"In honor of October," Elia held up a finger to indicate she was modifying her request. "Tell me a really creepy story this time."

“Alright.” Nate picked at the label on his beer bottle, searching his memory for something Elia would appreciate. “There was a guy in Canada, I forget his name, who was out on bail for fraud. He’d been caught trying to cover horse racing debts by embezzling from the company he worked for, and his wife let him come home on the condition that he go to her parents the next day and ask them for financial help. This guy idolized her parents, and he went to sleep on his couch that night dreading telling them about how he’d screwed up their daughter’s life. But it turned out he never had to.” Nate took a long pull of beer.

Elia flicked condensation from her bottle at him. “You always do that. You milk your pauses.”

“That night,” Nate continued, his voice dropped low, “after two days of sitting awake in a jail cell, he fell asleep. When he woke up, he was in a hospital bed with deep cuts all over his hands and a police officer standing over him.” Nate arched an eyebrow and tried to leer like Vincent Price.

Elia shook her head in disgust. She was slouched so low that her ponytail ran back and forth across the back of her chair like an increasingly disorderly rodent. “Milk, milk, milk.”

“This guy had gotten up in the middle of the night, driven over to his in-laws’ house, let himself in, strangled his father-in-law into unconsciousness, stabbed his mother-in-law to death, then driven himself to the police station and confessed. All without waking up.”

“Holy shit.”

“He was acquitted of all charges.”

“Holy shit!” Elia’s dark eyes were wide. “How did they know he wasn’t lying?”

Nate shrugged. “You can be the best liar in the world, even fool yourself into believing your own lies. But bodies know the truth. They know when you’re stressed, afraid, depressed.

And bodies don't lie about pain. His hands were cut down to the bone when he walked into the police station, but he didn't show any pain until after he woke up. Then, all he could do was scream."

"Damn." Elia stared out into the lightening sky. "And the only weird stories I ever have to trade are about the things I pull out of people's butts."

"Yes." Nate toasted her with his mostly-empty bottle. "But you tell them so well."

She inclined her head to indicate that she accepted this compliment, and they fell back into comfortable silence.

Nate thought about the Mermaid, hadn't really stopped thinking about her all night, but he didn't bring her up. There was pleasure in keeping her a secret, intentionally hiding her existence as if she really were a mythical creature. Because even if she wasn't one, she was something equally rare.

Night after night, Nate sat watching strangers act out the dreams that moved them. His study participants didn't mime walking around opening kitchen cabinets; they enacted what they felt deeply enough to override their malfunctioning neurological safeguards. Mild mannered men and women climbed into bed, only to reveal deep wells of rage, fear, lust and violence. This made sense to Nate.

Sleep was always escaping him. And when he did catch it, his dreams were much like the ones he saw others act out at his work—impotent punches, arms flailing defensively against attackers, fierce strangulation of a pillow, shouts, moans, tears. To see a woman climb into bed like everyone else and escape into something beautiful, become something beautiful, by abandoning herself to a dream? It calmed him.

"What has you smiling like that?" Elia was watching him. Her eyes were tired.

“Nothing.” Nate closed his lips around the secret of his mermaid.

When the sun was up high enough to rebuke them over their neighbors’ roofs, Elia reached for his hand to lead him inside. It was the same gesture she used every morning he ended up on her porch. And every time he was grateful for the gesture, the invitation. He still was, but this morning, Nate caught her narrow hand in his, gave it a quick squeeze and told her goodnight.

The first time he’d slept with Elia, it had been because she was pretty and interested, but also because he hoped that it would relax and release him into sleep. Instead he’d lain awake next to her while she twitched and frowned through her dreams before letting himself out to return to his sleepless bed. He never asked her what she’d wanted out of it, but the awkward, quiet way she moved to the opposite side of her bed afterwards told him it had more to do with avoiding loneliness than looking for love. As free and open as they were with each other on her porch, they were silent strangers inside. Why they were still going inside together two months later was the real question. Maybe for the same reasons they had the first time. Maybe because it felt like part of the contract of their friendship, and they were afraid that if they reneged on one clause they’d lose the rest.

But that morning he walked away picturing the calm, early waves of sleep with a mermaid stroking steadily through them. If he’d broken an unspoken contract by leaving, Nate didn’t glance back to see its fallout. A calm had settled over him. He’d heard a siren song to join a mermaid in sleep, and his mind floated in a soft, blue haze as his body went through the rote movements of his nightly ablutions. He reveled in shutting his blackout curtains and the gentle friction of sliding between his sheets. That morning, for the first time in what felt like years, Nate closed his eyes and within minutes fell asleep.

Two more nights, Nate watched the Mermaid swim. Each night, he watched her lie still as her brainwaves spindled and ebbed before bursting into action as her body did the same. The first swim of the night would be the shortest and the last the longest, but every ninety minutes or so, when she cycled into REM sleep, Nate closed his book and sat up straighter in his chair. She flipped and kicked, grinning with the pleasure of moving through water that only existed in her mind. Her motions were sensuous without being overtly sexual. A couple of times, she vocalized. It wasn't any more articulate than the usual grunts of Nate's other subjects, but there was a tonality to it he'd never heard before. As if she were singing in her dreams and her sleeping body couldn't quite control pitch or shape words.

After each night of watching her, Nate went home, and he slept. Not the restless tossing and turning that he had become habituated to. Not the stoned, stripping away of all inhibitions that had forced him off of Ambien after one too many middle of the night online purchases he didn't remember and barefoot, shirt-less walks through his neighborhood shame wouldn't let him forget. Not the sedated unconsciousness of heavier sleeping medications that left him groggy throughout the following day. Sleep had been stressful for Nate, and so he had braced against it every night as he climbed into bed. The Mermaid abandoned herself to sleep. And somehow from watching her, Nate was able to do the same.

He tried to enjoy it while it lasted. Accept this temporary respite from the insomnia that strung him out over the past few years until he felt like he was going through the motions of a tamped-down, muted simulacrum of life. But on the fourth day, the day the study really began, Nate woke up midafternoon to a feeling of dread.

Since each subject's disorder manifested differently, each was observed sleeping for three nights to establish their personal baseline of activity. The fourth night, each subject would take a pill thirty minutes before climbing into bed. Half would be ingesting a placebo. The other half would be ingesting a hefty amount of Melatonin—a hormone naturally produced in the pineal gland to induce sleep and hence had fewer side effects (and also, admittedly, less efficacy) than the regularly prescribed Clonazepam. Additionally, all subjects would sit for half an hour each day in front of a special lamp—the control group sitting in front of a regular florescent lamp they were told was a sun lamp, the experimental group in front of a special polychromatic polarized lamp designed to align their Circadian sleep rhythms with the sun. The hypothesis was that doubling down on these natural sleep aids might be enough to mute the manifestations of this disorder, sparing patients from suffering through the difficult side effects of heavy medication.

Nate did not know which group the Mermaid belonged to.

That night at work, Nate didn't open a book. The first hour and a half crawled by as he watched the EEG screen. When her brainwaves finally indicated she'd reached REM, Nate stood and moved closer to the glass, but her arms remained still at her side. She rolled onto her side, and Nate's heart jumped when her legs gave a little kick, but then she stilled. Small gestures and a dozen or so strokes and kicks was all she gave him that night. He knew he should be glad. He knew that if the rest of the experimental group were doing nearly as well as she on the first night of treatment, being listed as first author on some of the ensuing papers would be good for his career. Instead, he was bereaved.

Elia was sitting on her porch when he got home. She hadn't been the previous two nights, and he hadn't let himself wonder about whether she had been off work and gone to bed early or whether she hadn't wanted to see him. That night, he left his satchel on his steps again and walked over without waiting for her to beckon. A beer was waiting for him on his chair. An unexpected gush of relief washed over him at seeing it and the bland smile on her face.

"Hey, buddy." She angled her head away from him to look back out into the sky. She was slouched low in her chair as usual and the movement made a wreck of her ponytail the way it always did. His pulse picked up at the memory of the enormous snarl he'd created at the back of her head more than a few times.

"Hey, stranger," Nate said. "I missed you the last couple of nights."

"I went home for a couple of days. My mom's been having a rough time, and I was overdue for a visit."

Nate nodded sagely to cover for the fact that he didn't know what to say. He and Elia didn't generally talk about their lives, just drank and told stories that weren't directly about themselves. He wasn't sure if he should enquire further or if that would mar the unquestioning acceptance they could count on from each other. He settled for something in between. "Where does she live?"

"Tampa."

"That's not too bad."

"It's okay. I usually stay longer if I'm going to go all the way out there, but I didn't plan on going, so it was too late to request more time off."

They sat in silence a while afterwards, but it wasn't one of their comfortable porch silences. It also wasn't the careful silence of her bed, where they protected what they were able

to give each other with their bodies from unwelcome expressions of emotion or lack thereof. This silence was uncertain. He'd raised questions between them by not following her inside. So he asked her another question to distract them both.

“Did you ever pretend to be a mermaid?”

Elia's eyebrows knit together. “What?”

“I mean, when you were a little girl. In the pool or wherever, did you ever swim around with your legs together and pretend to be a mermaid?”

She looked consternated for a moment, her lips pulling in tight against her teeth. But then she shook her head and shrugged. “I don't know. It's possible.”

Nate let the subject drop. They finished their beers and kept the conversation to inconsequential things. When Elia got up to go inside, she didn't reach for him, and Nate didn't know whether he was glad or sorry.

That night, sleep wouldn't come for Nate. He tossed and turned and felt as if he barely lost consciousness before waking up again. As a sleep scientist, he knew he'd been sleeping for hours in the lighter stages of sleep, and it just felt as if he'd been awake. He also knew that he was suffering from a self-fulfilling prophecy, that he'd decided that the reason he'd been able to sleep was because of watching the Mermaid swim. That it was his belief that he wouldn't be able to sleep without her that now kept him awake. And it was fear that his respite was over, that he was about to enter another multi-year stretch of chronic insomnia, like the one that had built and worsened as he approached defending his thesis and lingered afterwards like a bad hangover.

It had felt like the more he learned about sleep, the harder it was to come by, even though he'd known that it was really stress exacerbating his natural problem. Trying to walk, talk and move like a normal person when he felt like a shambling old man had worn him down. Friends

and relationships didn't feel worth maintaining when trying to react or emote in an average way was an exhausting performance. Knowing that he was doing it to himself only made it worse.

At noon, Nate gave up on sleep. He was dressed and on his way into work before he'd even decided what he was going to do.

He was told that Jason, the medical intern, didn't get to the Sleep Center until 2 p.m. The nurses and receptionist kept giving Nate strange looks for being in so much earlier than his usual 9 p.m. clock-in, so he shut himself in one of the sleep observation rooms and actually worked on a paper until five minutes after two. It was another ten minutes before Jason got there. When he did, Nate asked him loudly in front of the receptionist to join him back in the sleep observation room to answer some procedural questions about the study. The quizzical look Jason gave him told Nate that he was completely failing at acting normal, but Jason followed him anyway.

When the door was shut behind them, Nate turned pleading eyes to Jason. "I have a favor to ask you."

"Dude, what's going on? You look like shit."

"I feel like shit. Couldn't sleep last night." Nate pushed his hair back from his forehead and felt a sheen of grease there. "But that's not what I want to talk to you about. Do you know the woman I've been observing?" At Jason's blank look, Nate prompted, "The Mermaid?"

"Oh yeah," Jason laughed. "Crazy, right?"

“Yeah.” Nate shifted uncomfortably, then plunged in to the conversation that could end the career that had been his entire life for the past five years. “Are you overseeing her light treatment?”

“Yup, she’ll be here in thirty minutes for it.”

“Could I administer it instead?” Nate hurried his speech when he saw concern cloud over Jason’s easygoing smile. “I don’t want to screw the study up or invalidate our double blind status, I just want to talk to her. You see,” Nate tried to look embarrassed and hopeful, which wasn’t too hard considering that was how he was feeling, “I want to ask her out after the study’s over. And I’m worried that if I just pop out of my little room after her last night and say, ‘hey, I’ve been watching you sleep, want to go for a drink?’ it’ll be really creepy. But, I figure if she sees me beforehand and I get some kind of rapport going, it’ll be less out of the blue, you know?”

Jason still looked uncomfortable, so Nate did his best to seal the deal. “I won’t even technically be breaking the double blind because I won’t ask her anything about herself, and I haven’t even seen any of the lamps before, so I won’t be able to tell which kind she’ll be sitting in front of.” This was a blatant lie, since Nate had worked with one of the tenured professors to select which lamps would be used in the study. But Jason either believed him or decided this gave him enough plausible deniability of wrongdoing.

“Alright. Fifty bucks, you tell no one I did this, and she’s yours.” Jason looked him over. Nate felt a flicker of fear. “Are you sure you want to, though? Because you really do look like shit.”

Nate let out a whoosh of held breath. “I’m sure. I’m so sure. Thank you.”

It was weird to see the Mermaid awake. No, that wasn't right because he'd seen her awake when she was getting into bed every night. It was weird to see her with shoes on, in jeans and a blouse. Weird to have her look back at him when he walked into the examination room.

He told her that he would be getting things set up for Jason, who would be in shortly to take her physical examination (their compromise to ensure that Nate wouldn't screw anything up, like taking her blood pressure or other data they collected), and followed the intern's directions carefully about how to wheel the giant light safely over to where she sat on the examination table and plug it in.

She flipped her long, wavy hair over her shoulders and answered his greeting and explanations with short, pleasant sentences. Her voice was deeper than he'd imagined it would be from her vocalizations. Nate was even more uncomfortable than he'd thought he be. It wasn't until she shut her eyes against the light that he regained some of his resolve to say what he planned on saying to her. But instead, she was the one who led the way.

"I don't really buy this part of the experiment." She smiled. It was a friendly smile but only a shadow of her nighttime bliss. "I'm in the sun for hours every day all summer for work, and it's never made much of a difference for me. If anything, my husband says I thrash around even more in summer months."

Her eyes were still closed, so Nate didn't bother to hide his relief at the opening she'd given him for what he really wanted to say. "So, if you don't mind me asking, why are you in this trial? I mean, um." He stumbled when she opened her eyes and looked directly at him. "I've seen you sleep. Your manifestations aren't violent, in fact, quite the opposite. I've never seen

anyone look so happy, so peaceful in their sleep. It's beautiful. Is that really something you want to lose?"

She laughed sharply and leaned forward on her tawny arms. "Are you serious? You think I want to spend my nights swimming around, backhanding my husband if he's brave enough to try to sleep in the same bed as me? Do you think it's fun to wake up hitting the floor and be out of work for a week because I've sprained my wrist?"

"I'm sorry." Nate's stomach churned as if something had gone sour in it or died or was fighting to escape. He looked nervously over his shoulder at the door, hoping her voice hadn't raised high enough to reach Jason in the hallway. "I really am. I have sleep problems too, and the last thing I wanted to do was make light of yours. I just thought—" Nate broke off, wondering if he should just get up and leave. But the thought of going back home to the bed he wouldn't be able to sleep in kept him talking. "I just thought you looked so happy. It made me wonder what it felt like for you."

Her body relaxed back from the aggressive way she'd been leaning towards him. She looked tired, and Nate felt the same.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"No, it's alright." She shook her head, and some of her hair fell forward over her shoulder. "Actually, I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that, you were just asking a question. My little girl just started sleeping in a big girl bed?" Her sentence trailed up, requesting understanding. "She has nightmares. Not night terrors or anything, but they wake her up and she comes into our room wanting to get in bed with her mommy." One of her long fingers worried a crack in the vinyl exam table. "And I lie there with her, holding her, afraid to go back to sleep."

Afraid to hurt her. Once she's asleep, I move to the couch or her bed, but I can't be there for her if she wakes up again."

Nate nodded. He felt like a heel. "I'm sorry," he said for a third time. It didn't sound any better than it had the first.

"No, really. It's alright."

Nate was halfway to the door before he realized he hadn't asked her about the thing he'd wondered most. He turned back to see she'd already shut her eyes again against the rays of the polychromatic polarized lamp. "Why swimming?"

She laughed, this time a softer sound. Her eyes remained shut when she answered. "Isn't that listed in my case history? I'm a mermaid. At the Weeki Wachee Mermaid show. Every summer, two shows a day Thursday through Sunday. I'm even on the postcards." She smiled and it was her beatific nighttime smile. Her performance smile, Nate now realized. "If you have a daughter, you should bring her. Little girls love mermaids."

Nate's mouth moved, trying to shape a response, but he could find none. So he nodded again and quietly shut the door.

It was almost three p.m. by the time Nate got home. He didn't have to be at work for another six hours, but he was too wired to fall asleep. He sat in his car for a while, trying to decide whether to go inside or keep driving. Instead he found himself on Elia's porch, quietly tapping on her door in case she was still asleep.

“Hey.” Surprise colored her voice when she opened and saw him standing there. “You look awful. Are you alright?”

“Yeah. No. Well, mostly alright.” Nate always forgot he was a full head and a half taller than her. He felt huge looming over her in the doorway.

“Well, come in.” She turned and walked back to her kitchen, rightly assuming he would shut the door and follow. Something looked different about Elia. Nate couldn’t figure out what until he realized that this was what she looked like at the beginning of her day, when her ponytail was still smooth and her movements alert. “I’m making breakfast. Are you a bacon and eggs man?”

“Yes.” He sat at her kitchen table while she bustled around. She cursed when a yolk broke and hissed threats when a grease spatter burned her bare arm. This relaxed Nate because it helped him recognize his nighttime Elia in this breakfast-cooking day-person. If she’d asked him what was bothering him, he might even have told her, but asking probing questions wasn’t the way between them. Instead she sat down with her plate across from him, and they ate. When they were done, she tapped her fork nervously against her plate a few times before carefully putting it down. She slouched down in her chair the way she did every night, but it felt intentional, like a pose, this time.

“Last night, when you asked me about pretending to be a mermaid, I had a story I wanted to tell you. I just didn’t feel like telling it right then, you know?”

Nate nodded. He turned sideways in his chair so that he could lean against the wall instead of the puny back of the chair.

“You’re going to laugh, but I used to pretend to be a manatee.”

“A manatee?” Nate laughed. “What, you pretended to be gray and blubbery?”

“Manatees are beautiful,” Elia protested. “No, really. When you see a picture of them, they look like awkward, thirteen-foot-long, fat monsters. But, have you ever seen one move underwater?”

Nate shook his head.

“Oh, Nate.” Her face lit up. “When I was ten, my dad took me—just me, without my mom or baby sister—to the Three Sisters part of the Crystal River. In the cold weather, the West Indian Manatees migrate up this spring-fed river because it’s warm there. And in this one spot in all of North America, tourists and kids are allowed to stick a plastic snorkel in their mouths and climb into the water with this endangered species.”

Elia leaned forward with her elbows on the table, eyes bright. “There I was, floating with my butt poking up through the surface of the water, awkwardly kicking my flippers, and I see this shape. Its gray is hard to distinguish from the blue of the river at first. It looks like part of the water, like the water is alive and coming towards me, fast. I freeze, not kicking or breathing, and this manatee, the beautiful, graceful creature, glides right up in front of me. It’s everything I’m not underwater, no awkward elbows and knees poking out, just smooth, rippling lines of easy movement. I see it, and I’m in love. I’m still terrified, but so in love with it right then. The only pets I’d ever had were fish, so I was used to loving things that couldn’t love me back, but I was so enthralled with this manatee hovering in front of me that I reached my hand out. It didn’t swim away. Instead, it clapped my hand between its flippers and pulled me towards it. I freaked, sure that it was going to eat me, so I ripped my hand away and swam back to the boat. I refused to get back in the water, even after the captain told me that the manatee was probably trying to bring my hand in for a belly rub.” She leaned back in her chair, signaling her story was done.

Something in her face told Nate this story was about more than manatees, but he wasn't sure what. "Did you ever go back?"

"No." Elia's lips thinned. "But it's my favorite memory of my dad. Driving out there, just the two of us, then him not questioning why I got out of the water so fast, just telling me how brave I'd been to get in at all. Maybe that's why I loved manatees so much after that. Or maybe I just felt guilty for swimming away, and I was trying to rewrite the memory into a happier story. I really don't know." Elia pulled in a breath and held it in for a moment before continuing. "He died two months ago. My dad."

Nate nodded in sympathy. As if to say, yes, life causes us grief. Yes, I know this. He realized that two months ago was when he'd first seen her on her porch. Short-term insomnia was common after the death of a family member; if Elia's father hadn't died, he probably never would have met her.

Then he realized what she was really telling him. Two months ago was when she'd first invited him into her bed. She'd been grieving the entire time he'd known her. It was unsettling. He'd always sort of thought of them as two of a kind. Two people who worked all night and still didn't want to go to bed. Two people who told stories about everything but themselves. Two people who were emotionally stunted enough to be sleeping with each other for two months without ever really talking about what it meant. Loneliness welled up inside Nate at the idea that this likeness might be a temporary condition. He nodded again.

"Today I endangered my whole career by talking to one of my sleep-study participants."

"Why? I mean, why did you do it?"

"I can't sleep." The words felt hopelessly insufficient. Nate dropped his forehead onto the table, feeling defeated at trying to explain before he'd even really begun. "I'm groggy and out of

it at work. The only time I feel fully awake is when I know I should be asleep. And then, this woman joins my study, and she looks so happy when she dreams. I felt like she was the first person ever who could just show me how to do it, how to sleep. But then the study starts working, and she stops acting out her dreams, and I stop being able to sleep, so I went in to talk to her. As if she really were some sleep guru who could help me. And not only do I find out that she was actually in the control group with the fluorescent lamps—meaning the only reason the manifestation of her disorder calmed down was from a placebo effect—I also find out her dreams aren’t even really happy, she just smiles a lot at her work. I feel like such an idiot. Not for going in to talk to her, though that was blindingly stupid as well, but for building this whole thing around her in the first place.”

“Well, yeah.” Elia sounded amused.

Nate rolled his head to look up at her. “Thanks a lot.”

“But so what? Sometimes we really need to believe in something. You needed to believe you could sleep, and so you found a way to do it.” She smiled. “The question is, now that you’ve figured out that the woman was your placebo, can you figure out a way to believe you can sleep without her.”

Nate frowned. What she was asking felt impossible. Tantamount to asking someone with a genetic disease if they could just stop being sick.

“And if not,” Elia continued, “can you find a less staggeringly stupid placebo to work for you instead? You know, one not in direct conflict with your livelihood. You perverse ass.”

Nate laughed, sitting back upright in his chair. “Did you know they think that manatees are why people believed in mermaids? I mean, that they were what sailors were really looking at when they thought they were seeing mermaids?”

“Yeah.” Elia smiled a little skeptically, but let the change of topic go. “Like unicorn myths coming from people seeing wild horses running on the beach and then finding a narwhal horn.”

“Have you heard the theory about dragons though?” Nate was the one leaning forward enthusiastically now. “They think that cavemen would come across a python that had just eaten an entire antelope or something, carry it back to their cave or camp or whatever, drop it in front of their fire to cook, and all the hydrogen that had been building up inside the snake from the decomposing antelope would burp out of the snake and be ignited by the campfire.”

Elia laughed, her eyes crinkling up into a happy squint. She was dark and funny and beautiful, and he was why she was smiling.

“Do you want to go back there?” Nate looked at his phone. It was five hours until he had to be at work. “Right now. We could drive to Crystal River. It’s only, what? An hour or so away? We could go, stay for two hours, and still be back an hour before I had to go to work.”

Elia’s face pursed up, but not unhappily. “Hmm, maybe. I don’t know. Let me do the dishes, and I’ll think about it.”

“Think about it,” Nate said. He blinked and felt a reluctance to open his eyes again. “While you do, I’m just going to lie down on your couch for a minute.”

“Go for it. I mean, definitely don’t offer to do the dishes for me or anything.”

“I won’t.”

A dishrag hit Nate on the back as he exited the kitchen. The light was dim in the living room, and the bonded leather of the couch was more velvety than the real thing. He fell asleep with his legs dangling off the side so his shoes wouldn’t dirty the cushions. He didn’t wake up when Elia pulled off his shoes and tucked an afghan around his feet or when she left the house to

go to work. But when his phone rang, and he answered, assuring the Sleep Center's receptionist that he was on his way, just stuck in traffic, his body remembered the feeling of her hands on him. Outside on her porch, he closed his eyes one last time against the bright sun and let its light warm his face.

Alligator Pear

June was an astrologer, but not the kind you'd think. She didn't know the names of the stars or what sign she was born under. She had no maps, charts, or even a telescope. On a clear night, lying on her back with a breeze tickling up through the tight mesh of her trampoline, she could see eight, maybe nine stars if she were lucky. But with the familiar weight and half-warmth of her dad's sleeping bag laid unzipped across her, it seemed right to June that she couldn't see more. Seeing the stars was not what it was about. It was peering through the veil that she loved, finding meaning in the questions, not in the answers from the stars.

Which is why one crisp November night June both was and was not surprised when she got an answer.

"I'll be right out, just grabbing the notebook," their dad said from the back door. His youngest daughter squeezed past his flannel-covered legs. "Help Becca onto the trampoline," their dad said before disappearing back inside.

June's five-year-old sister was running, her dark mop of hair in a collision course with the rectangular frame of the trampoline. June crawled towards the corner of the mat. She was accustomed to the aura of catastrophe that surrounded Becca. Sometimes the accidents were spectacular, but more often than not, Becca slipped or bounced through unscathed.

“I can do it!” Becca scuttled backwards when June reached to lift her onto their tall, elderly trampoline.

June sat back on her heels and watched Becca grab the frame and hop one, two, three, four times. June knew she was about to lose hold of her patience. That most prized virtue was always whipping free from June’s grasp, but she bit down lightly on her lower lip and concentrated on her own hands against her pale, bare legs. On bright, sunny days, when June turned puce from heat or sun, she envied how Becca took had their father’s dark, slim build. But on cool nights like this, she reveled in the small victory of feeling comfortable in shorts when her father and sister had to bundle to stay warm. June lifted her eyes back to Becca’s bobbing head. Her resistance was as futile as Becca’s hops.

“You can’t do it, you’re too little.” June grabbed her sister’s wrists and pulled. Becca wailed. June glanced nervously at the light dancing against the living-room window. Saturday nights, their mom said the rosary along with the television. The back door squeaked open.

“June!” Their dad trotted over.

Becca’s wail turned into a repeated anthem of “I can do it!”

Their dad squatted. Then, instead of lifting Becca up, he let her climb him like a step stool over the rusted metal frame and springs and onto the mat.

June pulled the sleeping bag over herself and tried to recapture the feeling she’d had just before the back door opened: the stomach-twisting feeling she got when she hung upside down from the sofa long enough that the ceiling started to look like the floor; the half-suffocated thrill in church when incense and heat made the air too thick to breathe; the feeling that the world was an exciting place, and that, if she could just slip free from her child’s body, she could be exciting too. She focused her eyes on the brightest star and asked it to reorient her world into something

mysterious and thrilling, but the shifting and bouncing of the mat sent the stars zig-zagging across the sky.

“Scoot over.” Becca stood over June, her belly foreshortened into prominence from June’s perspective. June’s hand drifted over her own child’s belly with less baby fat, but still without hips or breasts to frame it.

“Dad has to be in the middle with the notebook,” June reminded Becca. “Everything slopes down to where he is. You’ll just get squished.”

“I want to be in the middle.” Becca nestled her knobby limbs down against June’s side. To want was to do, for Becca, and things went her way as they often did.

Their dad propped his flashlight on his shoulder and flipped through the notebook until he found the last written page. He bent the rest of the pages around the wire binding and pulled out his pen.

“Let’s see. Where was Captain Alligator Pear when we last saw him?” The answer was written in front of him, but he liked to see if they remembered.

“He was walking the plank!” Becca rambled on about how pirates had captured the crew and why she thought that the Pirate King should have a parrot, followed by a blow by blow description of the fight this parrot could have with Captain Alligator Pear’s monkey.

For each of the seven virtues there is a deadly sin. If it was clear to anyone who saw Becca and June together that patience was the virtue June would most struggle for in her life, June’s secret was that the answering sin of wrath was already alive and slithering inside her. Sometimes it found its way out, usually disguised as a corrective response to Becca’s misbehavior. But June knew wrath for what it was and fought to keep it contained. As she lay there, listening to Becca’s happy babblings, her limbs tensed against the desire to coil and strike.

The only weapons she had equipped against wrath were a desire to be good and a sense of responsibility for both her and Becca's behavior, ascribed by their mother to her oldest child.

Then, halfway through Becca's description of the monkey and parrot's fight, Becca's cool fingers slipped into June's. The insignificant weight of her hand was disproportional to the answering weight of guilt it sent sinking through June. June made use of that weight and anchored her patience to its leaden mass. It pressed down against her wrath, until she could no longer feel it squirm inside of her. When Becca's middle position resulted in June having to lie all the way at the edge of the sleeping bag or roll on top of Becca, June felt her patience tug at its tether. But guilt was immovable. She lay still next to her sister, holding her hand, and listened as their father weaved Becca's contribution of monkey-parrot warfare into their longer story.

The Captain Alligator Pear stories were told only on perfect, cool nights after the mosquitoes had gone into hibernation and before the wet cold of winter set in. The Captain was brave and daring and had had so many terrible things happen to him that June felt he might be ready to give up the sea and live a more staid life. Sometimes, June would silently imagine herself into the Captain Alligator Pear stories. Imagine that she was beautiful, like Linda Ronstadt in *The Pirates of Penzance*, taken captive by Captain Alligator Pear or his nemesis, the Pirate King, and that her alluring virtue would somehow manage to reform both villainous captains. But after both man and alligator professed love for her and a desire to straighten up their ways, June really didn't know where the story could go from there. Stories about getting married and settling down weren't the kinds of stories that Captain Alligator Pear starred in. He was a giant alligator after all, though June knew that alligator pears were just what her grandmother called avocados. The Captain's name made sense to her despite this; it

acknowledged a freakish in-between-ness, neither fruit nor vegetable, neither alligator nor pear, or in the case of The Captain, neither good nor evil, neither alligator nor man.

The Captain had been created by the three of them years before, and June had felt proud of this until she'd been old enough to realize that her dad had really been the one writing the stories all along. Which explained their lack of romantic content as much as it did their focus on sailing riggings and alligator anatomy. Becca didn't care as long as she was allowed to continue inserting animals improbably into the plots. June really didn't mind either, since it allowed her to lie there half-listening, half-imagining her own stories where she was beautiful and good and she belonged in the most exciting worlds she could imagine. Even if they did seem less exciting after she'd finished with virtuously reforming them.

"And then maybe the monkey could steal the Pirate King's hat!" This idea cracked Becca up, and she released June's hand and kicked her feet up into the sleeping bag, sending wafts of cool air against June's skin.

The wind rustling through the Monkey Grass under the trampoline sounded like voices whispering, like secrets just out of reach. It sounded like it had felt the time she used her mom's razor to shave a smooth patch of skin on her leg. Then Becca squirmed again, her elbow gouging June in the ribcage, and the world slid back to normal. Nights like this always passed too quickly and soon it would be time to go inside, brush their teeth, say their prayers, and become normal children who watched cartoons instead of creating worlds.

Wrath stirred against guilt's weight, and June's lower lip found its way back between her teeth. She felt cheated. It didn't even take a poorly placed elbow or a shriek from Becca for June to find her private imaginings shattered by returning to her own child's body. Just the bouncing slope of the trampoline mat, the constant balance it took to not roll on top of Becca, trapped June

in the present. In reality. And for that, before she could counter its uprising, wrath bucked and toppled guilt off its back, patience fluttering away behind it. Wrath scrabbled up from the dark hold, looking through June's eyes at the brightest star right above her, and wrath, who was June, who was wrath, didn't exactly wish or pray, but she asked the star: Is Becca happier because she doesn't try to be good? Or does Becca's happiness leave no room for my own? If I stopped being good, would I be free? If I were free of Becca, would I be happy? Could you take her?

Take her from me. Would you?

June watched the sky.

"Hold it there, girls." Their dad slid out from under the sleeping bag and jumped over the side of the trampoline. "I've got to make a bathroom run. Be right back." Before the back door even closed behind him, Becca was up and jumping around.

"Look what I can do, June." Becca landed on her back on top of the sleeping bag.

"That's not a trick," June said, not bothering to sit up. "It's only a trick if you bounce back up."

"No." Becca shook her head. "This is a trick where you don't bounce up. You fall and then you pretend you're sleeping. See?" Disentangling herself from the sleeping bag, Becca started jumping again.

"Becca, lie down." June's words were mangled through her unwillingness to unclench her teeth. "You're bouncing me too much."

Becca's elbows hinged back and up like flightless wings. "See? Like this." Twisting midair, she landed on her back a few inches from June's feet. Becca tried and failed to remain parallel to the mat as she was bounced back into the air.

"That's great, Becca."

“Now you do it.”

“No.”

“Do it! Do it, too!”

“Fine!” June stood up and fell back down again.

“No, you have to jump first! Like this, see? I’ll show you how to do it.”

June tried to watch Becca’s tutorial. She tried to hold onto her patience, but wrath had thrown guilt so completely that she couldn’t find its weight inside of her. Wrath was free at last. June got to her feet and began jumping with a fury that Becca mistook for enthusiastic participation.

“I’m a monkey!” Becca bounced higher. “You be Captain Alligator Pear, and I’ll be the monkey!”

From the heights of her jumps, June noticed Becca land close to the edge of the mat before being sprung up and away. June’s teeth jarred on a landing and she tasted the copper brine of a bit lip. She said nothing.

Becca bounced wildly back and forth, closer and farther away from the edge, making monkey noises. “Are you Captain Alligator Pear, June?”

“Yes.” June’s breath caught as her sister bounced so close to the edge she could have felt the hem of the mat through her sock if she were paying attention.

“And I’m the monkey?”

“And you’re the monkey.”

Becca bounced again once, twice, and on the third time June timed her landing to hit the mat at the exact same time as Becca.

In trampoline physics, if two people landed on the mat at the exact same moment, one person's bounce would be stolen and they would be left standing on the mat as if their jump had never happened. The other jumper would be bounced twice as high in the air with enough momentum for two. If a jumper knew how and timed it just right, it was possible to control who would be left standing on the mat and who would go flying.

June landed, using her knees to send her bounce through the mat to erupt back up through Becca's feet. Becca had come down at a bad angle, and the double momentum sent her flying up and back off the mat, over the rusted springs. Wrath swelled inside of June. June—whose skin felt so tight, she thought it might split, molt, be clawed away to reveal a new, happy, alive and cruel June—watched as Becca realized her plight, scrawny limbs flailing against insubstantial air.

But when Becca came down, it was on the safe side of the metal bar. The frame clipped the back of her heel, collapsing one skinny, brown leg underneath her. The other leg slipped between the springs and scraped its way up to the thigh. Becca was going to have a bruised butt and a brush-burned leg, covered in rust. The wrath that had made June feel so full a moment before shrank from the surface, the familiar weight of guilt pressing it down from above.

Their mom taught them that every time someone sins, they sin twice. Once in their heart when they decide to sin, and once more in their body when they actually do it. The sin of the heart, June knew, was much more serious than the sin of the body. But if Becca's body was safe, June hoped that maybe her heart was safe as well.

Becca hadn't moved from where she'd landed, arms at her side, one leg folded awkwardly beneath her, the other disappearing into the dark under the mat. Her nose and lips began to visibly puff from tears waiting to be shed.

June slid on her knees towards Becca, slowly shifting her weight so the springs wouldn't contract and pinch the tender meat of Becca's thigh. "Becca, it's okay. I'll help you." June meant to comfort her. But Becca's wide eyes and stricken face told June her sister did not find the sight of June slithering towards her comforting at all.

Something about this—maybe relief that Becca was alright, maybe pleasure at being found worthy of fear—surprised a laugh out of June. Whether this laugh was the final indignity or if Becca's shock was just wearing off, June didn't know, but Becca burst into tears. When June reached for Becca, Becca shoved June's hands away.

This was when their dad came back outside. June wondered if he saw the whole thing, the moments her imagination would later fill in: June reaching for Becca, the force of Becca's rejection sending Becca's body backwards over the tall frame, mop of hair splaying outwards when the top of her head connected with the cement patio before their dad could take more than a step in her direction. All June saw was Becca's eyes widen, her mouth a perfect O. All she heard was the crack when she landed.

There was a quiet moment when the only sound was their dad's sneakers scuffing against the patio before he kneeled down over Becca, calling her name. Then a sob rose up from the ground, and June could breathe again. She watched from the trampoline as their dad picked Becca up and carried her towards their mom, who had come out at the sound of Becca crying. June caught a glimpse of blood on her dad's shirt and then the backdoor closed behind them. She slid back to the center of the trampoline and pulled the sleeping bag over her shaking legs.

She wouldn't be in trouble. Her father had seen Becca send herself over the edge by pushing June away. What he didn't know, what Becca wouldn't know how to tell him, was that Becca's rejection had not been misplaced.

The Monkey Grass whispered to June, but she felt frightened of it now, frightened of herself. She wanted to go back inside, but the dark under the trampoline seemed to spread tentacles through the grass towards the house. She pulled the sleeping bag closer, taking comfort in how it smelled like the garage and her dad, but when she looked back up at the sky, she felt that comfort leak away. The brightest star, the one right above her, was gone.

She stared at the sky for as long as she could stand, then blinked moisture back into her eyes. June told herself that if the star came back, if it had just drifted behind a cloud as dark as the night sky, then she was safe. Or if the star really was gone, maybe if she lay there in penance long enough, she would be forgiven. She doubted this would work, because to be forgiven she had to be truly sorry. She had sent out an intention into the world, and it had been answered. The whoosh of cars passing on the other side of her block came further and further apart until the only sounds were the quiet stirrings of her yard and the tiny creatures hiding in it. She closed raw eyes and let her ears report: the gentle clack of wind knocking needles from the half-bald pine trees along the fence, the plink of them landing in the neighbor's pool, the tap tap tap of moths bumping themselves against the porch light's plastic globe. The sounds were faint, lulling, and she grew drowsy.

Clack. Plink. Tap.

And then, loud—so loud after the quiet—and directly below her, something trampled through the Monkey Grass. June shot upright, sleeping bag falling around her feet. If it was the neighbor's cat, it was welcome to join her, and if it was a rat, it wouldn't be able to scale the tall, smooth frame of the trampoline. If it was a raccoon, Becca would be thrilled, but June should probably prepare to run for the back door because her dad had warned her that raccoons could be rabid and were excellent climbers.

When two little hands grasped the side of the trampoline between her and the house, June inhaled to scream, but the small, furry body and long curving tail that followed the hands up and over the edge were not those of a raccoon, but those of a monkey. She held the breath she had sucked in, afraid that if she made the smallest of sounds the monkey would disappear back to wherever it came from.

But the monkey didn't run away. It grasped the rusted springs with its hands and crawled towards her, its tail twitching above it. June held very still, afraid that the springs would pinch the monkey's tiny fingers, but she needn't have bothered. The monkey was across them and sitting in front of her so quickly, she was left gaping down into its small, tufted face, wondering at how it had gotten there.

Becca would be over the moon at having a monkey in their back yard. As soon as she thought it, the monkey gave a shriek, turned tail, and ran back over the edge of the trampoline, disappearing underneath it.

"Wait," June called. She slid to the edge of the trampoline and hung upside down over the edge, but the Monkey Grass underneath was dark and still. She jumped to the ground and crouched to duck her head under the trampoline, but there wasn't even the smallest movement. The night dew on the grass sent a chill up through her bare feet, and June thought wistfully of her bed.

She straightened and looked up, as if the night sky was a watched pot, and the star could have boiled back up to the surface when she wasn't looking. June was not really surprised to find that it hadn't. The emptiness of the sky made the emptiness of underneath the trampoline even more galling. The monkey had been there, she knew it had been, but if she went inside now and

told her parents, no one would believe her. She bent at the waist and gingerly stepped into the Monkey Grass.

“Monkey. Here, monkey.”

It was too dark under the trampoline for June to see where she was putting her feet. She waded in, letting her knees be tickled by unseen blades and her feet inform her of when she stepped on the prickly stems of the purple buds that grew out of the grass. When she'd walked like this, farther than seemed possible, without finding the monkey or coming out on the other side of the trampoline, June craned her neck around and looked up. She expected to see the trampoline mat and maybe one or two stars through its tight mesh. What she saw instead was the night sky, made deep and vast by more stars than she knew existed. June stood up straight and looked around her. She was alone in a field of waist-high grass. There was no sign of the trampoline, her house, or the light haze she was accustomed to peering through. She had never been alone like this before, with nothing and nobody anywhere near. Just an empty field and an uncomfortably full sky. She wondered if freedom was always this lonely. It was a relief when a familiar trampling sound drew her attention back to the grass.

“Monkey?”

June chased movement and sound across the field. She hoped that following the monkey would be like retracing her steps, that it would take her away from the emptiness of the field and the fullness of the sky and somehow bring her back home to her parents and her bed. The thin blades of grass whipped against her bare legs as she ran after glimpses of the monkey's bobbing tail. A sound that June realized had been in the background all along swelled louder with each step until she parted the last bit of grass in front of her, and her eyes confirmed what her ears hadn't been able to believe.

A vast body of water stretched out into the horizon the way the grass had seemed to moments before. And in the middle of it was a giant ship with three tall masts and two shorter ones sticking into the sky, colorful stained glass windows that glowed in the hull like eyes, and on the prow, a strangely shaped masthead. The monkey darted up the impossibly long gangplank, its tail curled above it in a question mark that grew smaller as it made its way from the marshy shore all the way up to the distant ship.

Fear stiffened June's legs. She stopped at the edge of the grass, eyeing where the gangplank sunk into mud. There was only an empty field behind her, a known nothing. It would be impulsive, dangerous to follow a wild animal someplace she didn't know if she was allowed to be. Becca would follow it without a second thought, but June knew that when lost, she was supposed to stay in one place and wait to be found. But for once, even though she was frightened, June did not want to wait. She wanted to find, not be found.

She carefully stepped over the mud and placed one bare foot in front of the other on a wooden ramp that wouldn't have been too narrow if someone had had the good sense to put railings on it. She tried to keep her eyes on her feet, but the ship looming larger and larger in front of her kept pulling her attention upwards. As the shape of the masthead became clearer, she thought it might be a mermaid with her arms sticking out in front of her in a ballet third position. But when she glanced up a few yards and dozens of careful footsteps later, she realized her mistake. The unlikely balletic mermaid she had imagined around the jutting, thirty-degree angle protruding from the masthead was in fact a different part of anatomy of a different species altogether. It was the gaping jaws of an alligator ten times the size of a man.

This was all the warning June needed. She'd heard this ship described in detail so many times that when she finally reached the edge of the ship, June took in the bustling crew with an

unsettling mix of familiarity and fear. The one-legged Prussian swabbing the deck, the swarthy first mate leaning against the helm with a scimitar tucked into his belt, the blind old man peeling potatoes who could sing a sea shanty so heartrending that it would drive a siren to dash her brains against the side of the ship, the monkey she'd chased from her backyard who kept watch from the birds nest. All of them and more hulking shapes, covered in grime and tattoos, stopped what they were doing and turned to look at her.

June froze. She thought about running back to shore or maybe even just jumping over the side of the ship into the water, but her body wouldn't comply.

"Captain," the first mate called from the bridge. "The men are all aboard and awaiting your orders." His name was Aprim. June knew this, as she knew that under his tunic were two jagged scars, like the one her dad got from having part of his kidney removed, except that Aprim's were from his brother running him clean through with the very same scimitar that was now strapped to his belt. He was talking to the Captain, but his kohl-lined eyes were watching her expectantly. All their eyes did.

The monkey screeched. June started and lost her balance. She righted herself easily, sliding one foot back to support her shifting weight, but when she did, she realized that something was wrong. Her thighs hadn't chafed against each other the way they usually did, shushing in corduroy in the winter or sticking together on hot days above the crotch of her shorts. She looked down to find that not only were her thighs no longer touching, they were a good foot apart, on opposite sides of a yellow, scaled belly. She had to tuck her chin against her chest to see this alteration because, in addition to her pelvic transformation, there was a long green snout that now protruded from the front of her face. June's jaw dropped open in wonder, and she saw more than one set of eyes dart to the recesses of her maw, then quickly away. Ashamed of the

gigantic tongue she could feel rolling around between sharp edged teeth, she snapped her jaws shut with a speed that lifted the hair off the neck of the nearest pirate. The crew's faces remained impassive but a pungent, familiar smell seeped out of their skin and cut into the soft membrane of her nostrils: fear.

They were afraid of June. No. They were afraid of the Marauder of the Bayous, the Ravager of the Seas, that most fearsome of all reptiles, Captain Alligator Pear. She was Captain Alligator Pear, and maybe always had been. A starboard breeze rolled over her in an unseen, olfactory tide of salt and fear, and she sucked it into her as if it were the source of her sudden, fierce elation.

"Man the capstan and hoist the anchor!" she bellowed. There was a croaking rumble as the words reverberated through her barrel chest. Her stubby legs launched her into the air and she landed on all fours. She scrambled her way up to the bridge, and the stairs rubbed pleasantly against her itchy underbelly and down the length of her tail. Aprim moved aside from the helm when she righted herself back up to her full height. She grasped the knobs of the large, wooden wheel with the claws that grew out of six of the ten toes on her forelegs and knew that this was where she belonged.

"Where to next, Captain?" Aprim asked with a respectful lowering of his gaze.

Captain Alligator Pear let her eyes drift up past the crew rushing to their stations, past the torches that lit their work, past the monkey climbing the long way to his post above the fore royal mast to the night sky. The sky brimmed over with stars. She knew that if she read them correctly, there wasn't a place in the world they couldn't bring her. And yet, something was missing. Her eyes darted from star to star.

“Is something wrong, Captain?” The question came from a scrawny figure throwing his meager weight against one of the spokes that lifted the three tons of anchor—the cabin boy, Pip, her memory supplied. The capstan rotated and her view of him was blocked by the straining backs of the taller crew members.

The Captain dropped back down to all fours. Holding her belly up from the ground, she moved each leg individually in a high walk, but quickly got frustrated at how long it took her to reach the stairs to below deck. Aprim called after her to ask for orders, but she didn’t answer. She lowered herself into a belly run and pushed at the deck with all of her feet, letting her stomach skim the varnished wood as she twisted her torso side to side. She quickly reached the bow of the ship. Raising herself back up onto her hind legs, she opened the door to the captain’s quarters which held her sleeping berth and, more importantly, the Chart Room. Charts, maps, and along with the inked-out shapes of coastlines and the much more interesting expanses of seas between them, the maps that really guided her. Maps of the stars.

She barreled through the door, ready to throw herself at her charts, but was brought up short by a figure already bent over them. In a long white gown, her chin demurely tucked, bow-tie lips pursed, the woman turned towards the door. Captain Alligator Pear felt an uncomfortable, exciting flop in her stomach as her eyes traced up past the empire waist and corseted bust to the doll-perfect face framed by a bonnet and halo of curls. It was her favorite character from *The Pirates of Penzance*, but in body only. In no movie she had ever seen had Linda Ronstadt’s eyes looked so black and cold and deep.

“Hello, June,” the woman said, and her voice was wrong, too. She was all wrong, but also familiar, like someone June had known all her life, but had never noticed was there. “I hear that you’ve been looking for me.”

“Yes,” June said. She took a step forward and realized as her thighs rubbed together, that she was June, and that this was what she was looking for. “I want to take it back. What I asked for, I want to take it back.”

“You can’t make that kind of deal with just anyone, June.” The woman turned and reached a hand through the chart table. “You know that, don’t you?”

June took another few steps, drawn by the strangeness of the sight. When June’s eyes followed the woman’s arm down through where the table should be, June saw instead her little sister lying on the nappy, hand-me-down flannel of her Care Bear sheets. The woman’s hand brushed Becca’s bangs away from her clammy forehead. June looked at the woman’s face gazing down on Becca and recognized in her expression lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride.

June wanted to snatch her little sister up, take her someplace this woman could never find them. But that was impossible. Because wherever June went, she would only bring this woman with her. She had been fooling herself that patience versus wrath was the only battle being fought inside her. June lusted for power over her life. It was a gluttonous, greedy lust that would never be sated, not when what she really wanted was to have more than Becca, when she envied little sister’s moral sloth, was furious that her little sister wasn’t even aware of her own sins, aware of how much June suffered, how much better she was than Becca. As surely as there was sin in June’s heart, Satan would be in her life. Sin remade in her image. Her prayer—and no matter how she might like to pretend otherwise, a wish on a star was little more than a misaddressed prayer—hadn’t been the kind that God would answer.

“Do you love me, June?” Linda Ronstadt who was June who was Satan asked, and June wondered for a flicker of a moment if she was lonely. If that’s what everything that was wrong with the world was about.

But the question was so much more than that. It was a riddle, a chess move, much deeper than June knew how to play. In the balance was Becca’s life and June’s soul. June wanted to beg Satan to let them go, to leave them alone, but June knew that wasn’t how this worked. She looked down at her sister’s face, so peaceful and oblivious and knew that even with all of her sins, June would do anything for Becca. That for Becca, she could try to be chaste, temperate, charitable, diligent, patient, kind and humble. But Becca had never asked those things of her. Becca had just made herself happy and assumed that June would do the same.

“Yes,” June answered in a gush of air that left her chest completely empty. Quiet like a deserted battlefield.

God is Love, she consoled herself. Everyone should be loved. Hate would let Satan deeper into her heart than love ever could, and letting wrath into her heart was what had brought this out of her, brought Satan to Becca, in the first place. But no, June realized, that wasn’t it. She looked into the woman’s empty eyes, saw all the worst parts of herself, and June did love her.

“Yes,” June said again, in case she had imagined saying it the first time. And she felt, lonely and empty and free. “But you have to leave Becca alone.”

The back door creaked open, and June sat up with a little gasp, knocking the sleeping bag to the side and surprising a laugh out of her mom.

“Come on in, June. It’s late.” Their mom beckoned to June with the arm that didn’t have a romance novel tucked under it. “You don’t want to spend the whole night out here, do you?”

June snatched up the sleeping bag and jumped off the trampoline the way their dad did, landing hard on the damp grass.

“Whoa there,” their mom said.

June didn’t slow down to regain her balance. She ran past her into the house, dragging the sleeping bag like a disgraced cape behind her.

There, propped in front of the television with the volume turned down low and his mouth hanging open, slept their dad. Next to him was Becca, curled into a corner of the couch, her bangs stuck together in clumps from the melted ice pack balanced on her head. Their mom propped her romance novel open on the back of the couch, dropped the icepack onto the floor, and lifted Becca into her arms. June thought she would carry Becca straight back to her bedroom. Instead, their mom turned to June, hugging Becca tightly against her chest, and smiled the smile that made their mom beautiful, no matter how overweight or freckled she complained about being. Seeing it made June want to cry, to confess what she’d done. But she did not.

That night was not the last time June saw the woman. Again and again she came to June, looking different sometimes, but always June knew her. And every time, June looked into the eyes of the woman that was everything she’d been raised to fear and offered love. And every time she meant it more than the time before. Even when she knew that it was a dream, that it wasn’t real, June still told her that she loved her. Because even if a dream couldn’t take her sister

and what June said in it made her wonder if she was losing herself, June would never take a chance with Becca again.

That night, June said nothing to their mom. June followed her into Becca's room and watched her tuck Becca into worn, Care Bear sheets. June waited by the door until she heard their mom get their dad up from the couch and the click of their bedroom door latching shut. Then quietly, so she wouldn't wake Becca, June crossed to the window and looked up at the sky. She could only see four stars from where she stood, but as far as June was concerned that was plenty. June let Becca's breathing lull her with its rhythm, then mouthed the words that would become her new prayer to sky. A prayer to dismantle stories, to save herself from damnation the only way she knew how.

"You are a burning ball of gas," she whispered. "You are a burning ball of gas, you are a burning ball of gas."

.... – .’s Story

They walked in an uneven progression along the top of the levee until they hit a chain-link fence. It extended all the way from the lake, up and over the levee, and back down on the other side. At the clearly marked “Do Not Enter” signs, Archer expected the professor to turn back or at least stop. They’d been walking for what felt like twenty minutes on the long, grassy ridge of a levee that was supposed to mean the difference between flooded and not flooded in the event of a hurricane. On the dry side, they’d left the University of New Orleans behind a while back. On the floodable, lake-side of the levee, streetlights lit an empty road that Sunday picnickers and recreational fishermen used to reach their favorite lakefront benches and water-fountain-equipped shelters. The last streetlight was set back from where the road dead ended in the fence. No light at all leaked from the other side of the Do Not Enter border.

The night was warm. Not as warm as it had been a few hours before, but judging from the way the thick, night air seemed to be contributing to the moisture beading on his upper lip and forehead, the air had to be pushing 100% relative humidity. The signs did not stop the professor. He led them along the chain link fence down the levee through the wide, grassy park area, all the way down to the paved bank of the lake that descended in a concrete stairway to disappear under the dark water. Archer felt so awake, like his senses were burning every detail into memory. The

astronomy class climbed down onto the algae-coated, cement stairway together. In silhouette against the shining water, they looked like selkies about to pull their seal skins back on and jump into the sea. Students held tightly onto the cumbersome pieces of dismantled telescope as they sidled along the stairs, past the edge of the fencing that had stopped where the grassy “land” did.

“I heard this is military land,” a slim brunette whispered. A teenage boy, not much older than Archer, answered that he’d heard the land was leased to the university but was full of abandoned buildings. Archer could see the leak of distant electric lights over the levee and large, dark shapes in between. They could be buildings. They could be dinosaurs.

Once they reached a clearing on the other side of the fence, Hue—who, like Archer, was passing for a college student simply by not telling anyone that they were from the magnet high school on the edge of the university’s campus—quietly broke off from the class. Archer wanted to follow her.

He lowered his piece of the telescope onto the tripod the other students had set up at the professor’s instructions, watching anxiously as Hue neared the edge of the flashlights’ domain. Archer scrutinized the motivations behind his sudden, sure interest in a girl who wouldn’t have gotten even a glance if he passed her in the hallway at school. He assessed that it was likely a series of paradigm shifts: from moving in a pack of other girls who seemed just like her, to being the only one “like him” in their astronomy class—younger, not quite white, not quite belonging; from his mind registering her as one of many readable people in their old context, to the only unreadable person in this new one. When class became trespass, the night grew thick with possibilities.

As soon as he was able to let go of his section of telescope that had made his arms rubbery with the carrying of it, he followed Hue. His eyes catalogued the order in which the dark

absorbed her—the silky black of her hair first, followed by her navy shorts, then the nappy gray sweater she was wearing despite the heat that plastered the cotton of Archer’s T-shirt against his back, last the white columns of her legs dashing a line for him to follow through the dark.

He gave chase, but she was gone.

“Hue,” Archer called quietly. It was weird to call her name when he’d never “met” her before, but they’d had Geometry together Freshman year as well as English Junior year, so they could have known each other if they’d wanted to. He stumbled through the dark, the glow of the Astronomy class flashlights yards behind him. The professor directed the class’ eyes heavenwards trying to find words that would get them all to look up at the same set of stars. Archer’s sneakers crunched on a broken bottle. “Hue.”

“It’s *hhwAY*.” Her voice came from higher up. Archer’s eyes adjusted, and he could see that the darker darkness that had been looming in front of him was a cement structure of some kind. Two white lines became her legs, hanging off something the height and width of a stage.

“What—” He tried to find her face in the dark and failed. “Where’s your torso?”

“I’m lying down,” she said and sat up. “My name does not mean ‘color.’ Say it like ‘way’ with an ‘h’ in front of it. What do you want?”

“Nothing.” His answer sounded flat to him, but he could think of no way to capture or transfer to her the connection he’d felt strong enough to send him chasing her through the dark. Archer didn’t believe in fate or destiny or God. He believed that sometimes the un-sentient mechanics of the universe cranked into alignment to make one person exciting to another one, but that excitement was no less real for it. He was smart enough not to try to express his acceptance of cosmic manipulations to her. “I was just wondering where you went.”

“I’m here,” she said and lay back down.

The professor strained to project his lesson to the increasingly scattered undergraduates, but he needn't have bothered. The lake was still and his voice carried easily over the gentle lap of water against cement. "If you've found Orion's belt—yes that's those three bright stars, you've got it—imagine the line running through them to the right and do you see that V? That's the face of Taurus the Bull. That really bright one is called Aldebaran. That's the bull's eye."

Archer hauled himself up next to Hue, realizing there must have been a set of stairs somewhere because the cement slab was chest height on him and Hue was at least a foot shorter. He lay down next to her, but not too close, their backs against the cool cement slab, legs dangling over the edge, faces up towards the sky. "What is this thing?"

"The Zephyr. Or maybe the Rajin' Cajun." He could hear her hair move against the cement as she turned her head slightly towards him. "It was a rollercoaster. This used to be Pontchartrain Beach. A theme park."

"No shit?" Archer laughed and twisted his head to look behind him. His eyes were adjusting but he didn't see any tracks. A ditch ran through the cement behind them. They must be sitting on the boarding platform. "So this is the crap box that put Lincoln Beach out of business."

Archer's mom was ten when Pontchartrain Beach desegregated in 1964, eleven when it put the "colored" Lincoln Beach out of business. He'd pulled these facts from old photo albums and childhood stories told by his grandmother, but his mother never talked about her past. So instead, Archer constructed narratives about her. A grinning bathing-suit photo on Lincoln Beach became the bliss of every summer day. A memoir of Ruby Bridges told the story of his mother sitting in a classroom of empty desks when white parents moved their kids into the still segregated Catholic school system. On the rare Friday night when his parents opened a bottle of

wine and put on Dianna Ross' break away album, *Dianna Ross*, Archer could see his mother swaggering through the Quarter, her 'fro picked wide and tall before she had to tame her hair and wardrobe for Boston University School of Law. His father's life was as open a book as his face. Archer could read in the wide, mustachioed grin in their wedding picture how that particular Irish Southie would count himself lucky to follow Archer's mom anywhere. Even back down South to become a CPA. But his mother's countenance remained opaque, her answers oblique.

Archer researched New Orleans in the sixties and seventies the way he saw his father read up on WWII—the time Archer's grandfather refused to speak about. Segregation era hubs like Lincoln Beach and Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard became havens, utopias to Archer's mind. Conversely, Pontchartrain Beach, City Park and Canal Street became villainous—first for being segregated, then later for putting Archer's utopias out of business.

When Archer had asked his father why his mother would never talk about what it was like, growing up through desegregation, his father only said, "I think there are a lot of reasons. Some of them are probably because she doesn't want you to hear about things being hard for her. But mostly, I think it's not the part of her story she likes to focus on. She's lived a much broader life since her childhood."

"But what about what I need to know?" Archer asked. "I feel like I'm half-adopted sometimes because I don't know anything about what it means to be black."

His dad smiled, and it was recognizably the same smile Archer used to cajole his way out of trouble, but his father's eyes were sympathetic. "Maybe she thinks you'll find out everything you need to know about being black by looking black to the rest of the world."

Lying on the remains of a roller coaster, Archer imagined Pontchartrain Beach emptying of white faces as the black and brown ones started to appear. He thought of the way City Park

had shut the public pool down rather than having both races swim together and wondered if white people on the beach had felt the same way or if they considered a lake to be big enough for them all.

“A roller coaster graveyard,” Archer said, relish clear in his voice. “It’s actually nice seeing a white segregation era landmark be all run down for a change.” Archer laughed, hoping Hue would join him, but she didn’t. He tried not to squirm. The only thing worse than striking out was showing you minded striking out.

“Just past the bull’s eye,” their professor intoned in the distance, “a little above and to the right you can see a hazy cluster of stars. That is the cluster we will be studying tonight. They are called the Pleiades or the Seven Sisters. They’re an open star cluster with middle aged hot B-type stars. They make up the bull’s shoulder. Can you see it? No?”

“Did he say middle-aged, hot, B-movie stars?” Archer said in mock puzzlement, turning his head to face Hue. “Isn’t that an oxymoron?”

Hue tilted her head slightly towards him. Archer felt his heart jump in anticipation. Rounded lips parted. “Oh, shut up.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Shhhh,” she hissed, but didn’t sound particularly pissed.

Archer relaxed against the cool cement. He wondered what Hue was thinking about. Was she a stickler for classroom etiquette even under the stars or was she just that absorbed in the lecture? Was she nervous around Archer, and was shutting him down a way to hide it? Was so much happening in her life that she needed this quiet to mull it over? Guessing at people’s inner lives was Archer’s favorite pastime, but rarely did he feel like he came across a worthy puzzle. The possibilities were so wide open for Hue, contemplating them felt meditative.

The professor waxed poetical about the Pleiades, how it was one of the nearest star clusters to earth, how the hazy glow around the stars that led Tennyson to say they “glitter like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver braid” was really from a dust cloud in the interstellar medium the cluster was passing through. How the ancient Greeks accounted for it when one of the seven brightest stars disappeared—the seventh brightest star in the constellation being a shell star that varies in brightness—claiming that of the seven sisters Orion lustily pursued across the sky, the youngest, Merope, had married a mortal and faded away.

“I should call you Merope,” Archer said. He was thinking of how Hue had faded to black when she walked away from the flashlight’s circle.

“Thanks, but I’ll pass on being the subject of a god’s rape fantasies.” Her voice was dry. “If I’m going to be one of the Pleiades,” she said and raised a wool-encased arm to point in the general direction of the cluster, “I’d rather pick a different myth about them. I want to be the warrior general Lampado, daughter of the Amazon Queen.”

“Which star would I be?” Archer asked, realizing and not caring that he was giving her the perfect set up to make him a maiden if she wanted to.

“Well, you’re the Archer. You’re all about the hunt, so you’d have to be Sagittarius, the centaur. Or by a different myth and a different kind of hunting, Crotus, the satyr.” She swiveled her head, searching the edges of the sky. “I don’t know if we can see it. Part of why I’m taking this class is that I know tons of mythology from taking Greek last year, but I can never tell which stars people are talking about. They just look like a bunch of dots to me. Even if you draw lines through them, I don’t see how anyone would see centaurs and sisters.”

Archer looked at the lines of her eyelashes, the circles where pupils disappeared into dark irises. He could imagine any number of stories from them. He lay quietly next to Hue listening to

the remainder of the lecture over the distant waves of the lake and the quiet ebb and flow of their breathing until the Levee District Police rolled over the levee in their four-wheeler and told the class they had to go.

That first class turned out to be their second-to-last class as well. The next week, they were informed by email that they should report to the classroom listed on the syllabus the following Monday. When they showed up, a harried graduate student handed out an in-class-reading assignment and informed them that their professor had been let go for breaking the law by bringing them onto the Lakefront after dark and making the university vulnerable to lawsuits (should any of the students have injured themselves on the abandoned property).

Considering that his mother had paid for most of the addition on their house with one particularly lucrative liability suit she won for her firm, Archer had to admit the university's reasoning was pretty sound. Hue had arrived after him that 2nd class and sat on the opposite side of the room. She looked like a stranger under the florescent lights. Archer noticed a small, dark dot on the top of her left ear, probably a mole, and that she was slightly less beautiful than she had become in his mind. He offered her a ride home after class, but she declined and after a few minutes of waiting with her for her ride, her cursory—though not overtly unfriendly—responses were enough to send him on his way.

A day later, the class was informed via email that the university had been unable to find a replacement for their professor, and the class was being cancelled. If they couldn't find a class they'd like to switch into, registration fees would be refunded. Archer switched into Intro to Philosophy, another class selected for its optimal combination of college credit and an easy A.

Archer expected Hue to fade into the background after that. They belonged not just to different social circles, but different social strata. Archer had achieved great success in high

school by gaming the system that had seemed designed to screw him. All the way through junior high, Archer had struggled with being too white, too like his meticulous CPA dad to fit in with his mom's side of the family, and at his almost entirely white Catholic school, too black to ever be mistaken for belonging.

A magnet high school was different from other schools though. It pulled the highest testing students from all over Orleans Parish and as a result was one of the most evenly integrated schools in the district. There were two girls for every boy, even playing offense on their chronically losing football team, so attractive boys—like Archer—were especially valued here. The biggest gossip of every year was who'd scored a perfect SAT score and who'd been accepted to MIT, so high grades were a social boon, not a detraction. Moderate athletic talent that had barely gotten Archer off the bench at his last school made him an all-star here. For the first time, Archer could be an oreo, could be openly good at math, and still be one of the coolest people in the room. He became more esoterically white in front of his black friends, and more black than he'd ever had the guts to pretend to be in front of his white friends. Archer became everyone's favorite friend who wasn't like them, their gateway into the other world. He'd been on the homecoming court two out of the last three years, and he'd already been nominated for king in his senior year. He'd be willing to bet that less than a fifth of their class of 250 would know how to say Hue's name. Probably less.

But Hue did not recede. He developed a heightened awareness of her location, between which classes he would pass her in the hall, knowing that wherever he sat at lunch, she'd be sitting cross legged in the courtyard eating brown bag lunches with the same five Vietnamese girls Archer wouldn't have had any more or less interest in than Hue a few weeks before. Now he found himself asking people what her friends' names were, what they were into. She oriented

him, gave his movement direction. But when she passed him in the hall, sometimes meeting his eyes, sometimes not, it seemed that her awareness of him was decidedly peripheral. She was oblivious of what each point of contact meant to him.

The notes were not the slickest thing Archer had ever come up with. He generally felt that passing notes should be left to middle schoolers and that in almost every case, the best course of action was to sack up and go talk to a girl. But he tried that with Hue, and the disinterested responses she'd given him when he'd tried to make the usual what-classes-are-you-taking small talk hadn't been promising. Besides, the girl that he passed in the hallway, looking like any number of girls, wasn't the one he was trying to talk to. He needed to find the other one, the one who'd shushed him in the dark the way you would an annoying brother. The one whose silence riveted him.

The first note he'd slipped through the slat in her locker was little more than a line graph he'd drawn after memorizing the exact location of everyone in the hallway when she'd passed him on his way to Calculus. He didn't write any names, just titled the jumble of dots and lines "Hallway Constellation," but he felt like she had to know it was from him, had to recognize lines as relationships, had to know which points were them.

The next day before Calculus, when she passed, he gave her a huge, shit-eating grin and handed her a note that only said ". - ." her name in Morse code. She pursed her lips and raised a skeptical eyebrow, and Archer recognized the girl from the dark slipping out to chastise him.

Next he sent her a guilloche flower. He'd spent more time than was really necessary adjusting the radius, opacity, and the major and minor ripples on the online software until the design was more art than math, until he hoped it would evoke Fabregé's mechanical, decorative

guilloches than what the Central Bank printed on bills. Archer copied the mathematical equation used to build it on the bottom of the page, then deleted it. A “Guilloche Corsage” was what he titled it, prepping her for the actual conversation he was determined to have with her.

On his way out of school, he asked his friends to wait for him and climbed through the underclassmen and the carless that sat on the sidewalk waiting to be collected by parents. He could tell she’d gotten his note by the nervous way she looked at her friend Mai when she saw him approaching, then away as if this rudeness would deter him.

Well, if she wanted him to stop, he would. “Hue,” he called, giving the end of her name the upwards lilt the Vietnamese pronunciation website had suggested. “I have a question for you.”

She muttered something to Mai, then scrambled through the sitting students and their backpacks towards him. “Inside,” she hissed as she passed him, marching past his gaping friends back into the school.

He grinned at them and followed her in, loving the small tight steps she took into the building.

“No,” she said, turning to face him. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve lost me,” Archer said, leaning against the wall and closing a few more inches between them.

“I won’t go to Homecoming with you. I’m sorry.”

Archer blinked at her presumptuousness, but her presumption was correct so he couldn’t very well complain. “Why?” Archer asked, trying not to be too put off by her refusal.

“Because you don’t know me,” she said with a fierce authority that brought his litigious mother to mind, “and yet you’ve clearly constructed this whole thing around the few minutes that

we've actually talked to each other, and I don't want to be the teaching point of a life lesson where you realize that you can't project whatever you want onto other people without being disappointed. Mysteriously elusive Asian girl turns out to be high schooler preoccupied with her grades: no thank you."

"So don't disappoint me," Archer said with what he hoped was a devilish smile.

Her face reddened, the slap of his words drawing blood to her skin. "If you were actually listening to what I was saying, you'd realize that's a pretty cruel thing to say." She pushed past him to go back outside.

"Hue, wait. Wait!" Archer shouted. She stopped, turned back, and shushed him, and Archer's heart skipped a beat. "At least think about it. Even if you hate me, pretending to think about it would at least allow me to save some face with my friends."

"I don't hate you." Hue looked down at her hands and picked at an angry looking cuticle.

Archer could see through the glass doors that an older Vietnamese man had gotten out of a battered station wagon and was talking to Mai. Archer was running out of time. "So I bullshit myself about you. So what? You have no tolerance for any of the rest of my crap, just make sure you call me on that too while you're at it." Archer glanced nervously back at the door. Hue followed his eyes to the man who was now climbing the steps to the door.

"Okay," she breathed and ran to the door to stop her father before he came through.

"Okay," Archer said, and felt himself grow a few inches taller.

Though Hue wasn't allowed to date, her parents allowed her to go to homecoming with a group of her friends. If Archer put a corsage on her wrist after she got there, and they took pictures together, her parents were none the wiser of it. Archer wasn't named Homecoming King, but he was still on the court, and Hue looked tiny and wonderful on his arm when they paraded into the hall and started the first dance with the rest of the court.

In the following weeks, Archer squeezed his large frame into Hue's tight circle of friends for the beginning of lunch period before dragging her off from table to table of his friends. It was the surprising sort of pairing that made the hallways buzz with speculation. It was a widely accepted truth that only a rare few Vietnamese girls in the school were allowed to date, and they were only allowed to date the sons of other congregation members of their ornately colorful churches out in New Orleans East. Archer's teammates asked him about Hue's parents, about whether or not they had a problem him, and he would answer them with a solemn look. Hue never related anything outside of the typical mundane details of family life, but Archer was not allowed to come over to her house, he could not call her at home, and he could not see her outside of school. In those restrictions, in the loose cut of her pants and her demure headbands, Archer read chapters worth of conservative, restrictive, protectiveness. To Archer, theirs was a segregation-era-worthy, star-crossed love story and every limitation Hue related only fueled the romanticism.

When Hue was particularly quiet and withdrawn one lunch, Archer didn't ask why. He'd been raised in a house where questions didn't get answered by difficult women, but statements made with presumed knowledge could get confirmation.

"You look stressed today. Parents are the worst."

"What? Why are you talking about my parents?"

Archer draped an arm around her and pulled her in against him. “I’m just saying, they don’t understand.”

Hue shrugged his arm off her shoulders and gave him a confused look. “No, I have an AP European History test after lunch, and I told Mai I would study with her. I told you, I need to get back, but every time I go to leave, you stop me. Why? So you can sit here and say weird things about my parents? What wouldn’t they understand?”

“Me.” Archer wagged his eyebrows waggishly. “Or haven’t you told them.”

“Oh, Archer,” Hue said with a sigh. “We just eat together. There’s really nothing to tell.”

After that, Archer and Hue spent one lunch apart and then another, and soon they were practically strangers again.

In the normal way that new memories overwrite old ones, Hue was pushed into the background of Archer’s memory. When he thought of her over the years, it wasn’t of the girl he’d imagined her to be or the girl she actually was. Hue became the first female embodiment of his disappointment—that first magical girl who turned out to be just a girl—then later as his perspective matured, a supporting member of the cast of people he realized he had disappointed.

But mostly he didn’t think of Hue. When he got the invitation to his ten year high school reunion, she didn’t particularly come to mind. When he saw her name listed on the sign-in sheet at the large downtown bar that had been rented, he smiled at the prospect of seeing her, but not dwelling on it, made his way to the bar.

But when he leaned back against the bar and saw her sitting amidst a group of people on the stage, her pale legs dangling over the side, he was poleaxed by the memory of that night under the stars, the feeling of wide possibility spread above and next to him. He waited and watched, making small talk with old classmates. And then when Hue approached the bar to get another drink, he moved in next to her.

“Hello, Hue. Or should I call you Lampawhatever, the Amazon star.”

Hue laughed and moved her hair back over her shoulder. “Hello, Archer. Still working your charm for all it’s worth, I see.”

And he was. Archer had polished most of the unattractive angles off of his charm until it slid unobtrusively through conversations, making space for whatever he wanted to follow. He felt his charm working on Hue, saw her eyebrows knit in concern as he told her about his knee surgery, got a hard won laugh by dredging humorous anecdotes out of a fairly unhumorous career as an engineer for an oil company. After some prodding Hue told him about the residency that she was near to completing. How she decided to become an oncologist despite her mother dying of cancer, rather than because of it. All of this information was traded in that prepackaged way that people use to deliver large swaths of time to each other. Archer was surprised to find himself growing increasingly impatient.

“Hue, I’d like to know something about you.”

“Archer,” she responded acerbically. “I have just been telling you about me.”

“I mean.” Archer placed both palms flat on the bar and wrestled his tangle of regrets into words. “I want to know something about you just for the sake of knowing it. That’s why I came over to talk to you. But I can’t seem to help myself. I just keep trying to bend the conversation around into something that would get me into your pants.”

“Pardon me for being skeptical,” Hue said with no trace of apology in her voice, “but that sounded more like a pick up line than anything else you’ve said tonight.”

“Then thwart me! Tell me something heartbreakingly unsexy.” When Hue paused, he suggested, “How about something that you would have wanted to tell me about when we were teenagers, but I was too narcissistic to ask. Tell me that.”

Her eyes narrowed in a way that reminded Archer a little of his mother, but mostly of Hue herself, ten years before. “Why?”

“You know, I don’t think I can explain.” Archer swirled the cubes that hadn’t had time to melt around bottom of his whiskey-less glass. Hue tucked her hair behind her ear, and Archer smiled when he saw the familiar dot of a mole there. “Why don’t we just say I’d like to draw a new constellation around that old set of stars.”

“Archer,” Hue said, and her eyes looked a good ten years older than her face. “It disturbs me, but I can no longer tell if you are completely full of crap or just mostly.”

“Hue,” he said back, mimicking her tone fondly, “just tell me a story.

She looked at him skeptically a moment longer. And then she did.

It was about why she’d wandered off in the dark that night under the stars. It was about how right she felt it was that the first and only time she was on Ponchartrain Beach, it was too dark for her to see it. That seeing it would have punctured a long-held fantasy shaped around a postcard tucked into an old album.

Her father had bought it the summer of 1973. Catholic Charities had resettled him and his young wife in a neighborhood called Versailles in New Orleans East. He was shrimping on a boat with hand-knotted nets, not unlike the ones he’d worked with in Saigon. He and his wife had one room in a house rented by relatives, in a new neighborhood in a new country, but the

marsh and heat were familiar and so were many of his neighbors. But he found he couldn't stop waiting for the thunder of bombs falling. For the dry heat of not-so-distant flames. For the rhythmic percussion of gun shots.

Then one day, his wife saw an ad for Pontchartrain Beach, and she told him that they were going there. They had very little money and no car, but his wife was determined, so they talked to a couple from their church who did have a car, and one Saturday in May, the four of them drove down to Pontchartrain Beach. The park itself was bright and gaudy, and people whipped past them overhead on rides screaming as if that were a joyful thing to do. The two couples had brought a picnic basket and a blanket, and they walked past the flashing lights and smell of food stands. Hue's father and the other husband laid their blanket and the spread of *bánh mì* and *char siu bao* their wives had packed, while the women went to change into borrowed swimsuits in the bathhouse.

All day they sat there together, eating and talking amongst themselves because there was no one else there who would have understood their language. Hue's father was aware of how different they—their clothes, their food, their language—were from the crowd around them. But as the sun set, and Hue's mother and the other wife splashed back out into the lake for one last swim, Hue's father looked at them out there, and for the first time, saw how they looked right with the other laughing, careless women and their children. Their happiness made them belong. As the sky bled red behind them and the water reflected pearlescent blue, for the first time, Hue's father couldn't imagine a bomb being dropped on these beautiful American women. With the laughs and merry screams from the rides, he couldn't imagine actual fear or danger intruding.

Hue's father told her this was the day that he first really believed he was an American. Hue's mother told her that this was the day her husband came back to her. When he filled back out into the shape she remembered.

Archer listened to Hue's story, and he tried to reimagine that night under the stars from Hue's eyes. The weight of lying on the carcass of the rollercoaster. The dark hiding the shells of everything else that had been there. He felt a flash of sadness from the realization that he was an intrusive figure in her moment of private importance, but then remembered what he was trying to do. That he was trying, for the first time, to really fill in the rough outline of Hue with her story, not his. He smiled, and asked her to tell him another one.

Ghost Crab

The moonlit waves licked at Becca's ankles, sneaking sand out from under her bare feet. Her limbs twitched with the urge to run out into the dark surf, but Becca willed herself into stillness. There wasn't time to waste. Sooner or later someone would come outside and realize she was no longer building sand castles in the floodlights next to the condo driveway. She would be watched more closely after that.

Another wave and then, by her left foot, was what she'd been waiting for. A ghost crab. Probably an adolescent if its burrow was so close to the shore, but possibly an older crab come to wet its gills in sea water. Becca dropped into a squat and snatched the crab up before the next wave could splash her bathing suit. She was careful to grasp its pale shell from behind where its claws couldn't reach. No, its carapace, she corrected herself. The more specific your words, the more powerful your speech, her dad would have said.

Pinching its carapace securely, Becca hurried towards the mound of sand that hid the other items she'd collected. Her only light was from the moon, magnified to gigantic proportions by its proximity to the horizon. It was a blue moon. Called blue because it was the second full moon they'd had that month, but it was as white and round as a lidless eyeball. She arranged her ingredients with her free hand. A bubbling sound came out of the squirming crab, like a purr

through gills. Becca rubbed her finger over the crab's yellowish-white back and cooed to it.

"Don't worry, this will all be over soon." She emptied her plastic bucket of sea water into the hard-packed pit she'd dug in the sand, then placed the ghost crab in the bucket. She fumbled with a plastic lighter, finally getting it lit and holding a piece of driftwood over it until it ignited. She placed the burning wood at the edge of her pit and reached for her next item.

"Becca, are you playing with fire?!" June bellowed from behind her.

Becca whirled around, trying to block her sister's view of the burning driftwood.

"You better get your butt up here right now or—" June paused in her charge down the raised wooden walkway. "Is that my travel blow dryer?"

Becca's knuckles tightened around the dryer's battery-pack handle. It had taken her hours to come up with a way to make wind for her spell. "I'm just borrowing it."

"The fuck you are." June snatched the dryer out of Becca's hands before shoving the driftwood, burning-end first, into the sand. "You are going to be in so much trouble when I tell Mom." She grabbed Becca's upper arm and propelled her towards the condo.

"Wait, my crab," Becca said, digging in her heels and pushing back with her weight.

"Leave it."

"It'll die!" Becca imagined the ghost crab scrabbling at plastic walls, gills dehydrated, pale exoskeleton a target for seagulls against the vibrant orange of the bucket. "You ruin everything."

June bit her lower lip, and Becca went very still. June only made this face when she was struggling not to lose her temper. Becca had learned the painful way that it was best not to antagonize June until she had gotten herself back under control. June released her lip, and both girls relaxed.

“You know I have to tell Mom you were playing with fire,” June said without acrimony. “She’s going to kill you.”

Becca took a step towards the wooden stairs. When she felt June’s hand relax on her arm, Becca threw herself sideways, breaking free to run back and kick over the bucket, giving her crab a means of escape. Swinging back on her sister, Becca pointed accusingly at the blue Bic lying next to the driftwood. “Dad’s going to kill you when I tell him where I got the lighter.”

“You really need to update your threats. It’s not you and him against me and Mom anymore.” She pointed a pale arm at the Bic in the sand. “Give me that.”

Becca squatted down and handed the lighter to June, using her lowered position to peek into the bucket to make sure the ghost crab had escaped. She had been ready to kill it for the sake of her spell, but she would have hated to see it die for no purpose. The only trace that it had ever been there was a swirl in sand, the caved-in entrance to its burrow.

June tucked the blow dryer under her arm, then pulled a bent cigarette from her back pocket and flicked a flame out of the Bic on the first try. At thirteen, June was only four years older than Becca, but somehow she still managed to look like a woman more often than not.

“What were you up to anyway, trying to have a crab boil?” June gestured at Becca’s pit. The burning cigarette dangled between her fingers with a casual familiarity Becca found shocking.

“No.” Becca pushed the driftwood deeper down into the sand, trying to make it disappear.

“I mean–” June pulled smoke into her mouth and blew it quickly back out again. “You know those aren’t real crabs, right? You can’t eat them.”

“They are real crabs.” Becca shoved hard on the last couple of inches of driftwood visible above the sand. “*Ocypode Quadrata*,” she mumbled. She knew her sister wouldn’t understand her words, wouldn’t understand that their scientific name proved they were crabs.

Not that scientific names were all that scientific. Her dad said that people just made them up, the way they made up all words. They only put them in old languages because it’s a tradition. It still mystified Becca how exactly words were made up and how exactly something made up could become a fact. Someone or some group of people had made up the definition of a crab and some group of people before them had made up the words that went into that definition. Understanding that chain of events was called Etymology, and it was what her dad did for the university. She tried to remember what he’d said about the ghost crabs. *Ocypode* meant fast feet and *Quadrata* meant something about water, but there was something about what they used to be called. Something almost magical that she couldn’t remember.

“You know.” June gave her bent cigarette another quick puff. “Big words don’t make you sound any less like a twat.”

“*Stupidus Bitchotica*,” Becca muttered. She gave the wood one final shove before picking up her bucket and heading back towards the condo.

“I heard that,” June said from behind her, following her to the stairs. She didn’t sound angry, but Becca broke into a run.

Sea oats leaning through the railings of the walkway whipped against Becca’s legs, but she didn’t let the itching of her skin or the threat of splinters in her feet slow her down until she hit the cement patio under the raised condo. She rinsed off quickly under the outdoor shower by the garage, then rinsed off again more thoroughly when June stopped her and pointed out the half-moons of sand where her bathing suit rode up on her butt. Becca thought June had gone

ahead inside, but when she dripped up the stairs to the landing outside the front door, June was there waiting for her, holding out one of the sun-dried towels from the banister.

“I won’t tell Mom on you because the whole point of us coming out here was to give her a break from everything.” The porch light shone over June’s shoulder, leaving her face in the dark, but making the blond hairs that escaped from her ponytail glow an angry orange. “But no more lighting shit on fire. Got it?”

“Alright,” Becca mumbled. Pulling the towel loose from her body and bending over to wrap it around her wet hair gave Becca an excuse not to look up into the shadows of her sister’s face. She might have been tempted to dawdle in her inverted position, but June went inside and left the door gaping open for Becca.

The main room of the condo was split into a kitchen and living room by a counter and strategic lighting. Becca padded through the porch door and onto the cold tiles of the kitchen area. She knew her mother and June were sitting only a few feet away in the living room, but she tried to act as if the kitchen were a separate room, a room that she was alone in. She grabbed a handful of Goldfish and some Oreos before she looked their way.

June was sitting next to their mother on the couch. June looked like a younger, prettier version of their mom, just as Becca looked like a browner, scrawnier version of their dad. But in the dim glow from the television, it looked like their mom’s I’m-watching-you stare had abandoned her vacant face and taken up residence in June’s eyes.

Becca crammed two Oreos into her mouth before she was out of sight.

The bedroom Becca and June were splitting was the smaller of the two. The other bedroom opened straight out onto a balcony with a view of the beach, but neither girl had taken

their mother's offer to share it with her. Instead they'd carried their things quietly into this room then fought in fierce, hushed tones over who got the half of the room with the closet.

She put the Oreos and Goldfish down. Both hands were required for picking up her heavy backpack and carrying it into the closet. June's sundresses brushed the top of her head as she cleared a space between June's tennis shoes and sandals just big enough to squeeze herself in next to her bulging backpack. One more quick trip out to snatch June's cell phone from its special pocket in her purse, and she was secure in the closet, shutting the door behind her. Her fingers fumbled in the dark with the phone's buttons until she found the right one and green light poured from the screen. One missed call from June's new boyfriend, a text from her best friend, but no other new alerts. Becca felt oddly relieved, but even more disappointed. She navigated her way through the elderly phone's menus to double check that she hadn't missed any messages since the last time she'd checked a few hours ago, which she hadn't. Then she started a new one.

Dad, please call me. I won't tell anyone, I promise.

She clicked send, but the phone vibrated immediately. MESSAGE NOT DELIVERED. Becca deleted this message as she had all the others. Feeling a band tighten around her ribs, she unzipped her backpack and slid her hands down the smooth spines of her *Harry Potter* collection. They were hardback copies, the British versions, not the American ones. Words matter, her dad had explained when he wouldn't take her to the bookstore on the night the American version came out. They're powerful, more powerful and lasting than any other thing in this world, and you shouldn't change someone's words just because it makes it easier for you to understand them.

It had been almost a month now since she'd last seen him. A month since he'd said the words she couldn't stop trying to understand.

“Don’t trust them,” he’d said through the chain link fence of the schoolyard. It had been two months before that since the last time her mom had let her go spend the weekend with him. His skin was really shiny, and his hair stuck to his forehead in clumps. “Don’t trust anyone. Not even June or your mom. They’re coming for me, and then they’ll come for you next. Whatever you do, don’t let on that you know what we are.” Then his eyes jumped to the teacher walking towards them. “Promise me,” he said. So Becca did, even though she didn’t really know what he meant.

It was a promise she was trying to keep. She hadn’t asked any questions that would make anyone suspect she doubted the story she’d been told about his having to go away because he was sick. She was hoping he’d find a way to get back to her and explain what was going on, or at least whom she could trust. She’d written him letters, called and texted his phone, even convinced one of her friends’ mom to stop by her dad’s apartment, supposedly to pick up her retainer, but he didn’t answer the door.

When Becca was little, and they all still lived together, and before June had decided she was too old for it, Becca and June used to drag a sleeping bag out under the moon and their dad used to tell them stories about pirates and talking animals. And because their dad said the words, the stories had felt real. Now Becca struggled to tell herself stories. Stories about what happened to her dad that she could believe. She knew their mom had lied to her. If their dad was sick, he’d still be able to talk on the phone or they’d at least be able to visit him in the hospital. So Becca told herself stories, trying different ones on, trying to believe in them as if believing could make them true.

Last week, she’d told herself that he was a spy. That no one could find out that she knew his secret identity. Tonight, she’d told herself that the urgent words he’d whispered through the

fence meant that she was a witch, that they were both wizards, and that's why he could hear people talking when no one was there. She'd stood outside under the blue moon and tried as hard as she could to believe it was true. That ghosts talked to him. Real life witches wouldn't be like Harry Potter. She'd read about the witch trials. They used to take people away for less than hearing voices.

Becca slipped out of the closet and quietly eased open the door to the hall. Her mom was saying something, but her voice was too quiet to hear over the sounds of the television.

"Have you explained things to her though?" June's voice sliced down the hall. "I mean, like, really clearly, so she can't misunderstand? Because she was talking about him earlier like she thought he might be back any day now."

Becca padded quietly out into the hallway until she could make out her mother's voice. "I was clear, June. I spared her the details, but I was clear."

"No, I'm sure you were." June sighed. "It's just, remember when we told her there was no Santa Claus, and she kept talking to the ceiling like he could hear her, like she was starring in her own Christmas movie?"

A quiet laugh escaped their mom, and Becca was drawn around the corner by the sound of it. They were still sitting on the couch where Becca had left them, but June was facing their mother, her feet tucked in underneath her.

"She never believed us," June said. "Not until there weren't presents from Santa under that tree. I'm just saying, there's no Christmas day in this kind of situation, and—"

"Becca," their mom said, making both her daughters start guiltily. "Do you need something, honey?"

Becca wrapped her arms around herself. It was cold in the living room, and she still hadn't changed out of her bathing suit. "Can I go back outside? I promise to stay by the driveway."

"No," June said with a threatening look.

"It is getting pretty late, Becca," their mother agreed. "You can go back outside tomorrow. Why don't you clean up and get ready for bed?"

Becca's eyes drifted towards the living room's sliding glass doors. The moon hung low in the sky, but only the bottom half of it was visible through the glass. The doors led out onto the long balcony that continued all the way down to the sliding glass doors of her mother's room. Becca thought quickly. "Can I take a bath in your bathroom? Ours only has a shower."

"Sure sweetie." Their mom smiled, but her voice sounded hollow.

Becca crossed and shut herself in their mother's room. She went into the bathroom only for long enough to plug the tub and twist the knobs for both taps. Running back across their mother's bedroom, she dragged open the sliding door to the balcony, shutting it behind her. Only quiet whumphs marked its progress back and forth in its tracks.

Standing on the balcony, with nothing between her and the watching ball of the moon, Becca was suddenly at a loss. She stepped closer to the railing, the cement under her feet still warm from the sun. Her pit and her ingredients on the beach had just been theatrics, make-believe not belief. She closed her eyes and told herself again that she and her dad were different from everyone else because they were special. That he was going to come back and take her away, and they were going to be happy.

She tried to focus on that thought, will it into being true, but the sounds from inside made it hard to believe she was anything other than a child who was supposed to be taking a bath,

standing alone on a balcony. She needed to focus. Becca climbed carefully up onto the wide railing, hoisting herself up and throwing a leg over the far side to dangle over the sand more than a story below. The railing was wide, but even though Becca was a good climber, it was hard to get to her feet. Standing tall, holding her arms out for balance, toes splayed wide on the railing, everything got clearer. Her heart beat faster, but everything else slowed down, narrowed down to what she could see and feel. The moon looked so close, it seemed possible reach out to touch it. A breeze gently pushed on her back, and her blood roared in her ears. She opened her mouth, and wove a spell of belief with a word that she and her dad had created and recreated the meaning of every time they said it. “Dad.”

There was a whumph behind her, then June said, “Becca!” and the spell was broken.

Becca was furious at June. For intruding on the one moment she’d been able to feel anything other than alone in months. Becca wanted to blot June out, to feel the rush in her ears and heart that had made it possible to forget everything outside of the suspended moment she’d created for herself. Becca looked up at the moon, thought of her father, and stepped over the edge into space.

Her sister’s scream followed her down, even as air whipped up past her. Becca tried to keep her eyes on the moon, tried to think of her dad, feel like he was with her again, but the strange calm she’d felt balanced on the balcony was ripped away. She gasped in air, feet and arms tried to find something to push against, but there was only empty air.

Sand is soft, and Becca was light. She’d fallen out of enough trees and bunk beds to be good at collapsing her gangly limbs in a roll that spread out the impact through her whole body—feet, knees, hands, right shoulder, hip and ribs. But some landings are bound to be hard. Becca

lay there on her side, unmoving in the sand. Her feet throbbed, a stinging began in her hands and knees.

Becca was getting to her feet by the time June, with their mother on her heels, made it down the stairs and past the showers to her. Becca saw June slow to a stop at the sight of Becca standing, but their mother continued on at full speed until she reached her youngest child and pulled Becca in tight against her.

With Becca's history of accidents, their mother assumed she fell. June stood back and said nothing when their mother carried Becca's much-too-heavy weight back inside. Upstairs, while their mother checked Becca over in the kitchen, slathering her scrapes with Neosporin, June settled in a corner of the living room. Becca waited for her to say something, but she didn't.

When Becca was tucked securely between the sheets of their mother's bed, she was actually relived when June quietly slipped in. June crossed to the balcony, opened the door and gestured for Becca to follow her. Becca shed the multiple icepack their mother had tucked in with her and followed June out. Whatever June had to say, Becca would prefer their mother didn't over hear it while soaking in her tub.

"Jesus Christ, Becca, what the fuck is wrong with you?" The words were expected, but the twisted-up look on June's face was not.

"Nothing," Becca said, frowning at her. "I didn't get hurt, so what's the big deal?"

"You jumped. I saw you, you jumped."

Becca hugged her arms in tight across her stomach. "I was just... trying something. It's not like what you're thinking."

"Then what?" June leaned in, grabbing Becca's shoulders. "Just tell me what you're thinking. Because I am so fucking scared that you're losing your mind like Dad, and I'm trying

to hide it from Mom because she's a complete mess, but I can't do that if I think you're going to go crazy and light yourself on fire or jump off another building or something."

And there it was. The word no one had said to Becca, that she had tried never to think herself, the one that changed everything. Crazy.

"We're not crazy."

"Becca." June let her go and took a step back. "You might be completely sane, but you're acting like a nutter. I know this has all been really hard for you, but—" June ran out of words and dropped her hands to her hips, a habitual gesture that looked wrong with the searching expression on her face. "Dad wasn't eating, Becca. Do you remember how we would go over there on his weekends, and there would be no food anywhere, and I'd have to ask him for money to go pick some up?"

He'd stopped having milk and vegetables first. After they'd eaten their way through the canned soups and ramen, there'd still been cookies and peanut butter. Becca had rolled her eyes at June for doing dishes, vacuuming, buying boring things at the store when she could have gotten pizza. Becca had watched cartoons, told herself that her dad writing words all over the walls of his bedroom was etymology, and eaten what June brought home from the corner store. She'd told herself that she and her dad were creative, and that sometimes other people, people who thought life was just about doing chores, wouldn't get that.

"He was getting skinnier and skinnier. He could act normal when he had to, when Mom picked us up or dropped us off, but I know you noticed it when he started talking to people who weren't there. I had to tell Mom. Don't pretend you didn't see that."

"Just because you didn't hear them—"

“No,” June said, her voice getting hard. “That is not a game we’re going to play. If you’re my schizophrenic little sister and you have your own kind of crazy going on, fine. But Dad is sick, Becca. If you don’t believe me, you can wait until he’s back on his meds long enough, and he can tell you himself. But you do not get to pretend to hear things that only exist in his head.”

Becca leaned her forehead against the railing. Neither of them said anything for a moment, but June’s forearms came up to rest against the railing next to Becca’s head. They leaned like this for a while before Becca stood up and looked into June’s face. June’s eyes were red, but she there was no other sign of weakness on her face.

“I’m not crazy.”

“I know,” June said. She turned her face towards the moon now squatting near the horizon. “But thanks for saying it.”

They stood together like that for a while. Looking at the moon or beach or sky, feeling the warm air move in from the water and brush through their hair.

June spoke without looking away from the water. “What would you be doing if you were here with Dad?”

“We’d be down on the beach with flashlights looking for crabs.” Just the two of them, cataloging their findings, talking about what animals they’d found on other vacations, adding these new ones to the list.

“An occult, secret alien from the ancient depths of the sea.” June dropped her voice deep and eerie to mimic their Dad’s.

“That’s what he said!” Becca repeated the words to herself silently, trying to commit them to memory. “I knew he said something about them the last time we were all out here together, but I couldn’t remember.”

“I know it’s ridiculous, but when he said that, and I looked down at those pale, little things popping up out of the ground and running around my feet, it seemed like it could be real, you know?” June shivered. “That they really were ghosts or aliens, and we’d all been fooled into getting close to them because they looked like something normal. I ran off that beach so fast. But then Dad was always good at scaring me. You know?”

“Yeah,” Becca said, even though she only sort of did. Occult could just mean beyond human comprehension. Secret could mean hidden from view, which the crabs were either by sand or coloring. Alien was simply a matter of perspective. “They are real though. Just a different real.”

“Yeah,” June said. And it didn’t matter to Becca that she knew June didn’t really know what she was talking about. It was enough for June to stand next to her, look out at the rest of the world, and agree.

The Kaiju of Plaquemines Parish

The first thing that It notices is different is that It notices things are different. Before It only knew now

and now

and now

a present that changed without It really connecting the now to what had come before. Green stalks, smooth, wet when the hooks on Its legs pierce through the leaf, sturdy under Its prolegs when It lengthens to reach towards the light, stretching to hook hold again, slicing into green and tasting the green's sharp brightness, wind pushing through Its spines, almost lifting Its body from the stalk of grass, but each foot clinging to the safety of green.

It pulls the stalks together, wraps them in Its silk. When they are secured, It wraps Itself in with them, around and around, spun into safety. That's when It notices things are different. And that's when It starts to grow.

“Now, Agent—” Jim Witherspoon, Regional Assistant Supervisor of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries, put down the papers he’d been shuffling ever since Camille walked into his Audubon-print-festooned office.

“It’s Fortenberry, sir.” She blinked. “Camille Fortenberry.”

“I don’t think I could have heard you correctly.” Witherspoon slid his reading glasses farther down his nose and folded his hands over his paperwork “Did you say a giant—”

“Yes, I did sir.” Camille sat at the edge of her chair because that was how she always sat; it was the only way for her to sit with her feet still on the ground and without slouching.

“I understand the possibility that you might have discovered a new species of Lepidoptera can be very exciting, but how this can possibly justify your telling my secretary there is an ecological disaster, I—”

Camille stood up, and Witherspoon’s eyes widened at being interrupted. She slipped her hand into one of her voluminous khaki pockets, pulled out her phone, and leaned over the desk to show him the image on its screen.

Witherspoon’s mouth hung open for a moment before he spoke again. “Is that your field vehicle, Agent Fortenberry?”

“I thought it would help show the scale.” Camille swiped to the next picture and the next. Dozens of angles, a close-up of the matted silk, others taken from increasing distances with the Jeep no longer in the shot. “I didn’t have any measuring tape with me, but it appears to be roughly four-and-a-half jeeps long.”

Witherspoon looked up at her searchingly, but Camille just blinked back at him. She’d been told that she wasn’t very good at reassuring people, so she didn’t try, but she could imagine

what Witherspoon was thinking. It was what she'd thought when she first saw it. Who on earth would put a giant cocoon in the middle of a field of cordgrass? But then she'd gotten closer.

It was hard when she'd pushed against it, but its surface was sticky and had clung to the rough patches of her calluses when she pulled her hand away. A V of ducks flew with purpose towards the field, but changed course when they saw its lumpen silhouette against the lightening morning sky. After eight years in the marsh, the hair on Camille's arms stood up at the marks of human boots on shore. In hunting season, she stalked the hunters, hoping the specter of her riding by with a somber expression would remind men set free with rifles that there was still a rule of law. In the field with the noises of small animals going about their business, no tracks through the grass except for her own, its residue clinging to her palm, Camille knew the cocoon belonged in the marsh. That it was alive. But how could she explain that to a man who lived behind a desk?

"Agent Fortenberry, would you mind stepping out into the waiting area for a few minutes?" Witherspoon said. "I need to make a few calls."

After the labs had tested to confirm the cocoon really was formed of abnormally large strands of moth silk, after Night Vision goggles had confirmed that the center of the cocoon was warmer than heat from the sun could account for, after a team of ultrasound techs had rubbed their equipment along the sides of the cocoon and confirmed movement, though of what they couldn't say, after state troopers had taken control of the site and imposed order on the herds of news crews that had flattened a wide circle in the shoulder-high cordgrass around the cocoon, after the

National Guard had arrived and taken control from them, after days turned into a week, Camille still refused to go home.

Witherspoon could have ordered her to. Camille didn't know why he hadn't. If she had been her supervisor and seen her bloodshot eyes, oily hair, and dirt-smudged uniform on only the second day of her round-the-clock vigil, she would have fined her for it. Maybe suspended her. Witherspoon just narrowed his eyes and told her that since there was a shower and a cot in their field office's trailer, she might as well make use of them.

Maybe he let her stay because she found it. Maybe because it was good press to have the semi-young, female field agent handy for the endless rounds of interviews that were the bread and butter of a 24-hour news cycle. Camille didn't care how many times they asked her whether she thought it was an alien pod, or if it was chemicals from the oil spill or runoff pollution from Hurricane Katrina that had resulted in their mutant moth, as long as she got to stay with it. If Witherspoon had sent her away, she'd just have snuck back through the marsh after dark. The training to become an agent of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Enforcement Department had been as vigorous in its survival training as it had been in firearm training, but Camille's familiarity with the Wildlife Management Area she patrolled went well beyond the ability to survive in it.

Camille would have preferred to watch the cocoon from the boughs of a nearby cypress. She was uncomfortable around crowds in general, but this particular collection of attractive, facile reporters and military who clearly respected no one's authority but their own could have been hand-picked to set Camille's teeth on edge. But she stayed with them because these interlopers who had trampled three acres of protected coastline into mud, had information Camille needed.

Something was growing inside there.

Camille had never wanted to be a mother. Not when she was a kid, not when she'd had that brief but intense affair with her Biology T.A., not when she'd hit thirty, not ever. But there was something growing inside of her, too. Something large, dark and ready to fight for whatever was inside that cocoon. It was *hers*. The feeling had crept up on her as the peaceful marsh filled with more and more scientists, military personnel and news crews, all with different motivations: to study, to contain, to entertain. None of them were there to protect it. Not even Witherspoon, who'd revealed himself as a true-blue beaurocrat before he'd even set the smooth soles of his loafers on the marshy turf.

Camille was the policeman of these wetlands. She'd protected and served the animals and marshes of this area for eight years, making sure no hunter or fisher killed without a permit, no trees were lumbered, no fires set. Camille would protect this moth because it was her job, even if no one else thought it was. But Camille would also protect this moth because it was hers.

So a week into the cocoon watch, when she saw Witherspoon being ushered with a group of scientists into one of the large, restricted tents set up by the National Guard, Camille edged her way through the group and quietly took a place just behind him. When she tried to sneak past the guard at the tent's door by walking too close to Witherspoon and stepped on the back of one of his loafers, Witherspoon looked at her for a long moment and then told the guard that she was his assistant.

There was a large table with one too few camp chairs around it, so Camille sat on a folding stool near the door-shaped flap of an inner room of the tent. Introductions, which she was not included in, washed over Camille in a blur of PhDs and university affiliations. It quickly

became clear that she'd insinuated herself into the National Guard's meeting with an entomological advisory board. A meeting that Witherspoon himself seemed only to be observing.

The governor, a religious man who believed in the concrete manifestations of the end of days, had announced to the state that he thought it entirely possible that the cocoon was the first of many, a sign that pestilence was to descend on their sinful nation. He'd declared the cocoon and its surrounding area a natural disaster, putting the problem of how to manage it squarely in the hands of the National Guard. The National Guard, having no such religious convictions, had not set upon the cocoon with flame throwers the way the governor had hoped. That wasn't to say they didn't have incendiary devices on site and a containment plan already in effect. But they were reaching out to the scientific community for advice.

"If we cut a small incision in the cocoon and send an exploratory camera—"

"You won't need a camera if we dissect it now. I don't see what the point is in waiting for it to come out on its own, when there is so little likelihood of it surviving. Considering the amount of mutation it must have taken to—"

"If you dissect it now, we'll never find out if it was going to mature into a viable specimen."

"What I want to know is why aren't any of you worried that it might emerge as what you call a 'viable specimen'?" The scientists turned in surprise to National Guard Brigadier General Peter Michaels, who'd interrupted their debate. He had nice, big square hands and a reassuringly severe face, a face you'd want defending your country. "What kind of damage could this thing do if or when it comes out?"

“I could put together a very rough, extremely approximate environmental impact projection for the surrounding ecosystem, maybe by...” the blond woman who’d wanted to use the exploratory camera, pulled out a day planner and started flipping through pages.

“That’s undoubtedly a good idea, Dr. Norton,” Michaels interjected. “But it’s not what I’m trying to ask. Upsetting the area’s ecosystem would be unfortunate, but I’m more concerned about its impact on us. Damage to property, loss of life.” Michaels looked between the blank expressions on the scientists’ faces. “Excuse me if I speak in lay terms for a moment, but I’m asking more about the likelihood of a *Godzilla*, *Mothera*-type situation.”

“Mothera was peaceful,” Camille volunteered.

The long rectangular table of scientists and National Guard turned to look at where she perched by the door. Witherspoon, who’d sat silently through the entire meeting, looked over at her like she had suddenly and inexplicably materialized in the room, a circumstance for which he could in no way be held accountable.

“Yes,” Michaels acknowledged with a twist of a smile. “But what kind of behavior could we expect from an actual giant moth? Would it be strong or heavy enough to damage any property? If it’s somehow able to fly, will we need to reroute planes passing through the area? What would a thing like that eat? Would we look like food to it?”

“Well, depending on what species of moth—“ Dr. Norton began.

“Louisiana Eyed Silkmoths always breed in that field. They build their cocoons in the cordgrass.” Camille watched for them every year—their tidy bundles and the furry, cream-colored wings that would emerge. She could take the scientists outside and show them the giant cocoon’s miniscule brothers and sisters if they hadn’t been trampled flat along with the rest of the surrounding area.

Dr. Norton tucked her chin-length hair securely behind her ears and sent Camille a sharp look. “*If it’s a Louisiana Eyed Silkmoth or *Automeris louisiana*,*” Dr. Norton continued, “then it won’t eat. They just fly around, mate, and die. If we are sure that there are no other giant moths flying around, we shouldn’t have to deal with any offspring. This is lucky for us, since caterpillars are voracious and feed in packs. A pack of caterpillars of this size could denude ten to twenty square miles a day.”

“A search is being conducted of surrounding marshes for signs of any similar anomalies.” Witherspoon gave a small nod to Dr. Norton, but directed the rest of his statement to Michaels. “So far none have been found.”

The debate continued in much the same way. Camille’s heart gave a flutter every time the lone preservationist tugged on his mustache and suggested transporting the moth to a less populated location—less populated than an undeveloped marshland in the toe of Louisiana’s boot?—maybe an island where it could roam free. Camille’s guts wrenched when the entomologists strategized how best to adapt research techniques developed for much smaller specimens—like encasing a moth’s head in resin before slicing it into millimeter thick discs—to such a dramatically larger scale. After five hours of heated debate without coming any closer to a consensus and a Skype phone call with the governor who was now trying to backpedal on his remarkably unpopular torch-first-ask-questions-later stance, Brigadier General Michaels came to a decision.

The eyes of the world were on Louisiana and their real life Mothera. Middle schools everywhere were ordering chrysalises for their Natural Science and Biology classroom because laboratory supply companies were sold out the previously less-popular, less-stocked moth cocoons. News stations had set up live, round-the-clock video streams of the cocoon. A cocoon-

watch app had burst into sudden popularity a few days before, also streaming the live feed, but also with an alarm function that would go off at the first signs of movement of the great beast inside. Because of this scrutiny, they would make what efforts they could to preserve the moth's life, but the moth had to be kept in captivity.

A large net enclosure was already being hung from a four-story-tall frame that had been constructed around the cocoon. This would have to make do until a larger, more permanent construction could be built. If the moth survived.

It heard them before It came out. It had been aware of them, moving around, driving things into the ground, probing at the edges of Its safe darkness. It wanted to stay in the dark, but the darkness felt too small now. It itched. When It couldn't bear the smallness of the dark anymore, It chewed at the dark, secreting acids from Its mouth that helped dissolve what It had built around Itself. It chewed and pushed until Its head was out. Everything looked different. Not just because there were tiny, noisy things moving everywhere and light coming at It from hundreds of points on every side. Its eyes were different, It realized. Before, sight had just been light and dark and colors. Now It saw things clearly, separately.

It squeezed until It got its thorax and its legs through, until It was standing on top of Its dark, safe place. Its back itched and when It clenched Its abdomen and tried to stretch Its thorax the way It used to climb, It felt something open up on Its back. It tried moving again and air swirled around It.

The little things swarmed all over the ground and more flashes of light, more sound, came from them. One little thing ran straight towards It, but was stopped by some kind of web. A web with a confusingly regular pattern.

It noticed then that the web surrounded It on every side and It felt fear. The parts on Its back moved again and this time It felt Its weight lift briefly off of Its legs. It wanted to feel that again, and so It beat again and again until It was off the ground. Its wings hit the web and there was no way to keep going up. It fluttered back down in defeat, then rose back up again. This time when It hit the web, It flipped around and started chewing on the web, the same way It had on Its dark, safe place, oozing acid from Its mouth. More of the little things were making louder noises now, swarming faster than before. It kept chewing and chewing, and one line dissolved and then another and another. Soon It was pushing Its head through again, then backing out when Its new wings were too large to fit through. Chewing more, and then finally. Taking flight.

Camille stumbled back from the net to get a better view of the giant moth bobbing in and out of the ring of floodlights above its breeched enclosure. Cream-colored fur rippled over its thorax in time with the rifling of Camille's hair and rattling of surrounding vegetation, a rhythm set by the beat of its massive wings. She felt connected by the pulse to the land and people around her, an unseen circulatory system of air, with a moth for a heart. There was a moment when the large black dots on each of the lower wings, delicately shaded in pink and yellow, seemed to stare down just at her like an enormous set of eyes. Her knees turned to jelly, and she couldn't have moved then if she'd wanted to, but then the wings flapped again, and the illusion was broken.

Newscasters bellowed to be heard over screaming bystanders. National Guardsmen shouted orders to stand down, Stand Down, STAND DOWN. The urgency of the repeated order pulled Camille's attention away from the way her moth was hovering precariously close to one of the ring of flood lamps that surrounded its enclosure. She turned to see that a guardsman a few yards away from her was frozen with his rifle aiming at the flying beast above him. Other guardsmen holding their positions called orders at him, but Camille had spent too many years out here among the hunters not to recognize prey. Fight or flight: when terror took over a small animal's mind, it might run, as many of the newscasters and support staff had done, but if escape was impossible, they remembered claws and teeth, and this small animal had a soldier's instincts.

Camille was running for the man before she knew what she would do. Her field weapon had been confiscated by the National Guard upon their taking control of the area, and any abrupt motion to disarm the man might result in a trigger slip that could injure her moth. Camille slowed to a trot until she was standing between the man and the moth, his gun still aimed high above her head. His eyes didn't even flicker towards Camille, but every other muscle on the man shook with tension. Camille slowly raised her arm up over her head until she blocked the muzzle of the rifle, until his sight must only have shown the blurred peach of her palm. He started and Camille braced for the pain of having her hand shot off, but instead the man seemed to come back to himself, lowering his rifle even if it was only to turn terror-filled eyes towards Camille.

A thump and a loud groan turned both their attentions back overhead, and Camille understood why the moth had not already flown away. It thumped itself again against one the tall, vertical arrays of floodlights, and this second impact proved too much for the structure. Sparks sprayed out from severed wires, and the pole fell back on a nearby tent that collapsed around it. The tent churned with the frantic motions of people caught in the fabric, but that was

more of an impression of sound and motion than anything Camille could see. The remaining floodlights had gone dark as the pole went down, and Camille was blind while her eyes adjusted to the sudden dark of a moonless night. Her ears listened past the screams of remaining civilian bystanders, past the muffled shouts from the collapsed tent, to the rustle of the moth's wings growing fainter with each beat.

It was flying away.

Before her eyes could finish adjusting, Camille was running for her jeep. The thump of other feet around her first made her think that the others had thought the same—to follow it. But as she climbed into her jeep, the beams of nearby flashlights revealed guns, grenade launchers, and all manner of weaponry. This was a hunt.

Spotlights mounted onto the National Guard jeeps searched the sky even as they tore off after it. News crews scrambled to get their equipment back to their boats. There were no roads this far south, so the only land vehicles were ones that Camille had led in on the animal trails she used when she wasn't patrolling by boat. Seeming to have forgotten her warnings about the changeability of the marsh, the National Guard jeeps cut a direct path through the grass in the direction the moth had flown. It was going to lead directly to them getting stuck in the mud. Her jeep rocked as someone climbed in the passenger side. Camille was surprised to recognize the neatly-coiffed Witherspoon buckling himself into the passenger seat.

"Agent Fortenberry."

"Director Witherspoon."

"Proceed."

Camille tore off, not on the direct path the National Guard had taken, but on one of her animal trails it was now too dark for anyone else to find. She cringed at the damage to the

erosion-slowing vegetation the other jeeps were causing, but she couldn't help a smile when other sets of headlights slowed, stopped and were left behind, flooded out by marshy patches.

Calls for assistance and a direct order from Witherspoon stopped Camille long enough to pick up priority passengers from one of the bogged-out vehicles. Brigadier General Peter Michaels, covered in muck from the knees down, displaced Witherspoon in the passenger seat. Witherspoon seemed content to be wedged in the middle of the narrow backseat between an agitated Dr. Norton, who kept standing as if to see past the dark tree line, and a Sergeant something-something whose attention was glued to the nattering walkie talkie in his hand.

Camille feared that she would hear through the staticy clamor of the walkie talkie that one of the two helicopters en route from a nearby base had gotten a visual on her moth. That Michaels would change his mind and give the order for it to be shot. Tranquilizers wouldn't work on an insect; that idea had been brought up and discarded in advance. The decision that had been made back in the tent, to try to keep it alive, would undoubtedly be reconsidered as soon as the moth neared civilization.

"It's heading northwest!" the sergeant reported from the backseat.

The moth jerked in and out of sight as searchlights mounted on the remaining National Guard jeeps that had fallen in line behind Camille found it in their sweeps across the sky, then lost it again with the beating of its wings.

"Alright." Brigadier General Peter Michaels turned in his seat. "I got into this jeep with you smart people because I need ideas. Now."

Dr. Norton stood up in the backseat again, and Camille hoped Witherspoon wouldn't make her stop if the silly woman fell out. "It's the skyglow," she said. Her chin-length hair was whipping around her face. "It's being drawn towards the city by the lights."

Michaels twisted all the way around to bellow at the doctor. “What city? There aren’t any cities out here.”

“Venice,” Camille said and turned the wheel to cut through the tall grass to a different nearby trail. It was the southernmost fishing town on the toe of Louisiana, called the End of the World because it was where the roads stopped. Camille rented a house on its outskirts, and though she didn’t quite call it home, she’d slept there any night she wasn’t camping for the past eight years. “It’s only got about two hundred people, but it’s got lights.”

The air was everything. The wind flowed over and around It, pushing against the undersides of Its wings like joy. It could find Its way with the light. Some part of It came out knowing that, knowing that light meant direction. It beat Its wings against the air and flew towards the gray glow that It saw in the distance until It was bigger and brighter. Then the light multiplied, wasn’t one light but many and It didn’t know which to follow. It followed one, then another and another, tried to go towards the light, but ended up bumping against them. When this happened, It would realize that the light was not the true light that It should have been navigating by, but a false light. A lie.

It became frantic looking for the right light. It tried to rest on the branches of the false lights, but they crumpled beneath It, fell over with deep groaning sounds and sparked to dark. When all the lights went dark, It was relieved. It was able to just sit and be still, to rest Its wings which were tired from Its first flight.

Then the light came for It. The light came with wind and a loud whumphing sound, but the light was bright, and when It flew towards this light, It didn't bump against the light's lie. The light led It onwards as the light was meant to do. It felt joy, and It beat Its wings faster.

Camille sat immobile in her jeep, eyes transfixed on the rhythmic battering of Venice. The National Guard had and somehow convinced the local police to announce over the loudspeaker at the town's center a warning to residents to turn off all lights immediately or risk property damage. Probably thinking the police were giving them a heads up on a particularly bad swarm of termites, most residents had heeded the warning. It seemed as if no one had known who to contact about getting their few streetlights turned off, though, because before Camille and the convoy following her had made it to the town's outskirts, all four had been toppled by the moth. By the time they pulled onto paved road, it looked as if half of the town was standing in the street, quietly watching the moth beat its wings against the town's one large hotel. Two guardsmen risked life and limb, dodging debris the moth knocked loose from the hotel's exterior—first destroying its glowing, lighthouse sign before moving its attentions to the carport to get at the lights underneath—to rally the terrified teenage hotel staff inside into figuring out how to turn off lights that were never meant to be turned off.

Sitting in her now empty jeep, watching the moth beat itself against this ugly, stucco building, waiting for this last part of the town to go dark, Camille felt unnerved. It wasn't that she lived here; even if the moth had crumpled her dark, shuttered house whose porch light she never left on, it wouldn't have upset her much because she didn't care much about anything in it.

It was the quiet of the crowd. The people of Venice didn't scream or shout orders like the news crews and soldiers had. They just stood there and watched, some of them taking video on their phones. Venice had been half washed away by Katrina, and its population had been halved again in 2010 when the oil spill kicked the fishing industry in the face. She knew there'd been fewer hunters staying in their hotels and eating in their restaurants after Hurricane Isaac because the Wildlife Management Agency issued fewer duck hunting licenses after multiple square miles of duck-feeding grass fields were washed away in the storm. These people lived on the edge of large, dangerous nature. They took soft suburbanites out on boats to catch and wrestle on board fish their own height and weight. The ones who were still here were the ones who'd rebuilt their homes even though they knew that it might mean watching everything get washed away again. But when Camille looked at them standing there, she didn't see resilience. She saw the acceptance of people who were used to life's being unfair.

The hotel went dark, and Camille heard her moth's wings go still. She could sense everyone trying to make as little noise as possible as their ears searched for clues of movement their eyes couldn't detect in this new dark. The regular squawking of walkie talkies excited some movement among the National Guard, and her straining ears heard the helicopters approaching before her eyes picked out their search lights in the distance.

Camille missed the conversation between Dr. Norton and Captain Michaels where it was suggested the search lights on the helicopters could lure the moth away from the town. When the choppers arrived with only one search light glowing between them, and reversed direction as soon as the moth lurched up from the hotel's partially collapsed roof, it was easy to deduce it had been planned. The news crews and National Guard who'd just arrived by boat, piled back in their

boats and gave chase. The town stayed dark, as if afraid their lights would lure the monster back to smite them.

“That was a good idea, Dr. Norton.” Michaels nodded up at the receding light of the helicopter and the dark form that flit across it.

The doctor mumbled something deprecating about her suggestion. She’d joined Camille in the jeep, standing on the seat for one last glimpse of receding wings.

“But we can’t have it lead that thing on a chase indefinitely.” Michaels drummed his fingers against the hood of the jeep. “How would you trap a moth for a lab experiment?”

The doctor made a sound halfway between a laugh and sigh. “I hate to break it to you, but you might have put the wrong entomologist in your jeep. I don’t work with live moths. When I want to catch moths, I put a bowl of soapy water next to a light bulb. They confuse the reflection of the bulb for the light itself, then get wet and can’t escape.”

“Interesting,” Brigadier General Michaels said.

Air, sound, movement, light. For the first time since It came out of Its dark safe place, Its world narrowed down, became simple again. Like when It had only to stretch, slice, chew, spin. Now, It had only to fly. If It followed the light, It would find the others who had stretched, sliced, chewed, and spun with It. They would follow the light as well, and then It would dance, mate and finally rest. Its wings were tired, sore, but It followed the light. And then there were two lights. Lights moving closer together as if they would meet. It flew towards them both. Soon It would rest.

It had been Witherspoon's idea to follow in Camille's boat. Without his prompting, Camille might just have sat in the jeep, grateful the dark hid the wet on her cheeks, that the news people followed the moth instead of descending on her and the town. When the three of them—he, Camille and Dr. Norton—had been left standing in the wreckage of Venice, watching as Brigadier General Michaels rode off in one of the National Guard boats and the only National Guard left around them were those assigned to dealing with the moth's aftermath, Witherspoon hadn't missed a beat.

“Fortenberry, your field boat is docked nearby, I assume?”

It was tied up at the marina, and in short order, the three of them were climbing in, eschewing state-mandated life vests and riding off towards the still visible helicopter light. The wake from Michaels' high-powered boat rocked Camille's small motorboat. Dr. Norton gripped the side of the boat as if she were contemplating being sick, but Camille didn't slow.

They were still a considerable distance away when they saw the inevitable. Camille had known it was coming from long before Michaels had walked off with a purpose after hearing Dr. Norton's moth-trapping technique. She'd known it from the moment she'd understood what was in front of her in that field. In the singularity of its life, she'd seen the moth's death prescribed.

Camille stopped the motor even though they were still at least a mile from the other boats. Outlined in the spotlight of the helicopter, they watched the moth's last moments. The helicopter hovered lower and lower in the distance until it seemed to rest on the water. And then the black shadow that had flitted between them in the light didn't flit again. The moth drowned, its wings trapped in the lamp's watery reflection, its shape indistinguishable from the horizon.

Mankind feared the aberrant, never mind that mutation was a natural, essential part of life. That was why Camille had brought the cocoon to Witherspoon, in the hopes that if people had enough time to get used to the idea of a giant moth before it came out, maybe it wouldn't seem so strange, so threatening. She could see now that she'd been a fool. Her moth had died, and she had been the one to bring it to its murderers.

Camille's cheeks were dry now. Dr. Norton was protesting how wasteful it was to drown the specimen. How it likely would have been better preserved if they'd shot it down over dry land. Witherspoon seemed to be enjoying himself by taking a contrary position.

"Well, we have to assume Brigadier General Michaels was under a certain amount of public-relations pressure not to shoot the moth unless it was posing a clear danger to society. But he was doubtlessly getting no less pressure from local and state government to keep the streetlamp toppling to a minimum. Think about it." Witherspoon, crossed an ankle over his knee, cocking his head at the blond doctor. "If he'd let the moth live and there had been any more damage or loss of life, Michaels' career would have been over. But if he'd been the hand of the government who'd shot down the nation's favorite pet, he wouldn't be advancing his career at any point soon either. Water really was the obvious choice." Witherspoon made it sound like a fact.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair to kill the moth when it had as much right to live as any of them. It wasn't fair that Venice once again got hit by a disaster it had nothing to do with. It wasn't fair that the moth had been born and died surrounded by people, but alone. It wasn't fair that that loneliness had made Camille feel for it like kin.

"What was the point?" Camille asked. Her voice sounded rough with disuse. It seemed impossible that it had been less than an hour ago when she led the charge to Venice.

“What, for the moth?” Witherspoon interlaced his fingers over his crossed knee. “Well, if you think back to Dr. Norton’s earlier breakdown of the Louisiana Eyed Silkmoth’s life cycle, it’s just copulation and death.” He laughed nervously. It occurred to Camille that Witherspoon might be attempting to flirt with the blond doctor. “Sorry,” he said, misinterpreting the horrified look on Camille’s face. “That came out even more depressing than I thought it would.”

Camille hadn’t been asking what the point of the moth had been. The moth just was. The same as the water, or the marshes, or the ducks, or the alligators. She had been asking what the point was of letting the moth live at all if they were just going to kill it.

“It got to fly,” Dr. Norton said.

Yes, Camille thought. That was something. Boats converged on a position on the horizon. The sneaking gray of dawn lightened the sky, though the sun still wasn’t visible. Their boat bobbed in the water, but whether from the distant wakes of boats or the ebbing tide, it was impossible to tell.

Myrmecology

“Get out while you still can.” June’s voice crackled through the phone. “You don’t belong there.”

It was the afternoon before Hurricane Isaac made landfall, and her words hadn’t sounded ominous or fateful then. The sun was shining, and I took it for granted that I was fully clothed and dry, sitting upright on one of the boat’s benches. Danny, clad in hip waders, had valiantly climbed overboard into the marshy shallows and was dragging us the last couple of feet to solid ground so the boat’s rotors wouldn’t snag on submerged roots.

“Harsh, June,” I said. Cord grass whirled against the sides of the boat. “Thanks for being so supportive of my work.”

“This isn’t about your work.” June paused, and I sensed her holding her breath for a moment before letting it out slowly. When we were children, she used to bite her lip right before she either walked away or smacked me good, and it was nearly impossible to tell which it would be. As an adult, I didn’t find her breath-holding to be much different. “Don’t even pretend that you are endangering your life because your work is requiring you to. There’s no way that’s true.”

I shouldn’t have answered the phone. June and I had already hashed out all of her arguments for why I should evacuate the evening before: my niece would love to get a visit from

me at June's mother-in-law's in Meridian; I was living in a death trap over a river that was definitely going to flood; it was the seventh year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, and how could I put her through this; I was going to die.

I had laid out for her all the reasons why I didn't think I needed to: Hurricane Isaac was just a Category One, and it would likely be downgraded to a tropical storm as soon as it hit land; the raised fishing camp I was renting would be higher and drier than most of the state; I had evacuated for Hurricane Gustav because she asked me to four years before and was thanked for it by being stuck in traffic for eight hours, only to end up spending the weekend in a hotel room with no power in Baton Rouge while my New Orleans apartment never lost power; the only thing that sounded worse than that to me was spending the weekend with her mother-in-law in Meridian; I was not going to die.

Danny's narrow shoulders bowed forward with the effort of hauling the boat onto shore. I felt a wave of guilt for chatting on the phone while he dragged the boat through the marsh like some kind of soggy rickshaw driver. I'd only answered the phone out of surprise to hear it ringing in the middle of the Manchac Wilderness area. I barely even got reception at my fishing camp on the Tangipahoa River just outside of Ponchatoula. When I remembered to, I shut off my phone in wildlife preserves to keep it from running down its battery searching for service.

"Just tell me," June said in a tight, practical voice, "what it is that you are doing that is so important it can't wait a couple of days until after this hurricane is past."

"Hey Danny," I called out, switching the phone to speakerphone. It was a deflection technique I'd used on June many times, and I knew it would drive her crazy. "June asked me what it is we're doing out here in the swamp. You want to tell her?"

“Hey June,” Danny called back. “We’re tagging ants.” He dragged the boat the final inches up onto shore. I stepped out onto the soggy turf.

“And tagging ants requires both hands,” I cut in, “so I’m going to let you go, okay? Call you later, I swear.”

“Becca.” June spat my name. “You’ve been doing that all summer. Give me a better reason why you are out there today, or I’m going to leave my family in Meridian, get in the car, and drag you out by your hair.”

“You shouldn’t wind your sister up like that,” Danny said. He doffed his baseball cap and wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of a brown hand. The young idiot refused to wear sunscreen, claiming he tanned easily. He did, but whenever we were out for more than four hours, his skin got a pinkish undertone reminiscent of a pig on a spit.

“In ecological disaster entomology,” I explained to June, not bothering to hide my audible sigh, “how recent and complete your data is on the dispersion of ant populations before an area gets flooded is exactly as important as the data you collect afterwards.”

I noticed a faint look of consternation on Danny’s face as he turned to finish unloading our equipment from the boat. He had started out as my means of transportation—a neighbor with a boat and a willingness to drive me around in it all day for gas money and minimum wage pay—but I had hired him on as my field assistant (a very minor pay bump) after only a week of tedious coordinating with undergraduate assistants commuting from Baton Rouge. He was just as good as or better than any of the undergrads who had been assisting me, but I rarely talked shop with him.

“Danny and I hit all of the other areas we monitor in the past couple of weeks,” I explained both for June and Danny’s benefit. “Once we finish checking on our ant populations

here in Manchac, I'll have a beautifully complete and up-to-date data set for before the storm. If I stay here, we can get right back out as soon as the flooding goes down. I've never even seen data sets where the researcher went back into the affected area until two or more weeks afterwards."

The reception blessedly started to break up at that point and all that came through of June's answer was "Danny, tell my... that you... evacuate... and her stubborn... endangering a minor."

Danny's blond eyebrows furrowed. "Did she say something about endangering a minor? What minor are you endangering?"

I didn't have the heart to tell Danny that even knowing he was twenty-two didn't keep me from looking at his coltish frame and open face and seeing a kid. Three months before, June had brought my niece Sandra by to visit me at the camp. This was back when June was still only four months pregnant, but no less hormonal. She'd assumed Danny was in high school, and I'd done nothing to disabuse her of this assumption. I knew that if she thought of him as an adult, she'd look differently at me living across the river from an un-vetted, un-attached man, regardless of whether or not the eight year age difference and the absolute lack of anything in common was deterrent enough for the two of us. And then I'd have to sit on the phone listening to her talk about that.

"You're breaking up, June. I'll call you back later."

Danny and I pulled on our gloves and got to work. We used the handheld radio scanner to track down the ant populations we'd already tagged with radio receivers, logging their GPS location before combing across the fields to find more. By the end of the day, we'd found all of the colonies in the reserve we'd previously tagged and tagged two additional colonies—the first of

fire ants, the second acrobat ants. Tagging the ants consisted of picking them up (by means of getting them to bite onto your gloved finger), dabbing their backs with glue using a matchstick, and then using tweezers to attach the tiny, light-weight radio receiver. It really wasn't hard, but you had to isolate the freshly glued ants for an hour afterwards to make sure their receivers weren't dislodged before the glue was finished drying.

We were sitting next to a decaying tree stump, watching some freshly glued acrobat ants arch their abdomens up over their thoraxes in their plastic enclosure, when Danny asked, "Do you think these little guys are going to be here after the storm?"

"Some of the colonies will be." I tapped my gloved fingers against the clear plastic of their enclosure lightly. The ants responded with a frenzy of activity. "Most won't. These acrobat ants are awfully close to the water. I'll be very surprised if they're here when we come back."

"Doesn't it bother you?" It was hard to tell if his blue eyes were squinting from the sun or scrutinizing me. "Watching everything get washed away like that?"

It did bother me, but for reasons I didn't want to get into. "It'll make for more dramatic findings if most of them don't survive." I turned on the receiver and saw signals of the ants in the enclosure clearly on the display. They were so close together, they registered as one large, shifting blob. "Grant-awarding committees love studies with broad scope. If the populations are more decimated than in other post-disaster studies, the data could be used to support a correlation between shrinking wetland buffers caused by global warming and increased ecological disruption. That's the stuff sexy scientific papers are made of."

"You know, you could come to my mom's with me." Danny's voice was casual, his fingers folding and refolding a blade of cordgrass between his calloused fingers. "She's baking a

turkey tonight, and she filled up the second freezer with ice, so that if the power goes out, there'll be plenty of food for sandwiches."

I smiled and didn't say that I thought his mom's house in Ponchatoula was way more likely to flood than my raised fishing camp. Truthfully though, I mostly didn't want to go because I felt like an interloper in town, a city girl everyone knew didn't belong. If it hadn't been for Danny, June might be the only person I spoke to for days at a time. But if I was really going to be honest, whether or not I was in Ponchatoula didn't make much difference. I hadn't really socialized in Baton Rouge either.

"Thanks," I said and meant it. I was grateful he asked, even if his mother's did sound even worse than Meridian. "But I'm actually looking forward to watching the weather and the river from my place. Hurricane weather is my favorite. It gets all cool, and the air gets charged. Then in a day or two, we can get right back out here and check on these little guys." I smiled to hear myself parrot his words; calling ants little guys made it sound like they might get together a game of T-ball.

"Why ants?" Danny had folded his cordgrass into the shape of a paper football. He flicked it at me, but it unwrapped midair.

I picked up the unwound blade and started tearing it into pieces. "Do you mean why do I care what happens to ants?"

"No." His fingers were deft, continuing to fold a new grass football even as he peeked under the brim of his hat at me. "I think I'm asking, why ants in particular?"

I shrugged and scattered the pieces of my shredded blade of grass. "Funding. A lot of entomological funding, like the grant paying for this study, is from the pesticide industry. And there's a lot of interest in killing ants." I lifted the lid off the ant enclosure and tipped them back

out onto the ground. After a moment of roiling confusion, the tiny insects began orchestrating themselves into lines, following pheromone tracks back towards their colony. “Death and animal research go hand in hand. You’re either killing your research animals at the end of your experiment, control group and all, or you’re like me, studying behaviors and chemistry of an animal so someone can come along behind you and try to use what you’ve learned to kill them. Sometimes you have to wonder why we do it.”

“Are you telling me that inside every myrmecologist, there’s a frustrated E.O. Wilson?” Danny asked.

I raised my eyebrows at him. Very, very few people knew the name of the father of myrmecology. Even fewer than those who knew that myrmecology was the study of ants.

“You’ve been holding out, Danny boy.”

Danny grinned. “Google. There was some weird stuff out there about how people thought he was into eugenics though.”

“He wasn’t.” I pulled off my gloves and wiped my sweaty palms on my pants. E.O. Wilson was a bit of a personal hero of mine, and I wanted to explain it right. “People just don’t like to think of themselves as animals. He saw ants sacrifice self-interests for the good of the colony, and posited that human morality might have evolved because altruism and self-sacrifice can help a human colony’s DNA get passed on, even if it is detrimental to passing on an individual’s DNA. Looking at human beings as DNA’s way to make more DNA disturbs people. It makes them worry either that you are challenging their religion or that saying society is a function of evolution is one step away from justifying social inequity as biologically determined.”

“What about everything people do that doesn’t help society pass on DNA?” Danny pulled his hat lower down on his forehead and stood up. He was trying not to smile. “What would E.O. Wilson say is the evolutionary purpose of tagging ants?”

“Maybe that it’s a manifestation of my biofillia, an evolved attraction to nature and other forms of life.” My sweeping gesture took in the sun-scorched cordgrass, the rotting stump, and the August sun beating down on us. I laughed, and Danny, as dehydrated and more sun burnt than I was, laughed harder. “Or that I’m trying to protect my human colony’s habitat. But I really can’t speak for him.” I took the hand Danny extended, managing not to groan when I realized my left hip had stiffened up from sitting on the ground to long. “If you asked me right now what the evolutionary function of our tagging ants is, I’d tell you that it will buy us take-out tonight.”

Danny approved my dinner plan. When we got back to the boat, I turned on the tracker, but the blip of the acrobat ants was almost out of range. By the time we were far out enough that Danny could turn on the motor, the blip was gone.

* * *

That night, I went to sleep with the soft patter of rain on my roof. The following morning, I woke up to sheets of rain thrumming against the walls. I crawled out of bed and ran to the nearest window. I pressed a palm against the glass and the vibration of the rain through the glass raised goose bumps on my arms. Outside, branches thrashed against each other, knocking free leaves and twigs to be swept downwards by the rain.

I was nursing my second cup of coffee, standing just inside the door to my porch, when June called again. From where I stood, I could watch the rush of the rising Tangipahoa River

without getting more than a stray raindrop or two in my mug. The river looked alive, splashing up on the other few camps I could see downstream, and kicking off the river bend as if the water knew it didn't belong onshore and was racing to get back out to the gulf. The day before, it had been still enough that mosquitos could breed in its shallows. I didn't want to move from where I stood, but until the storm passed, not answering the phone would not be an option. Not unless I wanted June calling the police to come check on me. I retrieved my cell but carried it back out to the open doorway before answering.

"Good news, I'm not dead yet," was my opening gambit. I took another sip of my cooling coffee and waited for her roaring response. The only thing June hated more than my winding her up was knowing that I was doing it on purpose.

Her quiet words took me off guard. "That's not funny, Becca."

"I wasn't really trying to be funny. Just pointing out that the hurricane is passing right now, and all it's done is given me a beautiful view."

"How can you be so cavalier about this? Seven years ago today, you were stuck in your attic, hoping someone would come by in a boat and pull you out of there."

"Yes, I was." I could still see the wall of water rushing down my street from the 17th Street Canal breach. Like Moses had decided to stop parting the Red Sea. I was lucky that I heard a rumble and looked out the window or my first warning would have been my door blowing off of its hinges. I watched from the hatch of my attic door as all of my furniture was pushed by the tide of water to the back of my apartment. I lost everything except for the phone I was holding. I had to be pried out of a hole I'd kicked through the wood siding with no shoes on. My car ended up in a neighbor's tree. We never found my cat. "So considering that I'm

materially more in touch with the risks of not evacuating than you are, how about you acknowledge I'm an adult, capable of making informed decisions."

"They're saying on the news that the Percy Quinn Dam might break."

"This thing's just a tropical storm by now." I looked across and down the river to see the water had almost risen to the bottom of Danny's one-room shack. I was a good four feet above him, so I was still safe, but I hoped he'd had the good sense to raise anything he wanted to keep off the floor before heading over to his mother's. "Why would puny, little Isaac be the one that brought down the Percy Quinn Dam?"

"There's more flooding for some reason, I don't understand why. But apparently they announced in June that the lake was scheduled to be temporarily drained so they could repair the dam, only they never got funding for it, so it never happened, and now the water level's up higher than it's been in years. Becca, I think you should get out there." Her voice was getting frantic.

I could hear my niece calling for June in the background. "It's too late. It wouldn't be safe for me to be on the road now. I'll be fine, I promise. Sandra's calling you, how about I call you later and tell you again that I'm still alive?"

"You can't do this to me again." June was angry now. "I still have your voicemails. The ones you left from your attic. What kind of person almost drowns in their own living room and then decides to wait out a hurricane in a river house under a leaky dam?" I could hear Sandra's voice quietly repeating "Mommy" in a pleading tone through the receiver.

"People deal with things differently." I heard the edge in my voice, but couldn't seem to smooth it out. Both of our houses got flooded. We'd both lost almost everything. Including our Dad, who'd self-medicated himself into an overdose after a month of living in a shelter in Texas.

We were both with our mom and her new husband, a Catholic deacon, in Kansas by that point. The storm made June want to have more to pull closer, to recover so fully that no one would ever know how much she had lost. I wanted less to lose so I pulled up roots in New Orleans and didn't set them back down. There would always be storms on the horizon. "We're both contributing to society, June. Your way is not more valid than mine just because you've reproduced."

"Your self-satisfied evaluation of our differences is duly noted." June's voice was quiet now. Controlled. "You know what, you're right. My daughter needs me. You don't. Fine. I won't call you again. But don't you dare leave me another voicemail like the one you did last time."

"I won't." Below, I saw movement in one of Danny's windows. The oval of a face flashed in the glass. "I have to go. I'll call you later." I hung up without waiting to hear her response and dialed Danny's number.

"Hey, Rebecca."

"Hey Danny, is someone in your place? I thought I just saw something in your window."

"Yeah, I am, actually." The face returned to the window, and I recognized the shape of his curls through the glass. "My mom's boyfriend and I got into a fight last night, and I just couldn't stay there. So I came back here."

The river had risen flush with the bottom of Danny's shack. "You're going to be standing in water soon."

"Yeah." Danny gave a tight laugh. "If you take the word 'soon' out of that sentence and replace it with 'now,' I'd say that's 100% accurate."

"Do you think you can make it over here? Safely?"

“The road’s flooded. I tried to go back to my mom’s about half an hour ago, but I couldn’t get through.”

I leaned out over my railing and could see that his boat was still tethered to the common pier downstream. My hair was plastered to my face by the time I leaned back in. “What about by boat?”

Danny’s window opened and his curly head craned out and got similarly plastered by the rain. He leaned back in and answered, “I could probably do it.”

I didn’t realize my boat launch was a few inches underwater until I started down the stairs. I was shielded by the worst of the rain by the camp above, but the wind was blowing so hard by this point that the rain and rushing river had given the water a horizontal vector that drenched my clothing before I reached the submerged boat launch. I thought about going back up for my shrimping boots, but then Danny came into sight, his little motor struggling to make it back upstream. I wanted to be there to help guide the boat in, so I stepped out onto the launch and heard an awful creaking. He was still a few yards out, but I knew he would be there in seconds, so I slithered my way along the slick wood boards under my feet, holding onto the support piers as I waded out to him.

A moan, muffled by the water, reverberated up through my feet. Then a sharp loud crack. The river must have undermined the supports, or dry rot could have finally given away. All I really know is that when the wood broke underneath my feet, my hand slipped from the post, and my world went sideways. Water slapped against the length of my body, and then I was under, and

the current was pulling me down and towards the wreckage of launch. I tried to push off against the boards, but my foot pushed through a layer of mud into a pocket of ragged wood that cut through my jeans and maybe deeper, I couldn't tell. I didn't realize I was trapped until I tried to pull free.

I didn't think underwater because my body was fighting my brain, trying to breathe, thrashing instead of assessing how to get loose. But there was a quality of recognition to my horror. A band was tightening around my chest, and I wanted so badly to push out all of the air I had sucked in to scream when I felt the boat launch buckling under my feet, the scream I held in when I hit the water. But I couldn't let the air out. Because if I did, I wouldn't be able to resist sucking water back in.

I embraced the burn in my lungs and clawed madly at what was left of the boat launch, the washed-out support post that I somehow ended up partially beneath. My left leg was not crushed by it, just caught like a fish on a hook, disappearing between dark shapes barely visible through the greenish-brown murk of the flooded Tangipahoa. I kicked my shoes off and ripped open the button and fly of my jeans. With every hard-won inch of leg I got free, I wished that it weren't a universal truth that jeans are the worst thing to get in or out of when wet. And still, I hadn't breathed.

The jeans were trapped behind me in the murk, and I was swimming upwards towards the shadow of the boat when I couldn't hold the air in any longer. Bubbles burst out of me and made for the surface. The swiftness of their ascent mocked my heavy limbs. There wasn't far to go. I was less than a second behind them. But when Danny stuck his head into the disgusting water and reached for me, when his wiry arms dragged me up the last inch through the surface, I felt

saved. It didn't matter that I probably would have made it to the surface even if he hadn't seen the bubbles rising from my deflated lungs. I was alive.

Danny said later that I was under so long, his next move would have been to dive in after me. But really, I couldn't have been down there as long as it felt like I was. Just long enough to think I might die. Just long enough that when Danny hauled me into the boat and loomed over me, looking down at my pathetic, huddling form, I saw myself through his eyes. I imagined watching myself from above, being washed away.

Seven years before in my attic, looking down on the parade of all of my earthly belongings, my bed, my bookcase, my television, floating past before slamming against the back wall of my shotgun house, I remember thinking my apartment looked strangely empty, even as it became more and more full. I'd decided then that it must be because I wasn't used to looking at it from above.

Seven years later, looking up at Danny, I realized what I must have always known: I had been what was missing from my apartment. My home as the space around me, defined by my peripheries. There had been a terrible wholeness to the experience of being submerged, water filling that space around me, trying to fill the spaces inside of me, a negative void made positive. Underwater, part of me had recognized this completion with a horrible: of course. Of course this is how it will end.

But then it didn't. I kicked and swam. And I didn't end.

Danny maneuvered us in under my house until he could grab my stairs and tethered his boat to them. We climbed directly from the boat to the stairs, not trusting the little bit of launch that was still attached to their base. Then we were back inside my house, dripping onto my

kitchen floor and staring at each other. I didn't have any pants on, but how bare and raw I felt had nothing to do with clothing.

When he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me in close, we were in shock. He was warm, and I was cold, and it felt good. But when his thumb found the side of my face, brushing a wet clump of hair away from my eyes, shock started to feel like an excuse for not thinking things through. I let myself hold him for half a breath longer, catalogued where his belt buckle pushed into my navel, the lines of warmth created between us, how long it had been since either of us had blinked, then pushed away from Danny, left him standing there, dripping on my kitchen floor. I didn't offer him a towel or anything, just grabbed my phone and called June.

She answered.

"Hey," I said, trying desperately to sound normal. I carried the phone outside onto my balcony and sat with my back pressed up against the rough, varnished siding. For my own sake, I wanted to tell June what had just happened. But I knew that would be cruel, that she would be a wreck until I made it out of the area. At a loss for what to say, I asked, "How are you?"

"Let it be noted, that I didn't call you." June was pissed. This both felt incredibly unfair considering what I'd just been through, and soothingly familiar. But then I heard her slowly breathe out and knew she'd let it go. Maybe because she could hear in my voice that something was wrong. Or maybe just because forgiving me was a part of who she was. Then she asked, "Do you remember the first time school was cancelled for hurricane days? We built that shelter in my closet and stocked it with all of your stuffed animals and my books because the school hurricane safety flyers said the safest rooms in the house were the ones without windows. Only our house didn't have any rooms without windows? The folks thought we were just having fun, but then

Dad heard you crying in there, he pulled us both out, wrapped us up in ponchos, and walked us straight out to Lake Pontchartrain. Remember?”

“That was Hurricane Andrew.” I was calmed by the memory. Tears started streaming down my face and I laughed, I think in relief that I was able to be calm. “It started as a Category Five, but it was still a Three by the time it got to us.” The wind changed directions, and the rain sheeted under my porch awning onto my bare legs. I was already soaked so I didn’t bother moving back inside.

“It was the day before it hit, and remember the lake?” June continued.

Huge waves had splashed up over the seawall, over the benches, over the bridges. Water spouts moved up and down, so far out they looked like giant creatures running up and down the Causeway bridge. Standing in the middle of a hurricane was a rush, the crack-cocaine of biofillia. I laughed again, this time, a little hysterical. “I remember jumping up in the air and getting pushed two feet back before we landed. God that was exciting.” I wasn’t scared for the rest of the storm. I kept begging Dad to take us back out there, but he wouldn’t.

“Exciting? Do you know what I remember most about that day, Becca?”

I didn’t answer, just closed my eyes and felt mist settle on my face.

“I remember your being so small that you couldn’t make it over the top of the levee without holding my hand, the wind was so strong. I remember jumping holding hands, and feeling like we were flying backwards. But you were lighter and were getting more air time, so I let you go so we could see how far you could fly. But when you came down, you kept running backwards.”

I remembered this. Feeling like my feet couldn’t quite get hold of the ground.

“You couldn’t stop. You were pushed backwards like that over the top of the levee, and I ran after you as fast as I could, praying I’d get to you before you went down the other side and out into the street. That really scared me, Becca. Not because I really thought that you were going to get hit by a car, no one was out on the roads, but because it made me realize Dad wasn’t really watching us. I was the only one there to protect you, and that scared the crap out of me.”

I remembered it. I remembered our telling Dad afterwards and his not believing that I hadn’t been faking it for attention. In his defense, as a kid, I faked a lot of things for attention.

“During Katrina, when I saw on the news that there was a breach in the levee right by your house, and cell towers were jammed from everyone trying to call everyone else at the same time, and calls were going straight to voicemail, I had that same feeling in the worst way. That I hadn’t realized I was the only one watching you until it was too late. Becca, I do respect your decisions as an adult, I do, but I can’t take this again. And that voicemail you left me. How on earth could you say goodbye to me like that?”

“I promise I will never say final goodbyes by voicemail again.” I pulled my wet legs against my chest, trying to hug some warmth back into them. Pain shot down my left calf and I realized there was a bloody gash down the length of it.

“Christ, Becca, it’s not that you tried to say goodbye to me. I would have treasured that. It’s that you laughed. You told me you loved me, and then you said ‘I guess this is goodbye’ and you laughed! How could you laugh at the worst thing that had ever happened to me?”

My brain was too frazzled, too fuzzy to put into words that my laughter that day, and a lot of my laughter this day, seven years later, was the sound of me letting go. A hurricane-sized permutation of how it eases your terror to scream when you feel yourself lift from the seat of the rollercoaster. You get hurt when you brace yourself in a car crash; that’s why drunk drivers don’t

get whiplash. Letting go, accepting death, was how I got through that day. Studying hurricanes and the complex communities of insects they destroy, that was how I got through every day since then. Making a study of death. That it would happen, that I would have no control over it, and that if I could just completely let go, maybe I could stop being frightened.

I couldn't tell her that, today, I hadn't accepted it. Today, I had fought for air, and I lived. So instead I said, "I promise to evacuate next time."

June exhaled. "Thank you."

I was shivering now from the cold, and probably also out of reaction, so I made my goodbyes, and we hung up. Danny was still standing where I left him, dripping on the warped linoleum of my kitchen floor. His expression was guarded. I felt like a royal asshole, so I insisted he take a shower to get warm, knowing full well that the hot water would be gone by the time he got out.

I bandaged myself up, dug out my largest sweats and left them outside the bathroom door for Danny, scraped off my sodden underwear—taking a vain moment to be glad that they were some of my “good” underwear—and climbed into some fuzzy pajamas. Next, I set off to dig through my cabinets for any food or beverage likely to impart warmth to my chilled core.

By the time Danny came out with two inches of leg showing at the bottom of my sweats, more coffee was brewed, a can of chicken soup was bubbling on the stove, and I was hunched over my tracking receiver at the kitchen table.

“What are you looking at?” he asked. He lumbered awkwardly over. I could tell he was feeling uncomfortable in my house, in my clothes. Around me.

It felt awful. I'd had so little contact with people since I'd been in Ponchatoula, I'd taken it as confirmation that I didn't need them. It had never occurred to me that my sister on the phone and Danny on the boat, playing cards, and eating greasy take-out with me had been enough.

I turned the display towards him. He leaned in squinting, then looked at me in confusion.

"I thought that receiver had a pretty limited range."

"It does. I turned it on because it occurred to me that we might see some of our ants floating by if their colonies got washed out upstream. It was pretty unlikely, but—"

"This looks like it's—"

"Yeah. Right under us."

"But our nearest site is ten miles away. How can they still all be together like that?"

"Want me to show you?" I was smiling so wide, my cheeks started hurt. He smiled tentatively back.

We were careful going back down the stairs, and we didn't go very far. Just low enough for clothes to feel damp all the way through. Just low enough to see the fire ant raft clinging to a broken-off post next to the bottom step.

"It looks like a hill made only of ants." Danny sounded mystified. "How is that floating?"

"Only fire ants can do this." I put my hand on his shoulder, bracing myself as I leaned past for a better look. He went very still, then reached a hand up and covered my fingers with his. "They're fighters up to and past death. They cling together in a ball, trapping tiny bubbles of air between them, enough to keep them buoyant for a long time. You're just seeing the top layer. A lot of the ones on the bottom of the raft will die, but they hang onto each other anyway so that the others can live. Evolutionary altruism."

“Badass.” Danny crept lower on the steps to get a better look at the ant raft. I let my hand fall away rather than following him down. “People wouldn’t do that.”

“You’re right.” I tried to estimate the number of ants in the raft. “There’s nowhere near that many people I’d be willing to drown for.”

“No.” Danny looked up at me from the second to bottom step, the one we had clambered onto together from the boat less than an hour before. “I mean not let death stop them. Would it screw up your experiment if we pulled them out?” The rain and water splashed up onto Danny’s pale, bare feet, up past the tan lines on his ankles to make his sweats cling to his bird-legs. He looked vulnerable as hell standing that close to the water, but he was sure-footed. I trusted him not to fall in, and I trusted myself to pull him out if he did. Beyond that, I still had a lot of figuring out to do.

“We don’t need to.” I wrapped my arms around myself and remembered his hands, on my face, on my back. “They’re doing just fine on their own.”

I took a deep breath, and then held it inside of me. Not to suffocate anger the way June did, but to savor the earthy smell of mud kicked up by the river, the sharp bite of gasoline from Danny’s boat, the musty rot of plant and fish debris along the shore. Most people thought rot was a smell of death, but really, it’s the smell of bacteria breaking down something finished into something new. Fires clear space for new growth, floods build up surrounding land with rich deposits of silt, and a rotting fish head can feed a floating ball of fire ants for a month.

Shaking my head at myself, I went down the steps until I was even with Danny, pulled a shard of broken wood out of the debris around the stairs, and tossed it slightly upriver of the ball of ants. It floated past them without catching on their pier and continued down river. I reached for another one, and Danny realized what I was doing.

“What happened to your ‘more dramatic findings?’” He laughed and joined me. It was a broken plank from the boat launch that finally drifted towards their pier at just the right angle. It caught between the pier the ant raft clung to and another post closer to shore.

We went back upstairs and turned off the receiver. The ants might crawl down the length of the board and reshape themselves into a new formation that could reach the shore. Or they might miss their chance and float down the river, buoyed by the last breaths of their dead. I didn’t want to know. The next day, Danny and I would go back out in his boat and search for too few blips. But for one day, we could close our eyes and pretend they all survived.

Vita

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