Spring 5-15-2015

Garberville: A Collection of Stories

Katharine Kara Breithaupt
University of New Orleans, karabreithaupt@yahoo.com

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A Collection of Stories

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

by

Kara Breithaupt

B.A. University of San Francisco, 2008

May, 2015

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The Lovebird

The day my grandmother showed up with Fucking Bird was the day she told us that my grandfather was dead. I was twelve, and my mother and I were in the kitchen making chocolate-chip cookies when we heard a car rumble into the driveway. My mother pulled aside the old dish towel hanging over the window and said, "Oh my God, it's my mom. What in the world?" She wiped her hands on her apron and told me to come on then.

I bounced off the step-stool and ran in front of my mother as soon as we got through the front door. When my grandmother emerged from the car, she had a parrot on her shoulder. I rushed towards her, my cheeks aching with the width of my smile, reaching out to hug the grandmother that I hadn't seen in months. When I was about to embrace her, the parrot shrieked, and I recoiled in tears.

"Kayla, no," my grandmother hissed at me and extended her arm, her open palm a few feet in front of my face. "You can't run at me like a banshee and throw your arms out. Now you've scared him."

"I can't hug you?" I murmured, backing away. I watched my grandmother coo at the bird, stroking its gray feathers with her fingertips.

My mother put her arms on my shoulders and stood behind me. It felt like some force in her hands held me up while I tried to breathe normally again.

"Mom," she said, "I don't know where you've been, I don't know what you've been—"

"Good lord, child," my grandmother interrupted, smiling at the bird. "Don't call me that. I'm going by Pebbles now."

"You're not responding to 'Mom' anymore?" my mother asked.

"Hello," the parrot said in a voice that sounded like a squeaky boy. It shook its head, said, "What do you want," whistled and lifted its feet one at a time.

"Hold my medicine, my darling Asha," Pebbles said, handing a joint to my mother and turning her attention to the parrot on her shoulder.

I'd been so distracted by the initial excitement of seeing my grandmother and by the parrot that I hadn't noticed the joint she held. My mother squeezed my shoulders and stepped around me. She took it in between her thumb and pointer finger and set it on the hood of my grandmother's car.

"My little lovebird is six months old today, and he's talking so much." My grandmother said the sentence in a high pitch, as if she were talking to an infant. "Yes he is," she continued, puckering her lips at the bird.

My mother stood next to me, the lines on her forehead wrinkling.

"Okay," she said, sighing and crossing her arms. "I honest to God don't know what to address first. Where you've been, this whole name thing—you do know that a lovebird is a specific type of parrot, right, Mom? You don't actually have a lovebird."

"Pebbles," my grandmother said sharply, narrowing her eyes and looking at my mother. "I'm going by Pebbles now."

"Pebbles?" I said. The heartbeats smashing inside my chest had slowed, and I felt capable of speech again. "I'm pretty sure that you have an African Gray."

"Now why would you say that?" my grandmother asked.

"It's gray," I shrugged. "And someone talked about different parrots in class for Show and Tell. Mother was there…". my voice trailed off when my grandmother didn't even acknowledge me.

The parrot's feathers glinted in the sun and looked like dragon scales. The feathers around its eyes were tiny and fully white, the gray feathers on its body were edged in white, the wings were sleek and gray, and the tail was a brilliant red. A Congo African Gray. I reached out to touch it. The parrot cried out, beat its wings and snapped at me.

"Fucking bird," Pebbles said, shaking her head and brushing her fingers into what must have felt like down feathers.

"Fuck-ing-bird," the parrot said and whistled.

"Mom," my mother began.

"Pebbles," my grandmother said, her forehead wrinkling.

"Pebbles," my mother repeated. "Try not to swear around Kayla. She's twelve."

"No, darling, that's his name," my grandmother said.

"Whose name?" my mother asked.

"My lovebird. His name is Fucking Bird," my grandmother said. "Fucking Bird loves you, but he doesn't like you yet. He's sensitive."

"Fucking bird," the parrot said, wobbling its head up and down. "Fucking bird fucking bird." He whistled.

"Parrots aren't sensitive," I said, louder than I needed to, frustrated by the whole thing. I reached out again to try to touch him. His chest puffed out, and then he plucked out one of his

own feathers. I snatched my hand back and watched, horrified, as the feather drifted slowly to the ground, the different grays ringed in white. When I looked up, the fucking bird was staring at me, unblinking.

"Oh, darling," Pebbles said to me before clucking at the bird. "You're making him stress pluck."

My face felt hot, and I was disconcerted. I was used to my grandmother paying attention to me. I turned to my mother, who rolled her eyes and shook her head at me.

"All right, Pebbles," my mother said, continuing to shake her head, "where did you and Dad go this time?"

Though they lived just twenty minutes outside of Garberville, we'd only see my grandparents once or twice a month. Before my grandfather died, I never felt like that was often enough. My mother told me every time I brought it up that her patience with her mom only lasted so long. My grandparents never answered the house phone, and they'd randomly leave to go on what my grandmother called a 'Love Escape.' My mother cringed every time she heard that phrase. I don't know if it was because my dad had never been around and my mother didn't have a relationship with a man at all, much less what her parents had, or if she thought her parents running away on love trips was gross. Probably both.

Half of the time when my mother and I stopped by my grandparents house, they'd be gone. We'd later learn that they were camping in the woods or on a fishing expedition. The previous year they were gone for a month, and we didn't know until afterwards that they went to Hawaii.

"Oh, we weren't on a Love Escape this time," my grandmother said. "When your fucking father had a heart attack and left me, I went for a drive. I came across a garage sale way out on Avenue of the Giants and ended up with this beautiful specimen when he was two months old."

My mother's left hand went to her chest, and her right hand reached out for me, clenching my shoulder. Just as she had braced me a few minutes before, I tried to be sturdy for her. Her mouth hung open, she blinked several times, and for a moment the only sound I could hear was my mother heavily breathing in and out.

"Dad died?" my mother asked in a small voice, and I heard her swallow.

"Wait, what?" I whispered. "What?" I said louder. "What?" I yelled. It was the first death of someone I knew, and I was shocked. I staggered, and my mother's hand tightened where she still gripped my shoulder. I yelled, and I sort of cried, and deep down, I worried. I didn't feel the devastation for my grandfather that I thought I was supposed to. I also felt hollow—my grandmother had always made me feel like the most important person in the room.

"Yes, well, don't make a fuss about it," my grandmother said, matter-of-fact. "Or he'll start stress plucking again."

When I woke up the next morning, the trees seemed too tall, and the sun looked wrong outside my window. My grandmother cared more about a bird than she did about me. And I hadn't known to miss my grandfather because I hadn't known he was gone.

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My dad moved south to San Francisco with his best friend Drew when I was one. I overheard my mother refer to Drew as "the new woman" a few times. By the time I was ten, she stopped mentioning both of them entirely. I wished that my grandfather had tried to fill the emptiness my dad left behind.

If my grandmother were red and orange and yellow and purple, my grandfather would be gray. He had hearing aids, and he read a lot. He was tall and thin and wore his khaki pants higher than his belly button so that they stopped above his socks. He never talked much. I guess my grandmother did enough talking for the both of them. He did smile a lot, though. An easy, crooked smile, where his eyes practically squinted shut.

Rosebushes blazed around my grandparents' house like colorful stars. When my mother and I visited, I helped my grandmother plant flowers or bake. We played with her rock collection, or we studied her books of constellations and old maps.

"See, darling," my grandmother said, and pointed at a map from the 1500s when explorers were still trying to figure out the world. "Things aren't always what they seem." She then pointed at the sepia-colored standing globe on the table in the corner. "And how do we know that we've got it right now?"

"Science?" I asked.

"Fuck Jesus no," she replied, shaking her head. "We just have to believe what we believe in, trusting our own truth. This is your world, and you have to figure out how you want to live in it."

Sometimes my mother got frustrated at my grandmother's language or at her "inability to see things clearly," as my mother explained to me, usually in the car, as we drove away and my mother took the corners too fast.

One time when I was ten and heard my mother start yelling at my grandmother, I slid out of the house and ducked behind a rosebush so they wouldn't see me. I peered through the branches to see my mother's arms raised in my grandmother's direction. I stood up with the intention of running into the woods when a voice directly behind me said: "Hi."

I felt like my heart dove out of my chest, and I couldn't prevent the scream that fell from my mouth. I put both hands over my lips to clamp down anything else that could involuntarily blast from my throat. I turned around, realizing that it was my grandfather.

"Huh," my grandfather said, and smiled. I think that was his way of chuckling.

"Come on," he said, tilting his head towards the woods that lined the property.

"Okay," I replied and followed. "Where are we going?"

"To see my tree," he said.

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just followed, trying to put my footsteps in his. For every step he took, I took two. I looked at the leaves covering the ground and at his worn brown shoes and at the space of white ankle above his white socks.

"You know," he said as we passed by an overturned tree with roots that tried to hook the sky, "your mother and grandmother love each other very much. They just have a difference of opinion sometimes."

On my left, we walked past two trees that grew into each other. They had separate trunks but leaned together, their twisting limbs indistinguishable from one another.

"I know," I replied.

When we stopped a few minutes later, my grandfather angled his head back and opened both of his arms to the sky. Directly in front of him was a massive redwood. I looked up and couldn't see any branches, just the trunk that went up and up and up.

"It's like Jack and the Beanstalk," I gasped.

"Huh," my grandfather said, reaching out his arm and placing his palm on the bark. The bark was old and worn, with trenches and grooves and patterns. It looked like it held all of the secrets of the world.

"Everyone should have a tree," he said. "This one's mine."

I never understood what he meant by that. I forgot about it for two years until the day my grandmother arrived bearing a parrot and a death. The day after the news of my grandfather's passing, my mother drove me to my grandparents' house. When she got out of the car and walked towards the house, I lagged behind.

"Come on," my mother said, motioning with her arm for me to join her.

"No," I replied, crossed my arms and shook my head.

"Honey," she said, tilting her head. "What's wrong? Come on. We're just visiting your grandmother."

"That's the problem," I screamed, and when she stepped towards me, I ran away from her and into the forest. It took me awhile to find the grandfather tree, but when I did, I sat cross-legged on the forest floor and looked at it. That day with the tree was the most my grandfather and I had ever spoken. I sat with a straight back, and my heart beat all over my chest. After some time, I lay back and in one motion spread my legs and arms out and looked up at the height of

the trees around me, those ancient, lasting things, and I cried. I cried because I had spent a fair amount of time with my grandfather, but he was quiet and boring, and I didn't know enough of him to miss him like I should. I cried because I didn't know what direction I wanted my world to go in. I cried because my grandmother wasn't who I thought she was, death is scary, and I was lost.

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I can't pinpoint an exact life-changing event, but, the general idea is: I was fifteen and Pebbles was over almost every day, and I was so fucking tired of watching my grandmother speak to Fucking Bird and stroke those beautiful goddamn feathers—which Fucking Bird still wouldn't let me touch—and I knew I needed to get out. I needed to get away. Towards the end of the first year that my grandfather was gone, my grandmother went through what she referred to as her 'holy elevation.' By that time we were used to calling her Pebbles. But she took it a few steps to far by shaving her head and wearing Buddhist prayer beads. And she insisted that Fucking Bird was my grandfather.

I watched the *The O.C.* and thought the t.v. show looked so cool. Every time I turned it on, my mother told me to turn off that trash and go outside. Which meant that I turned it on as frequently as I could with a steadfast resolution to watch every episode of the season.

In Garberville, legitimate career paths were things like growing and dealing pot, working at the Hemp Connection or The Legend of Bigfoot, or at a restaurant or one of the two bars. In the TV show, people had real money and real high-powered jobs. I wasn't sure what an

industrialist was, but it sounded more important than anything around my hometown. Throughout the entire first season, nobody had grandmothers who waited months to inform the family that the grandfather had died. There were no fucking birds repeating things people said, and no mothers who were unhappy but did nothing about it. There might have been unhappy mothers. But, there were no animals on the show that anyone claimed were humans. There were no mentally disturbed grandmothers.

From what I understood, the easiest way to get out was to go to college. It was difficult for anyone to argue with the worthy calling of higher education. My mother suggested I go to Humboldt State University in Arcata, but I wanted UCLA or USC. Humboldt was an hour and twenty minutes north of Garberville, and that wasn't far enough away. I didn't get into UCLA or USC, but I did get into San Diego State, and countless nights my senior year in high school I lay awake and smiled, thinking of the future and that I would live life the way I wanted to.

My mother brought Pebbles to my college orientation, and Pebbles brought Fucking Bird. No amount of begging and pleading could dissuade my mother from bringing my grandmother or the parrot. I even cried.

"But," I argued, hands on my hips. "Pebbles is losing it. She's fucking insane."

When my mother replied, "She's not totally insane," my laugh sounded cruel.

"She wears crazy things," I said, "she says crazy shit, and she doesn't understand that a goddamn person can't be in a freaking bird. I don't want her in my life at all, much less traveling with us to my first college experience."

My mother looked hurt, and for a moment there was nothing but breath between us. Then she slowly said, "You're talking about your grandmother and my mom. She's been with that

parrot every minute for the last six years. If she's not allowed to come, and she's not allowed to bring Fucking Bird, she's either going to have a conniption or a heart attack." She sighed and shrugged. "I only have one parent left. And you only have one grandparent."

"I'd rather not have a grandparent at all than have her in my life," I said, and as soon as I did, I wished I could pluck those words from the air.

"Look," my mother said, narrowed her eyes, and pointed her finger at me. Her finger shook. "My mom, your grandmother, is coming. You don't have to like it, but you have to accept it. And you have to respect her. And me."

I opened my mouth and shut it. My mother's volume was dangerously low. We rarely fought, and I couldn't remember the last time her voice sounded like that.

I screamed my frustration and then I turned around and walked away from my mother. The sinking sun shone in diagonal streaks through the trees.

Pebbles and Fucking Bird came to San Diego.

When the three of us entered the Professional Studies and Fine Arts building on a tour, a tall, thin man with a bald, pointy head like a sharpened pencil informed us that animals were not allowed in the building.

"Fucking Bird is no animal," my grandmother enlightened the gentleman. I'd heard her say this countless times in order to, in her words, keep Fucking Bird calm. "He needs to see where his granddaughter is educating herself," Pebbles continued, looking at the parrot and stroking him slowly, repeatedly, with one hand starting at his head and ending at his tail. "I see a lot of little Pop Tarts flitting around, and I am proud to say that our granddaughter is not a Pop Tart." The parrot bobbed his head, saying, "Fucking bird pop tart fucking bird."

I clenched my teeth and put my hands on either side of my forehead. I'd seen people my age talking to each other all over campus, and I hadn't said anything to anyone. I felt everyone's eyes on us. To my right, a girl grabbed the arm of the girl next to her, and they giggled. Loudly. Their heads bending towards each other. Every part of me wanted to run away, but that would just draw more attention.

Pencil looked my grandmother up and down. She wore a patchwork-quilt, floor-length skirt and a sleeveless, collared, button-down tie-dyed shirt. Her head was still shaved, she had her Buddhist prayer beads with her, and that day she wore Jesus sandals.

Pencil tightened his lips, spread his arms to encompass all of us, and piloted us back outside. As we returned to the radiance of the day, the palm trees and white buildings with the terra-cotta tile roofs, two things struck me. One: my mother didn't seem concerned. The parrot flapped his wings, whistled, and said, "Fucking bird darling fucking bird fucking bird pop tart fucking bird," lifted his feet one at a time, bobbed his head, and repeated the same string of inspiring dialogue. The second thing that struck me: everyone was looking at us. Everyone. I put my head down and brought my arms in close to my body.

"What the fuck are you doing," I said, low and with hate.

"Kayla?" my grandmother replied.

I glanced up to see her gently scratching the parrot's chin. She said my name without looking at me.

With everyone watching us, I said in a low voice, "Fucking Bird is absolutely not my grandfather."

"Darling," Fucking Bird said, clicked, and narrowed his yellow eyes at me.

I had never outright denied the parrot being my grandfather to my grandmother's face. Instead of responding with hurt or shock or denial, Pebbles said, "Oh, darling, he's just unhappy because he can't be with you in his human form. He's very excitable." She looked into the parrot's eyes and clucked at him. My mother and grandmother and Fucking Bird needed to leave.

"Fucking bird fucking darling fucking bird fucking bird my darling," the parrot screeched and bobbed his head up and down.

I heard laughter and saw a few pointed fingers. People took pictures of us on their phones. I assumed at least one of them was a video. I looked at the ground, turned around, and walked away from my mother and grandmother.

I was used to an entire town of less than one thousand. SDSU had more than thirty thousand students. While every person in the school was not standing there watching us that day, the laughter settled into me and stayed there in the following months. It became a lump deep inside of me, swelling with shame every time someone looked at me.

It seemed like everyone there was good-looking. A lot of them looked like models. The girls wore tank tops and short skirts, and there was a lot of long hair. They wore heels and carried purses that looked expensive. It was like a movie set. Guys wore shorts and flip-flops and threw footballs to each other. I was self-conscious about my shoulder-length mousy brown hair that wasn't straightened or curled: it was just kind of frizzy, the way that it dried naturally. I wore jeans shorts that were four inches longer than any others.

My roommate was from San Diego and had twenty-five friends from her high school. She straightened her hair and flounced in and out of the room, barely making eye contact with me. When I woke up one night to moaning coming from her bed on the other side of the room—

ten feet away—I lay there trying to breathe as silently as possible, hoping they didn't know I was in my bed.

When I received a care package after I'd only been there a month, I almost cried as I opened it and pulled items out. The note said "Just because," and "Love, Mom, Pebbles, and Fucking Bird." Written in my grandmother's writing at the bottom of the note was: "Darling, I'm sending you the forest and your grandfather. I love you." I thanked Jesus that I didn't see Fucking Bird's carcass in the box. My mother sent some chocolate-chip cookies, a scarf, and a pocket knife. I touched my fingers to my lips when I realized that I was smiling.

The forest that Pebbles referenced was a small spice jar that held the leaves, soil, and bark of the forest floor. It smelled like home. The "grandfather" she mentioned was my grandfather's senior high school yearbook. 1945. The faint smell of cigarettes was held in those pages. As were things I never knew about my grandfather. He had won "Class Clown" that year, and inscription after inscription told me about the man I should have known. "Funniest man alive," written in loopy writing. There were hearts in place of the dots above the i's. "Greatest guy around" in a male's scribble. "Couldn't have asked for a better, funnier person to spend four years with. Loved the parties, the memories, the laughs," and so on and so on. The autographs and outpouring of love and friendship filled the blank pages as well as the margins of those that weren't intended to be written on. His picture was handsome—a good jawline, a full head of dark hair neatly parted, his smile a little crooked. And his eyes shone. I stared at that picture and ran my fingertips over the messages to this man I didn't know.

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College in San Diego was beaches and beach cruisers and blonde hair and tan bodies and skimpy outfits. None of that was me. I couldn't even decide on a minor, much less a major. When I went home for the first time over Christmas my freshman year, the first thing I did was drive to my grandparents' house. The lights were off, and nobody was inside, but I wasn't looking for Pebbles. You don't smell nature properly in San Diego. You smell salt in the air and feel the beach wind in your hair, but you don't smell trees. Palm trees are not redwoods. You don't smell the needles and hear the sounds of the earth and creatures around you.

I went around behind the house and walked to the grandfather tree. The ten-minute walk was cool and damp, and raindrops plunked on the top of my head and on the sleeves of my shirt. The rain filled my ears, and the sweet, wet forest floor filled my nose. The walk hadn't changed. The overturned tree with the roots three times my height was still on my right, the two trees growing into each other on my left. I came upon the towering tree that my grandfather showed me as a kid, and it felt right. I leaned against the trunk, and put the back of my head against the wet bark, and turned my face to the sky. There was nothing extraordinary about this tree, except that my grandfather and I had stopped here.

I later walked into my mother's house soaked and smelling like rain, and dirt, and redwood needles. My mother shrieked and pulled me into a hug.

"Honey," she said into my hair, "I didn't know what time you were supposed to get home."

My mother seemed so little. I told her that I got back a couple of hours before but had been in the woods.

"Darling," I heard from the kitchen.

"Pebbles is here?" I asked as my mother leaned back and smoothed my wet hair away from my face. For the first time in a very long time, I didn't feel disgust at the thought of seeing my grandmother.

"That's actually the parrot," she replied, stepping back. "Pebbles is on the back porch."

"His imitation's gotten good," I said and headed out back.

My grandmother sat under the covered porch on the only chair with cushions. She had a joint in her hand and one leg crossed over the other. She wore a scarf around her head and an oversized sweatshirt with jeans two sizes too big.

"Pebbles," I said and nodded at her. She looked old. I'd been gone less than five months, but her eyes were a little more sunken, and her face had many more wrinkles than I remembered.

She smiled slightly and said, "You can call me Grandmother. Life is about accepting the gifts you've been given. And you are one of my gifts."

"Grandmother," I repeated. The word sounded weird when I said it out loud, and I couldn't decide if it made me happy or sad, but I sat in the chair next to my grandmother. My mother came out with Fucking Bird and placed him on my grandmother's shoulder. He clicked, said, "Fucking bird fucking bird fucking bird," and bobbed his head.

My mother pulled up a chair and sat facing both of us. We were a triangle. My grandmother passed the joint and a lighter to my mother, who took a hit and passed it to me. I inhaled slow and deep and looked at the generations of my family.

I passed the joint to my grandmother, and after my second hit I had the bizarre but intense sensation that my grandfather was with us. In the parrot. Sitting there quietly and peacefully

perched on my grandmother's shoulder. Blinking at me. I absorbed the silence of the four of us and closed my eyes with only the steady sounds of the raindrops plinking on the roof above us.

The next morning I woke early, threw on some clothes, and went out to take in the day. Fog hung in the branches, and the world smelled wet. A spider web the size of both of my stretched hands held dew drops that caught the sun and sparkled brilliantly. The sun slanted through in spurts, giving the woods a fuzzy, frosty glow.

I went a little ways into the woods behind my mother's house and sat there, cross-legged. I closed my eyes and listened to the universe breathe. The drips, and the faint crackles, and the bird calls.

"Darling," I heard. I halfway thought I was losing my mind. I sat up a little straighter and tried not to breathe. The second time I heard my grandmother's unmistakable voice, I opened my eyes. When I heard "Fucking bird," I stood up.

"Pebbles?" I asked loudly enough to be heard.

"Baby?"

I followed the voice through a handful of trees and came upon my grandmother sitting on the ground with her knees to her chest. Fucking Bird sat on her shoulder and greeted me warmly as I approached. "Bird darling," it said. "Fucking bird."

My grandmother didn't look surprised to see me. When I asked her what she was doing, she said that she liked to come to this tree because it was my grandfather's tree.

"But I went to my grandfather tree last night," I said. "It's out behind your house. It's not this one."

"This is the one," she said, nodding.

"How do you know?"

"This is where he proposed to me," my grandmother replied. "He got down on one knee and said, ‘Woman, I want you. For my whole life. This is my tree, and you’re my woman.’ It was very romantic. It was right here."

Instead of arguing with my grandmother, I replied, "He told me that everyone needs to have a tree."

"Oh, yes," she said. "My tree was always your grandfather’s, though."

"My tree," the parrot said.

"Pebbles?" I asked.

"Pebbles," the bird repeated. "Pebbles fucking bird pebbles pebbles pebbles."

"You can call me Grandmother. I accept it now."

"Do you really think that Fucking Bird is Grandfather? I had a moment last night where I was never so sure of anything in my life." When I looked at the parrot, he blinked at me.

"You know," my grandmother said, her eyes shining, "when my lovebird was a baby, his eyes were black. Then gray and then yellow. Those are the colors that your grandfather’s eyes changed to throughout his life."

Instead of telling her that wasn’t at all true, I nodded and sat down next to her. I reached out to hold her hand. When I squeezed it, all I felt were bones. But when she squeezed back, all I felt was strength.

The Door

I've done some stupid shit lately. Most mornings, now, the sun looks wrong outside my window. Jacey left, telling me that I needed to get through this self-destructive phase without her. I said all I knew to say. I asked her to stay. She replied, "I can't, Ty. I can't watch you wreck your life over the death of a man you barely knew." And she left. I watched her drive away, down the street headed away from town, and I felt detached from the world.

As a carpenter, I rely on clients to come to me. I don't have too much business, and I can't blame them. Nobody in his right mind would commission a rocking chair for his pregnant wife from the guy who ran off with a newborn. I'll get to that later. At the end of the day, with nowhere else to go, I go to the woods. The forest surrounds Garberville, and it's easy to find some kind of peace there.

There's this one redwood. It's a freaking perfect tree. The limbs start about one hundred feet up, but they stream out at graceful, gentle angles from the trunk. The needles are lush and full and so, so green. I sit in the decomposition of the forest floor, looking at this tree and the soft sun slanting through, and everything is velvety. I breathe in the day and the damp musk. The past year of my life has been a confusing hailstorm of shit, and I decide that I need to write a bucket list. Give my life some direction. Then I decide that more than anything, I want to manufacture a small door into the giant of the tree. A door that leads to the inside of something magnificent. Not necessarily large enough for a human to get through, and nothing that damages the tree, but a

space just big enough in which to stash something. I return with my mortise chisel and mallet my way into the wood, one dull thud at a time. The motion becomes rhythmic and soothing; the tools feel right in my hands.

I make the double-hinged door in three days, model it after a cathedral door, almost triangular at the top but with rounded corners. Sixteen inches in height, ten inches in width. I really get into it and even paint the damn thing, a light yellow color, like a muted sun. With an artist's brush, I trace the perimeter of the double doors in dark green and fasten on miniature, brass, dollhouse doorknobs. I buy the things off Amazon for $4.97. I probably should have just bought a whole tiny door online, but this is something that I can do. I want to make this.

When I install the double-hinged cathedral doors on the tree, I don't know what else to do. I go back to sinking into the debris of the forest. On the fourth day, I pick up on the bucket list idea again. I sit against the tree and write on a single white sheet of paper.

My Bucket List:

1: Find a woman? Become a father? Maybe. Maybe not.

2: Do something awesome. Help someone?

3: Live... happily. Have a kick-ass day every day.

Cross out. Crumple up. The Un-Bucket List. That sounds better. More original, less movie-ish. The bucket list comprises a number of experiences or triumphs that a person hopes to accomplish during his lifetime. I looked up the definition.

My Un-Bucket List: experiences I shall try to avoid during the remainder of my lifetime:

1: Don't hurt anyone in any way.

2: Don't make people cry.

That's all I've got at the moment. One can imagine that I'm writing this in the aftermath of a situation while reeling from the magnitude of the backlash. Or after a couple of alter-ego jackass moments. Yep. I wish I could say that my un-bucket list resembles a moral code that I choose to instill firmly in my life. But this is just common sense. I only have two items, and they're basically the same. Still going with the Un-Bucket List.

I fold the paper in half and in half again until it's too small to fold anymore. Then I open up the miniature door and place the paper inside.

In the beginning, I go back every day to my tiny door in the giant redwood. I open up the door and open up my un-bucket list and tell myself that I should be helping people. In the end, I just go back to work. Nobody's commissioning anything specific, so I build tables and wine racks of salvaged heart of pine. I shape podiums for sculptures and compile flower boxes. I make whatever I feel like.

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Rewind thirteen months: I had a woman. A long-term, live-in woman. Jacey. She smiled a lot and had those roomy, brown eyes that you could fall right into. The sun was above us, the earth below, and that's all I could ask for, really. Most days were calm and lovely. The smell of the woods always dangled in the edges of the air, and birds generally wing-dinged around above us. I thought life was sweet. Until it wasn't. In retrospect, my father's death lit a fuse of impassioned fury with which I attacked every valuable aspect of my life.

My father and I hadn’t been close since my brother and I found out that he’d (secretly, of course) cheated on our mom for twenty years. That was almost a decade ago, when we were in our early twenties. So it was baffling when I experienced what can only be described as a death hangover. A protracted, virulent death hangover. The phone rang on a Sunday when the grass sparkled with early-morning dew, and the sun was out but not yet beaming down warmth. As usual, my brother notified me in his tactful, easy manner.

"Hey, man, hey, Ty," Scotty said. He inhaled deep and exhaled, "Dad died. I just got a call from the hospital. They didn’t have your phone number."

"Huh?" My yawn suffocated in my chest, and I put my elbow on the kitchen counter and my face in my fingers.

"Wait," I continued. "Dad died? He was alone when he died?" When Scotty didn’t reply, I said, "Okay, then," in a strangled croak, nodded like an ass (as if he could see me), and hung up. I’d known that our father had a brain tumor and had gotten the whole MRI, CT scan, and biopsy shebang. I didn’t know that he’d opted for surgery, and had "complications." I learned that later.

Maybe it was the fact that the man died without actually saying the words "I’m sorry" for breaking up the family. He was smart about it, always different women in different towns, hooking up in different places. When his scandalous behavior eventually came out, it was with a vengeance. One woman came forward and told my mom. Then word got out; other women shared their stories. All of the women mentioned that he’d won them over by giving them the sweetest Hallmark cards. I’d seen the ones he gave my mom every year. Poems with professions of everlasting love and shit. Mom threw away her cards and moved to Sedona, Colorado. She said she couldn’t handle the way people looked at her everywhere she went.

Even the four-year-olds in town knew he had done something wrong. Benbow, Redway, as far north as Eureka. It might have been because Scotty delivered the news of our father's death in much the same way he had that of our old man's philandering. Phone call. Brief, devastating, world-shattering news. End phone call. In the concreteness of death and the reality of loss, someone else might have embraced life. I got shit-faced.

That night didn't destroy what I had. Although that night did break my phone and create a hole in my bank account. Buying approximately twelve rounds for everyone in the Branding Iron Saloon on a Sunday night was a bad idea.

"I want to be with everyone I care about!" I yelled into the air countless times. People cheered. I felt special. I wasn't close with many of them. Jacey was by my side, merrily downing the beers right along with me before they could get warm. When I took off my shirt and flexed, she tried to coerce me home. I rubbed my nipples with my index fingers, mumbled that I was sexy, and that I was staying. I hadn't worked out in at least four years, and my belly, along with the rest of me, was fast approaching middle age. Me: shirtless, drunk, and rubbing my nipples in public was not a good look.

When I later screamed, "I'm going to piss myself," the bartender screamed back, "Not right there, you're not." She came from behind the bar, pushed me off the stool, and walked me to the bathroom. She left without unzipping my pants, whereupon I collapsed and, as predicted, pissed myself. On the verge of passing out, I stared up at the photos on the wall until I saw one of my father, framed from seventeen years prior, standing in the Eel River in his Orvis waders, holding a sixty-six pound chrome-bright, fall King salmon. Even with the photo's age and faded colors, I could see the pink tinge of the underbelly of the fish. It was beautiful.

That incident wasn't a big deal. Stealing the baby was.

A few weeks later, when the sun was just beginning to tinge the sky, Jacey got a call. She rolled over on me and placed her hands on top of each other on my chest.

"We're going to help with a birth today," she said.

I didn't know how to take that. Jacey said hi to everyone. People were drawn to her. She always offered her time and efforts for endeavors that I didn't know existed. She did normal things, like helping cook or bake for pot lucks, or trim or bartend. But then there were the batshit crazy things, like trying to nurse a duck back to health or insisting on sitting in insomniacs' bedrooms and humming until they fell asleep (she only did that a few times, but still). She was entirely unqualified for half of the commitments she made. So when she said that we were going to help with a birth, I didn't know whether she meant a cat or a cow. Turns out, she meant a human birth. And it wasn't at Garberville Hospital.

Jacey and I bounced up in my old F350 Christine to the Mattole watershed where Bear Claw and Riverbend lived with their two children in a giant teepee. They had adopted the Native American lifestyle in the late 70's, and were truly in the wilderness, more than I would ever care for, nestled in between some really tall trees and some other really tall trees. They mostly just had each other, and the squirrels, and the deer, and quail, and Christ knows what else. The sky was a luminous, clear blue-gray, and I slammed the truck door, closed my eyes, and breathed in the crisp air of the late morning. The river dribbled over rocks in the distance. I thought I was okay. And then I heard Bear Claw's wife Riverbend attempt—and fail—to reign in a wail. That scared me.

Over the next several hours, more people came. There was a drum circle. Bear Claw passed around a peace pipe that he acquired on a reservation. Big Bob brought moonshine in a number of wine bottles that we passed around. The slow beats pulsated within me, and thick

woods blackened and blurred the fringes of my vision. Jacey was over with some of the women behind a large screen/room divider that someone brought. Riverbend had her baby in nature, and when it came and we heard the baby's screams, Bear Claw looked around at everyone, whooped like it was the happiest goddamn moment of his life, and raised a bottle of moonshine to his lips. I wanted that moment. He had accomplished something in life that was so simple and perfect. He was a dad. Everyone patted him on the back and shoulder, and hugged him, and congratulated him, and when Jacey came up to me in tears and said how beautiful and pure it all was, her eyes looked like they were melting, and it was just too fucking much.

I went into a dark, aberrant, insane rage. I can't explain it. I wanted that tiny, newborn baby. My thoughts ricocheted against the walls enclosing my brain, about the death of my father who just joyfully carried on with his life regardless of all of the families he ruined, about the brother whom I'd rarely seen angry or sad, about the blind trust kids put into parents and adults before they eventually realize everyone's a bit of a fuck-up, about Jacey's liquid eyes and the darkening trees. Something shrieked inside me, and I did not feel okay. I got up, nodded and close-lip smiled in the direction of anyone who vaguely acknowledged me, and walked right on over to the baby.

Riverbend held this new life in her hands, a minuscule human being. Well, I swooped it up and ran like an asshole. There were confused shouts, and I had this innocent, unblemished thing in my arms. I didn't know whether I wanted the baby or I wanted to be the baby, but I ran for the trees. I hadn't run in years, so needless to say, I didn't get too far. Bear Claw caught up to me almost immediately, and growled, "What. The. Fuck. Are. You. Doing."

I stood there, a shrieking new human life held against my chest, my head thwacking, my lungs and legs about to collapse, sweat dropping all around me, and I felt overwhelming grief.

Grief that grew and spread, and it felt like it ended in my blood and in every molecule. I desperately wanted to crush that baby right into my body and make it a part of me. I was holding a life in my hands, like my dad once held me. But my dad was gone, and he ruined the family and never apologized. Bear Claw stared at me and reached out his arms, and I wanted him to reach for me and welcome me, but he took back his baby and walked away.

***

Six months after I build the door, I return to it. I don't know the first thing to say to the child sitting in front of the door who looks about ten years old. She sobs and gasps, and while I'm extremely tempted to walk in the exact opposite direction, her sobbing makes me uncomfortable enough to want it to stop. When I ask her what's wrong, she says that the elf door is sad. I can't help thinking that this is not the type of female I was hoping for.

"Why?" I ask.

"They're sad," she says.

"Who?"

"The people who wrote those things."

When I crouch down and open the little door, dozens of pieces of paper spill out. The door is not visible from any street or commonly traveled path, and I can't help but feel a sense of awe that anybody found the door at all. I never told anyone about it.

I unfold one and read it. *A secret: I miss the baby I never had.* I cringe a bit, fold it up again, and open another. *My mom left me without saying goodbye.*

"Jesus," I say.

The girl looks up at me, and the tears have stopped. She wipes her eyes and blinks at me. Her eyes are absurdly green, the color of moss after it's rained.

"Well," I say and sit next to her. "They can't all be sad."

She doesn't say anything. I open a number of others, and they're all across the damn board. I show her one that reads: *It's going to be a beautiful day!* And another that proclaims: *Life is wonderful!*

"See," I say. "These are nice."

"They are nice," the child says, nodding.

I open one with scribble, and it takes me a minute to make out the words. *I wish my dad would die*. I don't show that to the girl but read one that says: *You rock, tree. My last note worked. My art is selling! Etsy is giving me my life back.*

"What's Etsy?" The girl asks me.

"I don't know," I shrug.

She scoots closer and sits next to me, putting one hand on my knee. It's the most innocent thing in the world, and it makes me happy. I open up another note, and after reading it, I realize I'm holding my breath. *I raped a child. And I want to do it again.* Goosebumps prick up on my arms, and the paper feels cold in my hand. I crush the note and put it in my pocket so the girl can't see it. So nobody can see it.

"You know what," I say. "Let's not read any more. Let's put these back and leave them."

"So more people will come and make wishes." The girl nods. "And have a place for their secrets."

"Ya, sure," I agree. "So people will have a place for their wishes and secrets."

I walk away with dread, knowing that there are people like that in this world where there is so much brightness. The note in my pocket feels black. I think about the girl, and about Bear Claw's baby. I think about growing up with Scotty and how our dad would take us out in the yard to throw around a football or baseball. We were always smiling.

The Watershed

When Dad and I were half a block away from Big Bob's house, shouting and Christmas carols flowed into the street. We walked in the open door to see Big Bob wearing reindeer antlers, hollering for people to listen to his favorite sound in the world. I'd learned many times over that his favorite sound in the world was the "beautiful, sweet, blessed sound" of him opening a beer can. I pushed my way through people I recognized but didn't know, heading in the general direction of the kitchen. In the hallway an older woman in a bright purple poncho stood with a grey parrot on her shoulder. She had a shaved head and cooed at the bird.

"Fucking bird fucking darling fucking fucking bird my darling," the parrot screeched and bobbed its head up and down.

I sighed. Garberville was a fucking nutty town. It seemed like a good percentage of the central town was at Big Bob's. There were cheers, and raised glasses, and so much happiness. The walls were wood paneled, and least one animal hung in every room: a stag's head with Christmas lights draped around the antlers, a fox, a fish. In the kitchen was a plaque with the head and torso of a taxidermy squirrel on it. A small, black, bowler hat sat on the squirrel's head, a joint in its mouth, a tiny red bandana around the neck, and both front paws were out, each with a miniature pistol glued to it. I grabbed a bottle of wine and an opener from the counter, pushed through people I didn't care about, and went out the back door and into the night.

When I was still close enough in to see through the large picture windows at the back of the house but far enough out to where the sounds of the party were just pulses in the air, I sat down with my back against a tree. I breathed in the ferment of the ground and the coldness of the night. I removed the cork, and inhaled, and exhaled, and took a sip from the bottle. Merlot. I don't know if it was the night or the solitude, but it tasted glorious, a taste of plum with a hint of leather lingering in the corners of my mouth. I was fifteen, and I missed my mom.

***

The story went like this: Dad was from Garberville, Mom from Long Beach. They met at Long Beach State, fell in love, got married, had me, seemed happy. The love and the marriage and me weren't necessarily in that order. Mom graduated with a psych degree, Dad got a BA in history. They kissed in front of me, held hands during dinner, had "date night" once a week. When I was a sophomore in high school, Mom left without a word, mid-life crisis shit. When we found out a few months later that she ended up in Hawaii with Terri, Dad freaked out, his own mid-life crisis shit, and we moved to Garberville.

When rational conversation and begging, then screaming and finally silence didn't alter my dad's idea to move from Long Beach to the redwoods of Northern California, I wrote a list. *Reasons why I, Jessica Netzel, am ABSOLUTELY NOT moving:

1: Everything I know is here.

2: Everything I care about is here.

3: We have a house here, a life. We have nothing there.

4: Here has beaches! No beaches = no beach volleyball.

5: Here has sunshine!

6: Here has my friends! What about all of my friends? What about Carrie and Lindsay and Lauren? I can't meet lifelong friends when I'm already fifteen.

7: I know there are redwoods and watersheds in Garberville. I don't even know what a watershed is.

8: I can safely say that Garberville doesn't have a Jamba Juice or Abercrombie or lifeguard positions. What about my job opportunities?

9: What about my future? I should be graduating from Poly. What college will take me with a diploma from Whale Gulch High School? I looked it up. The school is actually a called Whale Gulch.

Of all of the reasons that we shouldn't move, I didn't include the most important one on the list: What if Mom comes back?

When I handed Dad the paper, his already sunken face fell in a bit more. I returned from school to find the list on the kitchen table with a plateful of snacks. Cheese and crackers, grapes, a cookie. Like Mom used to put out for me. Dad wrote: "I'm sorry, Jess," across the top in red ink. Across the bottom: "A watershed is an area of land bounded by a divide where all of the water drains off and goes into the same place (a stream, river, pond, etc). It's a dividing point. You have Google on the phone I pay for. Look up pictures."

"It’ll be a new start," Dad said as we buckled our seat belts. He smiled small, no teeth showing, and his halfway devoid eyes made me more than a little depressed. He reached out and squeezed my shoulder. "Just us," he said. His hair, described a few months before by one of my friends as "sandy," looked more like salt and pepper. White gathered at the edges of his hairline.

"Ya, sure," I said. My dad put the car in reverse, and I was angry. I had to leave my whole life behind because Mom left and now Dad was too. My heart pounded, different parts of me twitching with each beat.

"You do realize this is insane, right?" I said, low and cold. My dad glanced at me and then back at the road and opened his mouth. Before he could say anything, I continued. "You might have grown up in Garberville, but you haven’t been back for years and years. You don’t know what it’s like anymore. I’ve never been there. Why would we move somewhere you don’t have family anymore? The population of my high school is bigger than the population of the entire town. At least if we stay in Long Beach, we have some family, and friends, and our lives. You’re going to ruin my life and my future, and I am not okay with it." I wanted to tell him I hated him, but instead said, "I don’t want to be with you." I didn’t mean that I didn’t want to be with him. I meant that I didn’t want to go with him. I didn’t want to move.

When my dad turned towards me, the lines on his forehead looked etched into his skin. The sun slanted through the window and washed him right out. He looked feeble and worn, and it startled me.

"Jess," he said. He got out the words "I’m sorry, but," before I cut him off.

"I don’t want to hear it," I said, crossed my arms, leaned my seat back, and stared out the window feeling bad. I knew my dad was doing the best he could. I also felt mildly suicidal knowing that we still had nine hours left in a car.

It took me awhile to recognize that the day was brilliant. It was a late October morning, and the hills rolled by. Clusters of trees showed as darker green swatches surrounded by grass that felt endless. Out Dad’s window was the coastline. My coastline. I pictured the white foaming against the sand and around the rock crowns in the water, and the turquoise changing to blue and then a deeper, darker blue the farther away from shore and closer to the rest of the world it got. I felt distanced from it all. In Garberville there wouldn’t be salty air and miles of sand beneath my feet, or craggy cliffs lining an ocean.

The silence was wired, and after a few hours the tension felt about ready to snap. I heard my dad inhale deeply and exhale and then he said, "To me, Long Beach is your mom. I’ve never known that city without her. I can’t explain it, but I don’t want to be there when she’s not. I hoped that she’d come back. But she’s not, Jess. She’s not coming back. So we do the best we can."

"How do you know she’s not coming back?" I asked, almost whispering, looking at him.

My dad sighed. "She told me she’s happy now," he said. "Without me."

For many years to come, whenever I thought of my dad, the image of him slumped in the seat, his right hand loosely resting on the bottom of the wheel, guiding us into our future, came to mind. Broken but trying not to be.

I thought of my mom. One day I got back from beach volleyball practice, and she just never came home. I went to bed late, thinking it was weird that she wasn’t home yet. I woke up

to a long email from her. She wrote that she loved me so much, that she was sorry, I was so strong, and that she just had to go. She had to figure out who she was. I made her happy, but a big part of her life was needing to be happy with who she was as a person. "You're the best part of my life," she wrote.

I didn't get it. All I could think about was how selfish she was and how much I needed her. If I was the best thing in her life, how she could leave me. I didn't know until adulthood that my dad had walked in on my mom with Terri. She never told me that she wasn't coming back. She never told me that she was happy without us.

There was a lot of nothing after driving through San Louis Obispo. Just long stretches of flat land with hills in the distance. We passed San Francisco and then Sonoma County, where vineyards lined the freeway and birds circled in the sky. Then a lot more land that appeared uninhabited and unused.

Though we hadn't spoken in hours and hours, my dad slowed down and pointed to a large store with plants, carvings, wind chimes, and all kinds of crap in the front yard. A massive wooden sign across the front of the building had the words "The Legend of Bigfoot" in black with a red, orange, yellow, and green background. The green was across the bottom, like land. The red was across the top, then orange, then yellow. Like a sunset. A twenty-foot tall wood-carved Sasquatch statue stood slump-shouldered front and center. It had a ballooned-out chest, upturned nostrils, and a straight-lined mouth. It was the ugliest depiction of a Sasquatch that I'd ever seen.

"This store's been here forever," Dad said, then paused. "We're about ten minutes out."

"Ten minutes out from what?" I asked.

"From our new home," he replied.

"Oh. My. God," I said. "This is where you're bringing me. To live. To a place with a Sasquatch. The legend of Bigfoot and the bumblehump middle of nowhere. Really?"

"Just give it a shot," he said, nodding his head and looking at the road. "Just give it a shot."

I didn't know whether he was talking more to himself or to me. Driving into town, I saw more dreadlocks in one block than I had in my entire life. Moccasins and patchwork quilt coats were apparently all the rage. Ali Baba pants, and hobo beanies, and hippie skirts were everywhere. A wooden sign with the imprinted words "Boot Leg" appeared to be a retail store. So did "The Hemp Connection."

When we pulled up to the Best Western, Dad gestured vaguely and said, "See, it's not that bad."

"That's it?" I asked, more surprised than upset. "Five blocks? That's downtown?"

"That's downtown." Dad said and nodded.

I stepped out of the car wearing shorts, a tank top, and sandals, and felt like I had just walked into an ice box. I crossed my arms and shivered.

"Forest air," a voice boomed directly behind me.

I jumped and turned to see a mountain man. He wore thick, heavy boots, jeans, a long-sleeved red and black-checked flannel shirt tight across his weighty stomach, and a full beard complete with shoulder-length wavy hair. "Fresh, crisp, forest air," he continued. "The miraculous smell of decaying wood and leaves." He loomed at least a foot and a half over me. I

suppressed the urge to scream. He threw open his arms with a flourish, and I was off the ground and suffocating in the man's flannel chest. I couldn't help but think that at least I was warmer.

After a moment, he set me down gingerly and advanced towards my dad with an impressive amount of speed for such a beast of a man.

"Sugar," he yelled. "Brother," swooping my dad into a similar hug. They grunted and walloped each other on the back, a solid man-hug. Once they broke apart, the two men stood grinning at each other. It was the first time I'd seen my dad truly smile since before my mom left. It was the first time I'd seen him with a friend, not just an acquaintance or a husband of one of Mom's friends.

"Dad," I asked. "What's sugar? You go by Sugar here? Not Tom?"

"Jess." My dad said and motioned from me to the man, "Big Bob. Big Bob, meet Jess."

"Well, she's a tiny little thing, isn't she," Big Bob said. "All skin and bones. We'll have to fatten her up."

Big Bob didn't talk, he yelled.

***

Apparently money goes further in Garberville than in Southern Cal, because before I knew it, Dad and I were all set up in a bigger house than in Long Beach, right down the street from the

Mateel Co-Op Art Gallery and the town square. School wasn't as miserable as I thought it would be.

I went to South Fork High School, about fifteen minutes north of Garberville in Miranda. It was slightly better than Whale Gulch High or Southern Humboldt High. Instead of twelve kids in the whole school, there were a few hundred. Everyone was pretty chill, and I had people to sit with at lunch. They weren't really my friends, though. Carrie, Lindsay, and Lauren had Skyped me a few times. The boys were being dumb, and Carrie's mom was letting her drive her BMW. I'd missed her sixteenth birthday party, which was epic.

Dad was a history teacher in Long Beach, but in Garberville, he did odd jobs. He mostly worked as night security at the bank. Which meant that he slept a lot during the day and was generally home.

I walked in one day after school, and Dad sat on the living room couch. He had a small pipe in one hand and a lighter in the other. He inhaled, looked up, coughed and sputtered. A strangling sound came from his throat, and when he coughed three times, I watched the smoke spew out of him in waves. I didn't know whether to laugh or yell. His face was still unshaved, and his hair was past his ears.

"Oh, God," I screamed, slammed the front door shut on my way out, and instinctively headed to the woods. It was only a ten minute walk before I felt lost and alone. I imagined a sense of companionship with the decaying nature of the forest. I zipped up my sweater, pulled up my hood, and lay on my back. Birds chirped above me, insects crawled around and over me, and I inhaled the musty, sweet scent. The sun sparkled through the trees, but the branches absorbed

all warmth. I shivered and thought, this is the most at home I feel here. My life as I knew it had crumbled, with only remnants remaining.

Instead of going home, I walked down Redwood Drive, the main strip. A few people waved at me as if they knew me. My dad found it endearing, but I thought it was weird. I was still getting used to smelling pot everywhere, seeing marijuana leaves everywhere, and overhearing conversations about different strains. I wandered into a clothing store and pushed through the hangers without actually looking at what was on them.

"Those are all made out of hemp," a girl said, and walked up. She wore a dark red oversized beanie, skinny dark jeans, and had a small dreamcatcher hanging from her long hair. We were the exact same height. I recognized her. She was a year older than me and went to my high school.

"They’re actually really soft," I replied.

"Tasia," she said and stuck out her hand.

I shook it and said, "Jess."

"I know," she replied and smiled at me.

***

I’d never stolen alcohol before, and when I felt my cheeks grow warm I didn’t know if it was from the thrill of drinking or from the alcohol content. I took another swig. My insides were getting warm too. The year before at this time, my mom was home, and I was out on the beach

surrounded by my friends. Now, I was out in the cold surrounded by trees. I saw my dad through one of the massive picture windows. His back was to me, and everyone in that kitchen walked up to him, arms outstretched. I squinted. Smiles were on everyone's faces. Big Bob put one arm around my dad's shoulders, and from the increase in noise and the way their bodies swayed, I could tell they were singing. I couldn't remember the last time my dad sang.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. Aside from the cold seeping through my thin gloves, I was comfortable in the nature and solitude. At that moment, at least. And then I heard the footsteps of someone, the sinking sound of the forest floor compressed beneath the weight of a person.

"I thought I saw you escape from the party," a voice said. "Can I join you?"

I opened my eyes. Tasia. "Sure," I shrugged.

"Great," she said, sat down next to me, and held out her gloved hand. I handed her the bottle. She took three gulps enthusiastically, gave me back the bottle with one hand, wiped her mouth with the other, and beamed, revealing a mouthful of crooked teeth. I nodded.

"Big Bob has this party every year," she said. "It's usually pretty fun. Everyone gets drunk, and someone always makes an ass out of themselves. Last year Big Bob dressed up as Santa Claus and ended up in his boxers for half the night. The boxers were green with a picture of three ornaments across the front, and "Nice Balls" written above the ornaments. The image is ingrained in my memory. He found his pants two days later, strung up on the flagpole at the post office."

"Funny," I smiled, and I meant it.

"Drink up," she said after a moment and motioned towards the bottle. In the moonlight, her teeth gleaned a pale white and seemed to take up half her face.

We passed the bottle back and forth a few more times. When Tasia asked how my Christmas had been, I showed her the knife my dad got me.

"That's a great knife," she said.

"Fabulous," I replied, closing it and putting it back in my pocket. "I'm carrying it around in my pocket just because I don't know what else to do with the thing."

"No," she said. "Seriously. Spyderco has that hole in the blade for fast, one-hand opening. It's a great brand."

I just looked at her. I didn't know what to say to that, but felt like I should say something.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said. The silence expanded between us. "Do you know what a watershed is?" I asked. It was the only thing I could think of. I took another sip and handed her the bottle again. Tasia giggled. It sounded tinkly and hung in the air.

"The watershed is the land that connects everything," she said. "Where all living things are linked by the common water course."

"That," I said, "is the hippy-est thing I've heard you say yet."

Tasia laughed again. "It's just land where water drains off and into one source," she explained. "Picture hills on either side. When it rains, water drains off the hills into different tributaries and stuff and all of the water ends up going into the Pacific Ocean." She wagged the bottle back and forth. "Done," she said. "Let's get another one and go to the river."

When I said I didn't feel like going back in Big Bob's house, Tasia offered to. I stood in the shadows of the trees in the backyard and watched through the windows as she went in to the

light and warmth, curling around people, quick hugs, swift smiles, and back into the cold of the night. Wine bottle intact.

From Big Bob's, the Eel River was a fifteen minute walk. We followed one of the many paths by the weak glancing moonlight, the main sound in my ears that of our feet depressing the damp ground. One after the other.

"Here we are," Tasia said when the path opened up along the edge of the river. Though rocks were scattered around, she sat on the ground, uncorked the second bottle and took a brief sip. "This," she continued, "is part of the watershed, where land connects us with the river." She patted the ground next to her, I sat next to her, cross-legged, and she handed me the bottle.

"We don't have the woods at home," I said. "We have the ocean, though."

"You don't consider this home?"

"No," I replied. "Long Beach is my home. I do like the forest though. I really love the smell."

"Dirt and growth and life," Tasia said.

I looked at her, in her man's coat and bright purple ear-flap beanie, and she looked back at me. She slowly reached over and removed the bottle from my hand, set it beside her, and held her hand to my cheek. The glove wasn't particularly soft, but my heart smacked all over the inside of my chest. She crouched in front of me, kissed me softly and briefly, just a connection of our lips, and leaned back to look in my eyes. Then my hands were on her and our tongues were together. With our winter clothes on, the only skin contact we had was that of our faces.

She was the first girl I'd kissed. My whole body prickled inside my layers of clothes. I felt fiery and shocked, but I didn't want the moment to end. I didn't want to stop. When I

eventually pulled away, I inhaled nature and smelled the promise of the forest. Tasia's smile took up her whole face.

"I've got to go," she said. "I'm supposed to meet my family at the late church service. Tradition shit."

I nodded. I was too breathless to say anything. Tasia leaned over again, our lips connected, and she was gone.

Instead of going back to Big Bob's, I went to our house. I didn't want people I didn't know asking me how my night was, and hugging me as if they knew me. I felt awe at what had just happened to me. I held it close, in my chest. It felt like a present. I walked inside, took off my boots in the entryway, and placed them against the wall. I stepped into the living room, where my dad sat on the couch, bent over, his head in his hands.

"Jess," he said, looking up, standing up, and reaching both arms out for me. "I didn't see you at the party, and I was worried." He pulled me into a hug. His arms felt thin but strong across my back. "Or," he continued, "I wasn't worried, but I wanted to be with you. It's Christmas." He squeezed me and stepped back. The warmth inside of me was gone, and all I felt was guilt. I'd been with a girl. I'd been away from him. And I'd felt so happy. So weirdly happy.

Dad's eyes were the lightest blue I'd ever seen them. His hair was thick and wavy and almost to his shoulders. His right hand ran across the top of his head, pulling his hair back between his fingers.

"Your hair doesn't look bad," I said. "When it's long, I mean. It doesn't look bad." It wasn't what I meant to say, but he smiled.

"You don't think I look like a bum?" he asked.

"Kind of," I replied. "But, more like a mountain man than a bum."

Scars

Jacob

Early morning fog hugged tree trunks, sun rays beamed through the mist, and for the first time in his life, at the age of seventy-one, Jacob thought that it wouldn't be a bad day to die. He lay on his back on the damp leaves, moss, and soft earth of the forest floor. He looked directly up. Jacob counted twenty-one trunks reaching above him, their leaves patches against the sun, their stems seeming to hold up the sky. It wasn't that he wanted to die. But if it happened, today was as good as any. He felt the people missing from his life in his bones. His daddy, his momma, and Sarah. His wife. His insides felt scarred by the losses.

Benj

For his twelfth birthday, Benj's parents gave him paint supplies. He set up his canvas, paints, and paintbrushes around what he considered his tree. The tree had a small hollow at the base where he left items that he didn't want to carry to and from his house. Benj knelt beside the hollow, moved aside dead leaves, and withdrew a small plastic ziplock bag containing a pocketknife, some pencils, and a picture of his baby brother. The bag's contents varied from week to week, but the picture remained.

Benj sat cross-legged on the ground as the sun fell all around him. He positioned the canvas on his knee and squeezed green paint into the center. He wondered if he could break apart old CD's and glue tiny pieces on the canvas to replicate the sun glinting off the dew on leaves

and shrubs everywhere he looked. With his index finger, he traced the semi-circle of the scar on his face. He started above his eye, halfway across his forehead, and followed the hook of the scar down, past his ear, ending near the corner of his mouth. He shivered, as he always did when his scar was touched. Then he placed the same finger in the middle of the green paint and drew a similar arc across the canvas.

Jacob

Jacob felt the stream of the sun slanting down on him and closed his eyes. He wondered how he got here. All of the memories and all of the moments that led to this one. Growing up, Jacob talked to his daddy during the snippets of time right before falling asleep. His daddy didn't tell stories, really, just spoke to Jacob like he'd talk to anyone else who would listen. He tended to repeat the same things.

"Jacob," his daddy said one night, using his hands to cup the comforter around Jacob's arms and legs. Jacob felt like he was in a protected cocoon. "I'm sure I've told you this before, but it's important to know how you end up at a place. And you ended up in Garberville in 1950 with me and your momma because land was cheaper here." Jacob's daddy pulled the small chair from the corner of the room and sat in it, next to Jacob's bed. Jacob turned his head, just about the only thing he could easily move, to listen to his daddy.

"And," he continued, "the logging jobs were constant." His daddy placed his hands on his knees and smiled at him. "Anyway," his daddy always ended abruptly, "goodnight, Son. Sleep tight, and don't let the bedbugs bite." He stood up, placed his hand on Jacob's head for a moment, replaced the chair, and walked out of the room. He always shut the door so softly

behind him. Jacob never did find out where that bedbug saying came from. Finding the reasons behind pointless things wasn't exactly a reason to hang around, though.

Jacob lay there, on the forest floor, surrounded by nothing but nature, and thought about his friends, Big Bob and Sugar. They were the only people in this goddamn town who might miss him. When Jacob was eight, Sugar's family moved to Garberville for the fishing and Big Bob's parents came to have a homestead in the hills. Now, the harvestable redwoods and sawmills that they grew up with were mostly gone, and silt covered the salmon beds. Jacob wasn't opposed to it, exactly, but times had changed.

When they were twenty-two years old, Jacob and Big Bob walked to the Pickles' property that bordered Big Bob's family's land. Big Bob's parents' sheep weren't bringing in the money needed to maintain the three younger kids, and the easiest thing to do was to turn to the Hill People. On a basic level, Jacob didn't understand people who chose to eat tofu instead of meat and who bought a new pickup or 4X4 but lived without showers or plumbing. The Pickles lived in a dome made of plastic and redwood but had paid off all of their land in three years. They were doing something right.

Alice Pickle answered the door. Jacob looked at Big Bob, Big Bob nodded, clasped his hands together in front of his body, rocked up on his toes and back on his heels and said, "Ma'am, I can't for the fuck of me figure out how to make shit grow."

Growing successfully used to be all about talking to people. Now, all kinds of information was splashed across the internet. Things like rock phosphate, potash, NPK, when to switch from high nitrogen to low phosphate. At the end of the day, growing dope wasn't all that

different from growing tomatoes. Jacob sighed. He figured it probably said that somewhere on the internet too.

From the time Jacob started smoking pot in his early teens, the only time he didn't was when he stopped doing drugs altogether for six months in his early twenties after taking a hit of acid. In retrospect, the acid wasn't the best idea. Jacob didn't remember whether Big Bob got it initially, or Sugar did, but he knew it came from some shady character on the street. Jacob never questioned his friends, though.

That night, Big Bob stood in front of the poster of Jim Morrison. "Holy fuck," he screamed, hands on his face while he looked through his fingers. "Jamesy's hair's getting longer, and, fuck, his tongue is sticking out, and Jesus Christ I'm looking at KISS. Nope. It's Christ now. Holy fucking hell, I'm looking at Jesus, and there's blood pouring down his face. What the fuck is in this shit?"

Sugar sat inside the house, swearing he heard voices in the trees outside, and Jacob hunched in an opposite corner in the fetal position. He cried for his daddy for what felt like hours.

Jacob smiled. If nothing else, his life hadn't been entirely boring.

Benj

After Benj covered the canvas with the greens and browns of the forest around him, he switched paints. He didn't have a color palette, so he located a rock and coated the surface with black.

He thought about his class at the alternative combined elementary and high school called Light Up Your Life. Everyone seemed to fit somewhere. Of the eleven kids in his class, Eagle

and Bear Tooth—whose parents had adopted the Native American Indian lifestyle in the ’60’s—lived in a massive tepee out on the Mattole watershed. Ty, Cali, and a few more lived in town, a few in the hills. Benj didn’t have a best friend. He didn’t have anyone to hang out with.

Benj’s mom had a knack for arts and crafts, and she taught classes like Sew It or Paint It. She told him a month ago that the school got a pottery kiln through a government grant, and since then Ms. Dorgenhopper taught about how awesome clay was and how many possible products could be sculpted by your hands. Before the start of every class, Ms. Dorgenhopper turned on Bob Marley and danced around to the steady beats. Her arms moved like water, flowing, bubbling with energy.

"Your hands can create such beauty," she proclaimed every class. "Let’s do this," she exclaimed, throwing out her arms in excitement, as if unleashing the beauty of hands and clay into the world. Two weeks ago, she announced that everyone would make rain sticks for the next few sessions.

Ms. Dorgenhopper always wore bright colors, like the rainbow. Ty sat across the table from Benj and did nothing during the entire first session. During the second, he beckoned Ms. Dorgenhopper over, and said, "A bong is basically a rain stick, right? What’s the difference?"

"Well," Ms. Dorgenhopper said, bending over Ty and drawing something on a piece of paper, "you just need to fashion a stem and bowl separately, to go here." She drew circles on the paper.

When she walked away, Ty looked at Benj. "Pretty cool about this bong thing," he said. "What’re you making?"

"A rainstick," Benj said softly, shrugged, and turned to the side, so that Ty couldn't see his scar.

Benj hadn't even thought about making a bong. He'd been fashioning his rain stick into a one-log house, like the one on display a little south of Garberville. On two of the tiny balls of clay that he made to go inside the rain stick, he used a pencil to draw miniature "B's." They looked more like circles than anything else, but he knew they were b's. Benj and Benny. That was his baby brother's name. He wondered how different his life would be. He always felt his scar burn across the side of his face when he thought about his brother.

Benj remembered the drum circle playing slow thumps on the outskirts of the outdoor funeral, and everyone he knew was there, along with a ton of people he didn't know. Old Man Buble and his wife brought their terrible-tasting cookies, and the Branding Iron Saloon opened their doors for the reception. Benj saw his mom's tears spill out from the bottom rims of her dark sunglasses, and when his dad left a pack of recently developed photos on the kitchen table a few days later, Benj took one of the two photos of the little brother he barely knew.

Benj painted shadows, and in the shadows, two tiny, almost indistinguishable figures, one taller than the other, holding hands.

Jacob

Jacob Buble married Sarah Pearl in a brown corduroy suit that he picked up from the thrift store on Redwood Drive. Sarah's sister threw the wedding ceremony together in a week and a half. When Big Bob asked Jacob, "What in the hell is the goddamn rush? Did you knock her up?" Jacob replied, "I just love her, man." He shrugged. "Why wait?"

Sarah's brown hair fell past her breasts in easy, natural waves. Jacob had never seen her in mascara, but she wore it for their wedding. Jacob wrapped his arms around her and drew her in for the kiss. As everyone clapped and cheered, her hair caught the breeze and flew all around him. He couldn't see Sarah's eyes, but her hair smelled like it had captured the sun.

Benj

Benj looked one more time at the photo of Benny. He was four months old with a big toothless smile across his face. He lay on the carpet on a blanket and both arms reached out as if wanting someone to pick him up, needing someone to protect him.

Benj had removed his Nolan Ryan baseball card from the protective cover when he was eight, replacing it with the photo of his brother. He put a pencil in his pocket, and the paints and brushes back in one of his mom's reusable grocery bags. The words "Paper" and "Plastic" were crossed out on the side of the bag, while the words "Canvas" and "Life" were both circled. If Benny had lived, he might be with Benj now.

He put the photo in the plastic bag and added the lighter from his pocket before stashing it away in the hollow at the base of the tree. With his pocketknife, Benj carved letters into the truck of the tree.

Jacob

Jacob opened his eyes to a sun sinking into the west. The leaves compressed under his weight as he sat up and then stood. He had nowhere to go, nowhere he needed to be, but the sun slanted in such a way that he should get somewhere within a few hours. He started off in the direction of

home, and after walking awhile in the same woods he had for decades, Jacob saw a kid with brown hair past his ears and one leg of his jeans partially rolled up. The kid carved one more letter into the trunk of a tree and when he turned to face Jacob, he blinked his eyes fast, as if trying to mask the trace of tears.

"Nobody is lonely here," Jacob read aloud.

"Old Man Buble?" the kid asked and blinked. "I mean, hi, Mr. Buble." He turned away from Jacob and shook his head so that his hair fell in front of the right side of his face.

"Yep." Jacob didn't know which of the dozens of kids around town this one was, but it didn't matter. "Nobody is lonely here," he repeated.

"Ya. I. Um," the kid said. "I was just." He took a breath and sighed. "I'm sorry for carving into the tree." He looked at his feet, and the top of his left ear turned red.

The boy looked so ashamed that Jacob laughed, and as he did, he couldn't remember the last time he had. "Don't apologize to me, boy," Jacob said and shrugged. "I've carved into a few trees myself over the years."

"I'm sorry about your wife," the boy said.

"Ack," Jacob replied. "Well, it was her time to go." He realized that it had already been one month since he woke up next to Sarah and found her lifeless beside him. He'd slept next to her for thirty-nine years. "I've been around too long," Jacob said and shook his head.

Jacob saw the painting leaning against the tree trunk, all greens and browns and blacks. He didn't comment but smiled to himself, remembering a time when he was recognized as a local artist and half of the living room was littered with acrylics and canvasses and paintbrushes.

"I, um." The boy mumbled and looked at the ground again. He tilted his head quickly again so his hair fell over half of his face. "Can I ask you a question?"

"What's that?"

"I think there used to be a spot near a waterfall or something? Like, if you knew where it was, people would hike up and there's a picture of an hourglass or something carved into the rock?"

The boy wasn't more than thirteen, and Jacob shrugged away his hesitation.

"There's a spot you have to hike a couple of hours to get to," Jacob said. "At the top there's large rocks on top of large rocks. In one area, the rocks form a sort of small shelter. People carved in the rock over the years. It's the give and take idea. A man in need of some grass now will leave some in the future."

"Cool," the kid said. "Very cool. I was just wondering."

Jacob watched the kid's pockets bulge out a bit and realized that he'd clenched his hands into fists. The kid looked nervous, like he was about to piss himself. Jacob smiled a little, thinking about the hikes up to the hourglass. When he and Big Bob and Sugar were this kid's age, when they were in their twenties, thirties, forties. The harder the hike got, the less frequently any of them went. First it was Jacob's knees that hurt; then it was his back. Jacob smiled wider and put his hand on the kid's shoulder to try to reassure him.

"I was about your age when I first took a hit," he said, looking at the boy. "There are actually a few spots like that in the woods here. It's usually only between a small group of friends."

"Do you know where one is?"

"Oh, sure, I know where a few are. It's been a few years since I tried to find any, though."

"Oh. Right. Okay." The boy shuffled his feet a few times, and he leaned down to grab his bag.

"We could try to find one," Jacob said. "There's a spot that might not have anything in it, but it's less than a mile away."

When Jacob started walking, the kid stepped next to him on Jacob's ride-hand side. The kid seemed so sad when he first saw him, and Jacob thought that now he looked excited. At least, Jacob hoped he was. The kid tilted his head to the side again, and Jacob knew which kid he was. Benj, the Dazet's kid. The one with the scar. The one whose dad was driving when the drunk driver smashed into them. The one who lost his baby brother in the crash.

Benj

Benj walked next to Old Man Buble, weaving through the trees, the silence between them expanding before being lost in the sounds of the leaves moving in the breeze. Insects, birds, and squirrels scuffled about. The lack of conversation was easy and comfortable. They simultaneously stepped over a log, and the old man said out of nowhere, "I was thinking about death earlier."

Benj inhaled fast, and he felt the scar searing along the side of his face.

"I was thinking that it wouldn't be a bad day for me to die," Jacob continued, and Benj felt the old man looking at him.

"I think," Benj answered after a moment, "that any day with death is a bad day."

"When you get to be my age," Jacob replied, "death just becomes part of the landscape."

"That doesn’t mean that death is okay," Benj said and felt his face get hot and his heart knock in his chest a little harder. He waited for the old guy’s response, his insides tingling.

"You may be right," Jacob replied, sighing. "Death is never okay. But, it’s a part of life, and you cherish what you have and just keep on living, I suppose."

They walked past an old deer carcass. The bones had been picked clean and the sun had bleached them out.

"You know," Jacob continued. "This is pretty much the first thing I’ve passed down to anyone."

"Why didn’t you have kids?" Benj asked, the words out of his mouth before he could take them back.

"We just never really tried one way or another," the old guy replied. "I never really wished I had them until Sarah was gone," he added, like an afterthought.

As they continued, Old Man Buble pointed out a few markers: a large rock, a stump that looked like it burnt thousands of years ago. He stopped at a tree that looked like every other tree. The old guy bent over, his arms on his knees. He was breathing so hard he looked like he might keel over.

"Found it," he said, pointing an old, bony finger at a faded etching—a clumsy "SB."

Using the tree as leverage, Buble crouched to one knee, and Benj smelled the dampness of his clothes. He smelled like the musty mix of an old person’s home and the forest floor. Old Man Buble brushed away large ferns until he located a triangle-shaped hollow. Benj watched the old guy’s hands shake as he reached into the tree’s pocket.

"There’s nothing here," Buble said. He sighed and sat back on an exposed root. His voice drooped with disappointment.

"That’s okay," Benj responded. "It’s cool that we tried."

The old man reached into his pocket and pulled out a ziplock bag. "I do have this," he said. "We can smoke it if you want."

Benj let a moment pass before answering. It didn’t seem like a lot. He wanted to say yes, but instead said, "You know what, let’s leave it for the next guys."

Gone

The music echoes off the walls and into Cali's nerves as she sits next to her mom at the Branding Iron Saloon. Cali's bones vibrate with every beat. The bartenders blast the music so loud that the Branding Iron is a place for watching. Cali can't hear a damn word anyone says. Her mom clenches both of her hands around a beer, and her hair looks wild. It's so beyond curly that it shoots out in all directions. Her mom closes her eyes tight and shakes her head. She sighs and looks at Cali.

The room is dark, with the main light coming from the wall behind the bar, shining on all of the plaques and framed photos and the mounted deer head. The door opens, and Cali smiles when she sees Big Bob. She'd recognize him anywhere. He has the height and build of a football player, but the stomach and beard of Santa Claus. Her mom jumps up off the stool when he walks over. Cali's mom puts one hand on Big Bob's shoulder, the other cups between her mouth and Big Bob's ear. Cali watches her stand up on her tip-toes while Big Bob stoops down to hear. She knows her mom's asking Big Bob if he's seen Mark. Big Bob shakes his head, and her mom deflates, her arms and head sinking a little towards the floor. Though she hasn't said so specifically, Cali knows her mom came to the bar to ask if anyone has heard anything about her boyfriend. Big Bob is an old timer, and if anyone knew anything, it would be him. Mark has been missing for three days.

To hear her mom tell it, she met Mark a few years before at the weekly farmer's market during his first week in Garberville. He'd just moved from Southern California, and his hair was too long to be neat but too short to be the mountain man look. Her mom could feel him looking at her. When he stuck out his hand and said, "Mark," she shook it and responded, "KK," immediately followed by, "and I'm not interested." Her mom told her that when she walked away from the stall selling peaches and nectarines, she didn't look back to where she knew Mark stood. She'd see him again. Garberville was a small town.

When Cali met Mark a few weeks later, her first thought was that she liked the smile lines in the corners of his eyes and mouth. Her second was that this was going to take a little getting used to. Her mom didn't really date. Cali knew that her dad had knocked up her mom when KK was twenty-two, they'd gotten married, had another kid, and that he'd left with her brother when Cali was in second grade. She remembered it but tried not to.

People came to Garberville, and others left. Some meant to come for a few months and stayed for the rest of their lives. A lot of it depended on growing pot. People called them cash crops. They came to try to make it, and they either did and stayed or didn't and left. Those who didn't were usually busted by CAMP—Campaign Against Marijuana Planting—somewhere along the way. AKA, the government trying to stop people from growing. So when Big Bob yells at the bartender: "Fucking hell, turn this shit down," and he and Cali's mom step closer to the table, Cali knows what her mom is really asking. The music volume turns down just enough so they can talk without screaming. Big Bob nodds at Cali, half a smile, and says, "Hey, kid. You twenty-one yet? Feck, you little ones grow fast."

"You know I'm thirteen," Cali says, smiles, and sips her Sprite.

"He's gone gone, or you just haven't heard from him?" Big Bob asks, turning to her mom.

"His truck's not at his place; but his tent and everything else is still there," she says. "He's just gone."

"You think something happened to him?" Big Bob continues.

"I don't know," she replies. "There weren't any busts this weekend. Someone would've heard if Mark was in jail. He wasn't supposed to take the trip to L.A. with some of his crop until next weekend. There wasn't word of any trouble, right?"

"I ain't heard shit," Big Bob says. "CAMP hasn't come down on us in a few weeks, and those fool shit-head kids from Eureka haven't come back. Everything's been quiet."

Cali's worried about Mark too, but she'd never tell her mom that.

Cali ran through it again in her head: earlier that day, her mom had asked if she'd seen Mark around town the past few days. Cali said no.

"Have you heard from him at all?" her mom pressed.

"Nope." Cali was lying on her stomach on her bed, keeping eye contact with Mark's dog, Tubby, who sat a few feet away. She was trying to see who would blink first. The dog sat there looking at her with those big brown eyes, their heads almost level. Tubby's mouth was open, his tongue out, his tail wagging back and forth making a swooshing sound. Cali could have sworn he was smiling. She'd never noticed how short a dog's eyelashes were. God, the dog was ugly. He started coming around Mark's place a year or so ago and was still the skinniest damn dog Cali

had ever seen. It didn’t matter what Mark fed him, and it didn’t help that he shaved his fur into a mohawk that ran from the back of his head to his tail. Mark said that he needed to keep his "terrier mutt fashionable."

"He hasn’t checked in with you about Tubby?" her mom asked.

"Nope."

"California, look at me." Her mom said harshly. "How long did you ask to watch the dog for?"

"Jesus, Mom," Cali replied, shaking her head and reaching out to scratch Tubby’s head, in between his ears. "A few days."

"And how many days has it been?"

"Two? Three?" Cali replied. "Something like that. Do you know that dogs don’t actually sweat through their skin? They sweat through their paws and pant instead. Isn’t that cool?"

Cali’s mom’s face was blank when she blinked at her. "Get in the car," she said.

Their 4x4 couldn’t make it up the stupidly steep, muddy path that Mark called a driveway. Cali’s mom kicked one of the tires when they got out, muttered the word "useless," and they trudged up the path. Tubby trotted ahead, his nose in the air, sniffing.

"Do you know," Cali asked her mom, "that dogs’ noses put out a layer of snot that helps them take in scent? They lick their noses to taste the smell."

"Cali, no fun facts for a bit, okay?" KK said, pushing her hair back from her face. "Just, give me a few minutes."

They didn’t talk for the rest of the hike up the curving trail. When they got up to where the land leveled off, Cali followed her mom over to Mark’s tent. KK unzipped it, and they stepped inside. For the first time, the large tent that Mark called home seemed bare and cold. He

always seemed to fill it up. Without him, the white plastic table and four chairs looked pathetic, the plywood floor: mud-stained. Everything was there: the propane lanterns, the camp stove. Mark's few books were still in the corner next to his large mattress which had sleeping bags and blankets piled on it.

Shortly after Mark and her mom met, Mark had suggested buying a mattress for Cali. KK initially refused, said that it would take up too much room in the tent. Cali was lying down in the corner, breathing as slowly and deeply as she could so they thought she was asleep.

"We can't just keep throwing her a sleeping bag every time you guys spend the night," Mark said. "Besides, the tent's supposed to sleep ten."

"My ass," KK said, but they got Cali a mattress. It was still there, in the corner opposite Mark's bed. His spare set of car keys were on top of the books, along with a photo he'd taken of KK and Cali the first night they dug out the fire pit.

"He's not here," KK said, looking around the tent and standing with her hands on her hips. "He has to be around here somewhere."

They walked through Mark's property. The tree branches gathered above them and the spring seemed larger and murkier than Cali had ever seen it. Tubby followed them, his fur darker from the mud. Everything looked brown as the sun sank behind the hillside. The fire pit looked forgotten.

About a year ago, KK dropped her off at Mark's place. KK was headed to work at the Hemp Connection, and when Cali walked up, Mark was digging a hole.

"Are you burying something?" Cali asked.

"No," Mark said. "I'm digging a fire pit for us. Want to help?"

"That's what kids are for, right? Free labor?" Cali said, but she picked up the other shovel and pushed the spade back into the soil with her foot. It was the first time Mark had referred to her as part of a whole, as part of "us."

That first night they made a fire. Cali gathered wood while Mark drove to the store. By the time KK arrived, the moon was perfectly round and high in the sky.

"Let's start a fire," Mark said, throwing lighter fluid onto the sticks and then striking a match. When the match hit the wood, the flames spread and grew, blue and yellow and red. He tossed a bag of marshmallows to Cali and smiled. She didn't open the bag properly, and six marshmallows flew through the air. Tubby's tail swung back and forth as he gobbled them up.

The wind caught the smoke and blew it directly into Cali's and KK's faces. Cali woke up the next morning smelling of woodsmoke and fire and ash. The next week, Cali noticed a photo that Mark had taken that night. It was of KK and Cali sitting next to each other, smoke surrounding them and blurring their faces. Cali thought that they both looked happy.

The wind picked up, and the cold air hit Cali like she'd run into something solid. Her mom zipped up her jacket, put her hands under her arms, her head down, and kept walking. Tubby, genius dog that he was, ran over to the edge of the spring and splashed a bit, the water jumping all around him. It must have been colder than he expected, because one jump Tubby was in the water, and the next, he was away, shaking himself off. Cali thought the dog looked like he was shivering.

Months before, when it was warmer, KK was at work and Cali and Mark stood by the spring and watched Tubby swim, his head bobbing in the water. The stick that Cali threw made a splash, and Tubby brought it back. The sky turned dark, and Mark said they should head in.

"I have some fine dining for us tonight," Mark said, his eyes crinkling. "I need to get cooking."

"Beans again?" Cali asked as they started walking to the tent.

"Beans and quesadillas," he responded. "Only the best." Mark whistled for Tubby, who ran up.

"Do you know," Cali said, "that dogs' eyes have a special membrane that lets them see in the dark?"

"I did not know that," Mark replied. "Are you researching dogs now?"

"I'm just interested in them," Cali said. "They're weird. Tubby was sleeping the other night, and his legs twitched, and he made weird sounds. Turns out, dogs dream. They have the same REM that we do."

"And what does REM mean?" Mark asked, throwing a stick that Tubby ran after.

"Rapid eye movement. Everyone knows that."

"Everyone doesn't know what REM stands for," Mark said. "You're a pretty special kid, you know that." He reached out and put an arm around her shoulders.

Cali wasn't used to being told stuff like that from any males in her life, and she held her breath and let the words hang in the air for a few minutes, hugging her all over. She wasn't very good at asking for things, but it felt like as good a time as any.

"Can you take me hunting?" Cali blurted.

Mark squeezed her shoulder, removed his arm, and grinned. He said that the only reason he had a gun was to shoot into the air in case anyone came on his property.

"But that's ridiculous," Cali said. "You're not even going to try hunting?"

"Nope."

"But everyone from around here hunts, and I want to learn."

"But I'm not from around here," Mark said.

"Right, you're from Hollywood," Cali said. "Celebrities, right? Celebrities are too good for hunting, so nobody there does?"

"I'm not from Hollywood," Mark laughed. "Santa Barbara is not Hollywood. But, yeah, guns, just not as many used for hunting."

On Cali's thirteenth birthday, Mark took her over to Big Bob's place, a ten-minute drive down the road. When Mark pulled up, Big Bob walked out with a rifle strapped to his back and two handguns in holsters on each hip.

"Let's fucking go," Big Bob said. "I don't have all goddamn day."

Without thinking about it, Cali laughed. "You look crazy," she said.

Big Bob wore a tight white shirt with the sleeves cut off and a camouflage bandana tied around his head.

"Come on," Big Bob said, motioning his head towards his truck. "I'll drop her off at KK's later," he told Mark.

That night, Cali thought:

1: Guns are freaking powerful. The kick is enough to knock your shoes off.

2: Having Big Bob take her shooting was one of the nicest things anyone had ever done for her.

They walked full circle around the spring and then KK headed back in the direction of the tent.

"So fucking weird," Cali's mom said, not necessarily directed at Cali. "So fucking weird."

Cali didn’t respond. She clamped her teeth together, dug her fingernails into her palm, and tried not to think about being cold. They stomped into the tent again; KK turned on the camp stove and sat down cross-legged next to it, her hands over the small flames. Cali sat next to her on the floor and put her hands over the other burner.

When it was cold and they were sleeping at Mark’s place, they usually put the stove over near Cali’s mattress. As if the brief remnants of heat did much. Cali just slept with her arms around Tubby. Not that the skinny-ass dog did much either, but he was better than nothing.

KK didn’t say anything, just stared into the flame, and Cali thought back a few weeks.

"I want more," Mark had said, another night when Cali was pretending to sleep. She did that a lot.

"More?" she heard her mom asked.

"I’d like to build a house," Mark said. "Or at least get some electricity. You and Cali are saints for putting up with this. At the beginning, it was move to Northern California and buy some land to try growing. Obviously, I wasn’t expecting immediate fortune, and at least this season I don’t have to buy baby plants again. But, everything’s taking a little longer than I thought. I guess I’m just saying I’m sorry."

"It’s not a big deal," KK said.

"I love that you don’t care that I live in a tent," Mark said, "but I care."

Her mom didn’t respond, and Cali realized that she’d never heard her mom tell Mark that she loved him. She didn’t really tell Cali that she loved her either, but Cali knew that she did. Cali wasn’t sure that Mark knew if either of them loved him. I love you, Cali thought, trying out

the words, rolling them around in her head. She whispered it in Tubby's ear and kissed his head. Cali knew that her mom liked the stability and was still messed up from Cali's dad leaving. A night or two a week at their apartment in town, a night or two a week at Mark's, a couple without him. Cali knew that she and her mom both liked having someone. She thought her mom loved him. She thought they both did. She didn't think that he'd just leave.

When they walked out of the tent, Cali grabbed the photo of their blurry, happy faces, folded it in half, and put it in her back pocket.

KK grasps Big Bob's hand, squeezes it, and tells him to let her know if he hears anything. Big Bob nods, and Cali hops down from the stool and follows her mom out the door.

"Fuck 'em," KK says, into the night air.

"Fuck who?" Cali asks.

"Fuck all of them," KK replies. "Nobody knows where Mark is, and I have no idea where to look next, but I sure as hell am not going to give up yet."

Her mom tells her to get in the car, that they're going to drive around and look for Mark. This doesn't seem like the most productive thing to do.

"What, like, just drive the streets?" Cali asks.

"I don't know, just drive around to fucking drive, okay," KK says. "Nobody's seen him in days. His cell phone's off. Everything he owns is still here. I don't fucking know."

Cali doesn't know what to do either, so she leans back in the passenger seat, crosses her arms, and looks out the window. KK gets out at the other bar and comes back ten minutes later shaking her head and saying, "Nobody's seen him."

It's a Wednesday night, and five people sit cross-legged on the grass in the middle of the square, forming a drum circle. A few more dance around them, swaying their bodies to the beats. One woman holds a thin, pink and purple scarf in her hand and swings it far more gracefully than Cali ever could. The light around the square causes the few trees to cast strange shadows. The town square isn't what town squares look like in movies. This one has cracked concrete with weeds pushing through. It's not even centrally located, really. People hang out there, but not because it's nice. Just because it exists.

Cali watches KK get out of the car and walk over to the drum circle and dancers. She comes back a few minutes later saying, "He has to be somewhere."

They drive the main street three times, south down Redwood Highway past The Legend of Bigfoot, though Benbow Lake and Richardson Grove State Parks. Cali continues to look out the window. Redwoods reach to the sky, their branches interlocking into blackness. Cali can't see the stars.

KK parks the car on the side of the road, gets out, and slams the door shut. Cali follows her mom. Her shoes sink slightly into the leaves.

"What are you doing?" Cali asks.

KK doesn't answer. She sits on the ground and then falls down onto her back. Cali stands over her. She doesn't know what the hell else to do, so she lies down next to her mom and looks up. Redwoods are everywhere, and they block out everything. Cali feels like she's breathing in blackness. Leaves rustle, an owl hoots, and the sounds of the forest fill her up. She grasps the

cool leaves of the forest floor, and hears her mom sigh. The sigh doesn't sound worried or upset, it just is.

"Well," KK says. "Everyone has to be somewhere, and we might as well be here."

"Mom?" Cali asks.

"Cali?" her mom responds.

"Mark could have just left."

"I know," her mom says. When she reaches over and puts her hand on top of Cali's, Cali can't help wondering if Mark's leaving really matters. Her mom's fingers curl around her hand, her fingers pressing into Cali's palm. Cali can't remember the last time her mom reached out to her like that. She can't remember the last time they held hands.

"Mark's cash crop is still at his place," KK says softly. "Underneath the plywood in one of the corners. He wouldn't have left all that money."

"Maybe he left it for us," Cali says, and the words fill the night.

The Present

"We got you something, Pops," Sugar's grandson told him, sliding his hand carefully across the green linoleum countertop in an effort to conceal the unwrapped present underneath. Sugar very clearly saw the phone. Trystan threw his hand in the air, and his eyes lit up, as if offering a technological toy was comparable to giving his grandfather a Royal Enfield, or a 182 Cessna Skylane. The phone instantly dashed away the harmony Sugar felt with the world while fishing earlier. He wanted to say fuck no, but instead he said, "Christ. You know how I feel about cell phones." He studied the little devil, with its sleek, black exterior and perfect, little buttons. He'd always thought of the chips and wires and shit inside computers and smartphones as robot brains with no personality or street smarts.

"I know you don't want people to get ahold of you whenever they feel like it," Sugar's daughter Jess said. "I know you want to do everything on your own time, but you need to join the rest of the world. Phones are more than phones. Phones are, I don't know, she said, her arm grandly gestured in the air. "—life." Sugar wanted to tell Jess she was full of shit, but she crossed her arms and smiled at him, immediately instilling within him feelings of incompetency as a technological dinosaur bastard. He'd heard the term. Not with "bastard," though. He added that.

"We can text all the time," Trystan said, the kid visibly bubbling over with elation.

Sugar wondered how to explain to his progeny the realness that watches, and calculators, and books, and pencils gave him. He sighed and looked out the window. There were trees, and hills, and animals, and rivers out there. For years Sugar had understood the inevitability of

getting a cell phone to communicate with his daughter and grandson at a frequency more than intermittent. Somehow running into them around town didn't happen as much as it used to.

"I thought we opened the lines of communication with email," Sugar said, knowing full well that he was more likely to walk out his daughter's door with Bigfoot in his possession than without the phone.

"Dad," Jess said, tilting her head and raising her eyebrows.

When she was a teenager this look was often accompanied by the word, "really?" She always meant it in an interrogatory way, questioning his reasons. He shouldn't have had to defend his logic behind curfews or forbidding her to date Hill boys, with their overgrown hair and vacant eyes.

"Grandpa," Trystan said. "I'll text you pictures and all sorts of awesome stuff."

When Sugar eventually conceded, his grandson told him that he knew technology, and he would teach him. As if the kid's eight years of existence and handful of years with functional thought could compete with a lifetime. Sugar left with the weight of the phone in his pocket knowing that he'd lost a sliver of the world he grew up in.

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Sugar knew that Jess was no longer innocent when she was fifteen and he discovered her passionately engaged in a disorderly exchange of saliva with that unexceptional boy from down the street. That night, he had dominated in Wednesday softball and was saturated in the afterglow that only five RBI's and three home runs propagates. Per tradition, after the game everyone converged upon the Branding Iron Saloon. The Branding Iron was a jolly place, with wood-

paneled walls, taxidermy deer heads, and shelves of empty beer bottles above rows and rows of a medley of spirits suitable to a small town with a healthy proclivity towards alcohol consumption. Sugar swaggered into the bar and jubilantly ordered a round of beer for everyone on the team. A donation booth at the annual Harvest Ball's pot luck had resulted in team shirts comprising a glorious array of mismatched colors and sizes with the bar paying to display its name across the shirt backs. The true sponsorship was in the half-price beer after every game.

"Sugar, baby," Big Bob yelled over the clattering of voices, clanking of pool balls, and incomprehensible song lyrics. "You can outrun me, but you *know* you can't outdrink me." When they met to distribute the shirts, Big Bob asserted his authority by demanding the one that was the brightest orange Sugar had ever seen. In daytime Sugar cautioned that if people stared at too long, the shirt had lasting harmful effects comparable to the sun's. He looked at Big Bob's bulk stuffed into the shirt two sizes too small. The material impressively gripped his stomach into rolls. Big Bob's biceps swelled from the sleeves in such a way that it looked like a significant percentage of his blood circulation was choked off. The words "Rabid Misfit," Big Bob's original and only motive for procuring the shirt, were cracked and deformed, the letters barely readable. Big Bob had executively decided that the team name was Rabid Misfits.

"We've been over this so many goddamn times," Sugar replied, gesturing towards Big Bob's plump belly. "Nobody can outdrink that beautiful, beer-guzzling machine you have."

"Who," Big Bob hollered to nobody and everybody, "wants to hear my favorite sound in the world?" Encouraged by the few shouts scattered around the bar, Big Bob exaggerated the opening of a beer can. It was impossible for Sugar to hear the dull crack through the racket. Everyone had listened to Big Bob's favorite sound in the world countless times, but the bar still echoed with cheers.

Later, when Big Bob charged towards Sugar, Jacob ricocheted off of his blimp of a belly. The orange shirt was striking even in the haze of the bar. Sugar watched Jacob's swift, smooth recovery with admiration. Anyone who was friends with Big Bob learned to maneuver around his belly. At that moment, some blurry part of Sugar's brain perceived that Big Bob's levels of fondness for people directly correlated with how adept they were at shuffling around what Big Bob regularly referred to as his "good bits." For a few moments, Sugar thought that Big Bob was going to tackle him.

Big Bob was two steps away, and Sugar's last thought was one word: fuck. One step away and he closed his eyes. He was seven beers and a few shots in and already waging an ongoing negotiation with gravity. Instead of being steamrolled by Big Bob's bulk, Sugar heard his barking laugh and felt his baseball cap snatched off his head. Sugar opened his eyes to see Big Bob gracelessly throw himself on the bar counter, a prone creature magnificently covered in wet patches of sweat stains and beer. After a moment of flailing limbs, Big Bob rose like a redwood and placed Sugar's royal blue hat on the deer head mounted on the wall behind the bar. Big Bob chanted "MVP" and pointed directly at Sugar. The chant got louder and louder, and gratitude gathered in Sugar's face and filled him up.

An hour later, Sugar slumped on a stool and stared up at the small gaping holes and absent ceiling mount. Sugar vehemently wished that Big Bob's wife hadn't recently been so successful on her campaign into drunken oblivion. The owners removed the stripper pole after Lucy drunkenly wrapped her legs around the pole and attempted to hold herself upside-down in an aerial pose. Her fall resulted in a bruised collarbone and spine. When it was widely acknowledged that she could have broken her collarbone if not her neck and was being monitored for internal bleeding, the owners deemed the stripper pole a failed experiment. Sugar's

eyes found the framed photo on the wall behind the bar of Lucy before she fell, one leg wrapped around the pole, one arm exquisitely raised towards the ceiling, her face angled back, covered with a smile that seemed unattainable on her pocket-sized face. Thinking about the absurdity of the episode made Sugar inordinately happy.

Sugar walked the twelve blocks from the bar to his house delighted that despite the demoralizing gray hairs he recently discovered, his muscles were still functioning and his knee wasn't currently throbbing. Stars sprinkled above him like sugar granules and banished thoughts of age from his mind. In the distance, tree crowns black with night bunched into the bottom edges of the sky. Sugar had cinched the win and to his knowledge, no hat had ever sat on that stag's head.

A short distance from Sugar's house, he noticed a dark blob in the yard faintly illuminated by the front porch lights. As he got closer, he realized that his daughter was heavily absorbed in brandishing her tongue in and around the mouth of a young man. He felt a violent revulsion at seeing his daughter occupied with something like that. Sugar fell over, blaming gravity. He collapsed and crawled behind the neighbor's bushes. Despite the noise he caused, his daughter didn't even momentarily pause. Sugar lay on the damp grass and wondered if Jess's heart felt like his, if it was loud and densely smashing against her chest, vibrating in her ears, but out of excitement or longing instead of from his terror that she would see him.

Sugar was on the lawn inhaling grass and dirt and the abrupt expiration of his daughter's childhood for what felt like forever. It was probably only three minutes before he heard muffled whispers and watched as the boy wiped his mouth, put his hands in his pockets, and walked right on down the sidewalk as if he hadn't just violated Sugar's daughter.

Over breakfast the next morning Sugar asked Jess who the kid with the bowling ball head was. She looked inside his eyes, shrugged, said, "a friend," and continued eating her cereal. She was not just successful in the nonchalant way she said "friend." She was triumphantly indifferent. Sugar tried to make his voice light and airy when he replied, "Friend?" Jess shrugged. He rolled the word friend around in his head over the next few weeks, and concluded that words held no meaning. But Sugar already knew that. He knew that words meant nothing when he walked in on his wife with Terri. Terri was on her back, naked, one leg wrapped around Sugar's wife. Terri's nipple was in his wife's mouth. Until that moment, Sugar thought that they had a happy marriage. That morning, his wife had told him that she loved him.

***

The phone clinked when Sugar lightly dropped it in the middle of the wooden table at the Woodrose Cafe. Jacob eyed it warily. Big Bob loudly proclaimed, "What a sexy midget computer."

Jacob picked up the phone and cradled it with reverence identical to that he showed towards the acid the three of them enthusiastically took decades ago before tripping balls and then just as enthusiastically swearing never to do it again.

"Remember a few years back," Sugar said. "I was walking to the cafe, and there were birds, and not one cloud, and the sun was shining smack into my skin, and it was one of the most goddamn peaceful mornings of my life?" They both looked like they were making a concerted effort to remember, so Sugar continued as if they knew exactly what he was talking about. "I

heard the most aggravating voice, I mean it really stirred me up. Turned out to be a girl walking down the sidewalk, bellowing."

"You asked me for a week if anyone schizophrenic or bipolar moved to town," Jacob nodded.

"She threw her arms around like a nut job," Sugar said. "I think she started crying at one point. I honestly thought she had some medical condition. I didn't know until months later about Bluetooth." Before Jess explained the concept of headsets, Sugar walked past a man who was talking. Because nobody else was around, he responded to the man. The man shook his head angrily at Sugar and walked away. Sugar genuinely thought that either, A: he was steadily losing his sanity, or B: a limited part of the younger population were contracting mental illnesses.

"Sugar," Big Bob said, "I'm glad you got a fucking phone."

"Trystan," Sugar replied, and shrugged, and for a moment he allowed himself to feel relief that somehow he (and more so his daughter) managed to do something right.

"Almost every person in here is on a phone," Jacob said, scanning the room. Small vertical lines showed on both sides of his forehead and his eyebrows squeezed a little closer in.

"You never know," Big Bob said. "People could be working, emailing, texting, on Twitter or Facebook or whatever the fuck. Looking at their calendars. Doing all kinds of shit."

"We've been here for awhile," Jacob said, "and that couple haven't even glanced at each other." He motioned with his head. They had the table closest to the window, and their heads might as well be firmly cemented inside their screens. They had to be in their twenties. It wasn't until Sugar walked outside that he noticed their entwined feet. He wondered if their feet had been linked the entire time.

***

It’d be accurate to say that for many years Sugar lived in a state of subdued hope that he wouldn’t entirely fuck up his daughter’s life by failing to help with homework, or to emotionally provide for her, by deciding to move to Garberville, or any number of things that occur daily when a single dad raises a teenage daughter.

Sugar stepped into his daughter’s house and smiled. Nothing was ever perfectly in its place: one of Trystan’s shoes looked like it’d been kicked against the living room wall, and Sugar almost tripped over the other one when he walked into the kitchen. A few glasses and forks remained on the kitchen counter, on the table. A sweatshirt drooped across a chair. Everything felt like it belonged.

"We got you a simple phone, Pops," Trystan started, shoving his hair out of his eyes for the third time in two minutes. "iPhone. Easy user interface, easily operable," he said, his fingers navigating the device with what looked like expert proficiency. Sugar watched him increase the icons and font to the largest available size. His iPhone was now accessible for the legally blind, which Sugar wasn’t.

Trystan asked if he knew what a text was. With anyone else, Sugar wouldn’t dignify this question with a response, but he replied that he had indeed been previously acquainted with the text. Trystan explained voicemail as if his grandfather had recently sustained an especially damaging brain injury. He told Sugar three times that he had to press the icon with the large number on it to access the calendar. Sugar hoped his grandson was momentarily afflicted by selective vision and didn’t actually see the word “Calendar” directly beneath the icon on the

home screen. When Trystan was satisfied at Sugar's very basic proficiency with texts, calls, and settings, he programmed his number into the phone: "So you don't forget, Pops."

He placed it in Sugar's hand saying, "It just takes practice, you'll get it, don't worry," and turned back to whatever was on the latest version of Nintendo or Sega or Wii video game consoles.

Sugar thanked his grandson, and he meant it. He also meant it when he told Jess in the kitchen three minutes later that her son approached the role of teacher with an impressive combination of insult and belittlement.

Jess set two glasses of water on the table and plopped herself down. The right side of her mouth lifted in a recognizably conspiratorial way. She told Sugar that she found Trystan looking at porn online. He had looked mortified, threw some feeble excuse about researching a class project into the air, and sprinted out of the room.

"He was trying so hard not to cry." Jess took a sip with obvious delight. "It was hardcore porn, though, like threesomes and throbbing penises and sperm dripping from girls' mouths." She looked like she was expecting some sort of reaction, and in the awkwardly long pause that started without Sugar's permission and which continued without him capable of controlling it, he experienced several realizations: 1: Trystan's dad left a few days ago, the piece of shit Sugar knew he was but hoped he wasn't. 2: He and his daughter shared single parenthood for the first time. 3: His daughter said "throbbing penises" and "sperm dripping from girls' mouths" not only in front of him, but to him.

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"We’re just standing on the shore like idiots," Trystan said angrily a few days later, swinging the fishing pole back and forth in crackbrained movements. It didn’t require a genius to track his initial agitation to the exact moment that Sugar demanded Trystan’s phone and secured it in his pocket. The sky was a light, feathery shade of clear blue. Sugar sat down on his usual rock. Beyond Trystan’s grunts, Sugar could hear the easy burbling of the river, the chirps and clicks, scampers and buzzes. He breathed in the musky decay of the redwood forest floor behind him and the warm scent of the sun on the rocks. "This is life," Sugar told Trystan. Sugar shared those words with him, and he wanted more than anything for his grandson to understand them.

California

Everyone I knew stood around the clearing in the redwoods, oranges and reds, purples and blues. People smiled among the balloons, tables full of food, and ice chests full of drinks. Almost everyone looked happy. My mom had decided that instead of wearing black at her funeral, people had to wear the brightest color they had. "A goddamn celebration of life," she called it.

"Everyone raise your glasses, please," Aunt Asha yelled over the talking. She wore a rich green dress, my mom's favorite color. "Starting in five minutes, I want everyone who wants to, to share a story about KK. A celebration of my sister's life."

People lifted their drinks, and a chorus of "cheers" surrounded me. The air felt stuffed with liveliness. Uncle Jimmy sat in a chair at the edge of the clearing, hunched forward, his elbows on his thighs and his head hung low. Every part of him sagged. Both of his hands clasped around a bottle of water. The bottle crushed inward, and the tips of his fingers were white with the pressure. I felt like that water bottle, crushing inward.

***

"Juice," Uncle Jimmy said without looking at me, his head in the trunk of his car, his hand outstretched in my general direction. I was fifteen, and Uncle Jimmy had recently come back from Spain, where he'd been for most of my childhood, "trying out the wine and the women," as

he told anyone who would listen. He was letting his hair grow, and it was thick and dark and tangled and formed a near-perfect circle around his head. His hair pointed out more than it fell down, and every time I saw him I couldn't help but think he looked like he'd recently been electrocuted. I didn't know what it felt like to be electrocuted, but I imagined you would get really sweaty afterwards. Uncle Jimmy was always really sweaty. He didn't even wear goddamn deodorant.

"The juice, Cali, the juice," he said with false urgency.

I looked past my uncle to the wooded hills in the distance. The beginning of the sunset was brilliant, lighting the bulges of clouds almost into translucence. Uncle Jimmy slammed the trunk and told me to put the wine in the house so we could go to JC Penney. My mom was working at the Hemp Connection and in the interest of time recruited her brother to take me shoe shopping for my cousin's wedding.

As I walked out of the house, I saw Uncle Jimmy sitting in the driver's seat drinking red wine from a plastic water bottle. He wasn't fooling anyone by putting wine in water bottles. I opened the driver's door and asked if I could drive.

"Fuck no," Uncle Jimmy said and took a sip of wine while motioning to the passenger seat with his free hand. "You're only thirteen."

"“I'm fifteen," I responded. "I can get my goddamn permit from the house. It'll take me two seconds."

"I don't even know what that is. Get in. I'm driving."

Uncle Jimmy enthusiastically sipped from the water bottle while navigating past small shops and big trees. When we parked at JC Penney, he opened the trunk, took the cork from a

half-full bottle of red, and refilled the water bottle with what he called "juice." The sun sank in the sky and it wasn't blazingly hot, but frisbee-sized circles of sweat showed dark and wet through Uncle Jimmy's light blue, Hawaiian shirt.

When we entered JC Penney, Uncle Jimmy told me that he didn't know why the hell Kayla was getting married. "Don't ever get married," he said, taking a drink and then slipping the water bottle into his back pocket. "It's bad. It's real bad. Do you remember my Uncle Ed? He had the right idea. Once his first marriage was over, he just played the field."

Uncle Jimmy cited his father's death as the root cause of his escalated drinking. That and the fact that he was Irish.

When most people talk about love, they speak of how beautiful and wonderful it is. When Uncle Jimmy spoke of love, he talked about how to avoid getting sucked in to the ultimate commitment. I walked faster down the aisle towards the shoe section. I wanted to get this bonding time over as soon as possible.

"Helloooo beautiful," Uncle Jimmy yelled. I turned around to see my uncle verbally accosting a salesperson. Her breasts were miraculous and hung in such a way that it was evident she wasn't wearing a bra. "Judy," he said, touching her name tag with his finger. His face was inches from hers.

"Hi," Judy said, smiling. "May I help you with something?" She stepped back. Her smile wavered.

"I'm just taking my little niece over there shoe shopping. Doing the good uncle thing." He gestured in my general direction. "But you are downright beautiful." Uncle Jimmy took a step closer to Judy, his protruding stomach advancing with purpose. I was conflicted. Judy's eyes

faltered, and I should have saved her, but I didn't. I turned around and halfway sprinted in the opposite direction. I didn't want anything to do with that.

Ten minutes later, Uncle Jimmy sat down next to me, the chair complaining with the weight. I buckled the side of the silver shoe and stood. I looked him right in the eye when I told him that Judy was wearing a wedding ring. I didn't blink.

"So?" He shrugged and took what can only be described as a guzzle from the bottle. "She was hot. I just have an enormous appreciation for women. Especially hot women."

I didn't particularly like the shoes, but I said, "Great. I'm getting these. Let's get out of here."

That night, I told my mom that Uncle Jimmy was drunk again and inappropriately hitting on women. Again. She said that he was family. That he didn't used to be that way and was only that way when he was drunk.

"Since he came back two years ago, I've only seen him goddamn drunk, then," I said.

She didn't contradict me, and the statement rolled around in the air between us, expanding in the silence.

"He said marriage is a mistake," I continued after a few long seconds.

"Your uncle doesn't fucking understand," my mom scoffed. "He never had kids, so marriage doesn't hold the same weight." Aside from my dad, I only knew of one guy she'd been with. Mark. He left, and she hadn't been with anyone since. She sighed and smiled small, and I knew that she'd like to get remarried someday.

***

I remembered when I was ten and Uncle Jimmy was visiting and brought me a doll from Spain. The next day, I had a tea party with the doll and some stuffed animals while Uncle Jimmy babysat. He poured red wine on the doll's head. Purposely. He walked in, poured wine on top of her head, laughed, and walked out of the room. I didn't know that it was red wine at the time, but with age, a lot more things make sense. Not that I'm old-old now, but at twenty-three it's a lot easier to fill in the blanks and try to make sense of it all.

When I look back, certain memories stand out. It's funny how that works. In twenty-three years with my uncle, when I think of him, a handful of memories shoot into my mind and snippets of visions play through as if in a slideshow of photos. The same thing happens with my mom. Twenty-one years with my mom, and out of all that time, it's brief snapshots, small memories.

Me bathing the doll, trying to wash out the red wine from her hair. No matter how many times I tried to get it out, a faint red always hugged her scalp. No matter how many times Uncle Jimmy made an ass out of himself, my mom embraced him, said that she wished I could have known him "back then," before Spain, back when he stood sideways and you couldn't see him he was so skinny. Back before he became a drunk. Fun and friendly until he wasn't. Uncle Jimmy came back to Garberville shortly after Mark left. He was a pathetic substitution.

***

When I turned fourteen, my mom gave me a hamster. Uncle Jimmy sent wine. In the following years, my mom stashed the bottles in the closet under the stairs with promises to return them on my 21st. By the time I turned twenty-one, she was already in the hospital.

"It's an investment," Uncle Jimmy said every time I saw him, handing over wine and then joyfully rubbing his belly with both hands. "I'm giving you investments. Just as good as stocks." He also said that they were special bottles because so many were named after me.

"They're not named after me," I said.

"They're bottled for you," he said. "They're bottled in the state named for you."

I had found this conversation aggravating ever since I was in second grade when I honestly thought that the state I lived in was named for me. The image is still vivid: we were inside the classroom for recess on a rainy day. The nine of us sat Indian-style in a corner of the room. We went around the circle four times, and each time each of us had to share a secret. Everyone had cool secrets. Mary's uncle invented BMX. Benj saw Bigfoot in the woods. Eagle's parents were in the process of building a bigger, better teepee out on the Mattole watershed. Jacey's dad was in court in Eureka and proved the prosecution dead wrong. I didn't know what that meant, but she said it with so much enthusiasm that I nodded in admiration.

Then it was my turn, and I didn't know what to share. I knew lots of facts but not too many secrets. It wasn't okay that my dad and brother had left a few months before and since then I'd only talked to them on the phone once. I didn't want to share that even though my mom smiled at me and her voice sounded light and airy, I knew she was sad. I'd seen her cry once. Which was one more time than ever before. Everyone looked at me, and I felt my heart smacking

like it was trying to get out of my chest. Benj leaned forward and rested his chin in both hands and blinked at me. I only had bad secrets. Then I knew what to share.

“California was named after me,” I said and nodded my head and smiled because my secret was as cool as everyone else’s.

There was a moment of silence when everyone looked at me. Then Eagle laughed the loudest donkey laugh I’d ever heard. She pointed at me, and her eyes closed because she was laughing so hard. Her finger shook with her shrieks.

"You think," Eagle gasped through her gleeful tears, "that California was named after you?" She put her arms across her belly and hugged herself, and then her whole body shook and her laughter alternately sounded like whoops and howls. The rest joined in. I was surrounded by laughter, and I didn’t want to be in the circle.

Uncle Jimmy was mean for making me think that a whole goddamn state was named for me. That was the first day I realized that adults lie.

It was the fourth of July, we were fourteen, and Benj stole a blunt from his dad. Ty, Benj and I went into the woods that morning. Ty had matches, and before Benj lit up, he gave us expert instructions: "You have to light one end and breathe in through the other. Think of it like a big straw and you’re trying to suck something up."

Smoke streamed from Benj’s mouth and hung in the cool forest air before dissipating. It smelled musty and plant-like.

"How do you feel?" Ty asked.

"Normal. You try."

Ty looked at me, raised his eyebrows and shoulders and smiled. He couldn't light the match. Three matches scraped with a quiet pop but without the flame.

"You're not doing it right," Benj said and struck a match. He held it up and told Ty to breathe in.

Ty breathed deep, emitted a strangled cough and some smoke and passed the blunt to me with tears in the corners of his eyes. When I asked him if he was okay, he winked. His voice was higher pitched than normal, which was reassuring, somehow.

"How am I supposed to feel?" I asked.

"You feel high," Benj answered.

"Like I'm high up?"

"It's like you're floating."

I wasn't sure that I wanted to float. I felt perfectly fine sitting where I was. But I was with Ty and knew that even the pot luck at the Harvest Ball every year had something to do with weed. It couldn't be so bad.

It was kind of bad. I breathed out hard in an utterly failed attempt to calm down. Benj lit the end for me, I inhaled, my throat burned, my eyes filled with tears, and smoke exploded from my mouth in a violent coughing fit.

"Water," I managed to croak.

The boys laughed at me, and then the earth fogged at the edges, and my heart vibrated my body with every beat.

"Whoa," I said as I lay on my back. My body felt like it was flickering in and out, and my tongue stuck in my mouth. I barely had enough saliva to swallow. I looked straight up into and beyond the branches to the strips of sky between the tops of the trees. There was the dark of the forest and then the light of the sky. There was my heartbeat, and then there was my body.

I leaned against a tree, the bark rough against my back. The bark felt like reality. I wanted to root myself in it. Ferns and mosses scattered in the shade and the woods got deeper as it grew later. Benj went back to his house for lunch, Ty threw some leaves at my head, and all I could do was laugh.

"Well, we've tried fucking pot," I intelligently observed.

"That's one of the things I've wanted to do with you."

I had no capacity for proficient thought, so I sat against the tree and let my heart beat all over my body. Ty grabbed my hands and helped me up. He was my exact height. He leaned in, my back connected with the trunk, and he kissed me. When I opened my eyes, the woods looked softer, somehow. I could barely breathe.

"I need to get to Uncle Jimmy's," I said after what seemed like a few stolen kisses that felt like forever. "Are you coming?" I asked Ty. He shook his head.

"I have to do fireworks with my family," he replied. "Dad got a ton of them for us to set off. I'll see you later, though."

Since he moved back, Uncle Jimmy had started a tradition of having people over to swim and BBQ and set off fireworks for the 4th of July. His house was a few blocks from the house my mom and I lived in, one block off Redwood Drive, the strip that is downtown Garberville. A five-minute walk from the Branding Iron Saloon.

A few hours later, Uncle Jimmy and I and some others went out the master bedroom window onto his flat roof so that we could set off fireworks.

"I'm Irish," Uncle Jimmy announced, dropping a box of fireworks that he carried in both hands, "but I do love America."

Laughter slinked up from below, and Uncle Jimmy lit a spinny firework, then threw it off the roof towards the pool. He jumped off the roof after it.

I saw Uncle Jimmy's leg bone sticking out before the blood started, the bone about halfway down his shin, his leg bent in a ninety degree angle where, from the angle, you'd expect his knee to be. He had an American flag bandana lopsided around his head, his brown hair shoulder-length and sticking to the sweat on his face. His stomach rippled.

"What the hell happened?" my mom screamed, running up and kneeling beside him. I looked from the roof first, peering down at everyone, feeling oddly removed from it all, too removed from it, so I walked downstairs. The redwoods circled Garberville, the town circled the property, the people circled my uncle—he was the center of it all at that moment.

"The pool moved, KK," Uncle Jimmy yelled repeatedly. "The pool fucking moved." He lay on the cement on his back, his left leg straight out, heel on the ground. His right leg lifted in the air but the end of it hung there, dangling, the white bone looking like too clean a break, too perfect, not jagged enough. The guests ringed around him ten feet back, everyone shaking their heads, my Aunt Asha with one hand over her mouth and the other around my cousin Kayla's waist. Our grandparents weren't there. We assumed they were on one of their Love Escapes.

"It moved," Uncle Jimmy yelled again, "the goddamn pool moved."

When he collided with the cement, he had missed the pool by seven feet. Kayla measured. She was older than me and thought to do such things.

Uncle Jimmy tried to drive drunk two weeks later when he was still in a cast. He hit a tree and was on house arrest for while afterwards. I walked to his house one day, and he sat on a lounge chair by the pool, his right leg elevated and in a full-length cast. He wore a straw beach hat and aviator sunglasses and his hands rested on his stomach similar to how pregnant women recline. The sun glinted off the pool water, and Uncle Jimmy reached his hands up and put them behind his head and leaned back and sighed.

"Here's some tea," I said, setting down the brown bag on the small glass-topped outdoor table next to him. "My mom wanted me to bring it." I turned to go.

"That's really great, Cali," he said. "Do you remember when I used to visit, and I'd walk in the door and you would scream and run to me and hug me?"

"No," I said, turned back, and tried to look at his eyes through his sunglasses. "I remember when you ran over our dog because you were driving drunk. I remember when you threatened to wrestle me when I took the keys from you because you wanted to drive."

He laughed.

I wanted to tell him that he scared me. I'd never spoken to him so directly, and my heart gonged. Bam bam bam bam. Sweat glistened in his chest hair. "I hope that that—" I said and pointed to the oversized wine glass on the table next to him within arm's reach, "—isn't wine."

"My lawyer told me I have to quit drinking," Uncle Jimmy said, shaking his head. "Something about jail. I'm drinking water with cucumber slices and a dash of cumin."

"Weird drink," I said, crossing my arms and looking at my reflection in his aviators. "From what my mom told me, since it was your third DUI, part of the court sentence was that you have to go to an alcohol education program where you'll be breathalyzed all the time."

"That's part of it," he said, wiping the sweat from his chest with his hand.

When I was eighteen, my mom set the table for the two of us. There were three tall, lit candles, cloth napkins in napkin rings with leaves carved into them, actual salad plates and multiple small platters. She made a pasta dish with sun dried tomatoes, artichoke hearts, cashews, and chicken. My mom had opened a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon, and two wine glasses sat on the table. Something she'd done since I turned sixteen. She only had four nights off a month, and I suppose she thought wine would bring us closer together. Garlic and chicken and candles smelling like cherry blossoms mingled in the house, seeming to fill the kitchen and entryway and expand into the walls.

Ty, who had been like my brother for years and then was something more, was ultimately something less. He had dropped out of my life, and I came to the realization that life wasn't great. Life felt less full than it should. When I swung open the front door, I was on a pot-induced high and emotional low. The scents of the house entered me, seemed to expand inside of me, and I just stood there.

When someone walked outside past the house happily, rhythmically, beating a drum, I didn't look. I couldn't help but think that it wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that my mom worked so much and my dad and brother were still gone, Ty was gone, Kayla was married and had a different life, and the only person I frequently saw was Uncle Jimmy, who had recently become

what could only be described as bizarre. It wasn't fair that a drummer could walk by playing such an uplifting beat and make me feel so unhinged.

My mom walked into the kitchen from the hallway. When she glanced at me, she called me honey. When she saw my face, she came over and fiercely hugged me within seconds. She rarely hugged me. She spoke into my hair and asked what was wrong without letting go. I wanted to push her away. I wanted to blame her for not feeling close to anyone except a recovering alcoholic. I didn't push her away, though.

That same year, I walked down the sidewalk towards The Hemp Connection, thinking about a new strain I had overheard a few people talking about: a combination of Sour Diesel and Haze. I actually heard someone say, "Fuel-smelling strains, like OG Kush, for example, instantly lift the mood. That's what they're known for." The reply: "I don't know, man, the fuel-y ones typically put me to sleep." I didn't know that much about strains, but I was intrigued.

I tilted my head back, and my face seemed to drink in the sunshine. My skin marinated in the warmth. The day was a soft light blue with only a few cottony clouds in the sky. The hills had grown in green with all of the rain. For the first time in a long time, nothing felt missing.

Whistling laced through my ears, and I knew Uncle Jimmy was coming up the road behind me. He took to whistling one odd tune a few months before, and nobody could get him to stop. Because he still couldn't drive, he rode a bike everywhere. He had to have one custom-built to accommodate for his girth. I felt Uncle Jimmy pull up next to me and felt nothing but reluctance when I moved my face from the sky to my uncle and opened my eyes.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I responded.

"You know, I named a rock after you the other day."

"That's interesting."

"Yes."

He looked at me, and I looked at him, and I had nothing to say.

"I rode my bike all the way to San Francisco and back," Uncle Jimmy continued.

"That's far," I said.

"Two hundred and four miles," he said and smiled big.

"That's really far."

He nodded and blinked, I nodded, and the silence between us opened up.

"Okay then," he said, saluted me as if I were an officer, and rode off.

That night, I sat on the kitchen stool and spun around in a slow circle. It squeaked a little, as it had for as long as I could remember. When I completed one rotation and faced my mom again, I picked up my wine glass and told her that I thought her brother was losing his mind. She didn't smile but nodded.

"He keeps sending me weird things," I continued, taking a sip. "Today, he texted me a photo of his face in neon colors in front of a hill. Yesterday, he texted me a picture of a leaf. I think he's really lost it since he stopped drinking."

"He doesn't know how to interact anymore," my mom said and placed both hands flat on the tile counter. Her face looked worn, haggard almost. She narrowed her eyes a little, and her forehead pinched in. "He's been sober for over two years. I think he's just fucking changed. But he's your uncle."

"I know, I know," I said, picking up the wine glass in my right hand and motioning in circles with my left. "He's your brother, and he's my uncle, and he's family and blood, and we care about him."

My mom sat in a big, black leather chair with her legs out and her arms on either armrest. I leaned over to tuck a white blanket around her and watched as the nurse connected tubes to her arms. Garberville didn't have a dialysis center, but Eureka did. I'd never been interested in medicine but sat fascinated watching the blood fill the tube and run red into the machine to be cleaned so it could be put back inside my mom. It was mesmerizing. BUN stands for Blood Urea Nitrogen. BUN is a test that's used to read the urea level in blood. The kidneys clean urea nitrogen from the blood. My mom had to watch the sodium, calcium, potassium, phosphorous, and other mineral levels in her body. She had to watch what she ate. The doctors surgically created an arteriovenous fistula in my mom's forearm to make dialysis easier. It's not easy having the blood taken from your body and cleaned and returned. She got weak. She looked old.

I eyed the red stream coming from my mom and read from a small poster behind her. There were bullet points.

The kidneys perform the following life-sustaining functions:

* balance the body's fluid levels
* remove waste from the body
* release hormones that regulate blood pressure
* control the production of red blood cells
* filter and remove drugs from the body

* produce a form of vitamin D that promotes strong, healthy bones

The outline of the human form was on the right side of the poster. Two crossiant-shaped (or kidney bean-shaped) organs were positioned facing each other, and were connected to the bladder, farther down the body.

"Fun fact," my mom said, "blood and urine tests can show how well your kidneys are doing."

"Fact," I replied. "Healthy kidneys filter almost two hundred quarts of blood every day and create around two quarts of waste."

"By waste you mean urine," she responded. "See, we're learning things." Her smile was barely there.

I pulled up a chair and sat next to her. I held her hand. One of her hands wrapped in both of mine. There are no fun facts in kidney failure. I truly believed she would live.

When it finally got to the point where she needed a kidney, I wanted to give her mine.

"I'm not letting you get tested," my mom repeated.

"Of course I'm getting tested," I said, sitting up straighter in the chair. "I'm giving you my kidney."

"I'm not letting you," she said, closing her eyes and shaking her head. "This isn't a discussion. I'm not taking your kidney."

"Of course you are. You're my mom. You're taking my kidney. I'm giving you my kidney." My cheeks felt hot, and I hissed to keep my voice down. I didn't want everyone looking

at us. "That's why we have two kidneys," I continued. "You gave me two kidneys, and I'm going to give you one back."

Without opening her eyes, my mom said that she was on the transplant list and either she'd get a kidney, or she wouldn't. Either way, she wasn't taking mine. When I told her that she had to, she said that I had so much life to live. If one or both of my kidneys failed in the future, she'd never forgive herself. If my future children's kidneys failed, I needed to be able to save my child. She spoke with finality. She spoke in such a calm voice that I couldn't handle it.

"You don't get to make that decision," I said.

"Honey," she said, eyes locked with mine as the red flowed out of her arm. "I'm not giving up. I'm just not taking your kidney."

The walls of the dialysis center had never looked so white. A week later, I called Uncle Jimmy.

"You have to," I said when he picked up the phone.

"I have to what?"

"Give my mom your kidney."

"I'm already scheduled to get tested," he said, matter-of-fact. "Next Monday. Of course I'm going to give my sister my kidney."

I slept that night, not thinking about how my mom would die, but knowing that she would live. Knowing that Uncle Jimmy would be a match. He had to be a match, because Aunt Asha wasn't, and because I wasn't. Neither of us had a compatible blood type.

Uncle Jimmy's skin hung loose in his arms and neck. I imagined it was also loose in his stomach. His face was thin, and his hair was still wild. His cheekbones protruded, and he stood

straight and tall. He looked like his dad. Except that he didn't wear his pants up to his nipples. Not yet, anyway.

I stood, arms crossed, leaning against the wall of the office, thinking, this is it. This is going to decide my future. The doctor walked in and stood, looking between me, my mom, my uncle. My body was tense. I felt tightly wound up.

"I'm sorry," he said, lifting his hands up a little and letting them fall. "But Jimmy's kidneys couldn't withstand a transplant. They're not healthy enough." He continued to say that my mom was on the transplant waiting list, but I shook my head.

"Wait," I said, noticing that my hands were clenched into fists and on my knees. "Wait. Is Uncle Jimmy a match?"

"His kidneys aren't healthy enough."

"From what?" I asked. "Why aren't his kidneys healthy enough?" and couldn't stop the tears from cornering my eyes. I tightened my finger nails into my palm.

"But," Uncle Jimmy contributed, sounding lost, "I've been biking and running for years. I'm healthy."

"Your organs aren't healthy."

"I thought his liver would be destroyed," I said, "but not his kidneys." I looked from my mom to my uncle to the doctor.

"I'm sorry, KK," the doctor said.

"It's okay," my mom said. "It's fucking okay," she repeated firmly, and reached her arm out to her brother. My uncle took her hand but didn't look back at her. He stared at the ground, and I left the room. When I unclenched my fists after what seemed like an hour, there were lines of crescent-shaped indentations all across my palms. They looked blue and purple.

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"A celebration of life," my aunt said.

People lifted their drinks and a chorus of "cheers" surrounded me. The air felt stuffed with liveliness. Groups of people clumped together, so many conversations happening at once. Except for Uncle Jimmy. He sat in a chair at the edge of the clearing, hunched forward, his elbows on his thighs and his head hung low. Every part of him sagged. Both of his hands clasped around a bottle of water. The bottle crushed inward, and the tips of his fingers were white with the pressure. I felt like that water bottle, losing air, crushing inward. Uncle Jimmy and I were the only ones who weren't surrounded by people. We were the only ones who were alone.

My cousin Kayla walked over to me and put her right arm around my shoulders.

"How are you doing, Cali," she asked. I sighed and looked at her. "Fuck," she said. "Terrible question. Can I get you something to drink?"

"I can't decide whether to get really drunk or stay really sober," I replied after a moment.

Kayla handed me a glass of red wine that she held in her left hand and then pushed her hair behind her ear.

"Well," she said. "I'm going the moderate drunk route and make the husband drive me home, and you are more than welcome to join me."

I looked at the wine, at the deep red color. I swirled the glass and thought of the streams of blood that I had watched go in and out of my mom so many times. Her blood was thicker than this wine.

I opened my mouth and then shut it. I didn't know how to tell Kayla that part of me never wanted to drink again. I hadn't told anyone what happened that day at the hospital. Nobody knew that our uncle could have saved my mom. My mom asked me not to tell anyone. Even on her deathbed, she protected her little brother.

I gave the glass back to Kayla, my hand trembling a little before she took it from me.

"Okay," Kayla said. "Water? I'm sure there's a bottle of water somewhere."

I looked at Uncle Jimmy, his head still down, his fingers interlaced, his hands still crunching the plastic. It looked like he was trying to suffocate it. I shook my head.

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "Thanks, though."

"Storytime," Aunt Asha yelled. Her voice sounded warm, and the words hit me like blasts of hot air. Stories about my mom. I wondered if I would learn anything new about her. Aunt Asha also had a glass of red wine in her hand, and it was so full that when she lifted it in the air, the wine hit the side of the glass and rose up over the edge. It slid down the outer surface, flowing onto Aunt Asha's hand. She switched hands and licked the wine off. It looked like thin blood.

Kayla put her arm around my waist and directed me towards my aunt and everyone gathering, coming together. I felt numb and let her lead me. I looked at Uncle Jimmy again, who placed a hand on each side of the bottle and squished it together. I imagined the sound of the plastic crunching together, folding in on itself, as small as it could get.

Uncle Jimmy stood up and walked rapidly to my aunt, cutting a few people off when he strode in front of them. One of those people was Ty. I hadn't noticed that he'd come, and I realized that I didn't care whether he was there. His presence felt like a mild observation, instead of the emotional turmoil that I still sometimes felt when I randomly saw him. My uncle stood

next to my aunt and said too loudly that he was going to tell the first story. She briefly covered her ear with her hand, smiled at her brother, and nodded. Of their family of five growing up, they were the only two left.

About forty of us stood there, in a circle, layers of people pressed together so that everyone could hear. Almost everyone had a drink, and the sky felt open and endless. There were no clouds.

Uncle Jimmy cleared his throat and spoke. He still had the plastic water bottle clenched small in one hand. He tightened his fist and began.

"Thank you for coming, everyone," he said. "I'm going to tell a story about my sister. From when we were little." He cleared his throat again, and in the pause before he started speaking, I heard people breathe in and out. I heard the forest floor compress with people shifting their weight from one side to the other. I heard soft sips of people consuming their drinks. It all sounded like life, and the only thought I had was that my mom should be a part of it.

"When we were little," he continued, "we fought a lot. You know I was the youngest, and with two older sisters, whoo-wee." I pressed my lips together, hoping he was going to tell a good story. Like the fact that my mom helped him with his math homework because she was better with numbers than their parents, or that the first time he drove a car was in my mom's light yellow, VW Bug. Without warning, he drove out of the parking lot where she was teaching him how to drive, and she screamed until he came to a stop three blocks later. The car was silent, and then they both started laughing. Slow at first and then in waves. I hoped that I could remember all of the stories.

"They played with dolls a lot," Uncle Jimmy said, squinting a little in the sun. "Barbies and such. They carried them around everywhere. They had tea parties with them. Our parents let one sit at the table when we ate. Just one. They alternated between the dolls, and pretended to feed them from their own plates. I didn't want to play with dolls. I wanted them to play with me in the woods. One night, I got tired of the whole doll thing. I snuck into their room and pulled off the doll's heads. Every single one of them. On the last one, KK sat straight up in bed, saw what I was doing, and threw a stuffed animal at my head. I pulled off the last head and went out of their room and got into my bed. I pulled the cover over my head and waited for KK or Asha or our parents to come into my room. I knew it was wrong. I waited for the screams or the crying or something. My heartbeat eventually slowed down and I fell asleep, thinking that at any minute all hell would break loose and I'd be punished.

"But when I woke up the next morning, KK was directing Asha in winding toilet paper around the doll's necks. She explained to Asha that the hospital fairy had come in the night. I'll always remember her saying, 'They need fixing now, and we can fix them. We can make them better. We just need to care for them.'"

Uncle Jimmy paused for a moment, his face folded in, and he slid a finger underneath each eye. "I tried to destroy the dolls so that my sisters would play with me instead of them. Instead of getting mad at me, KK turned the situation into the best possible outcome. She was like that, you know," he said, nodding. He lifted his head to the sky, as if she was there. Kayla's arm was still around my waist, and she squeezed my hip.

"You always made the best out of every situation. You always looked out for me. You are such a good person," Uncle Jimmy said. "I couldn't save the best person I know, because I fucked it up." Uncle Jimmy nodded again, turned around, and he walked into the woods.

When my uncle's words settled into me, I realized I'd been holding my breath. I quickly dropped Kayla's hand so I could run after my uncle.

VITA

The author was born in Long Beach, California. She grew up in Sonoma County, in Northern California, surrounded by vineyards instead of the redwoods present in these stories. She is a graduate of the University of San Francisco, and is in pursuit of a M.F.A. from the University of New Orleans. She currently lives and works in New Orleans.