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## Putting Makeup on Dead People

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Putting Makeup on Dead People

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 Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing, Fiction

by

Jennifer Violi

B.A. University of Dayton, 1996

M.A. University of Dayton, 1999

May, 2007

## Dedication

To my father, Alfred Domenic Violi, with gratitude and love. This is for you.

## Acknowledgments

I begin with thanks to my writing teachers: To Joe Pici, my first creative writing teacher, who again made space for me in the fall of 2005 when I was displaced, creatively and otherwise. To Amanda, for invaluable mentoring, keen editing, and kind friendship and for believing in and celebrating both my work and me. To Joseph for inciting both joy and heart in my words, Joanna for helping me explore the magic in stories, Randy for honoring the crafts of both teaching and writing, Dalt for bottomless coffee thermoses and creative support, Mari for challenges and a better scenic eye, Carol for keeping my work always point-ed, and Rick for inspiring in me a seriousness of purpose and a shrewd attention to detail.

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Two women have read almost all of these stories, more than once, with great care, and not because they had to in workshop. Their friendship, bigheartedness, and writing prowess has kept me afloat and steered in bold and good directions. I thank AC, for encouraging me to take risks, for gentle kindness, for being a kindred spirit and one who recognizes spirit in words. And I thank Arin, for shenanigans and generosity and wise readings, for talking about, writing, and living things even when they're messy or hard and finding the beauty there

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## Abstract

*Putting Makeup on Dead People* is a collection of ten short stories narrated by Donna that relate key moments in her life from early childhood through her mid-thirties. Because of the author's belief in the circularity of time and of what makes up human identity (what we do, what happens to us, to whom we are related), the stories do not progress chronologically. The collection pays particular attention to Donna's relationship with key family members: her father Nicky, her mother Martha, her Uncle Lou, her Aunt Selena, and her siblings, Linnie and B. Many of the stories also attend to Donna's relationship with Charlie, the man who finally becomes her husband. Through these stories of one woman's life, this collection explores themes of loss, healing, and personal growth. Ultimately, this work encapsulates one person's discovery of her core identity, underneath and in addition to all of the layers added to that core, through relationships, life experiences, successes, and failures.

Keywords: Donna, Charlie, Dad, Mom, Uncle Lou, Dayton

*I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story.*

~Tim O'Brien

*Tales are, in one of their oldest senses, a healing art . . .*

~Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Ph.D.

## Putting Makeup on Dead People

“What’s the matter with you?” Mom asks, shaking the extra dirt off of the silver spade.

“We’re at the cemetery,” I say. “People are often troubled at cemeteries.”

“Donna Marie, we’ve been coming here for seventeen years.” She gives some final pats to the dirt around the red chrysanthemums we just planted in front of Dad’s gravestone. “I’m not talking about the cemetery.”

I touch one of the flowers, feel the velvety petals. Dad loved chrysanthemums; so do I. Silently, I say hello to him. As I often do, I wish I could talk with him in person, tell him my big news, get his approval.

“So?” Mom asks. “Is it because you turned thirty today?”

“Mom,” I say.

“Is it Charlie?” She pulls off her gardening gloves.

“No, and nothing is the matter with me.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” she says and reties the silk scarf keeping her curly grey hair from frizzing out to eternity.

I just shake my head; she wouldn’t understand. She wouldn’t want me to quit my job. We always want different things. Mom likes ketchup, and I like Frank’s Red Hot Sauce. I like metaphors; she likes the metric system.

“Help me up,” she says, holding out her hand to me. “I have some cake for us back at the house.”

I stand and pull her up. I watch the chrysanthemums quiver a little with the breeze, imagine that’s Daddy, waving a happy birthday at me.



“And,” she says, pausing until I turn to look at her, “you’d be surprised at what I understand.”

Later that night, in my apartment living room, I sit next to Charlie on the couch, examine the package he just handed to me. I squeeze it, crinkle the white tissue paper, feel the bulky and pointy parts. I smile at Charlie.

“Open it already,” he says.

I untie the thin red ribbon and pull apart the tissue paper concealing a twelve inch plastic skeleton, mounted on a silver rod and stand. “Perfect,” I say. “I think I’ll call him Maurice.” A few months ago, I had asked Charlie for this, to keep on my desk at work. I had also asked Mom, but she’d never purchase such a thing.

Charlie looks at me, pushes up his black-framed, horn-rimmed glasses, which I think make him look even more like Ichabod Crane than usual. “Are you sure you didn’t want some jewelry or something?”

“Nope,” I say. “I need something more important.” I run my fingertips over the plastic bones, feeling the space between them, where they hinge. “I’m thirty,” I tell him. “It’s my Jesus year.”

“Time to get crucified?” Charlie asks.

I frown. “No. Time to start my public ministry.”

I’ve determined that my public ministry will involve enrolling at Chapman College of Mortuary Science, but I haven’t told Charlie, or Mom, this news yet. I need to take care of some other things first, not jinx it.

“This is a little creepy,” Mazeena says, leaning against my desk and flicking one of Maurice’s dangling arms. Mazeena is twenty-two, in her first out-of-college job, and I think her long blue-black hair and eye make-up, springing from a color palette I’d call “Bruised,” are creepy.

“So?” I ask, looking up from my computer and moving Maurice a few inches safely away from Mazeena’s black press-on fingernails. Now both bony arms swing and shake—skeletal jazz hands. Maurice must know it’s Friday. Jazz hands go with Friday.

I brought Maurice into the office last week, the day after my birthday, for courage, and other than the picture of me and Mom in front of Walden Pond (Mom wears an uncharacteristic and ridiculously large orange polka-dot sun hat), I think it’s the only interesting thing on my desk. Maurice laughs, in the way skeletons do, at the black stapler and the retractable pens sprouting like plastic weeds out of the white mug with the blue lettering: Salvatore’s Office Supplies.

“Sal wants you to take it down,” Mazeena says, reaching for Maurice again. I slide the pen mug over and successfully block her. Score.

Of course Sal hasn’t asked me himself. Growing up in Fairborn, Sal was Dad’s best friend. Sal also takes a while to get around to things, like retiring, which he’s been working on for the last ten years.

I turn back to my computer, hit enter, and the printer spits out three pages at me.

“What’s that?” Mazeena asks.

“An application for school,” I say. “I’m quitting.”

Mazeena’s eyes get big and crazy, like those of some rabid animal, perhaps realizing that the only other person under fifty who works at Salvatore’s Office Supplies

is about to jump ship. “Donna,” she says, “I’m sure you could talk with Sal about the skeleton.”

“It’s not about Maurice,” I tell her. Not exactly.

That afternoon, when I tell Sal I’m quitting, he protests and, since Mazeena has gotten there first, he tells me I can keep the skeleton.

“I promised your father,” Sal says. He pushes himself up out of his brown leather chair and walks to the window of his office, looks out onto Main Street.

“You’ve taken good care of me,” I say. “I’m sure Dad knows that.”

“Does your mother know about this new plan of yours?” Sal asks.

“Sal,” I say, “I’m thirty years old.”

“What, you can’t talk to your mother when you’re so old?” he says. “Stubborn like your old man.” He smiles.

I smile, too. “I’ll tell Mom this weekend. We’re having lunch with Uncle Lou.”

Sal smirks. “That Lou still causing trouble?”

“What do you think?”

Sal laughs.

Finally, he lets me go with a kiss on both cheeks, and I leave his office with the fading tingle of his day-old white beard scratching on my face.

\*\*\*

It’s Saturday night, and I’m considering giving manual stimulation to Charlie, lying next to me on my month-old full-size mattress—the first bed we’ve slept in other than the twin bed I’ve had since high school. Instead I say, “I quit my job.”

“When?” Charlie asks.

“Today,” I say. “I decided to go to mortuary school.”

“Mortuary school?” Charlie sits up.

“Yes,” I say. “I’m going to be a mortician.”

“Donna, what about what I want?” This is one example of why I don’t like Charlie as much as I used to.

Charlie isn’t referring to the manual stimulation, a term which he also hates for me to use. “Why not just say jerk me off or get me off?” he has argued, several times a year, for the last five years, as long as I’ve known him.

“It sounds vulgar,” I have responded. And usually then, we just have sex, about which we have no linguistic quibbles.

But now he doesn’t even know about the possibility of me touching him, so what he wants could be any number of different things. I’m tired, though, of what Charlie and everyone else wants. I need to do something for me, which sounds so lame and so self-help, but I can’t self-help it. It’s the truth.

Charlie rolls over toward me, propping his head on his hand, his elbow pressing into the flannel sheets he thinks are too hot for August. I just think they’re the only currently clean set. When I bought the new mattress, Mom got me the flannel set, patterned with varying-sized evergreens. “Just planning ahead for winter,” she said.

Charlie traces the big evergreen tree between us with his index finger. “So you’re moving away from me,” he says. “Where’s the school?”

“It’s here,” I say. I’m sitting up, trying not to be too freaked out by the water stain that seems to grow daily in the corner of my bedroom ceiling. I fold my arms over my chest. “Well, not right here, but it’s only half an hour driving.”

Charlie looks slightly relieved. “You hate driving,” he says.

“I’ll be fine,” I say.

“You’ll be too busy to spend any time with me,” he says.

I believe Charlie is remembering his MBA experience, and how he, in fact, was too busy to spend much time with me for two years.

“What’s the matter with your job at Sal’s?” he asks.

“That’s all you can say?”

“Well, how are you going to pay for it?” he asks. “You and your jobless self.”

“I’ve saved money,” I say. “You might remember that I save things.” I don’t look at him. I sit quietly, knowing Charlie hates me shutting down, hates when we fight.

Charlie leans in close to me. “I see dead people,” he whispers right into my ear. I know Charlie is making fun of me, that he thinks I’m entertaining some weird obsession. But his warm breath spreads out over my ear and onto my neck. I feel just a small brush of his lips on my earlobe. He reaches out and slips his hand under my folded arms, over my heart, fingers lightly splayed over my left breast. “You totally want me,” he whispers.

As much as I don’t like Charlie at that moment, he has a point. But I pull his arm away, slide out of bed. “I think you should go home,” I say.

Charlie groans and pulls on his pants. “Fine,” he says. “Maybe you’d want to fuck me if I was dead.”

The next afternoon, Uncle Lou plucks the lemon off of the edge of his water glass and puts it on his bread plate. “I’m not a Goddamn girl,” he says, shaking his head. And then, to me, “So how’s old Chaz?”

“Fine,” I say, and before Uncle Lou can add an inappropriate question about Charlie’s performance in the bedroom, as Uncle Lou is apt to do, I also say, “So, I have something to tell you two.”

Mom gets that look on her face like she’s terrified I’ll say I’m pregnant or something. She puts down her roll but keeps hold of her knife, a clump of butter smeared on its tip.

“You’re not knocked up, are you?” Uncle Lou asks, a little too loudly, and two middle-aged women in corduroy jumpers and cream-colored turtlenecks at a neighboring table turn to us and look aghast.

We are at Vandermeer’s, where Mom and I have lunch every Sunday. Sometimes we have special guests. Today, cameo by Dad’s brother, Uncle Lou.

Mom makes the sign of the cross and glares at Uncle Lou, who shrugs and leans back into the pink cushion on his faux-wood chair.

Taking in Vandermeer’s décor, funeral home, circa 1972, I hope I’ll have some decorating input when I start interning at my first funeral home. Because seriously, the dim lights and the pastel floral drape patterns will have to go. I don’t understand why a funeral home can’t be brighter, you know, more of a place that doesn’t make you want to kill yourself while you’re burying someone you love.

“No, everyone,” I say. “Not pregnant.”

“Thanks be to God,” Mom says.

I fold my hands in my lap. I inhale and exhale. “I’m going to mortuary school,” I say.

“Is that with the birds?” Uncle Lou asks.

“Dead people,” Mom says. “Birds are aviary.”

“You’re going to school with dead people?” Uncle Lou asks. “Why on earth would you do that?”

I start to reply but am surprised to realize I don’t know the answer to his question.

Mom says nothing, but she smiles, and it looks like a good smile.

Our waiter saves me for a moment from the crazies. His name is Rocky, and he looks less like Rocky the fighter than Rocky the squirrel.

“You like Stallone?” Uncle Lou asks.

“I’m sorry?” Rocky says.

“Sly Stallone,” Uncle Lou repeats, leaning in.

“Never heard of him,” Rocky says.

“You’re shitting me,” Uncle Lou says.

“No, sir,” Rocky says, and, to our great surprise, is shitting no one. Rocky takes a deep breath; he seems to be trying very hard not to let Uncle Lou get to him. “Can I take your orders?”

We order lunch and, when Rocky exits, Mom says, “Lou, that was rude.”

“Well, Jesus, Martha,” Uncle Lou says, “what do kids watch these days?”

At dessert, I ask for Irish coffee instead of pie, and everyone looks at me like I’m some brand of nuts. “That will be my dessert,” I try to explain.

“You saw they have blueberry pie?” Mom says.

“Yes,” I say, “but this will be fine.” I smile at Rocky.

“You don’t want some dessert with it?” Uncle Lou repeats.

I shake my head.

“She’s a drinker, I guess,” Uncle Lou says to Rocky.

Rocky nods solemnly, writes something else on his notepad, and walks away.

Uncle Lou leans across the table and squints at my hand, resting next to my water glass. “It’s definitely hereditary. The way you sit with your index finger pointed out like that. Nicky did that all the time.”

I wonder then about Dad, wonder if maybe he used to like to put makeup on dead people, you know, just as a hobby. Maybe that’s why I’m doing this.

“Oh sure,” Uncle Lou might say. “Growing up, we’d find Nicky with dead bodies all the time.” Then I’d hear story after story of Dad, hovering over corpses, an open tube of lipstick at the ready in his left hand, holding the cap between his thumb and that pointy index finger.

“That explains it,” I’d say, breathing a sigh of relief.

Unfortunately, no such story comes to my aid.

“So,” Uncle Lou says instead, “how much does a mortuary school education go for these days?”

“Lou,” Mom says, “I’m sure she’s got that under control.” She takes the napkin out of her lap, refolds it, and sets it on the table. “What I want to know,” she says to Uncle Lou, “is if you’ve made that appointment with the eye doctor yet.”

I’m grateful for the detour and impressed that it’s also a useful one. Uncle Lou’s cataracts have gotten worse. Mom doesn’t miss much. Then I realize she said I have things under control. Maybe she’s not as smart as she seems.



On Monday, I fill out my application and drive the thirty minutes to Chapman College of Mortuary Science. Charlie is right; I do hate to drive. But today, I'm too excited to care. Today, I'm reviewing all of the intelligent and charming questions I'll ask the admissions counselor. What are the strengths of your program? From my research, I noticed that you're the only program in Ohio with decomposition experts from three countries—how have you seen students benefit from that wisdom?

When I walk through the tall glass doors, an equally tall oak desk stands before me. I have to get up close to see the lady behind it. She wears a lemon yellow turtle neck and a denim jumper, and her graying blond hair perches on her head in a Dorothy Hamill bob.

“Where do I turn in my application?” I ask.

“Right here,” she says and holds out her hand.

“Um,” I say, pulling the application to my chest, “I have a few questions.”

“Okay,” she says, grudgingly bringing her hand back and folding it with the other one on the desk. “What do you want to know?”

Suddenly, I can't think of any of my impressive questions, and before I can stop myself, I ask, “What's your policy on death?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well,” I say, feeling like a derailed train plummeting off of a bridge, “if I die while I'm a student, do I get anything cool, like a free embalming or something?”

She unlaces and then relaces her fingers; she sighs. “No,” she says, her face blank.

“Okay, what else can you tell me?”

She sighs again, breathes in like she's rewinding her inner message tape. "The program is a year," she says, which is in fact, how the message starts on Chapman's voice mail. I wonder if she recorded it. "After that, most students typically do a one-year internship before entering the work force."

"Last bolt on the casket, eh?"

She doesn't laugh. "That it?" she asks. "Or do you have more pertinent questions?"

I'm not sure for a second if she said impertinent, but I think my time is done here. "Nope," I say and hand her the application. "Sign me up."

"Actually, there's an application process," she says, "so I can't really do that."

I force a smile. Now who's being pertinent.

On the way back from Chapman, I drive over to Mom's house, and she's walking up the sidewalk to the front door with grocery bags in both hands.

I remember unloading grocery bags with her when I was little. On the way home from the Kroger, Mom would keep the box of Dutch cocoa sugar cookies out so we'd have a treat. Once we got inside, she'd pull a kitchen rag off of the sink and promptly wipe the cookie crumbs off of my face. "There," she'd say. "That's presentable."

I remember her doing the same thing the day of Dad's funeral. Some aunt with stinky perfume had left a lipstick mark on my cheek, and Mom marched me to the funeral home water fountain, pulled out a Kleenex, and went at my face. I protested, dragging out the word "Mom" into two syllables, the skilled pronunciation perfected by all fourteen year-old girls.

Mom paused, immobilized my protest with that mythical look that could petrify plants and animals, and then wiped off the rest of the lipstick.

Now, she turns as she hears my car and smiles at me. I can't ever doubt Mom's delight in seeing me. Her whole face lights up like a Christmas village.

I follow her into the house and down the hall to the kitchen with the last of her grocery bags.

"So," I say, "I turned it in. My application."

"When do you find out?" She puts a half-gallon of skim milk in the fridge.

"In a month or two," I tell her and then remember the nice lady in the lemon yellow. "But maybe longer."

"What you're doing," Mom says, handing me a box of garbage bags to go in the closet next to me, "well, I think it's really important work."

I don't know if I've ever heard Mom identify anything other than religious life as really important work. Once, when I lamented the loss of a college boyfriend, Mom said, "Did you ever think that maybe the Lord wants you?" Which marked the only time I've ever hung up on my mother.

Now I take the box from her, and although Mom's not even close to a jokester like Dad was, I look carefully to make sure she's serious, and the phone rings. "Can you get that?" Mom asks on her way down the steps to the basement freezer where Green Giant corn and peas go.

"Hey, kiddo," Uncle Lou says, "what's the good word?"

"Turned in my application for school today."

"Oh," he says, "for the aviary."

“Right.” I sit down at the kitchen table, thumb through Mom’s Pennysaver.

“Mom just ran downstairs for a minute. She’ll be right back.”

“Okay,” he says.

“Uncle Lou, did Dad like dead people?”

“Come again?” he asks.

Mom comes back up the steps, a little short of breath.

“You know,” I ask Uncle Lou, “did he ever want to work in a funeral home?”

“Sorry, kid, your Dad was no mortician. But,” he adds, “boy could he tarantella.”

He laughs.

“Mom’s back,” I say to him. “Uncle Lou,” I mouth to her.

She nods.

“Now your mother,” he says, “I bet she’d be great at funerals.”

For a moment, silence hangs between us, and I see Mom, very clearly, holding my little sister’s hand and kindly greeting each relative and friend as they made their way to the white cushioned kneeler in front of Dad’s coffin. And I see her later that night, after we’d all gone to bed, and I came out to lie on the couch awake, tired of lying on my bed awake, and she sat crying at the dining room table with an untouched cup of tea.

Now Mom takes out two cans of cream of mushroom soup and starts to fold up brown bags. “Bye, Uncle Lou,” I say. “Love you.”

“I love you too, sweetheart,” he says.

I hand Mom the phone and watch as she stretches the cord across the kitchen so she can fold up the bags to put away in the pantry. It’s rare for my mother, master multi-tasker, to do one thing at a time.

Charlie waits until Tuesday to call and check in. “I understand,” Charlie says, “that I was an asshole this weekend.”

“That’s true,” I say.

“I guess I’ve been an asshole even earlier than that.”

“That’s also true.”

“You could argue,” Charlie says. “For instance, suggest that I’m not always an asshole.”

“Well, you didn’t used to be,” I say. “There’s that.”

“Okay. That’s hopeful.”

“If you want,” I say, because I’m not sure I want to forgive him.

“Donna.”

“Yes?”

“Cut me a break.” And he doesn’t say this like an asshole. He says it real honest, like a person who could actually use a break and is most respectfully asking for it.

“I could embalm you,” I say. It’s not funny, but Charlie laughs, so I know he has sensed that it’s a break-cutting line.

“And,” I add, to clarify further, “you can come and take me to get ice cream later. If you want.”

“Okay,” he says, “but what about what I want?”

“That could be funny,” I say, “but it’s not.”

“Sorry. I’ll be there in an hour.”

Forty-five minutes later, Mom knocks on the door.

“I thought I should bring you some back-to-school muffins.” She grips a large round Tupperware container. “They’re strawberry-walnut.”

“So am I,” I say.

Mom looks at me and smiles as one does at the insane. “Okay, honey.”

“Charlie’s coming to take me for ice cream in a little while.”

“Okay,” she says, “after ice cream, you can have muffins.” Mom goes to set the container on the kitchen counter and pulls a large Ziplock bag out of her purse. In it, she has paper napkins, plastic knives, and several restaurant packets of Sweet Dream butter. My mother does not work at a pancake house, so I’m a bit puzzled about the source of the butter packets. But I suppose some things are better left a mystery, perhaps contraband butter even more so.

Mom turns to me. “Your Dad would be so proud of you,” she says.

My eyes fill, just like that; it’s a trigger phrase. “Thanks, Mommy,” I say. “I needed that.”

She pulls her purse straps farther up onto her shoulder, tugs at a piece of hair at the nape of her neck. “You know,” she starts, and suddenly, I’m worried. She looks like she might be sick. Or hurt.

“What?” I ask and take a step toward her.

She shakes off whatever malaise had appeared, mostly. “I’m proud of you, too,” she says.

For a second, we look at each other, her blue eyes into my brown. I think then of when we’re out and people don’t know she’s my mother, how I like to joke that the gypsies brought me.

Now, I nod at her.

Before I say anything, Mom hugs me and pats my face. I watch her fiddle with her car keys on the way out my door.

At Dairy Queen, Charlie gets me a large chocolate vanilla swirl. I'm not a physicist, but it seems to me that ice cream twirled that high without toppling defies some kind of gravity.

"I'm proud of you," Charlie says.

"I'm proud of this ice cream cone," I say.

"I'm serious," he says. "I like a woman who knows what she wants."

"What about why she wants it? What about that?"

"Well," he says. "I like a woman who knows why she wants what she wants."

"What if that's not me?"

"Eat your ice cream," Charlie says. "It's good for you."

Back at my apartment, Charlie asks, "Would you mind if I slept over?"

"I don't think you've asked my permission for that since we met," I tell him.

"Well," he says, "enquiring minds want to know."

"No. I wouldn't mind at all."

"Meet you on the evergreens," Charlie says, making fake guns out of his index fingers and thumbs. Like a bad lounge singer, he fires two shots at me, winks, and then tears off down the hall to my bedroom like a five year-old, which is one of the reasons I still love Charlie.

I go to the kitchen to get glasses of water for Charlie and me, and I see all of the provisions Mom left on the counter. Back-to-school muffins.

Back to school. I smile as I fill up our water glasses.

And then, I set out two of the paper napkins and smooth the creases. I rig each one with a packet of butter, a knife, and a muffin. I don't have to open any drawers or dig around for anything in the cupboard under the sink. Everything I need sits right there on that counter. Mom left it all there for me.



## Something I Should Save for Later

None of us wanted to be on vacation. Dad was sick, dying actually, and trying his best not to act sick or like someone starting chemo in two weeks. Mom was exhausted, trying her best to behave like someone who got eight hours of sleep every night. Linnie had just started kindergarten, furious she had to miss her best friend Carol's Chuck-E-Cheese birthday party. Brendan was eight and not trying at all to be anything other than a pain in my butt. And I was twelve, poised for puberty and pain and doing my damndest to act like the thirty-five year-old I am now.

We were what Dad would have called real pieces of work.

We had arrived at the Marco Island Airport in Florida, and when we realized our luggage hadn't actually come with us, I thought we should've just turned around and gone home. "So what do we do now?" I asked Mom, doing my best to sound like I wasn't worried.

"Don't worry, Donna," Mom said. "Your father's taking care of it."

"What the hell do you mean it's in Seattle?" Dad said to the USAir man at the lost luggage counter. "We're in Florida."

"I know where we are, sir," the man said. He couldn't have been far out of college or maybe even high school, which troubled me since his name tag read "Howard." I'm sure there are babies whose names are Howard, but it still seems to me that one may be called Howard only after one is at least forty years old. This Howard hadn't earned his name, didn't seem to have a notion yet of all the horrible stuff life could

offer. And seeing him smirk at my father, at least thirty years his elder, standing at the gate of his own death, I wanted to just say to Howard, “You don’t know, you asshole.”

And Dad wasn’t happy with him either. “Are you giving me lip?” Dad asked, leaning into Howard. Actually, Dad could have used some since his own lips grew thin when he got angry. “Listen, Howie,” Dad said, his voice rumbling low and growly, “do you know how much it costs to take a family of five on vacation?”

“No,” Howard said, looking a little shorter, “sir.” Howard tucked a greasy strand of hair behind his ear. His nails were too long and had dirt under them, not like Dad’s hands, tan and strong, nails always trimmed. Dad had beautiful hands, just the right proportions.

“I think that’s a month’s salary for you,” Dad said. “So that means, following logic, that you should be working for me for at least a month, with no attitude. Don’t you think?”

“Yes, sir,” Howard said.

I tried to render myself invisible under the hood of my powder blue sweatshirt. Despite Howard’s idiocy, I always hated when Dad made a scene. It made me want to crawl inside of myself and disappear in some inconspicuous corner, like my left elbow.

Now I understand that a lot of Dad’s anger was the cancer, that the anger came from the sickness. Now as I tell my husband Charlie this story, he says, “Your dad was going through a lot.”

I nod because years later, I understand much more about people and how a temper can come from sickness, and vice versa. I nod as Charlie and I rock on our porch swing, creaking along with the June crickets and their midnight recital.

“Understanding is a tool,” Charlie says.

“Well,” I say, “I hadn’t been to the hardware store yet.”

All I had in the Marco Island Airport was a powder blue sweatshirt and, in the sweatshirt pocket, a small yellow notebook with flowers on the front of it. That was also a tool, but I didn’t know that either then.

Finally, Dad finished wrangling Howard and the situation, and we got into a taxi without our luggage, promised that it would be delivered to the hotel as soon as the next flight from Seattle came in. The van-sized taxi seemed, at first boarding, luxurious, lots of space in comparison to the airplane.

“How far to the Wavecrest Hotel?” Dad asked the driver.

“Fifteen minutes,” the driver said, “tops.”

Except it took a little longer.

One wouldn’t think rush-hour traffic would be much in Marco Island, but the highway stretched out, crammed with wet cars, sitting under a dismal gray, drizzly sky. Occasionally a truck would exit to our right and water would splash hard against the side of the van, but otherwise we just sat and inched forward.

Fifteen minutes into the trip, we sat nowhere near the Wavecrest. After repeatedly poking me in the side with his index finger and me saying “stop it” every time, and after about a billion dirty looks from Mom, Brendan pulled a piece of nuclear green gum from under the van seat and set it on my knee.

“You are so gross,” I said and punched him hard in the arm. I also smashed the gum into his leg.

“Ow!” Brendan said.

“That’s it,” Dad said, whirling around. “I’m giving you all to Diego.”

“Who’s Diego?” Linnie asked.

Without turning around, the taxi driver raised his hand.

“I think it’s quiet time,” Mom said, and no one argued.

Thirty minutes of silence later, Dad was done being in that van. When Diego stopped in front of the Seabird Hotel instead of the Wavecrest, Dad said, “Just let us out here. We’ll walk across the street.”

“Okay,” Diego said wistfully, looking over the family that could have been his.

So, Mom held Linnie’s hand, Dad held mine, and Brendan stood on his own between all of us. I didn’t think my hand needed to be held and tried to pull away, but Dad wouldn’t let go.

“Okay, let’s hit it,” Dad said, seeing a window through which to steer us all across the street.

“No,” Mom said, “Wait!” She pointed at an eighteen-wheeler coming our way. A cloud of grey smoke blasted out around it. The motor roared.

“Honey,” Dad shouted over the noise, “we can make it.”

Mom looked at him, raised her shoulders and eyebrows slightly at the same time, as if to say, ‘Well, if *you* want to kill the children.’

“Fine,” Dad said, and we stood and waited.

The truck took longer than it seemed it would, and we actually could have crossed, a few times. And when the truck passed us, it ran right through a long puddle of dirty street water, and every one of us got good and splattered.

Now, Charlie plants his feet on the porch floorboards and stops the swing. I know this splattering sounds ludicrous. He raises an eyebrow at me. “You’re sure you aren’t embellishing? Even a little?”

“I absolutely never exaggerate,” I say smiling. “No. I don’t forget much, and not then.”

“Yeah,” Charlie says, “and that was right before your dad—”

“The next spring,” I say and feel like I’ve gotten hit with that dirty street water again.

When the water actually hit us that day in Florida, Dad said, “Goddamnit.” He looked at Mom. “We should have gone.”

“You’re right,” Mom said, her voice shrill and pointy, “you’re always right.” Mom pulled a Kleenex out of her purse and started wiping off Linnie’s face.

Linnie looked down at her dripping plastic wings pin from the airplane. For a moment, she straddled the decision between laughing and crying. She chose the latter.

I also almost started to cry, as the smell of the gutter water ran down past my nose in big gray droplets. My sweatshirt stuck against my tank top and the skin on my arms.

“We look like zombies,” Brendan said.

All of us stood grey and slimy, my little brother’s fuzzy buzz cut replete with ominous grey spikes. Mom looked like an angry fighting-lady zombie, her red scarf holding in a mound of frizzed-out curls that could even make a part bloody head. And Dad looked, as I might have expected, like an Italian mafia zombie with a big Mediterranean zombie nose.

Dad appraised his undead family, ending with Brendan, and he patted B on the back. “That’s the spirit,” Dad said, smiling.

Of course, Charlie loves this part of the story. “Cool,” he says. I’m not sure why, but zombies still seem to consistently cheer up every man I know.

By the time Dad had discovered his new zest, the street had miraculously cleared. “Let’s go,” he said and started our march across it. Linnie still cried a little, but Mom scooped her up, and she quieted down with her head on Mom’s shoulder.

On the way to the Wavecrest front desk, we passed by the gift shop, and the display window popped with a long row of muumuus, floral ones, pure fuschias and neon yellows, striped ones—all different sizes. Mom had a muumuu she wore to the pool at home, and we always laughed about it. Dad would joke about what she kept under there—garden tools, a roller skating rink, some leprechauns. Secretly, I loved Mom’s muumuus, offering total freedom and flow. And who wouldn’t want to keep leprechauns under her dress?

“Look at the muus, Martha,” Dad said to Mom. “Moo, moo, moo.”

“Nicky, that’s enough,” Mom said, but she was smiling.

As we approached the front desk, the manager looked down his wire-rimmed glasses at us. “Checking in?” he asked slowly.

Mom ushered us all away from the counter and into the pastel lobby while Dad got our room straightened out. I hoped the hotel manager wasn’t Howard the Second and was glad I didn’t have to stand there and find out.

“I need to go to the restroom,” Mom said.

“I’ll watch Linnie,” I said, “and B.”

“Thanks, honey,” Mom said, and I liked it and hated it at the same time, how she had recently been treating me, like I existed as her ally instead of her daughter. It made me feel grown-up, but I wasn’t really. “And no one,” Mom said to all of us, “even dream about sitting down on this furniture.”

As soon as Mom walked away, B sniffed at my shoulder. “You stink,” he said. And then he pinched my arm, really hard.

I pulled back, about to punch B’s arm, but Dad came over, and I held my fist. “Well,” he said, “at least we still have a room.”

Mom came back with a clean face and tamed hair, and we took the elevator up to the ninth floor. In the room, Brendan and I sat on plastic hotel laundry bags on the two low wheely chairs with the seashell-print fabric, at the glass topped table with the room service menu standing up on it, as though we dined in a private café. Playing café in the hotel room always ranked as one of our favorite vacation activities, but that day we just sat there while Mom went at Linnie’s face with a wet hotel washrag.

In front of the table stood big glass balcony doors, and Mom had slid open the stiff blue curtains so we could see the Atlantic ocean. Dad opened one of the doors. Through the screen door behind it, the air blew in warm and salty-thick, and I took off my sweatshirt so I could feel the breeze on my bare arms. When I closed my eyes for a minute, the whoosh of the ocean made me feel like I sat in a rocking chair.

Dad paced back and forth across the room. I could see the pain on his face, that deep ache in his bones, where the cancer staged its battle. He did seem like a battleground, and just looking at him made me feel like one too.

“Mom,” Linnie said, “I want to put on my sundress.”

“Honey, we don’t have any other clothes to change into.”

“Goddamnit,” Dad said.

“Watch your mouth,” Mom said back.

“What do you want me to say?” Dad asked. “Damn it.” He walked over to the phone on the dresser next to the TV, pulled out the lost luggage receipt from USAir, and dialed.

“Come on,” Mom told Linnie, pulling her toward the bathroom. “We’ll clean you up and wrap you in a towel.”

“Yes,” Dad said on the phone. “I’m calling about my family’s luggage. Some bozo lost it in Seattle.”

I looked at Brendan and rolled my eyes, seeking some camaraderie. But, true to form, he stuck out his tongue at me. I returned the gesture and folded my arms. “This stinks,” I said.

“You stink,” Brendan said.

“Not as much as you do,” I said.

“Whatever,” Brendan said.

“I’ll hold,” Dad said, and it sounded like a threat.

I picked at my cuticles, glad that Mom had left the room so she wouldn’t see and yell at me. But then she walked out of the bathroom, followed by Linnie, wrapped in a towel, wet brown hair stuck to her face. Linnie looked much cuter back then, when she didn’t know about hair dye and liquid makeup.

“All sparkly,” Mom said, as though presenting Linnie to the Miss America panel, and then Mom turned to me. “Leave your cuticles alone.”



“Can you work on Donna now?” B asked, pointing at me and pinching his nose shut. “Because she stinks.”

“I stink,” Linnie said, grinning.

“No, you don’t,” B said. “You’re the only one who doesn’t.”

Linnie scrunched up her face at him. “I do too stink,” she shouted.

“If you all don’t cut it out,” Dad said, holding the receiver away from his mouth, his voice beginning a crescendo yell, “I’m going to give all three of you a whole plateful of stink.”

Brendan and I stared at Dad, who had just shouted. He had also utilized the phrase, “a whole plateful of stink,” and well, that was funny.

And as much as we all wanted to be mad, B snorted, and then I laughed and Linnie giggled and Mom snorted—it’s genetic—and Dad stared at us all like we were aliens. But also a little glint sparked in his eyes, and I thought for sure he would start laughing too, one of my favorite things because when he laughed, his whole body would shake and sometimes tears would run down his face. No one enjoyed a laugh like Dad. But right then, he didn’t laugh. He hung up the phone.

“Wait right here,” Dad said, and he walked out of the room and into the hallway.

“Is Dad mad?” Linnie asked.

“Well,” Mom said, “I don’t think so.”

We all sat and looked at each other.

“One of you two should get in the shower,” Mom said, appraising Brendan and me, probably trying to decide who had a thicker coat of sludge.

“I don’t have anything to put on,” I said.

“What about a towel?” Linnie said. “Or toilet paper.”

“Gross,” I said. “Grow up, Linnie.”

“Well then, you should go, B,” Mom said.

“I don’t have anything to wear either.” Brendan looked at Linnie. “And I’m not wearing toilet paper, weirdo.”

“I’m not a weirdo,” Linnie said.

“This is a pretty rotten vacation,” he said.

“You’re a rotten vacation,” Linnie said.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said.

As Linnie stuck out her tongue at B, I heard a whimpering noise. Mom was crying.

My insides felt hollow and the back of my neck got hot and prickly. “Mom,” I said quickly, “you could shower. Isn’t there one of those fancy bathrobes you could put on? Like in the movies?”

“Yeah,” B said, looking like he’d like to punch himself.

“It’s not that kind of hotel,” Mom said and cried some more.

She stood up, went out to the balcony, and collapsed onto a tan lounge chair. We could see her crying into her hands.

“See what you did?” I said to Brendan.

“I didn’t do anything,” he said.

“Me neither,” Linnie said, and she looked like she was about to cry, too. “What if Dad doesn’t come back? What if Mom falls off of the balcony?”

I looked out toward our collapsed mother and then at the door shut to the hallway. I pulled Linnie up onto my lap and wrapped my arms around her. Her hair smelled like Breck shampoo, and I kissed the back of her wet head. “That’s just silly,” I said, but the part of me that wasn’t trying to act like I was thirty-five, the just still twelve year-old part of me, feared that my little sister was right to worry.

So in Wavecrest Hotel Room 958, my brother and sister and I sat for one of those really long minutes, feeling like orphans and sinking into the terrifying unknown.

Then the room phone rang.

Three rings later, Brendan said, “I’ll get it.” He answered nervously and then smiled. “She’s on the balcony,” he said, and then, “She’s crying, I think,” and then, “Okay.” He set the phone down on the dresser, still smiling. “It’s Dad,” he said to Linnie and me.

I smiled at Linnie. “See,” I said, “everything’s fine.”

Then he went out and got Mom, who came in from the balcony instead of jumping off of it and talked with Dad until she was grinning too.

When she hung up, Mom said, “Okay. Showers for everyone.”

This time, I didn’t protest but just went into the bathroom and hoped for the best. I didn’t want to make Mom start crying again. When I got out of the shower, B got in, and by the time Mom got in, Dad came walking into the room with a big Wavecrest shopping bag.

“What’s that?” Linnie asked.

Dad grinned at all of us, standing wrapped in scratchy white hotel towels. “Our eveningwear,” he said. Then he reached into the bag and pulled out a hot pink,

terrycloth, Linnie-sized muumuu and handed it to Linnie. “For you, mademoiselle,” he said.

“Really?” she asked, like that was just what she wanted her whole life.

“Hold up your arms,” he said, and then pulled the muumuu right over her head.

The hot pink did become her.

Then he reached in again and pulled out an electric blue muumuu covered with exceptionally happy dolphins. He handed it to me.

I rubbed the terrycloth, much softer than the hotel bath towel, between my fingers.

“Thanks, Dad,” I said.

“You’re most welcome.”

When Dad reached into the bag again and pulled out a chocolate brown muumuu with white seagulls and handed it to B, my brother just said, “No way.”

“Brendan,” Dad said, “everyone’s doing it.” Then he reached into the bag, pulled out a Dad-sized, almost neon, lime-green muumuu, and waved it like a bullfighter at my brother. “Even me.”

“No way,” Brendan said again. “I don’t wear dresses.”

“Suit yourself,” Dad said, tossing Brendan’s muumuu on the double bed by the wall. “I’m going to check on your mother.” Then he disappeared into the bathroom with the bag and shut the door. Mom shrieked and then giggled.

I went into the closet and slipped on my dolphin muumuu. I could still hear Mom giggling from the bathroom when I emerged from the closet, so I took Linnie’s hand and promptly led her out to the balcony. “Come on,” I said to B.

“I’m not going anywhere,” B said, pouting and glaring at the chocolate fabric lumped on the bed.

“Suit yourself,” I said and pulled Linnie along.

“What are they doing?” Linnie asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said.

Two minutes later, Brendan joined us on the balcony, wearing his muumuu. Between listening to our parents mess around and putting on a muumuu, Brendan had chosen the lesser of two evils. And I had a sense right then that this night would be something I should save for later.

When something nice happened to my mother, like when her best friend from grade school sent her roses the day I started kindergarten, my mom would say, “I’m going to save this for later.” I didn’t know quite what she meant, could only liken it to the notion of saving half of my piece of tunnel-of-fudge cake for late at night, when I couldn’t sleep and needed something to make me feel better. But that wasn’t too far off from her intention. And this night was a keeper, perhaps with which to torture my brother, perhaps for something else.

“Don’t say a word,” B said and sat down on the lounge chair, tucking the muumuu between his legs.

And I didn’t, just enjoyed standing at the railing, letting the sea breeze blow around and under my muumuu, feeling like I could just fly right out and over the ocean.

Eventually, Dad and Mom emerged from the bathroom, she in her yellow muumuu with red tulips and Dad in his lime green number. Mom knocked on the balcony door and motioned for us to come in.

Inside, Dad held up the room service menu. “Tonight,” he said, in his best dramatic voice, “we’re dining in. And by the way, B,” Dad said to my brother, “you look fantastic.”

“Yeah, yeah,” B said.

“Are we really getting room service?” Linnie asked.

A reasonable question since we never got room service. Whenever we’d ask, Dad would always say, “Room service is a scam. Overpriced and never very good.”

But that night he said, “You can order whatever you want.”

“Like we do for my birthday?” Linnie asked.

“Yes,” Dad said, “it’s a new holiday.” He winked at her. “Muumuu Fiesta.”

“I love Muumuu Fiesta,” Linnie said. “We should get off school for that.”

B ordered a hamburger and two plates of french fries. Linnie ordered onion rings and four scoops of chocolate ice cream. I ordered fettucini and fresh squeezed orange juice. Mom ordered a filet, and Dad ordered lobster. After Dad placed the call, Mom said, “That’s going to be expensive, Nicky.”

“Now’s not the time to worry about that,” Dad said and kissed her on the lips. “Remember, it’s a holiday.”

“You’re right.” She took a deep breath and nodded.

After room service came, we ate like we were starving people, and Dad turned on the radio and found an oldies station. And we all danced, even Brendan, who wouldn’t dance with his wife at his own wedding. At the wedding, Mom walked over to me and held out her hand. “Someone should be dancing at your brother’s wedding.” And she and I did a fierce polka while B ate white cake and ice cream with his new wife.

But that night in the hotel room, before inhibitions sunk their claws in too deep, B did the twist with my father, lime green and chocolate muumuus swishing back and forth with the beat.

Later I lay down next to Linnie, to the soft sound of her breathing and the warmth of that breath on my shoulder, and Brendan conked out within two seconds of his head hitting the pillow on the rollaway bed. Unfortunately, that will never be me. Most always, my mind races right before bed, and my dad's did too.

My eyes adjusted to the dark room, with just a hint of light from the cracked-open bathroom door so Linnie wouldn't get scared. Even now I still like to keep a light on, and I suspect Linnie was just a scapegoat for how scared all of us were and how badly we needed just a little crack of light.

That night, Dad and I were both on the side of the bed closest to the nightstand, and I watched him, frowning just a little with his eyes shut. I knew he wasn't asleep though, because he wasn't snoring. And probably, knowing I was watching him, he opened his eyes and looked at me. It almost hurt to look at him right then because big shadows of fear and sadness cluttered his eyes. Still, I smiled at him, and he smiled back. "I love you," he mouthed to me.

"You too," I mouthed back.

And then he turned away from me and spooned up against my mother. Half an hour later, when I heard him finally start to snore, I let myself fall asleep, too.

After I tell Charlie about the family dance party that night, he asks, "So did you ever get your luggage?"

“What?” I say. I’m still stuck on that image of Dad’s face. I hope that now, from somewhere, Dad can see me, can see that I turned out okay, that I haven’t forgotten him. I hope he can see Charlie’s face. This is my husband, Charlie, I think. I’d like for you to meet him.

When Charlie asks, “What happened the next day? Your dad turned the muumuus inside out for everyone, I hope,” I realize that I’ve already introduced Charlie and Nicky. That Dad is right here.

I tell Charlie that the bellboy came at 8:30 the next morning with all of our suitcases on one of those big roly carts. Dad tipped him from the pocket of his muumuu. The bellboy looked around at all of us and raised an eyebrow.

“The family Von Trapp,” Dad said.

“Sure,” the bellboy said, taking the cash and making a speedy exit.

We spread out our suitcases as we always did on family vacations, resting them on counters and chairs and the two fold-out luggage racks from the closet. And then we sat, Linnie and me on one bed, Mom and Dad on the other, and Brendan on the roll-away. No one moved or went to open the suitcases. We just stared at them, all five of us, just recently awake and still draped in our muumuus. Mom got up and slid open the balcony door, stood with her back to us. Dad stood up too, and the sleeve of his lime-green muumuu flapped with a sudden breeze. “Breakfast on the balcony?” he asked.

We all nodded.

“Can I call room service?” Brendan asked.

“No,” Mom said, still gazing out the balcony doors at the early morning Atlantic rolling along.



We all turned to her, toward the sharp tone of her voice.

Mom turned back to us. “Dad should do it,” she said. She looked like she might cry, but she didn’t.

He walked over to her and put his arm around her. “Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

I watched Mom and Dad standing there, muumuu fabric mixing and billowing.

Dad kissed her on the cheek and turned toward us kids; a big smile flashed across his face. “Okay, breakfast,” he said. “What’ll it be, everyone?”

We hesitated, looking from Mom to Dad. Her fingers clutched at the fabric near his waist.

“Well, go ahead,” Mom said to us, now smiling too, her reassuring look. “Let’s get this day started.”

And we all ordered something, hoping it would be good.

## Not Some Other Creature

“I can’t go to the suburbs,” I say. “They make me want to die.”

“Aren’t you being a little dramatic?” Charlie asks.

“You didn’t grow up there.” I sit up as straight as I can on my ancient purple plush couch. It doesn’t match the rest of the furniture in my living room, but then nothing really matches in my whole apartment. “I know my enemy,” I say.

“You don’t have to stay,” Charlie says. “We’ll go home at the end of the night.”

“That’s what they want you to think,” I say. “You’re way too vulnerable. They’ll eat you alive. They’ll make you get an SUV. You’ll get a lawn goose and put a dress on it. I know it.”

“It’s just a party. We won’t be there very long.”

I sigh. Charlie wants us to go to his co-worker Brad’s holiday party. For the last three years, Charlie’s missed it. At Sanford Company, Brad sits one rung up from Charlie on the management chain, a man of influence, in things like promotions. Charlie’s up for one this year, and so he thinks it’s important to go.

“Okay,” I say, “but really, we can’t be there long.”

“Thank you,” Charlie says, sipping at his Merlot. “New topic.”

“Like?”

“Like,” he says, “how was embalming class today?”

“Did you know there are four different kinds?”

“No,” he says. “Do you have a favorite?”

“I’m not even done with my first semester. It may be too early to tell.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Fine,” I say. “Maybe my favorite is cavity.” My wine glass is empty, so I take a drink from Charlie’s. “You get to use a special needle to suck stuff out of the stomach.”

Charlie takes his wine glass from me, finishes the contents, and stands up. “That sounds disgusting.”

“You’re a punk,” I say. “You make fun of me, *and* you make me go to dumb parties.”

“It’s on the day after Thanksgiving. You’ll be in the holiday spirit.”

“No,” I say, “I’ll be on social hour overload.” It’s hard enough for me to be me these days, let alone being me around random people at a party. I get nervous thinking about parties, thinking about me at parties, thinking about how I just quit my job, a week after I turned thirty.

Charlie takes the wine glasses into the kitchen.

“Honey,” I call after him, “do you think this is a bad idea?”

“Do I think what’s a bad idea?”

“Going back to school.”

Charlie comes in and sits down next to me. He takes my hand. “I think it’s the mother of all good ideas. You’ll be the best mortician in world history.”

“Now you’re exaggerating,” I say.

“I never do.”

I smile at him.

“Listen, lover.” He stands and pulls me up with him. “I have to get home and do a little work. I’m running a meeting first thing.”

“Okay,” I say. “No sleepover tonight.”

“Not tonight.” He kisses me softly, just a brush on my lips.

Even after six years, my knees still get weak.

Charlie opens the front door and then turns back. “Oh,” he says, “I forgot. It’s a fancy party. You know, dress up.”

My knees solidify again, just like that. “I see how it is,” I tell him. “You want me to die, too.”

On Friday, when the doorbell rings, I’m watching PBS. Some classically trained British actor narrates a special about crocodiles. I reluctantly answer the door. Charlie stands there all lanky and handsome in his brown suit, with the blue silk tie I love.

“Damn,” I say, appraising him and smiling. “Let’s stay in and make out to nature specials.” I slip my hands under his suit coat and hold his waist.

Charlie reaches out and touches the jellybean shaped jade stone at my neck, sliding it back and forth on its silver chain, metal and finger tips skimming over my collarbone. “You clean up real nice yourself,” he says.

“Dressy enough?”

“You look stunning.”

I’m glad for the vote of confidence for my dark green shiny dress. I can’t decide if it makes me look like a bewitching mer-creature or some sort of apocalyptic crocodilian, like the Paleolithic ones British actor man just mentioned. When choosing

between mermaid and apocalyptic beast, I think one should always go with the mer, unless it's Halloween. But it's not Halloween. It's the day after Thanksgiving, and I'm going to the suburbs. Barring southern states with backyard bayous or horror movies involving sewers, I know that crocodiles don't belong in the suburbs.

"Let me just turn off the TV," I say and go back to the living room to find British actor man explaining how crocodiles let out this noise called a bellow. He describes it as their own unique cry, a deep rumbling, like building thunder. He says they must do it for no other reason than it's their noise, something that identifies them just as them, and not some other creature.

"Sure you don't want to stay here and make out?" I ask.

"What I want and what I must do are two different things," Charlie says.

I nod and take a last look at the close-up of a particularly wide-jawed crocodile.

Half an hour later, we walk up Brad's sidewalk, deep in the Dayton suburbs, deep in the land of ginormous houses seemingly engaged in some sort of pissing contest. Which one is bigger than the next? No room here for big old charming oaks; the only trees are dwarfish new things.

In front of Brad's house stands a two-foot tall plastic goose, wearing a checkered bonnet and apron. I take a deep breath.

Charlie looks at the goose, turns to me. "I thought it was a myth," he says. "I didn't know. We could turn around right now."

I'm ready to make a run for it with him when the front door opens, revealing a very muscular man with very sculpted hair and a small boy with those low-hanging pants my mother hates. Actually, I hate them, too.

“Hey, buddy,” the man says. “So glad you could make it.” He clamps Charlie’s hand into a firm handshake, pumps his arm a few times, gives him the handsome-man pat on the back. He shakes my hand, too. “Brad Davis,” he says, “and you must be Dana.”

“Yes,” I say, “but my family calls me Donna.”

Brad wrinkles his brow.

“I’m Tommy,” the boy standing next to Brad says. “I’m nine.”

“Well,” I say, “nice to meet you, Tommy.”

“I’m Charlie,” Charlie says to Tommy, “and this is my girlfriend, Donna.”

Brad laughs. “Well, now that that’s all done with, come on in.” Brad puts an arm around Charlie and guides him down the front hall toward the sound of lively conversation. “She’s a funny one,” Brad says to Charlie, and I’m not sure if Brad means funny ha-ha or funny troubled.

“I’m right here,” I say.

“See?” Brad says to Charlie and laughs.

It’s going to be a long night.

In the kitchen, Brad goes to get his wife, as well as drinks for Charlie and me, and I realize I am officially on another planet. Everything, and I mean everything, has a cozy—toaster, tea kettle, sugar bowl, Kleenex box. Candles of epic proportion line the counter. Each rests in a thin, berry-speckled, holiday wreath I can’t help but think belongs on some Roman God’s head. And amidst vast seas of gingham, ducks and jovial country folk smile out from every pot holder, dishtowel and refrigerator magnet. I fear that the little country people might jump out and into my purse, try to come home with me and procreate in my kitchen. Since my purse has no zipper, I hold the top shut. Brad

returns, handing a Bud Light to Charlie and some sort of punch in a paper, happy-country-people cup to me.

I take the cup and say, “Thank you,” positioning my thumb over the creepy farmer’s face.

A woman steps up next to Brad.

“My wife, Molly,” Brad says, and he puts his arm around her.

Not a blond hair of hers strays out of place, and she wears a pink satin cocktail dress with heels that would give me knee pain for at least two weeks. She extends a perfectly manicured hand. I know this hand. I know that hair. I feel like I just ate a mystery meat hoagie from the school cafeteria. It’s her.

It’s Molly Steinmart whom Brad has married, the Goddamn May Queen herself. She, the bane of my grade-school existence. In fifth grade, my last chance at being pretty as opposed to awkward until college, she robbed me of the coveted May Queen spot, and I had to be one of the two tall girls who helped her up in the pulpit to get crowned. Like I was some weird Amazon guard woman. Now of course, that notion seems cooler to me than it did then, but still.

“Donna?” Molly asks. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” I say. “Molly, right?”

“Yep. Wow. I haven’t seen you in years.”

I still have that nauseated feeling. Must walk away. “I know. Hey, Molly, Brad, would you excuse us for a second?”

“Of course,” Molly says, “but first, let me at least take your coats.” Molly punches Brad on the arm.

“What?” Brad asks.

Molly shakes her head and takes our coats. “It’s a good thing I’m here.”

“It sure is,” I say and grab Charlie by the arm. I pull him back into the front hallway, into the powder room, and I close the door behind us.

“Dude,” he says, “I know I look hot tonight, but can’t it wait until we get home?”

I glare at him, try to look smoldering mad.

“Well,” Charlie says, locking the bathroom door, mistaking smoldering mad for smoldering horny, “okay.” He pulls me close and leans in to kiss me.

I push him away. “No,” I say. “Brad’s married to Molly Steinmart.”

“And?”

“God, I hated her,” I say. “In fifth grade, she got crowned as the May Queen, of course. Instead of me.”

“If you’re expecting me to understand this, you may be mistaken.”

“And,” I say, “in seventh grade, she said I was a lesbian.”

“But you’re not a lesbian,” Charlie says. “Unless you’re a really good actress.” He puts his hand on my ass. “But I don’t think so.”

I swat his hand away. “That’s not the point.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a lesbian.”

“I know that, but at Saint Henry’s grade-school, there were not a lot of progressive thinkers, and lesbian was actually an insult.”

“Wow,” Charlie says. “Really?”



“I understand,” I say, “that you were raised by a pack of very open-minded wolves, and so you are in full communion with the natural world as well as the liberal party, but some of us grew up in suburbs such as these.”

“Right.” Charlie nods slowly.

Even if Charlie’s childhood has left him sometimes at a loss in the actual world, I love his family—hippie Renaissance people of the first order. Everyone is welcome at their house, and they’re always learning something new. Like Charlie’s mom, who decided to learn to ice-skate a few years back, and not just circle-round-the-rink skating, but things like Double Salchows and leaps and spins and stuff. And she’s actually pretty good. And while she skates, his dad grows herbs in the kitchen window and cans things.

“Well,” Charlie says, “what can I do?” In addition to learning from his dad how to can things, Charlie also got an M.B.A., so he’s good at being a team-player, too.

“Well,” I say, “can we have a signal?”

“What, like an ‘Abort! Abort!’ sort of thing if the mission goes awry?”

“Yes, but be careful where you say abort. Where lesbians aren’t welcome, abortion usually isn’t either.”

“Right,” Charlie says and shakes his head. “How about we sing something?”

“Hm?” I’m pretty sure that’s not from M.B.A. training.

“You know,” he says, “when one of us starts singing our sentences instead of talking, we’ll know it’s time to bolt.”

I nod. “Yes. Off like a prom dress.”

Charlie looks at me for a minute like he’s about to be off with my prom dress.

“Focus, honey,” I tell him. “We need to stay alert.”

“All right,” he says, “we’re going back in.”

We emerge from the bathroom, together, to the ringing doorbell. Molly passes us on her way down the front hall to get it. She cocks her head at us, raises an eyebrow.

“Sorry,” Charlie says and grins. “I just can’t keep my hands off of her.”

Molly makes a face like she’s just smelled something sour. “Okay,” she says, as if it’s not, and goes for the door.

Smiling, I pull Charlie toward the kitchen and go for the vodka bottle cozy, cuddled up to the toaster cozy. My punch is not nearly strong enough.

Fresh drinks in hand, Charlie and I find a spot in the living room. It seems safe, inhabitants including Tommy and an older woman in a sparkly red sweater which appears to have gold coins hanging off of it. Mine is not to question why.

“How are you doing?” Charlie asks me.

“I’m okay,” I say. “Drinks help.” I drink.

Then Brad comes to get Charlie. “Hey, come meet my brother, Ron,” Brad says. “He loves Michigan. You went there, right?”

I see that Charlie considers lying, but it’s not in his nature. “I did,” Charlie admits slowly and stands. He smiles apologetically at me. “I’ll be back.”

“Oh, she’ll be fine,” Brad says. Then he gestures to the lady in the sparkly red sweater and adds, “And, Aunt Roberta could talk to a brick wall.”

I take a deep breath and move next to the aunt on the loveseat, covered in a cream-colored fabric, with mallard ducks happily swimming in rows across it. The ducks make me a little dizzy, so I look at Aunt Roberta. I discover that each of the myriad

coins on her sweater bears the head of Queen Elizabeth. When Roberta turns to me, the coins shake, and her whole sweater jingles menacingly at me.

“It’s too early for Christmas music,” she says, pointing a long finger at the speaker in the corner, projecting carols at us all.

“You’d rather listen to something else,” I say, trying to sympathize.

Then the Christmas music abruptly shuts off, right in the middle of the word Tannenbaum. Roberta smiles. I wonder if she, or the Elizabeths, have psychic powers.

It turns out that Tommy is the culprit. He turns on the TV, slips a DVD into the player, and turns that on too.

“Watch this,” he says to an uninterested teenage boy with pants securely belted at the waist, glasses much too large for his face, and mousy brown hair drifting dangerously toward mullet-hood.

Bass-driven music pulses through the room. My paper punch cup vibrates closer to Aunt Roberta’s on the TV stand in front of us. And on the screen, a whole army of young boys, with pants just like Tommy’s, begins break-dancing, heads spinning on the ground, sporting moves that look like robotic push-ups. My speculation that I’ve entered some strange grade school time warp is confirmed. Tommy purses his lips, nods slowly in approval at the TV, and starts to mimic the dancers. The teenager quickly moves the large coffee table out of Tommy’s way.

“Looks like he’s got a nervous condition,” Roberta says.

“What if he really does?” I ask.

“What?” Roberta asks. “Where’s the punch? I need some more punch.”

“Tell me about it,” I say. Still, I can’t stop watching Tommy’s dance, like a highway accident.

I stand and go to pick up Roberta’s cup, thinking I’ll refill us both. But since I’m so mesmerized, I end up knocking it over. Red party punch spills all over Roberta’s green polyester pants and splatters droplets onto the many faces of Queen Elizabeth.

“She’s ruined me!” Roberta yells.

“Oh, God,” I say. “I’m so sorry.”

Then, of course, of course, Molly comes running. “What happened?”

“It was her,” Roberta hisses and points at me as though I just ate her first born or slept with her husband. “I need some napkins,” she laments.

Molly glares at me, and I know she remembers the time in third grade when I drank grape juice and then got sick and threw up purple on her best friend Jolene’s Pac-Man watch. Now I’ve spilled party punch all over not only Aunt Roberta, but also on the mallards and the cream-colored loveseat. Instead of a bull in a China shop, I am a crocodile in a duck’s living room. My face and neck heat up. I try to shrink into my green dress.

“I’m sorry,” I say to Molly.

“It’s fine,” she says.

“Ruined!” Roberta yells, in case anyone’s forgotten her, and Molly rushes off, I presume to get the napkins.

“What’s going on?” Charlie asks, walking into the room. His eyes widen as he turns his gaze toward me. I’m sure I must have that deer-caught-in-headlights thing going on, because this time he grabs my arm and pulls me out into the hallway.

Once we're in the powder room, Charlie seats me on the toilet with the lid down, which is, of course, covered in a fuzzy, pink, toilet-lid cozy. "Are you all right?" he asks.

"I could eat her apartment," I say.

"Are you hungry?" Charlie asks. "Because there are plenty of deviled eggs."

"No, I mean I could eat it," I say. "She's a duck. I'm a crocodile."

"How much vodka did you have?" Charlie squats down, takes my hand, puts one arm around me. "Do you need to throw up?"

"What I want and must do are two different things," I say.

"We should go."

"No," I say, "it's important for you to be here. We don't have to leave yet."

"Soon," Charlie says. "Let me just say goodbye, and we're out of here."

"Okay."

Someone knocks on the door.

We exit the powder room, and of course, Molly stands right there, Tommy next to her. "He has to go," Molly says.

"What were they doing in there, Mom?"

"Thomas," Molly says, "just use the bathroom."

Tommy closes the door behind him.

"You two," she says, like she's trying to find us amusing but wants to destroy us at the same time.

"Molly," Charlie says, "this has been really great, but Donna and I have to get to another party."

"Oh no," Molly says. "But I haven't even gotten to catch up with Donna yet."

“Sorry,” Charlie says.

“Well,” Molly says, “I think Brad’s in the kitchen. Walk with me, and we can talk on the way.” Molly says this like the kitchen might take more than thirty seconds to get to, but then again, she’s always been that multi-tasking, student-council sort of creature.

“And,” she adds, winking at me, “looks like club soda worked its magic again, so don’t you worry about that loveseat.”

Thank you, God, for magical carbonation.

As we step into the kitchen, Molly asks, “So what are you doing these days?”

“I’m going back to school,” I say, “to be a mortician.”

“Oh my,” Molly says, “that sounds horrible.” I can see her imagining a cadaver.

“It’s really not. I actually like it.”

“Wow, you know, I mean, I think that sounds so brave,” Molly says, “for you to be so old and do something like that.”

“You’re this old,” I say. “We’re the same age.”

Charlie squeezes my hand.

“Oh, I know,” Molly says, “and here I am in my safe happy marriage and this big old house. I wish I were like you.”

“I think you’re lying,” I say. But I say this under my breath, and just then Brad comes over.

“Brad,” Molly says, “Donna and Charlie are leaving.”

“It’s too early, man,” Brad says to Charlie. “Have another beer.” Brad opens the refrigerator door and pulls out a Bud Light, hands it to Charlie.

“I really can’t,” Charlie says, “but thanks.”

Brad shrugs, cracks open the beer, and takes a swig. “Hey,” Brad says, “did you see Tommy’s artwork? Never know he was ten.”

“Nine,” Molly says. “He’s nine.”

“*I’m* nine,” Tommy says, fresh from the bathroom to rejoin his happy family unit.

“Tell them about your picture, kid,” Brad says.

Tommy’s picture of a pilgrim with a Native American man takes up most of the freezer door at the top of the fridge. “The pilgrim is teaching the Indian how to cook,” Tommy explains. “The Indians didn’t know how to cook before we got here.”

“Smart as a whip,” Brad says.

I can’t think of anything appropriate to say. “Mmm,” I offer.

“Smart as a whip,” Charlie says, “picking up on all of that bad history they teach in schools.”

Just then, I’m so grateful for Charlie I could bellow. Instead, I put my hand on the small of his back and hope he knows that’s what I mean.

“What do you mean, man?” Brad says.

“Well,” Charlie says, “I think the Native Americans knew how to do pretty much everything before the pilgrims got here and took their land.”

“*Time for us to go,*” I sing.

Although Molly doesn’t know the signal, she might have gotten a little smarter in the last twenty years, and she goes to get our coats.

“Thanks so much,” I say to Brad. “We had a great time.”

Charlie nods, and before Brad can respond, I steer Charlie to the front door.

Molly intercepts us on the way. “I have to put out a fresh plate of cocktail wieners,” she says, handing Charlie both coats. “I’m sure you can see yourselves out.”

“Of course,” I say. “To the wieners!”

She smiles, sort of, and heads to the kitchen.

Once outside, I discover that Charlie has taken one of Molly’s holiday wreaths out from under a mammoth candle. He holds it out to me for inspection and then he puts it on my head.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Consider yourself crowned,” he says, pulling a stray leaf off of the wreath. “I know it’s November, but it’s never too late to recognize royalty, right?”

I smile, and then I cry. Tears run out and down my face, making black spots on my shiny green dress. “I’m so sorry,” I say. “Will it be bad at work?”

“Well, I’ll get promoted,” Charlie says, “or I won’t.” With gloved fingertips, he wipes the tears from both sides of my face.

I sniffle.

“Pull it together, May Queen,” Charlie says. “We’re going downtown for a drink.”

I take Charlie’s hand, and we walk to the car, past the lawn goose and her outfit. I know that Molly Steinmart Davis is a duck, a young duck. And I am an old wise crocodile, which is, for all intents and purposes, basically a mermaid with a lovely song to sing.



## My Very Own Decorative Cabbage

8

I would like David Hasselhoff to be at my cousin Lena's wedding. Then I could dance with him instead of Uncle Lou. Uncle Lou's cologne smells like the air freshener in the bathroom at The Pancake House. Uncle Lou takes both my hands and starts to spin around with me. It makes me dizzy, and I taste a little throw up in my throat. I pull away.

"Come on, Donna," Uncle Lou says. "You let me lead." He lets me step on his feet, and we dance slower. I feel easier.

Still, I wish Uncle Lou was David Hasselhoff. I have even started a file on David. In *Knight Rider*, he plays Michael Knight, and he's so cool. In the file, I have a picture of David in a leather jacket leaning against Kit, his car on the show. A *Knight Rider* activity book with crossword puzzles and stickers. A coupon to Baskin Robbins because I read that David loves ice cream. A picture of me with different hair—I've cut out just the long red hair from some lady in a magazine and stuck it on my head, on a picture of me from Easter last year with Daddy. I've also cut out Daddy. He wouldn't want to be in the file. He thinks David Hasselhoff is a "pretty boy." Anyway, I wanted to see how I looked with red hair like April on *Knight Rider*, who Michael Knight loves.

Now Daddy and Mom dance around me and Uncle Lou. He dips her, and she laughs. They look at each other like my brother Brendan looks at fudge ripple ice cream.

They dance like couples in those black and white movies, and they are good, smooth, sailing across the floor.

I bet David Hasselhoff is a good dipper. I bet he'd dip me just perfect.

20

"Hey," Tom says, reaching out for my silver Italian horn. "What's this age old symbol of sensuality around your neck?" he asks.

"Oh, Jesus," Patty says and walks off of her porch and into her house. Then it's just me and Tom, my professor's husband. And my age old symbol of sensuality.

I bite my lower lip, wipe the dampness of hot September air off of the back of my neck. Tom lets go of the Italian horn, and the charm drops soft and cool right above my collar bone. What is Dr. Djinn's husband doing at this party? And where is his wife? Foxy, Patty would call her. In class, Dr. Djinn wears tank tops and big copper earrings. I didn't meet her till my sophomore year, last year, and already, she is my favorite professor.

Tom wears canvas pants and sandals, leather strapped across his tan feet. He has a tattoo of a squirrel on his right foot. I want to ask him about it.

"So," he says. "You're in Lola's class."

I nod. I think he is an actor. She teaches directing. I'd like to act with him. He smells not like beer but like good whiskey. As if reading my mind, he pulls out a flask, hands it to me. "Want a sip?" he asks.

Would I ever. "Okay," I say. "I'll try a little."

“She’ll try a little,” he announces, to no one in particular. It makes me feel like we’re in a play, romantic and exciting, and I don’t know what will happen next.

I sip the whiskey, lovely lava down my throat. Tom, this beautiful man, takes me hand, swings our arms back and forth. “What are you—Spanish?” he asks. “I love that dark hair and those eyes.”

“Italian,” I say. I look out onto the street, see Brad and Bill from acting class walking down the sidewalk toward Patty’s. I pull away my hand.

“Right,” he says.

He looks down, past my Italian horn. “I don’t know,” he says, “why a tall girl like you is wearing such a long skirt. I bet you’ve got legs from here to Sicily.”

“Hey, Donna,” Brad says, climbing the steps to the porch. “Where’s Patty?”

Tom takes a step back from me. “Inside,” I say.

“Hey, aren’t you Dr. Djinn’s husband?” Brad asks.

“You bet,” Tom says. “Jealous?” He grins.

Brad and Bill grin back. “Damn straight,” Brad says and shakes Tom’s hand.

“See you later, man,” Brad adds as they head in the house.

“See you guys,” I say as the screen door bounces closed behind them.

“Don’t know a good thing when they see it.” Tom takes my hand again.

“You mean Dr. Djinn—Lola?” I ask.

“No,” he says. “You.”

I pull his flask out of his other hand. “May I?”

He tilts his head to the side and leans in close. He whispers, “Yes you may.” I drink. After I reseal the cap, he says, “Come on.” He takes my hand, and pulls it. But I stand still. He tugs again. “I just want to show you something.”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Donna, every experience can be mined for your art.” He lets go of my hand. “Or you can have no experience and no art. Your choice.” He shrugs and walks down the front steps and around the side of the house.

I am alone on the porch. I hear Patty laughing inside. She’s having experiences. I walk down the steps, and Tom stands in the grass, leaning against the side of the house. “She chooses art.” He grins at me. “Come here.” When I stand in front of him, he says, “Close your eyes.”

I do, and I feel his hands run lightly down the sides of my torso. I think of the last guy who touched me, who didn’t even know how to hug, who couldn’t even kiss me straight on the lips.

Tom grabs me by the throat like he might strangle me, but slides his hands softer behind my neck. He kisses me. “You taste like my whiskey,” he says. “You taste like my drink. You want me to drink you, baby? You want that?”

I open my eyes. I’m not part of this, I think. I don’t want to be part of this. But I am. And I suddenly feel like I’m six and polite. “No thank you,” I say, in a voice barely there, a voice small and mousy. And I walk away from him. I hear him huff or I think I hear him huff, but he doesn’t follow me.

I walk into Patty’s house and tell her I’m leaving. Patty says, “God, Dr. Djinn’s husband is a total poser. I’m sorry you got stuck talking to him. How’d you get away?”

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14

After church on Sunday, the usher lady hands Mom a bulletin. “Are you seeing anyone?” Mary the usher lady asks Mom. “Singles-night bingo next Saturday. We’re having bean casserole. And the Berger brothers will be there.”

“My husband died,” Mom says.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Mary says. “I thought—when did that happen?”

“A year ago,” Mom says.

“Oh, Martha.” Mary smiles brightly, playfully, winks at Mom. “There are more fish in the sea.”

“No,” Mom says firmly, not smiling. “Just one for me. He was my only one.”

“Well.” Mary clears her throat, looks away from Mom. She finds me. “So Donna, how about you? Do you have a boyfriend?”

I shake my head no.

Mary clears her throat again, a high pitched clear. “Okay ladies, you have a good afternoon.”

“You too,” Mom says to Mary. She looks at me. “Let’s go.” As we walk through the parking lot past the statue of St. Francis, Mom shakes her head. “The nerve.”

I think, I want an only one. I also think, I don’t want him to die.

25

The convention was supposed to be in Florida. “You’ll have fun,” my boss Sal said. “You’ll represent the company.”

But the convention coincided with hurricane season, and now the convention is in Fargo. And I am drunk all of a sudden at the Fargo Traveller's Inn bar with a salesman from Albuquerque. He wears jeans and a T shirt that reads, "Hot Like Swayze." He wears it ironically, so I like him. He has thick dark blonde hair and a frat-boy smile, and when I ask him what he values most in life, he answers, "Thousand Island dressing."

I laugh and say, "I don't believe you. I'd like to believe you, but I don't."

"Okay, listen," he says. "It goes, money, family, sex."

"Sex is number three."

"Well, tonight it might be number one." He smiles a smile with too many teeth. Once I kissed a guy with too many teeth. I would like to kiss Rick from Albuquerque. He leans into me. "What about you? What's your business?"

"Office supplies."

"That's never going to go out of style."

"It might for me." My Miller Lite tastes watery, like I'm drinking nothing. "I'd rather be doing something else."

"Like what?" he asks and takes my hand. He runs his fingertips over the top of it, over my fingers. My neck is hot.

"I don't know," I say slowly. "I don't know."

"Let's have another round," he suggests.

"Yeah." I think that somehow drinking another drink will help me figure out what I really want to do, that Rick and I can figure it out together, that maybe he'll just want to cuddle next to me all night and kiss me and get room service with me in the morning. I sip at my cold beer, and he sips at his.

“Whiskey,” he says to the bartender.

“What kind?” the bartender asks.

“I don’t give a shit.” Rick laughs. “The whiskey kind.” Dad used to say never to trust a man who drank generic. Rick slaps his palm on the bar. “The young lady and I just want a shot.”

“We do?” I ask.

“Yep,” he says. “A good shot helps you sort through it all.”

The bartender pours topaz colored liquid into two thin shot glasses. I slug the whiskey back. Rick does the same. “Want some more Anykind?” the bartender asks.

“As a matter of fact, we do,” I say.

The bartender shakes his head and pours.

Two shots later, I feel myself against the wall outside my room. Rick breathes into my neck. He’s reaching under my dress, and I hear my underwear rip. I laugh. “Oh, god,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry,” I whisper.

Then we’re in my room, and I try to push words out of my lips. “I just want . . .”

“Yeah, baby, tell me what you want.” I realize Rick straddles me as he says this, his pants are unzipped, and he’s pushing my dress up and ripping off the other side of my underwear.

“I don’t.” I try to sit up. “Don’t.”

“What is the problem baby?”

“You’re slurring, Rick.”

“Listen to who’s talking,” he slurs.

“I am not,” I try to say, but I know it sounds more like “Mamn’t.”

“What?” Rick kisses my neck, hot breathy sloppy.

“You’re not what I asked for,” I say.

“Huh?”

“I did a ritual,” I say.

“Tired.” Rick sighs, and his body goes heavy and limp over mine.

“Tired,” I agree, and put my arms around him until I can’t breathe. Then I push him off and roll away. I curl up like a fortune cookie.

The next morning, my phone rings a wakeup call at seven. My flight back to Dayton leaves at ten.

I lie alone in my bed. On the nightstand is the hotel’s business card. On the back, he’s written, “Maybe next time, RICK,” and his phone number. You really want me to call you, Rick? My head throbs, and the cheap foam board ceiling tiles spin around. I look to the floor and see my new black silk underwear splayed open like an animal pelt.

I am disgusting.

On the flight home, I sleep through the first drink service. When I wake, the man next to me hands me tomato juice with ice and a lime. He looks like Icabod Crane, and I can tell that airplane seats must suck for his long arms and legs. I take the juice.

“I thought you might need some,” he says. His eyes are fresh and soft, like grass. I’d like to lie down there for a rest, but I can’t look at him right now or I will cry.

I turn away and nod. “Thank you,” I say.

“I’m Charlie,” he says. “I like juice.”

“I’m Donna,” I say, glancing back for just a second. “I hate hangovers.”



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17

Becky and I sing to our Spanish IV class, “*Señor Sandman, me trae un sueño.*” Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream. We think we are cool and funny. We act like we’ve already had our dreams brought to us. Well, Becky maybe has, but I haven’t even had a boyfriend yet.

“*Excelente,*” Mr. Trauth says when we finish.

The class claps. Jim, who has a crush on Becky, smiles at her.

I scan the classroom. No one looks at me.

After class, Jim says to Becky, “You should come to the soccer party this weekend,” he says.

Becky looks at me.

“You can bring Donna,” Jim says. “My cousin Tim will be in town.”

I shrug my shoulders at Becky. “Okay.”

She nods at Jim. “Okay, we’ll come.”

That weekend, Becky drives us home from the party out in Beavercreek, and Jim sits in the front with her. I ride in the back seat with Tim, nineteen and a freshman in college. Tim told me he studies painting, and he told me I was the smartest girl at the party. “You’re more beautiful than you know,” Tim had said as we sunk into a corner of the old basement couch, shared with two soccer players with freshmen girls on their laps. I looked away, fiddled with the silver turtle ring on my index finger.

Now, as we start the twenty-five minute trek back home, Tim lies down in my lap, his hand cupped around my leg, right above my knee, under the long crinkly gypsy skirt I borrowed from Becky.

I close my eyes, rest my hand on the back of his neck where his hair softens and curls.

Becky puts on her R.E.M. tape. Jim says, “I love this one.”

I feel the motor rumble through me as Becky pulls out onto Woodland Road.

Tim reaches further up my skirt. His fingers play around on my thighs. This is new. This is, wow. He plays over my underwear and then under it. I think I should stop him, but his fingertips are soft and gentle, and I think of guitar strings and that Spanish folk music Mr. Trauth played for us last week—love songs. I am an instrument.

“I think Donna’s asleep,” Becky whispers to Jim.

“Tim, too,” Jim says. “If I wasn’t driving . . .”

Becky giggles.

Tim strums faster.

Then he slips a finger inside of me—I’m surprised how easily it glides in—and his thumb makes circles. Now he finger paints. I feel wet, and I imagine shimmery paint where his hand slips and slides. I am a canvas.

“My parents are out with Tim’s parents,” Jim says. “They’ll be home late. You should come in when you drop us off.”

“Should I?” Becky says.

Tim brushes and strokes and dips his brush in the paint well, in and out. Oh my god, what’s happening to my body?

“I think so,” Jim says. “I think that would be a great idea.”

Tim presses his thumb, makes a firm smudge and all of a sudden, I feel like I’m swallowing something delicious on the whole outside of myself, like I’m turned inside out. With my eyes still closed, I see a kaleidoscope of red and blue and purple light. I suck in air and gasp just a little. My eyes snap open.

Tim stops pressing and stroking, rests his hand on the inside of my thigh.

Jim turns around. “Hey there, sleepyhead,” he says, smiling at me like a dad. “We’re almost at your house.”

“Okay,” I say softly and close my eyes again. Tim squeezes my leg. I squeeze the back of his neck. I melt into the car seat.

24

I say, “Should we paint our faces?”

“No,” Liz says. “This is serious.”

Liz’s apartment dangles with paper lanterns and soft red light. It actually smells like incense and peppermints. Like a sheik, Liz drapes tapestries in bright rich colors. Liz does travel writing. Liz gets around, and she describes herself as “a child of the world.” Apparently world children don’t like face paint in their rituals.

“Face paint can be serious,” I say.

Liz looks at me, rolls her eyes. I work for a company that sells staplers. I wouldn’t really know. “Now,” Liz says. “We list all of the things we want in a man.”

I smell the sage Liz used to smudge the room. “How about organs, a circulatory system?” I ask.

“Donna,” Patty says, sounding like Mom, telling me to watch my smart mouth.  
“It’s important to tell the universe what you want.”

I try to think of something witty to say back. I can’t. Maybe this is important.  
“Why?” I ask.

“So the universe knows what to give you,” Patty says.

“The Moon Goddess,” Liz corrects.

“Whatever.” Patty shrugs

“We’re doing a ritual to the Moon Goddess.” Liz sets a purple pen and a piece of  
homemade paper in front of Patty.

Patty picks up the pen. “The Moon Goddess is in the universe.”

“Just make your lists,” Liz says. She turns on some instrumental music, her yoga  
cd. I try not to make a joke about feeling like we’re in the Temple of Doom.

I sip at cheap chocolate liqueur in a goblet. I start to write. *Funny, kind, nice  
hands.* Does that belong in this list? *Good dancer, smart. Kind.*

28

I inhale Rob’s second-hand smoke from the passenger seat of his Volvo. He says,

“Should I come inside?”

“I’m not sure,” I say. “I don’t want to rush things.” I want to do this right. I feel  
hot and tingly in my sundress. “I just broke up with someone,” I blurt. “He was too  
busy. He’s doing an MBA”

“I’m not him,” Rob says.

He’s right. He’s not Charlie.

“Okay, just come inside for some tea,” I say.

He nods. He comes upstairs. In my front hallway, he stands.

“I’ll be back,” I say.

On my way to the bathroom, on the hallway wall I see a giant cockroach, and I get sick to my stomach. I kill it. In the bathroom, I see another, and I kill it.

Rob’s not in the living room when I come out, so I walk the hall back to my bedroom. He sits on my bed. “Come here,” he says. He holds out his hand, and I walk to him. “I want to make you feel good.”

“Okay,” I say.

He pulls me down next to him, lays me back. He inches my skirt off and kneels at the foot of my bed, spreads my legs slowly and deliberately. I feel his breath through my underwear. He slides them down and off. And then he starts to lick.

I think I should stop him. I didn’t want to be here. I tense my legs.

“Relax, Donna,” he says. “This is just for you.”

It feels good, and I let him lick, let him make me come, let this be just for me until I cry out.

Rob looks up at me and grins. Then he slides next to me on the bed. “Did that feel good?”

“It did.” I feel quivery and sated. I cuddle next to him.

“Now I’d like you to suck me,” he whispers.

I freeze. The good feeling drains from me. Ah, I think, reciprocal. I remember my friend’s mom saying, you shouldn’t give anything because you want something in return. If you can’t give joyfully and without expectation, don’t give at all.

All of the sudden, I feel the weight of his expectation. I got you off, now you get me off. Hmm. Okay, that's how it works. I feel trapped all of a sudden, like I've been tricked and sold, and I find myself with this man's penis in my mouth, not sure why I'm doing it, but doing it anyway. And then, he's on top of me, ready to put himself inside of me, and I say, "Wait." I say, "Hold up."

"What?"

"I don't have any condoms," I say.

"Listen, I'm not going to get you sick, and I'm not going to get you pregnant."

Okay. This man is not Charlie. I wish he were Charlie.

"There's nothing wrong with feeling good," Rob says. "Be in the moment."

And it all sounds very logical to me, very sensible, even very philosophically resonant with me. There isn't anything wrong with feeling good and living in the moment and not feeling guilty. But there is something wrong. Since I can't figure out what it is, I say, "Okay." I push Charlie out of my mind. Why should I go against my own philosophy?

Rob slides inside me, pumps in and out. "Feels good, right?"

"Yes," I say, and it does. Sort of.

Rob's right. He doesn't get me sick and he doesn't get me pregnant. I should feel lucky.

6

Our doorbell rings. It's eight o'clock, and Mommy looks upset. "Who could that be?"

When she answers the door, I stand behind her and peek out. It's Billy Lewis from school. He goes to morning kindergarten with me. He's with his dad.

"Billy," Billy's dad says to him.

Billy looks down and shakes his head.

"Billy wanted to show Donna his swamp creature."

"Okay," Mommy says. "So that's what they're calling it these days."

Billy's Dad turns red and laughs. Mommy laughs too, but I'm not sure why anyone is laughing. Billy looks at his Dad's coat pocket, and Billy looks like he might cry.

"Where is it?" I ask.

Billy turns to me. "You want to see it?"

I look at Mommy. She nods. "Sure," I say.

Billy pulls out from behind his back this clear plastic monster thing, a little bigger than my Barbie, with lots of muscles like the bodybuilder who lives down the street. It has lots of teeth and inside it there's green goop that moves around where Billy squeezes it.

Mommy clears her throat. "That's very nice, Billy."

I hear the green stuff squish. "Ew," I say.

"Yeah," Billy says.

35

Charlie and I rock on our porch swing, on the porch of our new cottage, ten minutes away from Brighton Brother's Funeral Home, where I work.

The sharp crescent of moon slivers the sky. It's September and still warm at night.

"I might get something to drink," I say. "Want something?"

"I'm Charlie. I like juice," he says, like he does all the time, like he did on the plane when we met.

"Okay, weirdo." I move to stand.

"No. It's too beautiful to get up." Charlie leans his head on my shoulder.

"Okay. Let's just stay here." I trace circles on his leg, the denim smooth under my finger tips. I listen to his breath push out of his lips, like it does when he falls asleep. I feel a puff of warm air on my collarbone.

The sleepy twilight also breathes soft, the breeze rustling the leaves of our first house plant. In the small terra cotta pot, in the corner of the porch, sprouts one of those purple decorative cabbages. Uncle Lou brought it over last week when we moved in.

"It's your very own personal housewarming plant," he said and handed me the pot.

"Isn't that some kind of cabbage?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah," Uncle Lou said, "I wanted something Italian, like an olive tree. But at Frank's Nursery, Frank himself said those won't grow in Dayton. And I know cabbage is one of them Polack things." He sighed and reached out, touching a pointy edge of cabbage with his fingertip. "But I thought it was pretty, and you know, something you don't get all the time."

"Thanks, Lou," Charlie said, shaking Uncle Lou's hand.



“I love it,” I said and set the pot in the front corner where I thought it would be sunny.

Now, a week later, it’s still the only thing on the porch other than the swing, Charlie, and me. We all work well together, I think.

Charlie wakes suddenly and says, “What?”

“What?” I ask back.

He hooks his arm through my arm and rubs his nose against my shoulder. “What do you need, babe?” His arm drifts down, and his hand rests on my leg.

I turn and kiss his forehead. He’s struggling to open his eyes. He’s smiling a crescent smile. “Nothing,” I say.

My own eyes start to close, lids slipping down with gravity. It’s warm where my body meets Charlie’s. I imagine the warmth glowing soft orange-red, sealing us together. I push my foot onto the wooden porch floorboard, and we rock, Charlie and I, just a little. Back and forth. Forth and back.

I am ready for a deep sleep, the kind when I don’t wake up in the middle of the night needing a glass of orange juice or wondering if I locked the front door. The kind when I can’t remember my dreams, but just wake up sated.

## Ten Kids

Gwen moves nimbly up the mountain ahead of me in her yellow designer sports bra, smattered with daisies. Arms pumping, perfect skin glistening. A gold patch on her three hundred dollar tennis shoes catches the sun and reflects back into my eyes.

It doesn't matter. My eyes already sting from the sweat dripping down my forehead. My T-shirt is soaked at my chest and my stomach. I hike slowly, my knees stinging in the joints. My own forty-dollar Tennis Shooz from the discount store are rubbing a blister into my right heel.

Gwen waits for me at the top of the mountain. She smiles there as if she's Mistress of the Woods, as if the sun would rise and set for her and the big, beautiful oak trees would sway with the wind into a gentle bow at her feet.

The sun burns hot on my forearms where I was already red from the sun beating into the car windows on the ride down through Ohio and Kentucky and into Tennessee. Even the breeze feels oppressive. When I reach the small, flat stretch at the mountaintop, I squint up at the canopy of trees and spot a scraggly-tailed squirrel that promptly drops a chestnut on my head.

Gwen giggles and then asks, "Donna, are you all right?"

I hold my fingertips to the echo of chestnut on my scalp, and I collapse onto the ground, prostrate, where I feel most comfortable. Dirt understands me. Dirt *recognizes* me. Hey, *Simpatico*, Dirt says.

"Donna?"

“I’m fine,” I say, breathing heavily. “I just need to lie here for a minute.” Gwen crouches down next to me, all perky aerobic concern. “Alone,” I say, pressing my cheek into earth.

“Okay,” she says and stands up. I can tell she’s not sure what to do, and I don’t want to help her or make it any easier. This, along with everything else, isn’t easy for me right now. I want to be nimble and graceful, but I feel, as Mom would say, like a bull in china shop. And there’s no door big enough for me to get out. I keep clunking around in places like Salvatore’s Office Supplies, where I’ve been Supply Manager two years too long. And now I’m clunking around a bizarre vacation on a spirit-breaking hike with Gwen. This doesn’t feel like the top of the mountain. All of this work, and I feel like I haven’t gotten anywhere.

After a few minutes, I sit up for a while and still don’t speak. Gwen paces, stretches, relaces her shoes. Finally, I say, “Let’s go,” and we start our descent.

Back at the cabin, B kisses Gwen on the cheek. B usually looks bright-eyed and ready to go. But since he and Gwen got here yesterday, he looks like he hasn’t slept in years. He asks Gwen, “So, did you give my sister a run for her money?”

Gwen looks at her shoes and taps each toe. “We had a good time,” she says.

“Lies.” I force a smile. “Your wife beat me up the mountain. All three miles.”

Gwen says to Charlie, “Your girlfriend’s a good hiker. But it was two miles.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I read it in the guide book. It said—”

“Okay, whatever,” B interrupts. “Does it matter?”

Charlie hugs me. He whispers into my ear, “You look hot when you’re sweaty.” I lean into his skinny self.

Gwen shrugs. “I’m just good at physical things.”

My little sister, Linnie, laughs and twists her fingers around the ends of her straight, long hair, this month green and black striped—a little painful on the eyes right next to Linnie’s boyfriend Snooter’s bright red spikes. It’s like Christmas and death had babies. Snooter says, “Right on, let’s get physi-cal.” I think Snooter looks at Linnie then, but his eyelids rest perpetually at half-mast, so it’s hard to tell.

“Donna looks like she got physical,” Linnie says.

“Like you could do any better.” I am no longer smiling. “She’s an aerobics instructor. I work with copy machines. Cut me a break.”

“And you’re good at things I’m not good at,” Gwen says to me.

I almost demand that she list those things, but I’m afraid the list might just include items like breathing or blinking. So I go to the shower instead.

Originally, I thought this sounded like a horror-movie-to-be—three grown siblings gathered with their significant others in an isolated cabin outside of Knoxville. But now I just wonder which one of us will get drowned first by the tentacled beast in the lake. I’m hoping Linnie, since this was her idea. This past May, just after she graduated from college and decided to like her family again after a seven-year hiatus, she proposed the idea while we drank beers in Mom’s basement. “All of us are with someone,” she said to me, “finally.” She said this as though getting Snooter to be her official boyfriend came as a hard-won victory.

“Mom’s not,” I said.

Linnie frowned, and for a second looked like she was about six, the summer before Daddy died. “Donna,” she said, working the frown away, “you’re twenty-seven years old. You want your mother to come on the couples trip?”

Sadly, part of me did. Who would protect me from all of the couple-ness? “No,” I said. Actually, Charlie and I hadn’t been away together for a year, since we went camping with his hippie parents. Like Charlie, his parents are really down-to-earth, soothing people, so going away with Charlie is always fun. Since he was about to start an M.B.A. program in the fall, I was tempted for us to have some time away. I considered how we might travel with my siblings and avoid them at the same time.

Linnie said, “It’ll be fun for all of us to do something together.”

“Wasn’t Christmas enough?” I asked.

“That’s different,” she said. “Mom’s there. We couldn’t misbehave.” Linnie glanced toward the door to the upstairs where Mom was assembling tiles on a mosaic table, making a pot roast, and likely inventing cold fusion. Mom throws off the curve for the rest of us regular people.

“What if I can’t get off work?” I asked Linnie.

“Sal was Daddy’s friend. You don’t think he’ll let you take a long weekend?”

Of course Sal would. And I thought of the smell of live trees versus the smell of Salvatore’s twenty-four pound, acid-free, copy paper. “Of course he will,” I said, “but do you really want to spend a whole four days with Gwen?”

“Come on,” she said. “Gwen’s great.”

Linnie had decided this when Gwen bought her a yoga mat for Christmas last year. And a purple, terrycloth bathrobe. “Gwen knows luxury,” Linnie had said. Snooter

had gotten Linnie three jugs of Carlo Rossi *Paisano*, so her luxury gauge was just a touch off. I had gotten Linnie a book of wolf photographs. Even though she loves wolves, a book is still a book, and a yoga mat is more like a toy. And, apparently, a luxury. So in our mother's basement, looking at my baby sister wanting badly to have a couples trip and not wanting Gwen to out-cool me, I gave in. "Okay," I said, "but Gwen is not great."

"Fine." Linnie stuck out her tongue at me. "I'll take care of all of the details. You just have to come and bring Chaz."

"Don't call him that. You sound like Uncle Lou."

"God forbid," she said and spat on the ground to her left.

"Okay, we'll come. And maybe B and Gwen will too." I spat on top of her spit. "God forbid." We laughed. Hanging out with my sister wouldn't be so bad.

"Oh, they already agreed," Linnie said brightly. "Gwen can't wait."

"You asked her first? You're not even technically related."

"It just came up." Linnie leaned in and squeezed my hand. "It's not like we planned something without you. We both want you to come."

"Oh, gross." I pulled my hand away. "It's like you two are married or something."

"Now that's gross," Linnie said. "Come on, Donder, you'll have a great time. And you and Charlie can have the room with the fireplace."

"There's a room with a fireplace?"

So, this first week in June, all three of us wrangled up our significant others and went on vacation together. Linnie found us a cabin in the Smoky Mountains, just about

an hour outside of Knoxville. Gwen and B drove in from Pittsburgh, and the other four of us carpooled from Ohio. Travel highlights: Snooter asking Charlie non-stop questions about MBAs and then Charlie listening patiently as Snooter gave a detailed rundown of the “Sippy-Cups for Grown-Ups” business he wants to start. A long six hours.

After just one day here, with ice secured in plastic grocery bags resting on my swollen knees, and myself secured in a musty cabin couch corner, I’m doubting my ability to make a good decision. And I’m starving.

“I’m starving,” B says. We’re often hungry at the same time.

“Not-it for cooking,” I say. “My knees are two sizes too big.”

“Like the Grinch’s heart,” Snooter says.

The rest of us look at Snooter.

“I can grill us some cheeseburgers for dinner,” B says.

“And dude, we got vegetables,” Snooter declares, “so I’m on the kabobs.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Pardon?”

“Big D,” he says, “we’re about to have a kabob jamboree.”

I nod. “I don’t doubt it.”

“I’d like to help,” Gwen offers.

“Okay,” Linnie says. “You want to do some potatoes?”

“Baked?” Gwen asks.

“Totally.” Snooter snorts a stream of laughter as he goes to skewer vegetables.

Once B and Snooter gather meat and whatever is necessary for a successful kabob jamboree, they head outside to the grill on the left of the cabin. Gwen cleans potatoes, Linnie cuts limes, and Charlie gets beers for everyone.

While Gwen finishes the potatoes, Charlie and Linnie and I drink Coronas on the front porch. I lick at the lime pieces still stuck to the bottle top.

“Not a bad way to spend an evening,” Charlie says.

“Aren’t you glad you came?” Linnie asks.

I nod. Out across the lake, birch and maple trees gently wave their branches at us, and a hum of insects drones steadily, punctuated by bird calls. I start to relax. My knees unswell. The tension slips from my temples. I close my eyes and sigh.

And then I hear shrieking from inside the cabin.

Charlie jumps up and runs inside. Linnie and I follow, my ice bags clunking to the porch floor.

Smoke drifts under the swinging door to the kitchen. Charlie pushes it in, and we go after him. Through the foggy air is Gwen’s silhouette, coughing and doubled over, next to the microwave. The door hangs open and smoke spills out. As the air clears, we all see the remains of six crinkly aluminum-foiled potatoes.

“Here Gwen, move away from the smoke,” Charlie says and leads her to the kitchen sink. He opens the window above it.

I open the outside door, and B and Snooter walk in with a tray of burgers and grilled vegetable cubes. “Kabob-a-rama,” Snooter says. “What’s that smell?”

B looks at Gwen. “Honey?”

With the back of her hand, Gwen wipes her eyes, smears a streak of mascara down her cheek. She stammers, “Usually I just buy my food. Usually, I go to the Organic Grocery.”

“That must get expensive,” I say. “Good thing my brother’s an engineer.”



Gwen looks at B, who frowns.

From what B has told me, Gwen's never been much of a conventional cook. I don't know that she actually cooks at all. Mostly, she eats sprouts and dry foods or things like kelp and carrots. She often won't eat things at Mom's house. For instance, last Fourth of July, she asked Mom, "How much fat is in these cookies?"

"I'm sorry?" Mom said.

"The proportion," Gwen said. "You know, the percentage."

Mom raised an eyebrow at Gwen. "I know what proportion means."

"Of course," Gwen said.

"And I have no idea." Mom took the plastic wrap off of a tray of snickerdoodles. "They're cookies. Cookies have fat in them. That's what makes them good."

Any normal person would have dropped it, but Gwen continued. "Actually, you could make them with yogurt."

Nobody asked you Gwen, I thought, but didn't say it.

"That's an interesting idea." This was Mom's way of saying hell would freeze over, thaw and refreeze before she'd make snickerdoodles with yogurt instead of butter. Mom is a diplomat.

I'm not. "Yogurt's gross," I said. Then I made Gwen an abominably strong gin and tonic—a tactic I no longer use because of the repercussions. When Gwen drinks too much, at least as far as I've seen at family functions, she starts to dance. Or she likes to have sing-a-longs. So that Fourth of July, I had to cull my musical depths.

"Let's have a sing-a-long," Gwen said.

“Yes, please,” Mom said. “Donna, why don’t you play something?” And I found myself at the piano with Gwen breathing a gin and flat-noted version of “Send in the Clowns” behind me. The clowns never came.

Now I look at her and wonder why on earth someone doesn’t know that aluminum foil and microwaves don’t mix.

“I’m so sorry, everyone,” Gwen says and looks like she might cry.

B squeezes her shoulder. “Hey, no problem, we’ve got burgers.”

“And skewers,” Snooter adds.

“I’m going to go clean up.” Gwen touches her cheeks. “My makeup must look atrocious.” After a deep breath, she says, “Let me just pull myself together, and I’ll be right back.” She looks at each of us. “I’m sorry.”

“Baby,” B says, “don’t you worry about it.”

“Go get cleaned up so you can eat,” Linnie says.

Gwen wipes at corners of her eyes. “Thanks.”

While Gwen cleans up, I walk out onto the porch to get some air. Charlie follows.

I elbow him and start giggling. “What an idiot,” I whisper.

Instead of laughing, Charlie bites his lip and shrugs. “I don’t agree.”

I stop giggling.

“Honey, she’s trying. She wants to fit in. She’s nervous.” Charlie puts his hands in his pockets and looks out to the lake. “I know how she feels.”

“You’re nervous? About what?”

“Fitting in.” Charlie glances at me, then goes back to watching the water. “Here. And starting school again. I’m not eighteen anymore.”

I elbow him again. “Come on. You’re not nervous about anything.” I smile at him. “And you have to admit that Gwen’s a little bit of an idiot.”

“No, I don’t,” Charlie says. “And you don’t know everything about everyone.”

“Who says I do?”

“Oh please, Donna. You’re never wrong.”

“That’s not true.”

“See?”

From inside, Linnie yells, “Hey everyone, dinner’s getting cold.”

“I’m hungry,” Charlie says and leaves me standing on the porch.

The next morning, I’m up at seven while Charlie still snores away. I lie in bed for half an hour, willing myself back to sleep, but I can’t fight it anymore.

I head out to the kitchen which still smells vaguely of smoky metallic potato. And, thank God, someone made coffee. It pours out thick and dark into my mug, and I know who’s up.

B sits on the front porch.

“Um, I’m glad I could join you here at the truck stop,” I say, raising my mug in greeting.

He laughs. “If the coffee’s not strong, it’s not coffee.”

I sit down next to him on the porch swing and plant my feet on the ground to keep the swing from moving. “You couldn’t sleep either?”

“No, I’m used to this.”

“Oh right, you get up crazy early for work.”

“Yeah,” he says, “when I still worked there.”

“What?”

“I got the boot.” He laughs, but it’s sharp and scratchy and sounds like it hurts.

And the bags look a little darker under his eyes.

“Oh, B, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” I grab his hand.

“Things are just rough right now.”

I think of Gwen’s fancy tennis shoes and trips to the organic grocery and want to pummel her. “Do you need anything?”

B shakes his head. “I’m good at what I do. I just want to keep doing it.”

“Something will open up.” I squeeze his hand.

B smiles at me. “Thanks, Donder.” In one gulp, he finishes his coffee. “Hey, I think I’m going for a swim. Wanna come?”

“Meet you there?”

He nods, and I watch him walk the windy path down to the lake. I think how I hate my own job and feel guilty since I’m actually employed. The best thing about Sal’s has been meeting Charlie on the plane back from an office supply convention in Fargo.

I would love to know what I’m good at and then do that, like B. Or like Gwen, who is an idiot no matter what Charlie thinks. Or like Charlie. Who apparently is nervous about business school. And thinks I’m a jerk. Well, I feel like a jerk, too. I’m trying to embrace a career in office supplies, to be good at it. I’d love to go back to

school, too, but what the hell would I study? Everything should be falling into place, but for me, it's not.

I stand up to go inside and get my swimsuit. I see B down by the lake, small and far away, which is how I feel.

That night, after a fire-free dinner of salami sandwiches and macaroni salad, we gather in the cabin living room and a storm picks up. The rain drums against the roof and splatters the window panes.

“Should we play a game or something?” Charlie asks.

“Let's play ‘I Never,’” Snooter says.

Charlie laughs. “Are you kidding me?”

“Dude,” Snooter says, “I bought all of this Carlo Rossi. Someone has to drink it.”

“That,” I say, “is up for debate.”

Linnie looks at me with pleading eyes.

B jumps in and says, “Well, I'll have a glass. Snooter, you've twisted my arm.”

“That's what I'm talking about.” Snooter high-fives B. “My man.”

B kicks me in the shin. “Ow!” I say.

“What?” Snooter asks.

“Wow, I mean, I, wow that looks good. I'll have some, too.” I give B the evil eye.

“Right on.” Snooter pours me a mug of Paisano.

Linnie starts to take a drink.

“We're not playing yet,” I say.

“Oh.” She puts her cup down.

Gwen asks, "How do you play?"

Snooter sets down his glass, rubs his hands together like an old professor. "Well, I say something like, 'I never had sex in a broom closet,' and anyone who has had sex in a broom closet has to drink."

After Snooter gives three more examples, from which I gather that he and my little sister have had sex in a convenience store bathroom, a truck bed not belonging to them, and Mom's basement couch on which I regularly sit and read, I'm already feeling the cheap red wine. The game is afoot.

Charlie says, "I never snorted a beverage out of my nose from laughing." Of course, Linnie snorts right then, and we all laugh.

After a few more, Gwen is up and slurring her words. I worry she might sing. "Okay," she says. "I never had a squirrel hit me on the head with a nut."

I shoot her a dirty look. Then I drink, and Snooter does, too.

"Wasn't that funny, Donna?" Gwen asks. She smiles at me, teeth stained a purple hue. "You were really sweaty, and that squirrel just bonked you, right?"

I take another drink, slowly, stare deep into my mug. Tell me, Carlo Rossi, what would you do?

"Come on, Donder, it's your turn," Linnie says.

I smile at Gwen. "I never put aluminum foil in the microwave and set our dinner on fire."

Snooter laughs, but no one else does. Gwen sips her wine.

"Donna!" Linnie says and sounds like Mom.

"What?" I ask.

“No, Linnie, it was funny,” Gwen says.

Charlie folds a gum wrapper smaller and smaller. He won’t even look at me. In the living room, silence settles like the Black Death.

Finally, Gwen says, “You know, I’m tired.”

“I am, too,” B says, and jumps up with her. He doesn’t look at me as they head down the hall to bed.

Later, after everyone’s in their rooms, I’m getting a glass of water and find B in the kitchen.

“Hey there,” I say.

B finishes filling two glasses at the sink, and without turning around, says, “You don’t have to be such an ass.”

“Listen, she started it.”

He turns to me. “You should go easy on her.”

“She should go easy on you.”

“Look, I love her, and she loves me. We’re in this together. Maybe you could try to understand that.” He takes the glasses and walks out. The cold of the stone floor pushes up through my socks. I feel sick.

At B and Gwen’s wedding two years ago, I felt like that, too. I wanted to like her, but I just didn’t. Gwen had her hair in a tight bun and she wore pink lipstick, and sure she was pretty, but it seemed so fake to me. Of course I also wasn’t pleased about the yards of pale yellow taffeta wrapped around me and the other bridesmaids or the large bows perched above our asses. I remember wondering how my smart brother could choose such a dimwit.

Now I take my water and walk down the hall. When I pass Gwen and B's room, I hear crying, and it sounds like my brother. Then I hear Gwen speak very softly. I don't want to eavesdrop, but since I'm already a jerk, I lean against the door and put my whole self into listening. Don't even consider being mean to my brother, I think. If you do, I'll come in there and kick your ass.

But, with my ear pressed to the door, I distinctly hear Gwen say, "It's all going to work out, honey. I called Cynthia this morning, and I picked up three more classes. It'll give you some time to look." Her voice is kind and soft, like moonlight, like water. And then she says, in the same voice, "No matter what, I'm yours. I'm yours."

In our room with the fireplace, Charlie has fallen asleep reading, his dark-rimmed glasses halfway down his long nose. I touch his arm. He mumbles and then starts. "I'm up," he says.

"You're asleep."

Charlie pulls off his glasses and sets them and his book on the nightstand. "Ready for bed?"

I shake my head.

"What?" He forces his eyes open.

I confess to Charlie what I just heard. I add, "God, I'm a punk."

Charlie rubs his eyes. "Honey, sometimes we all do shit we're not proud of."

"You don't."

"Of course I do." Charlie touches my cheek with his fingertips. "Baby, you definitely need to cut people a little slack. But more than anything, you need to cut yourself some."



“Okay.” I take Charlie’s hand and kiss his fingertips. “But what about Gwen? What would you do?”

“Do we have to talk about this now?” he asks.

“No,” I say, but not convincingly.

“Listen, I would try my best to make it right, to say I’m sorry and mean it, and then I move on.”

“Will you apologize for me?”

“Donna.”

“Just kidding.” I slide under the covers next to him. “But do you still love me?” I glance at him and feel shy. “Even if I’m a punk?”

“You’re my punk,” he says and pulls me in for a kiss. “Now get some sleep.” He turns out the light and rolls over. In approximately thirty seconds, he falls asleep. The last few red embers in the fire place work hard to stay awake with me, but soon, it’s just me in the dark.

The next morning, Gwen and B pack a lunch and go for an all-day hike. Linnie and Snooter have sex for most of the day in their room, which I don’t want to know about but have to listen to, so Charlie and I escape to swim in the lake. Like most grown-ups, we all do an exceptional job of avoiding any possible tension.

Around ten, everyone is home and sitting tentatively near each other in the living room.

“Want to have a cigarette, man?” Charlie says to B. “I don’t usually, but I have an emergency pack.”

“You know, I do,” B says and turns to Snooter. “You in?”

“Fuck yeah,” Snooter says. “And, I’ve got my own little emergency kit to bring. Smokin’ with the boys.”

“We’ll be back,” Charlie says. “I think maybe we need a late night hike.

“Smokin’ and hikin’ with the boys,” Snooter says.

“Fuck yeah,” Charlie says, grins, and gives me a thumbs-up.

“Oh my God,” I say.

“Fuck yeah,” B says and kisses Gwen on the cheek. “You’ll be all right?” B eyes me peripherally, suspiciously.

“I’m fine,” Gwen says. “We’ll find something to do.”

“Yeah,” Linnie says. “We’ll have our own fun.”

When the boys leave, quiet perches around us again, and we all stare at different corners of the cabin.

“Well, Snooter’s Paisano is gone,” Linnie says.

“What to do?” Gwen asks.

“Should we look for him?” I ask. “He’s probably tall.”

“And hairy,” Gwen says. Well-played, Gwen.

“You’re both very funny.” Linnie drums her fingers on the arm of the chair, then stops suddenly. “I could pass around my pipe.”

“I’ve never smoked,” Gwen says, looking interested. Linnie jumps up and gets a ziplock bag and a tie-dyed ceramic pipe from her backpack in the corner.

“I haven’t really either,” I say.

“Really?” Linnie packs the pipe with what looks like dead leaves.

“Well, just a few times at college.” I shrug. “But I’m not a good inhaler.”

“I thought you were good at everything,” Gwen says.

“I’m not. I’m often an unskilled asshole.” I pull at a string in the carpet. “You may have noticed.”

“Maybe a little.” Gwen smiles at me.

“Okay, let’s do this.” Linnie holds a light to one end and sucks on the other of the pipe and passes it to Gwen, who puffs it right in like a pro. Gwen passes it to me, and Linnie relights it as I inhale. It burns my throat. My eyes water. I cough.

“And she says she can’t inhale,” Linnie says.

Three long hits in, and we’re all feeling giggly. Linnie says, “Let’s talk about sex.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to know one more thing about your sex life.”

“I don’t want to know about yours either.” Linnie sticks her tongue out.

“Well then, there’s nothing to talk about,” I say.

Linnie looks at Gwen. “You could tell us how you met B.”

I hit Linnie’s arm with the back of my hand. “Hey, no-memory, we know this story. Gwen was glistening beautifully on the treadmill, and B couldn’t stop drooling, so they fell in love with two straws tucked into a protein shake.”

“Actually,” Gwen says, “it was more like I fell down on the treadmill and looked like a klutz. And we fell in love over a bruise and an ice-pack.”

I laugh, a scoffing one. “You fell down?”

“I’m not a superhero.” Gwen passes the pipe to me, and I take a drag.

“Donna is,” Linnie says, the way she used to say things to piss me off, when I was a teenager and she wasn’t.

I don't want to be pissed off, so I close my eyes as I inhale. Suddenly, I see myself in yards of red spandex, flying over my life and trying to maintain some order. I blow out the smoke. "Yes I am." I open my eyes. "I'd either be The Copier or The Paper Cut, wielding office supplies to bring the world to its knees."

"Oh, yeah." Linnie's eyes light up. "Gwen can be The Aerobicizer. And I'll be Wonder Weed." She snorts, immediately followed by Gwen, and we all laugh until our eyes are watery.

Then Gwen says, "Donna, what about you and Charlie? Not sex," she adds. "Are you in it for the long haul?"

"Well," I say, "I think it's serious."

"Really?" Linnie asks. "Like marry-him-serious?" She sits now in the big chair, leans over the arm to me like she's a high school girl in *Bye Bye, Birdie*.

"Maybe." I'm starting to feel like everyone's looking at me: Gwen, Linnie, all of my old Italian aunts, people I don't know in Iowa, some minister at a chapel in Vegas. "What about you and Snooter?" I ask.

"Snooter is one hot fox trot," Linnie says. "But I don't know. He's, you know, chill, and that's great, but do I really want to just chill?"

Gwen nods, purses her lips.

"I mean, yeah, I do," Linnie continues, "but what about my art? Should I not chill and paint instead? It's a tough call."

"Tough." Gwen blinks her eyes once, slowly, like a sleepy alligator. "Yeah."

"You look stoned," I say to her.

"I am," Gwen agrees. "I totally am."

Linnie yawns. “Me too. I’m just going to close my eyes.”

Gwen and I watch Linnie’s eyelids settle down, her breathing even out, her mouth push open a little.

After a minute, Gwen says, “I think she’s out.”

I nod, and I feel a little sad. “Gwen, I’m, um, I’m glad you came on vacation.”

“Thanks,” she says. “I know it’s not easy.”

“What?”

“When someone is so different from you, to understand her.”

We both look at Linnie, in deeper sleep now, her hair hanging in dark green and black threads, lines over her cheeks, drooling a small circle on the tan chair pillow.

“Linnie doesn’t seem to have that problem,” I say. “The more different, the better.”

“She’s sweet like that.” Gwen pulls at a long blond curl, inspects it, lets it spring back. “But she also doesn’t know who she is yet.”

“You’re right.”

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

For a moment, I feel bad. I know what it’s like to be underestimated. I think, I have a lot to learn. Usually this thought puts instant knots in my neck and shoulders, but now my shoulders relax, and I lean my head back on the couch cushion. I have a lot to learn, and I don’t mind at all. I grin at Gwen, and I sigh.

Gwen grins back then giggles. “We’re total stoners. Is that what you’d call us?”

“Last Christmas, I asked Uncle Lou what they would call someone who smoked pot when they were growing up. You know, a stoner or whatever. And he said, ‘Well, Mrs. Vizzoca down the street had ten kids, and she would smoke four joints a day.’”

“So what did they call her?” Gwen asks.

“Someone who has ten kids.”

Gwen laughs. “Sometimes, I think I know how that feels.”

“Sometimes I think I have it pretty easy, but I still complain a lot.”

“You know,” Gwen says, “you have your ten kids. And I have mine.”

I want to hug Gwen, but for now I just sit next to her—she in lotus, me curled around a couch pillow. Watching my little sister sleep. Listening to crickets chirping and cabin walls creaking.

And beneath my arms, beneath the couch pillow I press against the front of me and the soft cotton of my T shirt, I feel just the tiniest, slightest strain in my chest as my heart gets one size bigger.

## Another Middle-Aged Person I'm Afraid Of

Father Bill twists shut the two locks on the gym door, slides in the bolt above them, turns around and grins at us. “Well,” he says, “six o’clock eastern standard. We’re locked in right on time.” He mimics washing his hands like Pontius Pilate.

I glance around at the St. Camillus De Lellis Players, our church theatre troupe, sitting in a circle of wooden folding chairs under the basketball hoop nearest the stage. I shake my head. I should have quit last month when Father Bill first brought up the Lock-In, but I couldn’t. I want to tell everyone tonight, but I’m not sure when. I’d just rather be at the Battle of the Bands on campus, drinking beer, eating dollar hot dogs and watching the drummer I have a crush on drip sweat onto his leather vest.

Instead, I’m in my grade school gym with the Players. When I was eight, I fell in love with their non-musical *AuntieMame*, in which Father Bill became a last-minute understudy for the title character. I adored their stage makeup and costumes. I loved the dark before the first scene, and I wanted the spotlight. After Dad died, when I was thirteen, I didn’t know what to do with all of the hurt, how to feel as much as I felt. Somewhere along the way, I realized I could feel anything I wanted on a stage. I wanted to play. Four years ago, the week after I turned sixteen, at the end of a rousing rendition of *Curious Savage*, I went up to Father Bill. “I’d like to join the Players,” I said.

Father Bill nodded gravely. “Donna, we’ll have to schedule an audition.”

So I practiced a monologue from *Night Mother* about a hundred times in the bathroom mirror, and at the audition, I did my best to convince those Players I would kill myself before I was done.

Father Bill even cried. “You’re in,” he said as they all applauded.

And with the tears of a priest and the unleashing of my inner drama queen, a Player was born. Over the last four years, I rehearsed for such gems as *Flowers for Algernon* or the one Father Bill wrote himself, *A Flock of Priests*, which involved inappropriately donned spandex and something Father Bill called “the theatre of the absurd.”

Here and now, at the Lock-In, I’m struck, as I have been this year, with the absurdity of me as a Player. The only person even close to my age is Richie, who at thirty, still has ten years on me. “This is exciting,” Richie coos, looking around the gym like he wants someone to tell a ghost story or munch on some Rice Krispie treats. He pulls at the edges of his curly blonde clown-wig hair.

I also look around the gym. “If you say so.”

“Donna, this night is about bonding,” Father Bill says. “We’re going to need positive attitudes all around.” He twirls his index finger slowly in the air. “All around,” he repeats. I think Father Bill maybe pushes forty-five, but he has that Dick Clark thing going on, so he may actually be ninety-seven or something. He claims Tai Chi and raw egg smoothies keep him young.

“I don’t know about bonding, but I was hoping for some food,” Dr. Roger says and rubs his belly, bunching up his “Fifty is Nifty” T-shirt from his birthday party two weeks ago. He sniffs through his large bumpy nose and adjusts the brim of his fedora,



which he wears even when doing fillings and check-ups at his dental office. Richie told me that once, when a patient asked him to take it off, he wouldn't give her any Novocain. Ninety-two year old Keenie, who looks like a tiny wrinkly fairy princess with her short silver hair and pixie nose, sits to Dr. Roger's right. Seventy-two year old Linda, who owns high heels in eight different shades of red—tonight's are magenta—and always smells vaguely of liquor and brisket, sits on his left, next to me. We're all here but one, the newest Player, the one who gets under my skin like tree fungus.

Leaf.

The gym doors rattle against the locks Father Bill just secured. He shakes his head. "Who could that be?" he asks.

I wonder if he really doesn't know.

He goes to the door, yells back to us, "It's Leaf!"

Leaf rushes in, breathless, oversized sundress flapping, long gray-brown braids flopping. I wonder if my own brown hair will turn grey like that, if I'll turn into a sundress-wearing, hippie wanna-be mom. Leaf, like Dr. Roger, is a nifty fifty. Last fall, her husband left her after thirty years of marriage. Last fall also marks when she became Leaf. Since she just moved to Dayton, I have no idea what her name was before, and I often wondered why, of all names, Leaf would choose Leaf. It seemed like a great chance to rename yourself. Why not pick something like Cleopatra or Veronique? One day, Father Bill just came out and asked, "Why Leaf, Leaf?"

Leaf smiled a mysterious smile with her glossy lips. She flipped back a braid. "I turned over a new one," she said. Leaf sends out emails to the Players with slide shows

of “Cutest Puppies” punctuated by quotes suspiciously attributed to the Dalai Lama. Leaf’s entrance on the Player’s field makes me nervous.

Now, the huffing Leaf sets two milk jugs full of something orange-red onto the long fold-out table, to which Father Bill has affixed a piece of typing paper labeled “C.D.L. Players Lock-in Supplies.” The paper hangs by a single strip of masking tape and no doubt was hung with a positive attitude. The jugs rattle the table. Leaf says, “I’m so sorry I’m late. I was making punch.”

“I hope it’s spiked,” Linda says and kicks off her magenta heels, revealing mangled bare feet that make me remember something I read somewhere about Chinese foot binding. I’ve seen them before, but I can’t help staring.

“Sweetheart,” she says, leaning in close to me, “the shoes have been worth it. Women look better in heels. And men look better in wheels.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. All I can imagine is Father Bill inside some kind of hamster wheel, spinning round and round. Maybe he has one for Tai Chi.

“Cars, baby,” Linda says. “Cars.” She throws her head back and laughs. Her blonde hair, a hue she’s told me is “sunflower cascade,” looks like hay. She wears red lipstick that somehow never cracks and her teeth are perfectly aligned. “Falsies,” she told me one day back stage and popped them out onto her palm. I gaped at the teeth, lifeless in her hand, and then suddenly she jerked her palm at me and I nearly jumped out of my skin. Linda just started laughing her laugh laced with at least fifty years of cigarette smoke. As Richie screamed from on stage, Linda popped her teeth back in and said, “That’s my cue.”

Now Linda calls to Father Bill, “So what’s on deck for tonight, Father? Shuffleboard? Charades?”

Father Bill finishes relocking the locks and rejoins the circle.

“I love charades,” Richie says.

“Are we really going to be here for eighteen hours?” I ask.

Father Bill glances at me but doesn’t answer. Instead, he smiles at everyone, like he’s got something up a few of his sleeves. He says, “Well, there will be s’mores later.”

“I love s’mores,” Richie says.

“Of course you do,” Linda says.

“What in the hell is a s’more?” Dr. Roger asks. Dr. Roger, whose first and last names are Roger, which leaves everyone wondering which name they’re using, doesn’t fuck around, and he doesn’t know much of the parlance developed post 1960.

“S’mores are toasted marshmallows with squares of chocolate melted between two graham cracker sammies,” Father Bill says, then clears his throat. Father Bill uses his own parlance, developed daily, I think. “I mean sandwiches. Like you’d make at campfires.”

“I love campfires,” Richie says.

“Son, is there anything you don’t love?” Dr. Roger asks.

“That’s right.” Linda hacks out a laugh. “Good one.”

“I bet Donna loves campfires,” Keenie says and winks at me. Sometimes Keenie still acts like I’m thirteen as opposed to twenty, and I suppose relative to Keenie, there’s not much difference. Keenie actually ranks as the best actress of the Players, and even at just four-foot-three, she always steals the show, often with just one line.

“Actually, I don’t like to get all smoky,” I say now.

Keenie crinkles her silver eyebrows at me, then turns to the group. “Well, let’s get started,” she says. “Time’s a wasting.”

“Guess we’ll just jump into a theatre game,” Father Bill says. “Tonight, we’re going to be trees. Everyone take a moment and think of which tree you’d like to be.”

I feel something knot and double knot in my stomach, much like how I felt last fall when I told my college roommate Patty about the Players. “You do what?” Patty had asked.

“I’m a Player,” I said.

“Donna,” she said, “that’s so bizarre.”

She laughed through my whole explanation, laughed as she pulled her black hair into a long ponytail, and laughed as she waved on her way out the door to Intramural Volleyball. “This, by the way,” she said, pausing and pointing to her navy sweats, “is when you wear sweat pants. You know, for sports.”

I looked down at my own gray sweatpants. I decided I needed to join things at school—cool intramural things, whatever they were—and stop hanging out at my grade school gym rehearsing for plays with, as Patty called them, “scary middle-aged people.”

Yet here I am, in the gym, with Father Bill now asking us to relax into the atmosphere of the Lock-In, to give ourselves up to the moment, and to consider whether we’ll be elms or magnolias. We’ve played this before, sometimes with bodies of water, sometimes animals, but tonight, Father Bill must feel adventurous, like a park ranger. Tonight, we will be trees.

“Oak,” Dr. Roger says.

“Did you really have time to think about it?” Father Bill asks.

Before Dr. Roger can answer, Leaf says, “Weeping Willow.”

“Palm,” Linda says.

“I get the ficus,” Richie shouts.

We all turn and look at him.

“I love the ficus,” Richie says and toys with his moustache. To combat his baby face, Richie has recently grown a mustache, thin and mildly alarming because it looks fake, like it might fall off into my coffee when he walks by or drift down like a feather off of his face and perch on my shoulder.

“Donna, what about you?” Father Bill asks.

“I don’t know,” I say, keeping my eye on Richie’s moustache. “Maybe I’ll sit this one out.”

“I’ve got it,” Leaf says. “You can be the gum tree.” She nods, grinning, like she just remembered the winning lottery number. “Remember that song?”

“I’d rather be Kookaberra,” I say. I’m mad at her for making me admit I remember that dumb song. I don’t need a Leaf. I need a life.

“Donna, you can’t sit in the old gum tree, you have to *be* the old gum tree,” Father Bill says.

“How ‘bout a redwood?” Dr. Roger asks.

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll be the redwood.”

“Folks,” Father Bill says, standing, “I need you to clear your chairs, take your shoes off—yes, I see you’ve done that, Linda—find your own space on the floor, and close your eyes.”

We all spread out. I feel the hard gym floor, cold through my socks. I think how it probably gets mopped twice a year. I bounce on my heels a few times, try to stay above the gym grime.

“Good.” Father Bill appraises our spacing. “Now take some deep breaths.”

I breathe and in the dark behind my closed eyes, I start to calm down, something that’s become rare this spring. My shoulders fall and loosen, and then, to my left, I hear Leaf emit a sound like a backfiring aquarium.

I open my eyes and look at her, clear my throat. She opens her eyes and looks at me. “Yogic cleansing breaths,” she says.

“It sounds like you’re choking on static,” I say.

Father Bill clears his throat. I close my eyes again, and Leaf resumes a more quiet breathing.

Father Bill says, “Now find your center, your bubbling hot lava core, and let your tree grow from there.”

I let out a laugh; I can’t help myself. I pretend to cough.

Silence.

Then Leaf takes another oceanic breath.

I laugh again, and this time I can’t hide it.

“What’s so funny?” Father Bill asks.

“I can’t do this activity,” I say. “I need a break.”

Father Bill cocks his head at me. I stare back. He throws his hands up in the air as if to say “kids.” “Okay, take a break.”

I look at the players and their arm branches and leg trunks, and imagine Patty smoothing on pink lip gloss with her ring finger and telling me what a total loser I am right now. Before I left for the weekend, she saw my packed duffel bag and asked what I was doing.

“Going home for the weekend,” I lied.

“Oh,” she said. “I was going to invite you to a party I just found out about, but I guess you can’t go.”

“At the Sig Eps’ house?”

“Yeah,” she said. “How did you know about it?”

“I forget,” I lied again, knowing that I heard Phil, the Sig Ep president invite her to the post-concert party last week. My drummer, who Patty knows I have a crush on, is also a Sig Ep and would probably be there. I’d waited for her to invite me all week, thinking that might be a good excuse to back out of the Lock-In, and maybe show everyone that I could be fun. But Patty never brought up the invitation.

“Well have a good time at home,” Patty said, “knitting, or whatever you do with your mom.”

Now, leaning back into the stage, I push both hands down on its duct-taped spongy edge and hoist myself up. I push past the thick red curtain with yellow-gold etching. Every time the curtain opens or closes, a cloud of dust bursts and settles afterwards. A small cloud poofs now as I walk by, and I scratch my nose, cough a little.

I should have quit last month at our meeting. Father Bill was supposed to hand out a new script, and before the meeting, I’d told him I had an announcement to make at the end. He asked, “Everything okay, Donna?”

I just nodded and swallowed my nervousness.

When we got started, Father Bill said, “Folks, I think we need some cast bonding.”

And something in me felt bonded at that moment, as in too tight and constricting my breath. An ominous layer of doom settled on me like white film over boiled milk. Bonding did not bode well for my announcement.

“What do you have in mind?” Dr. Roger asked.

Father Bill leaned over the big rectangular table in the rectory meeting room. “Well, I was thinking a lock-in.”

“Like prison?” Richie asked.

“No, like we all decide to lock ourselves in together for one night.”

“With a typewriter?” I asked. “And see if we write Hamlet?”

Father Bill frowned at me. “In the school gym.”

“What will we do?” Richie asked.

“We’ll play some games, do some improv, you know, get to know each other.”

“We already know each other,” I said.

“Well, we have a new member,” Father Bill said.

“I think it sounds great.” Leaf nodded. “I’m so excited to spend time with you all.”

“We’re a family.” Linda smiled at Leaf. I remembered when Linda said that to me four years ago. “I’m sorry about your daddy, sweetheart,” she had said with her arm around my shoulder. “I played Bingo with him once, and he was a real hoot. We ain’t him, but we’re a pretty good family.”



“Donna, did you have something to say?” Father Bill asked.

I looked at Linda’s red-lipped smile and froze. “No.”

“Are you sure?” Father Bill bent forward to check his notes, and a ray of sun from the window glared off of his bald head. I looked down and closed my eyes. All I could imagine was sitting around in a circle on the gym stage, holding hands and chanting, “Light as a feather and stiff as a board,” and trying to levitate Leaf.

Now I’m on the gym stage, but alone, and we haven’t tried to levitate anyone, yet. I sit in a corner in the way back, where I can’t hear Father Bill coaching everyone to feel their bark or imagine their root systems.

After about a half an hour, I hear footsteps. Richie emerges from the shadows and then sits, ankles tucked up under his butt, across from me. He folds his hands on his knees. “Why are you acting so weird?” Richie asks. “Is it having a new person? I totally understand. It’s hard for me to make new friends, too.”

“I can make friends,” I say.

“Well I think Leaf is pretty cool,” Richie says. “Don’t you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Richie, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You can trust me,” Richie says. “It’s okay.”

“I know.”

“For real.”

“Okay,” I say. “Maybe I just don’t need another middle-aged person to be afraid of.”

“What?”

“You know what? I said I don’t want to talk about it, and I don’t.”

“Snack time!” Father Bill calls.

I stand up and walk away from Richie. Now I’m going to have to drink a cup of Leaf’s punch. Great. Last week, over late-night Cheerios, I told Patty about Leaf, and Patty said, “She sounds like a freak. Why else would her husband leave her?”

I nodded. Patty’s right, I thought. Freaks get left. Freaks might not even ever get found.

Patty lifted her bowl and drank the last of her milk. “You should sit up straight,” she said, setting the bowl down. “Tall girls shouldn’t slouch.”

Now, I try to stand straight as I walk to the snack table near the bleachers.

“Punch?” Leaf asks.

“I’m allergic,” I say.

Five hours later, Father Bill has suggested we get some sleep, get an early start in the morning. Everyone stretches out in sleeping bags, girls on one side of the gym and boys on the other. Father Bill has designated both areas with marked signs and masking tape. I am drifting in and out of sleep to the hum of the water fountain motor when I feel a nudge and “Psst.”

I look up and see a shadowy Linda, dimly lit by the red exit lights at both ends of the gym. She’s waving a bottle above me.

I squint. “Is that Jack Daniels?” I ask.

“You betcha,” she whispers. “We’re out in the parking lot. Come on.”

On the girls' side of the gym, Keenie's air mattress is vacant, and Leaf's sleeping bag sprawls empty, too.

On the boys' side, Dr. Roger, Richie and Father Bill lie still, sacked out in their sleeping bags. I slip on my sneakers and follow her on tip toes through the side gym door, propped open with a brick. At the bottom of a short flight of steps, Keenie and Leaf sit on two big rocks at the edge of the parking lot. Above them, a headless statue of St. Camillus stands on a big pair of marble dice. Father Bill likes to say that he lost his head in a bet, but it was really the hail storm last October.

The April night air feels cool on my neck, and a full moon washes the concrete lot into a bumpy ocean. Leaf smiles at me. "Isn't it fun to be up so late?" she asks.

"I guess," I say. I'm sure Patty is still up, probably at the after-party, probably making out with my sweaty drummer from the band battle.

"Just us girls," Keenie says, grinning up at me and pulling her cardigan around her.

Linda hands me the bottle and sits on the bottom step, next to the rocks where Leaf and Keenie sit.

I hesitate. This feels like high school, but not high school at all. I consider going back to bed.

"Drink up and be somebody," Linda says.

Going back to the gym with "the boys" seems less appealing, so I take a small swig and hold out the bottle to her.

"Have another," Linda says, "it'll put hair on your chest."

“That’s disgusting.” I take another drink and pass the bottle back to Linda. Then I sit on the concrete and lean against the gym wall and a line of ivy.

“My mother always said that,” Keenie says.

“Mine too.” Linda sloshes the whiskey around in the bottle.

“Who really wants hair on her chest?” Leaf asks.

Richie peeks his head out the door above us. “I hope you gals weren’t going to leave me out,” he says.

“Of course not.” Linda pats the step next to her.

Richie climbs down the steps and sits, taking the bottle from Linda. He drinks and splashes some whiskey on his moustache. A drop dangles from the right edge of it.

“Gosh that makes me loose,” Richie says. “I think I’m a little drunk.”

“Sweetheart, you just had your first sip,” Linda says.

Richie shrugs. “I’m a lightweight.”

“Let’s tell secrets,” Keenie suggests.

“Oh, goody.” Richie takes another drink, resoaks the moustache, and passes the bottle.

I look at Linda, Linda looks at Leaf, Leaf looks at Keenie. “Well I don’t have any secrets,” Keenie says. “What have I got to hide now?”

“Come on,” Linda says. “Someone’s got to have a secret.” Linda hands me the bottle again, and I take a drink.

“Donna’s afraid of middle-aged people,” Richie blurts.

I choke on the Jack Daniels and clear my throat. I stare at a cigarette butt on the ground, half-smoked, and wonder if a blush is visible in moonlight. I glare at Richie, who mouths, "I'm sorry."

For a moment, Leaf stares, a deer caught in headlights, not sure if she's about to be hit. Then she says, "Me too." She nods. "No, really, all of these stagnant people, hating their jobs and their lives. It's miserable."

Keenie says, "I hate misery."

"Donna," Linda says, "I didn't think you were afraid of anything."

"Well." I push the cigarette butt with the front end of my right sneaker.

"How many other kids like you are in the Players?" Keenie asks.

"None!" Richie says.

Linda pats Richie's hand.

"None is right," Keenie says. "That's some bravado." Keenie raises her arm like she's brandishing a sword.

She did this once before, two years ago in March when I was deciding where to go to college. During dress rehearsal for our Lent and Repent vignettes, I had a little breakdown.

"Maybe I'm not cut out for school," I said to Keenie.

Keenie, draped in cream-colored robes for her show-stopping monologue as the prophet Isaiah, said, "Listen kid, you've got it in you. You're a Player!" And she lifted her thin arm with its translucent billowy skin out of those robes as if to wield a sword.

"Bravado," she shouted.

“Don’t hurt yourself, Keenie,” Dr. Roger said, but later that spring, he handed me a good luck card and a check for fifty dollars. “Just a little something for college,” he said.

All of the Players were always giving me a little something.

Now, in the dark cool parking lot, I smile at Keenie. I stretch out the sleeves of my sweatshirt to hide my hands.

Keenie lowers her arm. “All right, who else?”

“I have a secret,” Leaf says. “I never wanted to be a nurse.”

“I didn’t know you were a nurse,” Linda says.

“St. Camillus is the patron saint of nurses and gamblers,” Richie adds.

“I didn’t know that.” Leaf pats Richie’s knee. “Well, I’m not a nurse anymore anyway. After *he* left, I went moping into the hospital in Altoona every day. Until this other nurse I couldn’t stand at work—you know what she said to me?”

Linda shakes her head. “I sure don’t.”

“No one’s forcing you to be here,” Leaf says. “That’s what she said.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, but no one says anything.

The purr of a car engine whooshes by from the road over the hill. “Anyway,” Leaf says, “I’m happy where I am right now.”

“But he left you.” I hug my knees to my chest. “You’re alone.”

She looks from Linda to Keenie to Richie to me. “No, I’m not.” Leaf stands up and brings me the bottle.

“Thanks,” I say.

She nods and smiles, a kind, fifty-year-old smile.

I hold the bottle by its neck, wrapping my fingers around the cool brown glass. The moonlight makes it glow like a topaz, like my birthstone. I pass the bottle to Linda.

“God, I hope we don’t get in trouble,” Richie says. “What would Father Bill say?”

“Something about hot lava in my core,” Linda says.

“Well I don’t want his lava anywhere near my core,” Keenie says.

I start laughing, and I’m not the only one.

Keenie swings her legs and chuckles. Linda swings her half-empty bottle of Jack and wheezes out a laugh. Richie laughs and snorts and laughs and snorts. And Leaf giggles like an elf and shakes her head, her long braids swinging back and forth.

I listen to the laughter moving among them, bobbing brightly like a beach ball. Richie pops up. “Ficus, ficus, ficus,” he cries, spinning around like a tipsy ballerina, kicking up parking lot pebbles.

And, a Player found among Players, I jump up too. I stretch my arms above my head and start making chewing motions with my mouth.

“What are you doing?” Leaf asks.

I stop chewing. “I’m a gum tree,” I say.

## On Selecting Wine and Brownies

In the dark woods, I follow Liz, her white T-shirt flashing against shadowy clusters of oak and maple trees. “So this is where the magic happens,” I say to Liz in a seedy lounge-singer kind of way. I remember when a guy once said that to me about my bed at a party in college. And that night, I did make him disappear. Quickly.

I say this now to make myself feel better and less scared of being in the forest close to midnight on a Saturday. Out here there’s no TV or radio to buffer the deafening anxiety of being with just myself. And Liz.

“No, Donna,” Liz says. “Yes, of course, magic is everywhere. But no. Come on.” She keeps walking.

As my shoes crackle over pine needles and twigs, a chilly breeze tickles my ears. I wish I’d worn a thicker sweatshirt. It still felt like summer today in Dayton, but now just twenty minutes away, out in John Bryan State Park, I know fall has started. My skin tingles and my ears attune to each insect click and each flap of restless bird wings. Everything around me pulses, alive. I’m terrified.

Liz stops in a clearing circled by tall fir trees, moonlight casting long pine shadows. Liz takes off her knee-length sweater and then her dress, just like that, and underneath, she isn’t wearing anything but wool socks and suede mules.

“Dude,” I say. “Um, you’re naked.”



She kicks off the mules and pulls off her socks. “Skyclad,” she says, as though I should know exactly what that means, as though I should keep up. In that way that makes it hard to disagree.

Which is why I liked Liz immediately when I met her three years ago, my sophomore year of college. She had come back to my dorm room late one Friday with my roommate Patty. They were stumbling and stunk of cigarettes and Milwaukee’s Best. I had been asleep. “What’s up, Donna,” Patty had shouted as she flipped on the bright overhead light.

“You’re roommate’s asleep,” Liz said in that definitive way and switched the light back off. “Don’t be an asshole.”

“Sorry, Liz,” Patty whispered, like the sheepest of sheep. “Sorry, Donna.”

I liked Liz immediately.

I still do, but I’ve followed her into the woods for what she said would be “a Celtic adventure,” and now she’s naked, so it’s more complicated.

Liz stretches out her arms, palms up, closes her eyes, and tilts her head back. Her red hair falls in beautiful curls all the way down her back. Her body is thin and white. She breathes deeply.

I realize I’ve stopped breathing. “I think I’m ready to go.”

Without moving, she says, “Shut up and take off your jeans.”

“But I’m cold already.”

Liz lowers her head and her arms. She points at me with her index finger. I try not to notice, but her nipples are also pointing at me. “Don’t you want to live? Don’t you want to know yourself? Donna, you’re not having any life experiences.”

Liz, however, is having life experiences out the yin-yang. In college, the first time she heard the phrase ‘study abroad,’ I do believe she started drooling. She went to Italy our junior year and India our senior year. And after college, she got a job writing travel articles for Global Adventure Magazine. She just got back from doing an Ireland piece two weeks ago.

I just got back from another day as administrative assistant in the Com Department, answering freshman questions about the classes I just took. Stuck in the place I graduated from last spring. Trying to convince myself that I’m not one of those weird hangers-on who can’t bear to leave school. Still, I like having a steady job, my own insurance plan even; it makes me feel safe. And boring. Liz is right. Safe isn’t life experience, I think, looking at my naked friend in the moonlight.

“Fine.” I slowly take off my sweatshirt and shirt and jeans. But I leave on my bra and panties and socks. I don’t even know myself that well. “Sorry. This is as much as I can live right now.”

“Good enough,” she says.

I take my hair, thin and straight and brown, out of its ponytail, and I wish it went past my shoulders, like Liz’s. At least I’m not as white as Liz; my skin is still darker even where the sun—or moon—don’t usually shine. I ask, “So what are we doing?” My heart starts to beat faster. I’m pretty sure I don’t want to do a ritual.

Liz clears her throat. “I have a confession.”

“What is it?” I cross my arms over my chest, tuck my hands into my armpits for warmth.

“I don’t actually know,” Liz says, glancing at me like a guilty four-year-old, “what we’re doing.”

“Jesus Christ.” I’m irritated and relieved at the same time.

“I mean, I know I want to experience a Wiccan ritual.” Liz walks to one of the fir trees at the edge of the clearing, runs her fingertips over the bark.

“Don’t you need Witches for that?”

She presses her palm into the trunk of the tree, as though she’s convincing it.

“Yes,” she says, “you do.”

Now I know what’s coming. The same thing Liz has been bugging me about since college, since I told her about my Aunt Selena. A breeze snakes over my shoulders and makes me shiver. “Liz.”

“I’m just saying that one of us here knows a Witch.”

I shift my weight from foot to foot. “Haven’t you read a bunch of things on Witchcraft? I thought you were an expert or something.”

“I know a little.”

“Good,” I say. “Like what?”

Liz leans her back against the tree. That has to be scratchy. “Well,” she says, “everything you do comes back to you in threes, and um, you’re not supposed to manipulate anyone.”

“Right.” I drop my arms, exposing my almost naked self to Liz. “So what are you doing right now?”

“Kind of manipulating you, I guess.”

“Liz, I am happy for you to learn anything, but not for you to take me into the woods and get me naked for no good reason.”

“But I do have a good reason. And she’s just a phone call away.” Liz steps away from the tree. “Besides, aren’t you having fun?” She spins with her arms stretched out, giggling.

“Honestly?”

Liz stops spinning and nods. “Yes.”

“No.” I cross my arms again and press them against my chest. “This is officially no fun.”

I shouldn’t be surprised. As long as I’ve known her, Liz always jumps into stuff like this first and asks questions later. A few weeks after I met her, she and Patty and I were having chicken fingers and breadsticks in the cafeteria, and Liz pulled out the course bulletin. “Wanna take that ritual studies class with me next semester?” Liz asked.

“I think we get to sweat lodge.”

“It’s not a verb, Liz,” Patty said.

“Don’t be so trapped by language,” Liz said. “And besides, I wasn’t talking to you.” She looked at me. “What do you think?”

“Okay, sure.” I nodded, flattered. No one had ever asked me to take a class with them before. “I’ll take it with you.”

“Have fun sweating and lodging,” Patty said. “See, I’m not trapped.”

“Whatever,” Liz said. She, unlike me, never put up with Patty’s shit.

When Patty left to work out, Liz closed the bulletin and looked me in the eyes. “I’m so excited to learn about this stuff with you.”

I wanted to say thank you, but I looked down and started tearing little pieces off of my napkin. “So do you think we’ll get to study Wicca at all? I have an aunt who’s a Witch.”

“Really? That’s so cool. Can I meet her?” I’d only seen Liz get that excited about traveling; now she was salivating over my relatives.

I wished I hadn’t said anything. “Well, no one in my family actually talks to her.”

“Witches don’t mix with the Catholic Italians? Seems like a good match to me.” She shrugged. “But listen, you’re not them. You could talk to her.”

I tied my straw wrapper into a knot. “I don’t think so.”

Liz frowned, but then shook her head. “That’s fine,” she said. “Still, you know it’s in your blood.”

“I’m not sure it’s genetic.”

Liz made that sharp direct eye contact again. “Donna,” she said, “I think you have amazing personal power.”

What I liked best is that she meant it. She really did think it. I guess she still does. And maybe that’s why Liz and I are still friends, and I hardly ever talk with Patty. I just wish I could figure out on how to locate that amazing personal power.

Now in the clearing, Liz looks a little sad, and Liz without steam depresses even me. A wave of compassion pushes me to speak. “Maybe we could use a little guidance.”

“Donna, do you mean it?”

“She’s not Celtic, you know,” I offer. But I know I’ve already opened Pandora’s Box, and I’m going to have to call my aunt, whom I haven’t seen in ten years.

“Oh, wow,” Liz says. “I could, I mean we could learn a lot from her.”

I pull on my jeans and do up the belt. I'm not that much bigger than Liz, but I'm tired of comparing our naked legs. And I'm cold. "I'm not even sure she'll want to talk to me."

"I bet she will." Liz stretches her arms out again. "Witches are supposed to be really open, right?"

"I don't know."

"You'll really call her?"

"On Monday. I promise."

"Whoopee!" Liz yells and wraps her arms around me for a hug.

"Whoopee." I tentatively pat her bare back with my hands. "Now please, put on your dress."

On Monday morning at seven, I walk upstairs from my makeshift basement apartment. In the kitchen, Mom pours boiling water into her favorite floral teapot. She's in her long blue housecoat, and she has morning-Mom hair—half frizzed-out, half pillow-smashed.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Mom says. "Are you hungry?"

"Not even close." I sit down at the kitchen table and rub my eyes. I don't want to ask, but I remember Liz's whoopee face. "I need Aunt Selena's number."

Mom sets the kettle on the stove. She puts the tea-bag tin back in the cupboard.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, honey. What for?"

"I have a question for her."

”You can ask me.” She takes down her favorite mug, the bright red one my sister Linnie made in ceramics. “I probably know your dad’s family better than she does.”

“It’s not about Dad.” I get up and take the orange juice out of the fridge. Bent over behind the fridge door, I say, “It’s Witch stuff.”

“Oh,” she says. She leaves the kitchen for a minute, and I pour myself a glass of juice.

When Mom comes back, she hands me a phone number written carefully underneath a cartoon turtle lamenting that life is moving faster than he can. “Be careful.”

“Think she’ll try to convert me?”

“Don’t be flip, Donna Marie,” she says. “I just think Selena is involved in dangerous things.”

“Mom, Witchcraft doesn’t have anything to do with the devil,” I say. “I learned it in my rituals class.”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” Mom says.

Since Mom is often just as definitive about things as Liz is, I don’t push it.

“Thanks,” I say. “I’ve got to get ready for work.”

In the Com Department office, it’s time for everyone and their fraternity brothers to drop classes. It’s only 9:30 a.m., and we’ve already had a flood of students wanting to meet with the dean, who advises all of the freshman com majors—a policy he was so excited about originally but now hates. I’ve been glad to be busy, an excuse to avoid calling Aunt Selena. Maybe I’ll call Liz and tell her that Mom didn’t have the number. Or that Aunt Selena turned herself into something, like a gerbil, and can’t be reached.

As I prepare for a deceptive phone call, a tall, sandy-haired guy walks up the main desk, my outpost. I had a class with him last year, I think. And I don't think I liked him.

He makes eye contact with me and tilts his head to the side. "Didn't you graduate?"

"Yeah, last May."

"What are you still doing here?" he asks, in the same way one might say, 'You really wanted that mayonnaise on your ice cream?'

Randy Dixon, that's his name and yep, I definitely didn't like him.

"I work here," I say. "What can I do for you?"

"Can I see Dean Martin?"

I want to say, I don't know, can you? Instead I say, "What about?"

"I'm thinking of switching majors."

Indecisive and annoying. I feel better. "Let me see if he's available."

I walk back the short hallway to Dean Martin's office. Dean Robert Martin, who rarely uses his first name because he gets such a kick out of being called Dean Martin. He of the pale skin and white blonde hair who likes to belt "Volare," off key into his letter-opener. He with complete lack of anything Mediterranean in his genetic code, but who likes to ask me once a week where my family is from in Italy. "Calabria," I always tell him.

"Ah, the boot," he always says. And I never know how to respond to that other than a pensive and vaguely meaningful nod.

Now I knock on his door.

"Yes?"



I peek my head in and say, “Randy Dixon to see you. Wants to switch majors. Do you have some time?”

Dean Martin’s feet are up on the corner of his desk, and he’s staring at the poster of Venice in the corner of his office. “Do any of us really have time, Donna?” Dean Martin has a philosophical bent, and when he bends that way, simple conversations suddenly extend in complexity. And duration.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“You know what I’d love today, Donna?” He strokes his paisley tie.

I shake my head and hope he doesn’t tell me.

“Pasta, a big bowl of pasta. Rigatoni, macaroni, seashells, you name it.” He smiles, puts his feet down, and leans over his desk toward me. “What’s your favorite kind of pasta?”

“Gnocchi, I guess.”

Dean Martin nods, sighs, reclines back in his chair.

“Um, Randy Dixon?”

“Oh, of course. Send him in.”

After I send Randy Dixon into noodle-world, I look at my phone and think how to best phrase the lie to Liz. Just then my phone rings.

“Hey, Donna,” Liz says. “Did you call her?”

I touch the turtle paper from Mom. “No.”

“You’re still going to, right?”

“My mom thinks she’s dangerous.”

Liz laughs. “Of course she does. She’s probably saying a novena for you right now.”

“Probably.”

“Do you think she’s dangerous?”

“No,” I say and realize I’m lying. Something about me hesitates and is afraid, but I can’t say that to Liz. “Actually, I was just about to call her. We’ve been busy this morning.” I guess I’m on a one-lie limit. Shit.

“Cool,” Liz says. “Let me know when you do.”

After I hang up, I trace the phone number with a pen. I sit up straight and smooth out my skirt. I imagine it can only be my amazing personal power that compels me to pick up the phone and dial.

“Hello?” A soft, rich voice.

“Hi, Aunt Selena? This is Donna. Your niece.”

“Donna? Well, hi. What a—oh, honey. I’m so glad you called.”

She sounds genuinely glad, and I relax a little. “I actually have a favor to ask.”

On Wednesday night, Liz and I get to Giovanni’s Café early and settle into the corner velvet chairs with our coffee.

“I can’t wait to meet her,” Liz says.

“Yeah,” I say.

“You have to be excited to see her, right?” Liz asks.

My stomach feels empty. “Of course I’m excited.”

The bells ring on Giovanni's entrance door, and I see her. Long, straight brown hair and big brown eyes. She looks to the other corner first then turns to us. She smiles and holds her hand to her heart.

I stand up, and she walks over and hugs me, tight. I remember her perfume, musky and warm. She is beautiful.

Liz says, "Oh my God, you two look alike."

"Donna and I are the prettier version of my brother, Nicky."

Liz nods. "Donna's Dad."

"Yes." Aunt Selena's eyes turn wistful and watery, and I suspect that's what happens to me when someone brings up Dad.

"Liz," I say, "this is my Aunt Selena."

Liz shakes my aunt's hand. "Wow, powerful name."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Donna." Definitive Liz strikes again. "She's got a moon goddess name."

Aunt Selena hugs Liz then, too. "Nice to meet you," she says to Liz and turns to me. "I like her, Donna." Aunt Selena takes both of my hands. I remember her gentle eyes from Nonna's funeral, when I was six and first met her. And I know that look from Dad's funeral, ten years ago, when I saw her last. "You know he's still with you," she says.

I feel naked, like in the woods. I don't say anything.

She nods. "The spirits are all around you."

"What?" I look over my shoulders and laugh, nervously. "Like backup singers?"

She rubs her fingers over the oval purple stone on her long necklace and grins.  
“Kind of.”

Liz scopes out the area behind me. “Who’s there?”

Aunt Selena asks, “Who do you think, Donna?”

“I don’t know. Dad?” For a second, I smell his aftershave. Then I think of his mother, Nonna, slipping me dollar bills at the end of every visit. “Nonna, maybe.”

“Yes,” Aunt Selena says, “and some other people I don’t know. Another grandmother? And someone very young.”

I think of Grammy, Mom’s mom, who made Barbie clothes for my sister and me. I think of Billy Lewis, who had a crush on me in kindergarten and died of cancer in first grade. I always wondered if Billy was my one true love. Maybe he’s trying for some sort of cosmic romance. “Dead people all around me.” Trying to smile, I sit down on the velvet chair. Liz and Aunt Selena sit, too.

“I think that’s how it’s going to be for you.” Aunt Selena’s grin widens.

This doesn’t seem like good news. “What’s so great about that?”

“It’s your destiny,” Aunt Selena says.

Liz also drools over words like destiny. “Wow, Donna, that’s so cool.”

Great, it’s my destiny to be haunted by creepy backup-singer corpses. I have a quick flash of Dad and Nonna in sequined outfits, singing “Ooo” into a microphone. Too scary. Too much. I don’t want to know this. “Aunt Selena, Liz actually had some questions for you.”

“Of course. What do you want to know?”

Liz traces invisible circles onto her coffee mug. “Well, I wanted to experience a Wiccan ritual.”

“Okay,” Aunt Selena says, “tell me more.”

“I want to do magic.” Liz looks up then, eyes big and hopeful. “I want my life to be intense.”

“Life is intense already without magic,” Aunt Selena says. “You have to take care of your mundane world before you can dive into the spiritual one.”

“What do you mean?” Liz asks.

I’m not sure I want to know, but I’m curious.

“If your life is a mess, Witchcraft won’t fix it. Fix up your life first.”

“I want to,” Liz says. “I mean, I will.”

“If you want to learn, I could teach you.” Aunt Selena runs her palm back and forth over the velvet chair arm. She looks at Liz. “But it’s a serious commitment.”

For the next hour, like a parched desert nomad, Liz drinks up Aunt Selena’s words, only letting up when Aunt Selena requests a drink break. Liz asks questions, takes notes on napkins, draws diagrams. I, on the other hand, keep looking at my watch and praying for this time to be over.

At nine, Aunt Selena finishes the last of her cappuccino. “I hate to say it, but it’s almost my bedtime.”

“Me, too,” I say. “I have to be up early.”

Liz looks keyed up, like she could go all night. “Can I call you?” she asks Aunt Selena.

“Of course.” Aunt Selena writes down her phone number for Liz. Then she takes my hand and squeezes it. “Donna, you should come see me sometime.” She writes down her address on a sheet of paper. 919 Willow Street. “I’d love to spend some time with you.”

Her hand is warm, and her eyes are kind. She sees me. And she’d like me to visit her. Fat chance.

Thursday afternoon, I’m at work making copies and looking over my shoulder every thirty seconds. Since Aunt Selena mentioned all of the dead people yesterday, I’ve been freaked out. Will some ghost appear to me while I’m brushing my teeth? Stapling a memo? Dispensing a fountain drink in the cafeteria? Sleep last night came in neurotic spurts, even with the infomercials quietly humming on my TV screen all night. I’m exhausted today, and I feel raw.

When I bring Dean Martin a stack of copies, he’s staring at his Venetian picture again. “The Old Country is a magical place,” he says. “Have you been, Donna?”

“No.”

“Neither have I.” He sighs. “But someday.” His eyes are wistful, like Aunt Selena’s were last night when she thought of Dad. Something like empathy sneaks into my chest.

And maybe that’s why I have a glimpse right then of the real Dean Martin. The one who doesn’t want to be here, who’d rather be on a gondola, or leading elderly church ladies on bus tours through the Old Country. I understand that he wants an Old Country,

desperately. Some roots, some source, some spark. At that moment, I appreciate him in a whole different way.

“I’m sure you’ll get there, Dean Martin,” I say. “I bet you’d be a great tour guide.”

He looks up at me.

I nod.

“Thanks, Donna.”

When I get back to my desk, Liz sits in my chair, spinning back and forth. “Hey, friend,” she says.

“Hey there. Did you come to rescue me?”

“I want a spinny office chair,” Liz says. “I want an office.”

“What?” Who is this person, and where is my global adventurer?

“Something regular, you know.” Liz dumps my paper clips out of the Dixie cup on my desk. “You have benefits, too?”

“Yes.”

“Wow,” she says and starts to make a chain out of the paper clips, “this is a great job.”

“You have a great job.”

“I’m working on commission. Article to article. I could get canned at any moment, but Dean Martin is never going to fire you.” Liz smirks. “You remind him of his roots.”

“Maybe we could trade spots for a while.”

“I could use a little company,” Liz says. “Want to get some lunch?”

“I already went. Sorry. We can talk later, though.”

“Okay,” she says. She looks deflated, a popped balloon in a dirty gymnasium corner.

I feel like I should do something. “What are you doing this weekend?”

“Don’t know.”

“How ‘bout you let me take you dancing on Saturday? It’s Ladies’ Night at The Garage.”

“Ooh, fancy,” Liz says. “Is this cause I got you naked in the woods?”

“You betcha.”

As Liz blows me a kiss goodbye, I’m confused. It seems I’m Morale Captain today, keeping everyone propped up. But Liz is supposed to be together already. Even Dean Martin, as nutso as he is, is still a dean. And doesn’t that imply together? I, on the other hand, am worried about a troupe of deceased lackeys following me. Decidedly unstable. Not together.

After work, I’m restless and tired of anxiety. I don’t want to drive home, full of pictures of the people who might be following me. And going home makes me feel like I’m stuck and stagnant, just like at work. Powerless. Maybe I’ll take a walk in the woods, this time while the sun’s still shining its last few rays of the day.

I drive out to Yellow Springs, toward where Liz and I did our almost-ritual. As I maneuver through town, I pass Willow Street. Of course. This is where she lives. I keep driving a few blocks, but then I turn around. I can’t help it. I follow the slight curve onto Willow and park when I see a 900 address. The sidewalk jags up here and there, and all



of the houses stand like a motley group of old friends—beautiful, weathered, quaint. They aren't big, more like cottages. I decide they must have exquisite gardens. I would love to live here one day.

On a long black mailbox, I see a 919 and next to it, a crescent moon painted in silver. On the small porch, big wooden windchimes dangle from a coconut. They make a soft hollow sound, like slow drops of water into an empty sink. I walk up the few front steps and knock on the door.

In the stained-glass door window, I see Aunt Selena's face. She smiles through a bright blue panel and opens the door. "What a wonderful surprise," she says. "Twice in one week." She hugs me. "Come in, come in."

Her house smells of something warm and sweet. "I'm making brownies," she says. "Your timing is impeccable."

"I swear I didn't know." I laugh.

"Are you sure you're not psychic?"

I shake my head.

She leads me to a living room with a big blue couch and a rainbow of pillows. "Please make yourself at home."

"Thanks." I sit, and the soft cushions pull me in.

"Would you like something to drink? Tea? Milk?"

I shrug. "Either one."

"Maybe something stronger? I have a great bottle of Chianti I've been dying to open."

I perk up. "Dad's favorite."

“Mine, too.”

She leaves me to look at the bright yellow walls, a mural of a giant tree painted on one of them. A million different trinkets and pictures sparkle and draw my eye. A red Chinese lantern casts soft light in the corner. I am entranced.

Aunt Selena returns with two translucent green juice glasses in one hand and the bottle in the other. She sets down the glasses and pours a little into each. As she hands me a glass, she toasts, “To family.”

We drink. Her toast seems strange to me. “Aunt Selena,” I say slowly, “aren’t you angry at the family? No one talks to you.”

“You’re talking to me.”

“You’re right, but—”

“But what? Listen, I can continue to drag around every last disappointing moment from the past or I can just live right now, when my niece, the spitting image of my sweet brother, has come to see me and share wine and brownies. Which would you pick?”

“Wine and brownies.”

“Exactly. You are where you are. Where you are is your destiny.”

I sigh and sip my wine. “I don’t feel like I’m in my destiny.”

“Honey, you can’t see it,” she says. “Too many ghosts around you.”

I set down my glass. “You already told me that, and it’s been scaring the shit out of me.”

“I don’t mean those ghosts.” She drains her glass and sets it down next to mine. “I mean things you’re not letting go of. Old worries. Insecurities maybe. Stale fear. Those ghosts. They can keep a person blind. Paralyzed.”

Yes, I think, they can. “Can I have some more wine?”

“Of course.” Aunt Selena fills my glass and hands it to me. “Donna, may I ask you a question?”

“Should I take a drink first?”

She laughs.

“It’s okay. Ask away.” I take a drink just in case.

“What are you so afraid of?”

The Chianti warms my face. I don’t know—that’s my first instinct, but that’s a lie. I do know. Being boring, being normal. Not taking chances. I blurt, “That I won’t ever do, that I won’t ever be something—someone—amazing.” I look down.

“Well then you’ve only got one choice,” Aunt Selena says as a buzzer goes off from another room. “And, I’ve got to get some brownies out of the oven.” She stands and walks toward the smell of chocolate.

“Wait,” I say. “My choice? My one choice?”

Without turning around, but loud and clear, Aunt Selena calls to me, “Be someone amazing.”

When I get home, Mom reads the paper at the kitchen table. “Need some dinner?”

“No thanks.”

She folds the paper in half and sets it down. “Where have you been off to?”

I pull a red grape from the fruit bowl and pop it in my mouth, hold it in my cheek. “Visiting Aunt Selena.” I bite down on the grape and think, this tastes nothing like Chianti. But it’s still good.

Mom takes off her glasses, rubs the bridge of her nose. “Twice this week?”

“You know, Mom, she’s really great.”

“I’m sure she is.”

I break off a small bunch of grapes. “You should give her a chance.”

“You’re right,” she says, surprising me. “But you’ve always been better at that. More adventurous.”

“Thanks, Mommy.” I kiss her on the cheek. “I’m going to get some sleep.”

As I walk down the steps munching on grapes, I think, adventurous. Who knew?

On Friday night, Liz and I stand at the bar in The Garage. Derek the bartender decides immediately that we need to do shots. Full of energy and glad to be out, I agree. Liz appears dubious. He starts mixing things in a silver cocktail shaker.

“What kind of shots?” I ask.

“Red Roosters.” He lines up three shot glasses.

Liz grins at me; I can see she’s trying to rally. She slaps her hand on the bar.

“Well, cockadoodle-doo.”

Derek winks as he pours. “Any cock’ll do.”

We raise our shot glasses and drink them down. The Red Rooster is actually quite a delicious bird. Then Derek gets us our usual Coronas. “Now go shake those tail feathers,” he says.

“You know,” Liz says as we walk to a table at the edge of the dance floor, “I didn’t really want to go out.”

“It’s good for you,” I say. “You need life experiences.”

“Ha, ha. You’re so funny and clever.”

“You’re right. I am.” I clink my beer bottle with hers. “That’s why you’re my friend.”

“Among other things.” She clinks back. “Thanks for taking me out.”

We sit on high chairs that don’t even have the foot ring where you can hook the heels of your shoes. Our legs dangle, and we drink our beers. Already, the dance floor is half-full of The Garage’s usual strange crowd. College kids, old Dayton barflies, a cluster of leather-clad Goth women, and a few transvestites for good measure. One song ends, and some sugary, boppy music starts. It sounds like candy, and I feel a strong urge to dance. “You want to go out there?” I ask Liz and point at the disco-ball lit floor.

“Not yet,” she says. “I’m a little tired.”

You have one choice, I tell myself. “Okay,” I say, “whenever you’re ready.”

And for the first time in my life, I go out onto the dance floor alone. I find my own little space and start a little step-touch. My hips start circling with the music, and I lift my arms. Like a practiced diva, I lower them to my sides. I look left and right.

And then, over my shoulder, I say, “Hit it” to Dad and Nonna and Grammy. And even to little Billy Lewis. All of them liked me when they were alive, and I figure they still do. Nothing to be afraid of. I keep moving and close my eyes. Behind me, I can feel swaying and hear the soft jangle of matching sequined fringe.

When I open my eyes again some smarmy college guy dances too close in front of me, shaking his hips and giving me a thumbs up. “All right,” he says.

“Excuse me,” I say, “but could you not crowd us?”

“You’re alone.”

“Um, no, I’m not.” I stand still and put my hands on my hips.

“Okay, whatever, psycho.” He stomps off and starts dancing around the fringe of the Lady Goth circle. Good luck.

I roll my eyes and go back to dancing, trusting that my dead backup singers have probably practiced and coordinated their routine to perfection. I’m sure they can smoothly handle such an interruption.

Someone taps me on the shoulder, and for a second, I’m convinced it must be Dad.

I turn, and Liz stands there, one eyebrow raised. “Okay,” she says, “I’m not sure who you’re with, but do you have room for me?”

“Of course,” I say. “Just stand a little to the right. And keep your clothes on.” I smile. “We’ll make up the steps as we go.”

## The Center of the Earth

I ride south to Calabria. To meet Giuseppe, the cousin Dad met here over thirty years ago. With one hand, I clutch the neck of a lukewarm *Orangina* bottle. With the other, I press my fingers into the green vinyl seat. The chug-chug of the slow train chants me into a trance. But Olivia turns up her headphones, and suddenly a throbbing bass, punctuated by farm animals mooing and squawking, preempts my trance.

Olivia notices me glaring at her. “It’s my friend’s band, *Amish Cleavage*,” she says loudly and grins. “Aren’t they great, Donna?”

Olivia should not be here. Her dad, my Uncle Lou, should. Better yet, Dad should be here. Which is impossible. Right now, being here feels like my recurring Dad dreams, wherein he’s alive again but living down the street with some other family and he can’t make time to talk to me. Close but inaccessible. And I feel like that about myself, too.

I stare out the cloudy train window, try to focus on the green hills. Then a waft of Patchouli mixed with body odor drifts past my face. I hate Patchouli. It makes me want to throw up. I turn again, and Olivia has raised her arms above her head. Eyes closed, she seat dances. Across the aisle from us, a woman in a cardigan and what my sister Linnie and I call “nun shoes” pulls two little girls closer to her.

“Olivia,” I say, but she can’t hear me. I turn off her cd player.

She halts mid-shimmy and looks at me. “Hey,” she says. “What gives?”

“Your music,” I say. “It’s too loud.”

“Um, maybe you just don’t know good music.”

“Um, maybe you don’t have any manners.”

“I think,” she says, “you should take a pill of the chill variety.”

“There are kids over there,” I say.

“They speak Italian,” she says.

“I don’t care what they speak,” I say. “Just stop annoying everyone, okay?”

I feel the train starting up again and realize we must have stopped. “If we missed the stop,” I say.

“Then what?” she asks. “Are you going to beat me up?”

I say nothing and watch for the conductor, who walks by five minutes later.

“Paola?” I ask him.

“No,” he says. “*Allora, questo,*” he says and points to next town past Paola on the list. We have missed it.

“*Quando?*” I ask, hoping that the next stop might just be ten minutes away.

“*Due ore,*” he says and walks on.

“Well, thanks to you,” I say to Olivia, “we missed it. And now, it’s two hours to the next stop.”

“What do I care?” Olivia says.

“He’s your cousin, too,” I say.

“Listen,” she says. “He’s old. What would we do with him anyway?”

“That’s why we came here,” I say.

“Dude,” she says. “We’re in It-a-ly. Frankie say relax.”



I want to punch her right then, but I don't. I close my eyes and try to breathe evenly. Without opening my eyes, I say, "We're getting off at the next stop and coming right back."

"Fine," she says.

After ten deep breaths, and despite what Frankie or Olivia say, I still don't relax. I don't know how I can be related to this person, although I often don't know how I'm related to Uncle Lou either. Still, I wish he was in the seat next to me, as he said he would be two months ago. Then, in Dayton, he came storming into Mom's house for Easter dinner. He had kissed Linnie and me, shook Brendan's hand, and said to Mom, "Martha, you look like a million bucks," and "I need some vino."

After groaning to a seated position in the red armchair, Uncle Lou also declared, "I feel exactly like Dwight D. Eisenhower's asshole."

Mom shook her head. "I don't even want to know why you'd know what that feels like," she said. I wondered then if someone else lived there underneath her normal mom skin, someone funnier and spunkier, someone who said "shit" when she talked to her friends. And before Lou could respond, Mom, expert topic changer, said, "Lou, let's give Donna her graduation present."

Linnie looked up. "She graduated two years ago."

"Well, it's also a congratulations on your new job and moving out," Mom said to me. "And we never planned your graduation trip."

"What about me?" Linnie asked. "I got a new job."

"You answer phones at the front desk in your freshman dorm," Brendan said. Then he smiled sweetly at me. "But our little Donna's finally leaving the nest."

I wondered when it became inappropriate to tell your brother to shut it.

“So anyway,” Mom said, “your uncle and I bought you a ticket to Italy.”

“Nicky loved Italy,” Uncle Lou said.

“He did,” Mom said. Her eyes glazed, and I could see her remember.

“Mom,” I said, and I meant to say thank you next but what came out was, “I don’t know any Italian.” The thought of going to Europe, across the ocean for the first time, felt simultaneously like bliss and terror.

“You took Spanish,” Mom said.

“Don’t worry, kid,” Uncle Lou said. “I’m going with you.”

But Aunt Concetta heard about what her brother did for one of his nieces and demanded the same for her only daughter, Olivia. Uncle Lou could not abide disappointing his sister, and Aunt Concetta wouldn’t have let him. So instead, I’m here with my twenty-one year-old cousin who takes absolutely nothing seriously and who just wanted to come to Italy to “bone out with some Italian hotties.”

Now, from the train window, I watch the countryside. Farms and hills and telephone poles stay still as we pass them, southbound. I try to tune out all things Olivia, and to my relief, I fall asleep.

When I wake, it’s dark, and a young bald man sits next to Olivia. Olivia drinks something red out of a Dixie cup.

“Hey, nap-a-rama,” she says. “Have some *vino*.” She holds out her cup.

“What?” I say.

“*Si, signorina, vino*,” the man says while squeezing Olivia’s thigh. I am in no mood for thigh squeezing.

“Donna, Angelo,” Olivia says. “Angelo, Donna.”

“Pleased to meet you, Donna,” Angelo says. He looks at my breasts while he says this, so I think he’s more pleased to meet them.

“Right,” I say.

“You come and stay at my house,” he says.

“What?” I ask again.

“Your cousin,” Angelo says to Olivia. “She no talk much.”

Since neither of them seems to be encumbered with talking inhibitions, I discover a number of facts. Angelo lives close to the next stop, only fifteen minutes away. The earliest train back to Paola leaves tomorrow. Angelo says we can stay at his mother’s house for the night. Olivia thinks that’s a good idea. Angelo says we can take the train the next afternoon. Only because a mother is involved and because we have no where else to go, do I say, “Fine.”

Before we stop, Angelo leaves us to use the bathroom. Olivia leans across the seat and whispers, “Donna.” She smiles, crimson wine in the cracks of her lips. “I totally want to bone him.”

I never would have guessed.

Angelo’s mother, Bianca, kneads dough with wrinkled hands. Her white hair sweeps back into a bun, and like Dad’s, her large round nose commands her whole face. We’ve stood in the kitchen for five minutes, watching her do this while Angelo has disappeared somewhere. Bianca has not yet looked at us.

Angelo returns, holding a big carafe of red wine. “*Mama,*” Angelo says. “*Buonanotte.*” He gestures to us. “*Mi amici nuovi.*”

Bianca sets down her ball of dough and looks at us. Her wide brown eyes remind me of those paintings of people whose eyes follow you all over a room. She squints at me, then pushes up the sleeve of my short-sleeved white sweater. Her rough fingers scrape my skin and leave behind bits of dough and streaks of flour. She grimaces at my upper arm. “*Tropa magra,*” she says. Too thin.

Then she turns. “*Che cos'è?*” Bianca asks, looking at Olivia and her dyed black hair that hangs past her waist. Bianca snorts at Olivia and returns to her dough. I don’t think Bianca likes Patchouli either.

Luckily, in this kitchen I mostly smell onions and garlic and olive oil.

A young man walks into the kitchen and freezes when he sees us. Angelo nods to him. “*Mio fratello,*” he says to us, “Dionysio.” A brother.

Dionysio looks at me. Unlike Angelo, he first meets my eyes. He holds them and smiles. His teeth jut out crookedly like temple ruins, with one vampire-pointy in the front. His lips are thin like my Dad’s were and wide and soft, the color of the carafe wine. I want to run my fingertips over his clean-shaven face and clutch at that wavy dark hair, like a mane on some magnificent wild animal.

Dionysio steps toward me and reaches for my face. I think he means to kiss me, and I decide, it’s fine, I don’t care what Olivia or Angelo or anyone thinks. I have no idea where we are or who we’re with, but I’m about to make out with a hot wild stallion. I lean in, and Dionysio pushes up my chin to close my mouth.

“No catch fly,” he says and grins.

I feel like Dwight Eisenhower's asshole, of course, and heat floods my face. I need a drink.

Dionysio must know I'm thinking of liquor because he points to the carafe. "*Vino?*" he asks.

I point to him. "God of wine," I say. "Dionysio."

"God?" He looks at me, scrunches his brows, then realizes. "*Mitologia,*" he says and nods. "*Si, si. Allora, vino,*" he says. Dionysio gets small blue glass tumblers from a shelf over the kitchen sink, but Angelo steps in and takes them.

"*Grazie, Nysio,*" Angelo says.

Dionysio steps back.

Angelo fills the glasses. He hands one glass to Olivia, the other to me.

Trying to remember my manners, I say, "Bianca, *vino?*"

She scowls at me, goes back to slicing a piece of crusty bread. She dips it into a big iron pot on the stove, and walks to the edge of the kitchen door, where a big honey colored dog comes running and takes the bread in two bites.

"Mama no drink," Dionysio says to me. He winks and leaves the kitchen.

Angelo pours himself a glass of the wine and says, "Toast."

After we clink glasses, I drink my whole glass down without even thinking about it. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I notice that Angelo and Olivia drink one sip at a time, like civilized people.

Bianca stares at me, then my glass, then me again.

"*Di piu?*" Angelo asks, picking up the carafe.

I'm not sure what's appropriate, but I plunge ahead. "*Si*," I say, "*per favore*," and hold out my glass.

Bianca nods at me. "*Brava*," she says without smiling and stirs her sauce pot.

Olivia downs her glass, too. "More, *por favor*," she says loudly to Angelo.

Olivia looks to Bianca, who doesn't look back.

Angelo leads us out to a table in a dining room. "Please sit," he says.

We do, and Angelo sits next to Olivia. By the way she giggles and the fact that I can't see his hands, I imagine there's some groping, something I feel someone's mother would object to at the dining room table. I try not to watch or notice, but now Angelo kisses her neck. That move's hard to miss.

Bianca enters the room and clears her throat. In front of each of us, she sets down bowls with thick pasta and what looks like a creamy pesto sauce. I give silent thanks for an interruption, and the aroma of basil and pine nuts makes me inadvertently say, "Mm." Angelo gives me a dirty grin. "*Mangiamo*," he says to us. "We eat."

"*Grazie*," I say to Bianca, but she's already gone. As I eat the pasta, I realize how hungry I was.

Later that night, Olivia and I lie on twin beds in the back room of Bianca's house. I lie under the covers, and Olivia rests on top of them, in a sheer sundress with no bra.

"When is he going to get here?" she says.

"Who could you mean?" I ask.

Just then, knock-knock on the door to the backyard, and a whisper. "It's Angelo."

Well, mystery solved.

"See ya," Olivia says and slips out the door.

I look at the wooden ceiling beams in the dark and suddenly feel like I'm the only person on earth. I wish I could enjoy that feeling like Dad did, but I don't. One Sunday, when I got dropped off from my best friend's eighth birthday party, I found Daddy on the back porch playing solitaire.

He sipped a glass of Dewar's and orange juice and listened to *Aunt Carmela's Italian Favorites*, a record whose cover depicts a large and matronly Italian woman with ink-black hair and thick horn-rimmed glasses, stretched out on a chaise lounge, grinning with her burgundy lips. I loved *Aunt Carmela*. I said, "Hi, Daddy," but he didn't hear me over Lou Monte's "Lazy Mary."

I almost repeated myself, louder, but then he laughed, maybe at the lyrics, maybe at a memory. I don't know, but I saw very clearly Dad's contentment in his solitude. And so I left him alone.

Now, I have no music or drink or even a deck of cards. Just me, in a strange bed, suddenly hearing Olivia's squeals and Angelo's groans against the outside wall. *O solo mio*.

In the morning, Olivia's sheets stretch smooth across an empty bed. I get dressed and go to the kitchen. In it, Dionysio and Bianca drink coffee.

"Buongiorno, Donna," Dionysio says.

"Buongiorno," I say, distracted for a moment by the way he holds the coffee mug to his lips. I clear my throat. "Do you know where Olivia is?" I ask.

"The beach?" Dionysio says.

"But they'll be back for the train," I say.

Dionysio shrugs, then must see my nervousness. "Of course," he says. "*Si, si.*"

Bianca stands and wraps her shawl around herself. “*Andiamo*,” she says to him.

“We go to shop,” he says. “Would you like to come?”

“No,” I say, “I need to wait for Olivia.”

Dionysio nods, and they go.

I study the *Berlitz* Italian language book Mom gave me at the airport and practice saying, “*Mi chiamo Donna*.” I file my nails. I repack my suitcase.

Two hours later, and no sign of Olivia or Angelo. I hope Giuseppe does not worry. I jump up from the kitchen chair when I hear people coming, but it’s Dionysio and Bianca with full green plastic bags from the market.

“*Ciao*,” Dionysio says. He looks around the kitchen. “They are not here?”

I shake my head.

He frowns. “Do you want to go?” Dionysio asks.

“I have to wait,” I say.

“For Olivia,” he says and goes to help Bianca unload groceries in the pantry.

I sit for another hour on the front stoop. We have missed the train.

Dionysio finds me there. “Do not be sad,” he says. “We go out.”

That night, Dionysio takes me to a little restaurant with just four tables, two outside on a patio. We sit outside. An old man brings us mineral water, red wine, and a basket of bread. We eat tomatoes and mozzarella and olive oil and then one of everything on the menu. We compare stories of our pain-in-the-ass brothers. I tell him why I am here.

After our third carafe of wine, I say, for perhaps the tenth time, “I just want to meet my cousin.”



“Then why don’t you go?” Dionysio says. “I take you to the train tomorrow.”

“But Olivia,” I say.

“Are you mother of Olivia?” he asks.

“No.” I laugh. “Definitely not.”

“*Allora*,” he says.

We stumble home, and as I hold Dionysio up to keep him from falling into a ditch, I realize that he got just a little drunker than I did. At the house, he gestures for us to walk around back and to be quiet. I imagine Bianca goes to bed before midnight. We go in through the room I slept in last night. We stand by my bed, close to each other.

Dionysio looks at me. “Donna,” he says, “I would like to make sex with you.”

I jump back. “Right now?” I giggle.

“Yes.” He lies down on my bed and pulls me on top of him.

I listen to his heartbeat, smell musky soap through his shirt. I kiss his neck and raise my face, but his eyes are closed. He sleeps. I touch his face as I wanted to yesterday and stretch out next to him. “*Buonanotte*,” I say and close my eyes, too.

In the morning, I hear Olivia come in, and I slowly open my eyes. She carries a big straw hat and wears a short sleeveless red dress. “Hey, hey,” she says looking at Dionysio curled next to me. “Gettin’ lucky in Kentucky.”

“Shut up,” I say. “Where were you?”

“We had an adventure,” she says, beaming.

“We missed the train,” I say, “again.”

“Hey, you don’t mind going by yourself, do you?” she asks. “I’m going to spend another day with Angelo.”

“Are you kidding me?” I ask. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Well, no one said you had to,” she says. “Dude, chill.”

Dionysio wakes up and jumps at the sight of Olivia, who waves at him.

“Morning, hot stuff,” she says.

Seemingly mortified, he stumbles out of the room.

And even though I’m hung over, I jump up out of bed. Energy swirls in the center of me, in my gut. “You know what?” I say. “I don’t care what you do. I’m taking the train today.”

“Cool,” she says. “Angelo and I are going to the beach.” And just like that, she’s gone, again.

An hour later, I have put on a blue dress and zipped up my suitcase. Dionysio walks in, looking at the floor. His hair is wet; he smells of soap. “We go to the train?” he asks.

“Yes.”

Still looking down, he says, “I sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I walk over to him, take his hand. “*Va bene.*”

He smiles at me.

At the station, Dionysio buys me a bottle of water, and we sit together on a wooden bench. As the train pulls up, we stand. Abruptly, he grabs my arm and spins me around. He holds my neck like a warm mug on a cold day and kisses me, hard. His fingertips slide behind my ears and through my hair. Pressing his lips on my neck, he whispers, “I sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I feel like a mountain of jello.

He pulls back and looks at me. “I hope you have good visit. Maybe you come back?”

“Maybe,” I say.

I board a half-full car and sit, watch Dionysio from the window. His grin stretches wide and bright, like he’s a five year-old with a new bike. I smile back.

An old man boards and sits across from me. His faded tan suit slumps too big around him. He tips his hat to me and then slides it over his eyes. Arms folded, this old man starts to snore as soon as the train jolts to life. Daddy used to fall asleep like this in the big red living room armchair and snore to the television buzz.

Without the distraction of Olivia, as the train chugs north, I watch the other passengers—the shapes and lines of noses, the swish of a hand gesture, the way shoulders hunch with a walk and expand with an open-mouthed laugh. And something familiar slowly wraps itself around me. I gaze into the kind of brown eyes that feel as cozy warm and as elusive as the center of the earth. I know those eyes. And I close my own.

I feel Dionysio’s lips, soft on my neck. Goosebumps sprout on my arms like grass seeds in a plastic kindergarten cup. I sleep most of the way.

When the train slows, I wake. When it stops, the man with the too-big suit snorts awake, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and lifts his hat. He smiles at me. At the station, I find a taxi, and via dirt road, it takes thirty minutes to get to Giuseppe’s house in San Lucido. In front of the house, purple portulaca overflow from front window boxes. I step out of the cab.

He sits on the front porch on a stool. I know him from a picture. He knows me from a picture, too. “Domenico,” he says. “*Tu papa.*” His red eyes shimmer. He

smiles, and the thousand wrinkles on his face change positions. “*Cugina*,” he says, “*benvenuto*.”

I can’t believe I’m here, standing upright, looking at this man, despite my family’s assurances over the last few months. “You and Liv’ll be fine,” Uncle Lou had said. “I set it all up with cousin Giuseppe. You’ll love him.”

“So he speaks English?” I asked.

“No,” Uncle Lou said. “But I know a little *Italiano*. I’ve been there.”

I loved the stories of Uncle Lou and Dad’s trip, of them driving along one-lane mountain roads. How on curves they had to furiously honk the horn and pray not to die. How they ate big meals at big tables and laughed big laughs.

But I’ve heard Uncle Lou try to speak Italian, and it’s not pretty. So who knows what he actually set up with cousin Giuseppe.

Now Giuseppe asks, “*Dové Olivia?*”

“*Domani*,” I say, although I’m not sure she’ll be here tomorrow.

Giuseppe brings me inside his small house. He motions for me to sit at a wooden butcher block table, next to an old mint green refrigerator. On top of the fridge sit two boxes of cookies, one lemon, one chocolate, a bag of potato chips. Giuseppe opens the door, and I see three bottles of *Orangina*, a glass bottle of chocolate milk, and those little triangles of cheese wrapped in foil. From a small freezer compartment, Giuseppe pulls out a box of ice cream sandwiches. He puts two on a thin plate and sets it in front of me. I realize he has shopped for his young visitors, like Grammy would when Brendan and Linnie and I were all still in grade school and came to stay with her overnight.

Giuseppe says, “*Mangia*,” and so I do.

While I eat, he sits and watches me. As I finish the last bite of cakey chocolate wafer and vanilla ice-cream, Giuseppe stands. “*Andiamo, al mare,*” he says.

I go to put on my bathing suit, and then we walk to the sea.

As we walk, he says, “I happy to see you.” Each word sounds like a battle to escape his lips. He must also have a Berlitz book.

“Me, too,” I say. “*Anche io.*”

“Your father,” he says. “Funny man.”

I nod.

“Good man.”

I nod again.

He pulls something out of his pocket and presses it into my hand. “For grave,” he says.

In my palm rests a seed packet for violets. I start to cry. And, in the easy way of old men who have held back decades of tears, Giuseppe cries with me.

“My family, my friends,” he says, “all dead.”

I link my arm through his, and we keep walking.

“I feel only,” he says.

We stop walking, and I look at him. “Only?” I ask.

“*Solo,*” he says, his eyes brimming again.

“Ah,” I say, slowly. “I feel only, too.”

He nods and we walk again, making our way to the sea.

And I find myself with my eighty year-old cousin on a beautiful seashore. Ten feet away from me on a big rock, he perches over the beach with his rich rolling belly,

like some Mediterranean Buddha. His white undershirt balances in a makeshift turban on his head.

Clusters of people lounge and play on the beach. A group of skinny teenage boys and girls, a tall woman and short man with three small children, a young woman sunbathing and a little girl building some creature out of sand. I choose a place where I can watch the sand creature come to life. I glance back at Giuseppe and smile.

In a blended gesture, he points to the water, shoos me with his hand. He wants me to swim. I turn and look at the clear sea, calm as a full bathtub.

Dad and Uncle Lou maybe sat right here, eating ripe black cherries from the farmer's market, like the ones Giuseppe bought for me in a brown paper bag. I imagine Giuseppe then—probably handsome and lean, shirtless too, but not worried about sunburn on his scalp. Then, his standoffishness probably charmed the ladies. Although now, as he pretends to scowl but seems to secretly enjoy the teenagers flirting and children playing, he hasn't lost all of his allure.

The little sculptor girl abandons her sand project and walks over to me. Her shiny brown hair bobs around her face, and she wears a yellow bathing suit like one I had when I was six. She hands me a big conch shell. "*Ciao*," she says. "I am Francesca." She points out to the ocean. "Do you want to race?"

"I am Donna," I say. I listen to the shell, as though seeking my answer.

She smiles at me with her halfway-in front teeth.

I put the shell down and nod. "Yes, I do."

And we swim out in the ocean, far, far, far through the calm blue water.

She wins the race, but not by much.

Treading water across from her, I page through family albums, see myself on Florida vacation—dark hair, olive skin, something pure in the countenance, something sun-kissed and wave-kissed and unfettered.

Two hours later, Giuseppe descends from his rock. He dons his wrinkled white shirt and tan jacket. “*Andiamo*,” he says, “*ala casa*.”

I nod. Francesca leaves me and the five foot long sand turtle we’ve built. She returns to her big sister, who reads a magazine and sunbathes topless, face down on a blue towel. From her sister’s side, Francesca waves to me. “*Ciao*,” she shouts. “Bye, Donna.”

Her sister props herself up and lifts her head, peers at me under a cupped hand. I see a glimpse of her perfectly tanned breasts. Suddenly self-conscious, I clutch the old nappy towel Giuseppe brought for me, skirted around my three year-old faded red one-piece, breasts white and concealed underneath. But Francesca’s sister smiles and waves at me too. She pulls out an apple from her beach bag and hands it to Francesca.

“*Andiamo*,” Giuseppe says to me, brash, impatient. In between his wrinkles, I see Dad, barreling us all through summer family vacations.

I follow Giuseppe to the coffee stand where he orders a cappuccino. Apparently he needed a caffeine fix, something I can understand. I wonder if Olivia will come at all or if it will just be Giuseppe and me.

“You,” Giuseppe says, and I turn.

He points to the cup. “*Questo per te*.” This is for you.

“*Grazie*,” I say.

I rip open a sugar packet and empty it onto the milk froth. For a second, the crystals glint in the sunlight. I blend them into my cup full of strong coffee and milk and take a tentative sip, sucking in the coffee like an expert wine taster, blowing air to cool it as I drink it in. This is for me.



## The Way We Want Things to Be

It's Field Day, and I get to wear my hair in braids. And that makes me look fancy, I think. Except sometimes, making braids hurts my head a little. And this morning, Mommy's hands are shaking and she looks, like she says, "green around the gills."

Of course, Mommy doesn't actually have gills 'cause we don't live in the ocean; we live in Ohio. And we're people.

But I don't feel green. I just feel excited for Field Day, which happens when it just starts to get warm, almost summertime, and all the kids—even us kindergarten kids—get to go to the playground and do games and contests. Also, we get to bring lunch, but we can buy orange drink for twenty-five cents. So Mommy put a quarter in my lunch bag and no drink.

Mommy finishes one braid and puts a hair tie on the end.

When she starts the next one, I say, "Ouch. You're pulling."

"Sit still, Donna," Mommy says. "If I don't do it tight, it comes right out."

My hair isn't thick and curly like hers. It's brown and the really straight kind. In school, we learned about covet monsters and how they want things that don't belong to them, even though Jesus says that's not right. I have a covet monster about Mommy's hair.

"It hurts," I tell her when she starts the next one. And 'cause I'm mad at her curly head, I also say, "You don't take very good care of children."

"Donna Marie," she says in her serious voice. And then she starts to cry.

“Mommy?” I say. “I’m sorry. Please don’t cry. You’re very good with children, just like a babysitter.”

She holds my braid with one hand and wipes her eyes with her other hand.

“All right,” she says, “that’s enough. You’re forgiven. Mommy just doesn’t feel so good in her stomach.”

The phone rings.

“Don’t move,” Mommy says to me, drying her face with her T-shirt. She hands me the braid she still has to finish. “And keep an eye on your brother.”

My brother is B, and he is two years old. Mommy and Daddy named him Brendan, but I think he looks like a baby bumble bee. When I told Mommy that, she said, “And, his name starts with the letter B.” So I said, “Then he’s just B to me.” Even though they don’t think he looks like a bumble, Mommy and Daddy started calling him B, too. Maybe they’ve started to see the resemblance.

Resemblance is what I have with Daddy, even though I’m a girl and he’s a boy. I still have brown hair like him and brown eyes that look like mud like him, too. I don’t want his big nose, though. What would I do with all of the snot?

“Nicky, it’s for you,” I hear Mommy yell. Nicky is Daddy, and he’s in the shower.

“Can’t I call them back?” he asks.

“It’s Lou,” Mommy says. Lou is Uncle Lou, Daddy’s brother. “You should come to the phone.”

Daddy doesn’t answer back, but I hear the water turn off and the bathroom door open and the floor squeak in that one place by the phone in the hallway.

“Louie, Louie,” Dad says. “It’s early.” I can tell he’s trying to be funny, but Daddy’s voice sounds nervous. And he’s not laughing his great big laugh that makes his shoulders shake and his eyes get watery.

Then I hear a thump, and I keep hold of my braid, but go to the hallway. Mommy is watching Daddy. Daddy sits on the floor with just a blue bathroom towel on him. His hair still has shampoo suds in it.

When Daddy hangs up the phone, he says, “Mom died last night.”

Mom means Nonna, who gives me dollar bills and sips of her beer. Died means gone, I’m pretty sure, but I don’t want to ask.

Mommy crouches down and hugs Daddy.

Daddy says, “I need to call Selena.”

Mommy sits back and looks at him.

“She’s my sister,” Daddy says. Selena is Aunt Selena, and there’s a picture in a frame of her with Daddy and Uncle Lou with all of the other pictures on the table in the living room. I’ve never met her, but she is beautiful in her picture. No one talks to her ‘cause they think she’s a Witch. I heard Daddy and Mommy and Aunt Concetta, who is also Daddy’s sister, talk about it once when they were figuring out who should come to B’s baptism. I was coloring.

Aunt Concetta said something about the word Pagan, which I think is a word from the Bible for bad people. Maybe that’s why Aunt Concetta made the sign of the cross a lot.

“She casts spells on people,” Aunt Concetta said.

“How do you know this?” Daddy asked.

“I think she cursed me,” Aunt Concetta said. “Why else would Ralph leave me?”

“Ralph left you because he’s a jamoke,” Daddy said. “I’d like her to come.”

Mommy said, “Nicky, I’m sorry. I’m just not comfortable with her being there.”

Daddy said, “Okay,” but he sounded a little sad.

Maybe sad like he is this morning.

Mom notices me watching them on the hallway floor and says, “Come on, let’s finish your hair. Daddy’s got a phone call to make.”

I start to cry, and Mommy comes over and picks me up.

“Where’s Nonna?” I ask.

“She’s in a good place,” Mommy says. “Don’t worry.”

She wipes my wet face and gives me juice and then takes me to school ‘cause she doesn’t want me to miss Field Day and she says they have lots to do.

At dinner that night, we have meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Mommy puts out the ketchup for me. Daddy asks me about Field Day.

“It was okay,” I say. “Not that fun.”

“How come?” Daddy asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. “The games were stupid. And I wanted to be here with you.”

Daddy smiles at me. He looks tired.

When we finish our meatloaf, Mommy doesn’t get up right away to clear the table. “Donna,” she says, “we have some things to tell you.”

“About Nonna?”

“That’s one of them,” Daddy says. “We’re going to the funeral home tomorrow night, and then the funeral is Sunday. That’s when they bury her.”

“Cause she’s dead,” I say.

Daddy’s eyes look red and he doesn’t answer.

“Yes, sweetheart,” Mommy says.

“When do I get to say goodbye to her?”

“You can do that at the funeral home,” Mommy says.

“Okay,” I say. Before my turn in the relay race today, I wondered if Nonna would stay dead or if she’d come over for dinner first. We learned about death at school and how if you’re good, you go to heaven, and if you’re really good, like God’s son, something else might happen. Nonna was really good, so I ask, “Will she come back in three days like Jesus?”

“I don’t think so,” Mommy says.

B hiccups from his high chair. Daddy hands him a plastic block with a poodle dog on it.

“What else are you going to tell me?” I ask.

“Well,” Mommy says, “I’m going to have a baby.”

I am the feeling called surprised. “What will we do with it?” I ask.

“I think we’ll love it.” Mommy smiles and kisses B’s little hand.

“That’s right.” Daddy smiles, too.

“Then I’ll love her, too,” I say.

“It might not be a girl,” Mommy says.

“Okay,” I say, but I know it will be.

After dinner, we go to the living room to watch *Brigadoon* on TV. Gene Kelly is in it, and he is a handsome hunk. Mommy says she'd like to dance with him, and she says I can stay up to watch it with her and Daddy even though it starts at eight. I'm not going to school tomorrow 'cause of Nonna.

Mommy and Daddy sit next to each other on the couch. Brendan sits next to his dinosaur in the playpen. I don't feel like sitting. I have a little of some jitters.

"This will be good," Daddy says. "I need a distraction."

So since it's a cleaning soap commercial, I run back and forth in front of the TV screen.

"Not like that," Daddy says. And I walk to the couch very quiet and sit down.

Last fall, Mommy and Daddy took me to see *Brigadoon* at the Theater Under the Stars, and I loved it. Oh, boy. These two guys go to a place where boys wear skirts and they find a town from forever ago and an old man says the people are stuck there because of a curse. Then one guy falls in love with this lady who's been alive for forever, but she doesn't look it.

Daddy turns up the volume on the TV 'cause it's about to start.

"How can they do a play in the movies?" I ask.

"This'll be a little different," Daddy says, "but mostly the same story."

Daddy knows a lot about *Brigadoon* because he was in it once when he was an actor. He played the best friend part. Once, I told Daddy that I would play the pretty girl.

"You are the pretty girl," Daddy said.

The girl in this movie version is pretty, too. Mom says her name is Syd. “But that’s a boy’s name,” I say.

“Not always,” she says.

“Don’t name the baby Syd,” I say. “Okay?”

“Okay,” she says, “Syd is out.”

On the next commercial, I ask Daddy, “Did you ever see a Brigadoon?”

“No,” he says, but he looks like he might like to.

When the movie is over, and Mommy tucks me in, I ask Mommy if she ever saw one.

“No, honey,” she says. “It’s time for sleep now. Brigadoon hour is over.”

“Can we have one tomorrow?”

“Donna,” she says, like maybe she’s going to be mad at me for talking when I should be sleeping, but I can tell she doesn’t want to go to sleep yet either. “Tomorrow will be busy,” she says, “but maybe the next day we can have one.”

“What will happen then?”

“Well.” Mommy’s green eyes get a little swampy. “Maybe magical things and good things happen, and maybe you can change things to the way you want them to be.”

I chew on my pointer finger like I do when I daydream. “I’d also like to see a magical village and then get to live there and get milk from that cow at the village fair. And dance.”

Mommy laughs. “Okay village fair, close your eyes and dream about that cow.” She tucks the covers around me and kisses my forehead.

I start to count cows jumping over a big blue moon. One, two, three.

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At the funeral home the next night, my hair is back in two green butterfly barrettes. Mommy just put them in there before we left the house, and they already feel like they're going to slip right off of my head.

B gets to stay with Grammy, Mommy's mom. He'll probably get ice cream. Lucky. But I get to be here, in the lobby, where there are about two billion kinds of flowers all over the walls and on little tables. There are also lots of people here and in another room. Mommy points to that room. "Nonna's in there," she says.

Daddy looks like he doesn't feel very good, like he hasn't felt good since Uncle Lou called, and people come over and start hugging him. Right now, people is Aunt Concetta.

Aunt Concetta says, "I'm going to be with Mama." Then she looks at Daddy. "Nicky, you want to come?"

"Not yet," he says.

"Okay," she says to him. Then she leans down and hugs me and holds the back of my head with her hand. I feel her long red fingernails against my head. One of my barrettes slips down more. "Look at you, Donna," she says. "You're getting so big." She smells like Daddy's Scotch and the cleaning closet at school. I get a little throw-uppy feeling.

"Okay everyone," she says, "I'm going to Mama."

This time she goes.

Carmen the fish man is talking to Daddy now. Carmen wears four different gold rings, two on his pinkies. He's crying and blowing his nose into a white handkerchief.



“She was a good woman,” Carmen says. “She always fed us when we were kids.”

“I know,” Daddy says. And he looks like he might cry, too. I watch close ‘cause I don’t remember him ever doing that before.

A big thud happens in the other room and makes me jump. Daddy walks into the other room, and me and Mommy follow him.

“What was that?” Mommy asks.

Aunt Irene walks over to us. She says, “Concetta.” Then she waves her hand to a big group of people. An old lady with bunchy nylons shoos them back. “Give her some room to breathe,” the lady says.

And there’s Aunt Concetta, on the ground with her arm stretched out over her head.

“She’s out again,” Aunt Irene says to Mommy. Aunt Irene is married to Uncle Lou, and I’m not sure she likes people very much, even him.

“What’s the matter with Aunt Concetta?” I ask. “Is she dead, too?”

“No, she just passes out when she gets upset,” Mommy says.

“It’s an Italian woman specialty,” Aunt Irene says and rolls her eyes. Aunt Irene is Irish, like Mommy, so I guess she doesn’t pass out.

I’m both, so I don’t know what’ll happen to me.

Uncle Lou says, “Holy shit, Irene, cut her a break. I’m going to get some air.”

He walks fast out of the room. Uncle Lou has long legs.

“What do I care that she passes out?” Aunt Irene says, following Uncle Lou. “If you want, I can help you fall down, too.”

Aunt Concetta's eyes are fluttering. Daddy calls her, "a broad like no other."  
Mostly, I think she's my funny aunt.

At Christmas Mass last year, Aunt Concetta was sitting next to me, and she leaned over and whispered, "Look at Father's hair." Father Frank's hair was greasy and blond and was actually moving around on his head. "Dead animal," she said.

I was scared there might really be a dead squirrel or something on his head. But Aunt Concetta slapped me on the arm and said, "Just kidding. It's not an animal. It's a piece." I didn't know what that meant, but right then, in the middle of the Lord Have Mercy, she started to laugh, and that turned into a cough pretty quick. Aunt Concetta smokes a lot of cigarettes.

Now Aunt Concetta starts moaning. Daddy goes to help her up. He hugs her for a while and says, "It's okay." Then he walks her out into the lobby where the water fountain is.

Mommy and I walk up closer to the part of the room where Nonna is. I can see a big shiny box and lots more flowers—roses and lilies like in Mommy's garden. Nonna actually grew tomatoes in her garden, so I'm not sure why everyone didn't bring those.

Mommy crouches down next to me. She looks beautiful in her black dress. I like how her blond hair curls against it. She points up to the front of the room. "Do you want to go up? Do you want to see Nonna?"

"What will it be like?"

"Well, it'll be Nonna's body, and it'll look like she's asleep and very still."

"What about the not-body part?"

"What do you mean?"

“Well, the laughing part and the part that gives me dollar bills.”

“Well, that part’s not here right now.”

“Let me think about it.”

Then everyone in the room gets a little quiet. In the doorway to the other room, I see a lady with long straight brown hair. She looks around with big brown eyes. It’s Aunt Selena.

I don’t know, but she doesn’t seem like a scary Witch. And I hope I look like her when I grow up. It gives my straight hair hope.

Everyone backs away from Aunt Selena while she walks up toward Nonna, like the kids did at school when Larry Samuels told me I had the chicken pox. “That’s not very nice,” I say to Mommy. “Someone should talk to her.”

“You’re right,” she says and sighs.

So I smooth out my fluffy yellow dress like Mommy does before she goes into some place important, and I walk over to Aunt Selena and say, “I’ll go up with you.”

She crouches down next to me like Mommy did and smiles. Her long blue dress bunches up on the floor around her. Some of it touches my foot. Everyone is staring at us, but I don’t care. She has such a nice smile. “Thank you,” she says in a soft voice.

“You must be Donna.”

“You’re right,” I whisper. “Did you know ‘cause you’re a Witch?”

“No, silly,” she says and touches my cheek, “I know because you look just like my brother.”

“Oh,” I say.

“I know other things ‘cause I’m a Witch,” she says and winks at me. “We’ll talk about them someday.”

“Okay,” I say.

Then she stands up and takes my hand, and we go up to Nonna’s box.

Nonna looks like a statue, and she’s wearing lipstick. I almost tell Nonna that’s weird ‘cause she never ever wears makeup. But today she’s wearing all kinds, and her short hair looks like it does on Christmas Eve when Aunt Concetta does it fancy for her in rollers, like poofs of white icing. She’s also wearing her fancy Christmas Eve dress. Which smells like mothballs. But Aunt Selena smells nice. I lean my nostrils towards her instead. Sorry, Nonna.

Aunt Selena closes her eyes, and so I do, too. She smells like church candles and soap and something not sweet but nice. Much better than Aunt Concetta.

Aunt Selena says, “*Ciao*, Mama.”

I open my eyes and look at Aunt Selena, then back at Nonna. “*Ciao*, Nonna,” I say. Daddy taught me that *Ciao* is an Italian word and it means goodbye and also hello. I’m not sure which one I’m saying to Nonna right now.

Aunt Selena smiles at me, but then I feel hands on my shoulders, strong ones. It’s Daddy.

“Nicky,” Aunt Selena says.

“Selena,” Daddy says.

They stare at each other, and Aunt Selena starts to cry, and then they hug tight, right over me. I slide out of the way.

Then Daddy pulls away from her and says, “Donna, let’s go.” He turns me with his hands away from Nonna’s box and Aunt Selena, toward Mommy and the steel water fountain.

I turn back to Aunt Selena; I try not to move.

“Now,” Daddy says.

And even though I’d like to stay there with Aunt Selena, I know Daddy’s I-mean-business-voice, so I move it.

I stand by Mommy and watch Aunt Selena walk out the same way she came in. By her very own self.

Then I start to cry, and Mommy picks me up. “I love you,” she says, “baby girl.”

A few minutes later, Aunt Concetta passes out again.

Late at night, I don’t fall asleep. I wonder when I will die. I wonder if Nonna cooks gnocchi for everyone in heaven. I wonder what the funeral will be like tomorrow morning. I wonder if Aunt Concetta will pass out and Uncle Lou will get drunk and if Aunt Selena will be there.

Then I hear the floor squeak in the hallway, and I hear Daddy’s voice. So I climb out of bed and sit at the door of my room, half shut, behind where the light makes a triangle onto my rosy-colored carpet.

“Hi, baby sister,” Daddy says. “Selena Beana.”

Then it’s quiet for a minute, and Daddy laughs, and it’s quiet again. Then he says, “Well, Martha’s pregnant again.”

“Yes,” he says, “a good surprise.”

“No,” he says, “I don’t think it’ll be a girl. I have a feeling it’s a boy again.”

Aunt Selena’s smart like me. I’m going to have a baby sister, and if I get to name her, I’ll name her Brigadoon because I think she’s a magic hour baby.

“Well, we’ll see.” Daddy’s voice gets soft and almost a little happy, which makes me feel good. “It’s nice to think about a baby right now.”

I am glad that Daddy called Aunt Selena. I don’t know if anyone else would, definitely not Aunt Concetta. But I like that my Daddy does it. Maybe someday he’ll call her in the afternoon. But maybe right now it can only happen late at night. When most people are asleep and there’s no school or work or baptisms or funerals. Just Daddy talking to Aunt Selena. When it’s real quiet and they can change things to the way they want them to be.

## This, Donna, Is the Life

“Listen, Donna,” Uncle Lou says to me. “I hate that tangerine shit. Tangerine parfait. What the hell is a parfait anyway?” He bangs his spoon onto the tray. “I marked the Goddamn vanilla pudding. Can’t anyone read in this joint? Honey, get me some water.”

My chest tightens as I reach for the pitcher of ice water on the nightstand. Lying in the nursing home bed, Uncle Lou looks more like Dad than ever. Uncle Lou has told me that people used to ask if they were twins growing up. “No way,” Uncle Lou would say, offended. “I’m older than that little shit.” While Daddy was still alive, Uncle Lou still called him his little brother. Or “that little shit.”

Now, I pour Uncle Lou a plastic cupful of water and consider what I’d rather be doing than watching my favorite uncle suffer: getting a root canal, fending off a hungry shark, checking into hell.

Uncle Lou takes a gulp of water. “Old Trotsky’s got good drinkin’.”

Officially, the home is Trotskyanka’s Sanctuary for the Ailing, but Uncle Lou likes his own names for things.

After another swallow, Uncle Lou pins me with his icy blue eyes. Dad, whose eyes were brown like mine, used to say how some Dago ended up with blue eyes was beyond him. Uncle Lou would respond, “Hey, I’m just like Sinatra,” and sing “My Way” until the vein popped out of the edge of his round bald scalp and zigzagged like a lightning bolt down his forehead.

Now, Uncle Lou's vein doesn't come out very much. Gaze steady, he asks, "How's your mother?"

I take his cup and set it on the stand. "She's really busy. She'll get here soon."

Uncle Lou's lips make a straight line, frown-resistant. I know how he feels. I could use my mother right now, too.

"Oh, I know, all her projects." Then his mouth breaks into its usual grin. "You tell her I said hello."

I nod as Anne, the short, muscular morning nurse, bustles in to check Uncle Lou's vitals. Anne moves like Mom when Mom scrubs the kitchen floor or decorates for Christmas, like a whirling dervish. Like Mom might take care of things if she were here.

"Well hello, handsome," Anne says to Uncle Lou. "Hi, Donna," she says to me. "How's tricks?"

Anne turns Uncle Lou on his side so she can straighten his sheets and give his back a rest. The ALS moved fast through his body in the last year, sweeping out his strength, an angry parent taking away bodily functions like toys and privileges. Two months ago, Uncle Lou had to leave his east Dayton house and move to Trotsky's.

With firm strokes, Nurse Anne smoothes out the sheet where Uncle Lou lies. Tied only at the back of his neck, his papery thin robe slips down, and I see him naked from behind. His flesh droops soft, like white cake batter running down the outside of a bowl.

Dust coats the legs of the metal bed frame close to the floor. I fold my hands in my lap, turn my wrist. The second hand of my watch ticks past eleven. The morning's almost over, and soon I can get somewhere I can breathe.



A half-hour later, driving down Brighton Road on the way to my job at Brighton Brothers Funeral Parlor, past the Cozy Corner where Uncle Lou used to play cards, I remember Uncle Lou's other self—tall and strong, especially when Daddy died. I start to do the math and wonder why I don't just know it automatically now. Can't use my fingers or close my eyes since I'm driving, but I get there. Twenty-three years ago. I was thirteen.

That Friday night, Mom asked me to stay with her and Dad at the house, but called Uncle Lou to come pick up Linnie and B to stay with him and Aunt Irene. When Uncle Lou showed up at the door for my six- and eight-year-old siblings, part of me wanted to go, too.

“Hey,” Uncle Lou said, “how're the good kids?”

We all shrugged.

He squinted and bent down. “What about the good and rotten ones?”

B and I hesitated, but Linnie shouted, “Good and rotten!” And for a few seconds, we all laughed lightness into the heavy air.

Then Uncle Lou asked Mom, “Okay if I go say hello?”

“Be my guest.” Mom took her hair out of its ponytail and then pulled it back tight again. Some straw-colored curls had sprung loose near her ears, like they still do. She pulled at one. “I can't look at him right now.”

“He's not doing well?” Uncle Lou asked.

“No, he's a stubborn jackass,” Mom said. “We're having a fight.”

B and Linnie and I looked at our mother. I don't think we'd ever heard her say the word jackass.

“He doesn’t want a nurse,” Mom said. “Says we can’t afford it. Well, what on earth does he want me to do?” The way she looked at Uncle Lou, so vulnerable and afraid, I knew she’d forgotten we were in the room.

Uncle Lou stood tall and steady. “It’s not an easy time,” he said, putting his hand on Mom’s shoulder.

She took a breath and stood a little straighter. I did, too, as I watched my uncle walk down the hall to Mom and Dad’s bedroom, where she had a hospital bed all set up.

Then Mom’s shoulders slumped, her green eyes murky. Linnie clutched the front paw of her plush wolf Wolfgang and pulled at her brown ponytail with her other hand. B bit his lip, put his hands deep into the pockets of his long red shorts.

“Let’s go sit on the front porch,” I said.

“Good idea,” Mom said, all business again. “Off like a herd of turtles.” She put her arm around B and squeezed Wolfgang’s nose.

We sat on the porch for about five minutes, listening to crickets humming and clicking, watching headlights get bright and disappear on Franklin Road, until we heard Uncle Lou’s voice. “It’s dark out here,” he said, standing in the doorway, shadowy between the lamp-glow of the hallway and the dim porch.

None of the rest of us had thought about lights. I moved Linnie off of my lap, and we all stood up.

Uncle Lou hugged Mom and then me. “You’re gonna be all right, kid,” he said. I realized then that I hadn’t been sure I would be all right, but I felt warm enclosed in his arms. I believed him.

When Uncle Lou pulled away, he hustled B and Linnie out to the driveway with promises of Aunt Irene's chocolate macadamia nut cookies and the greasiest Goddamn potato chips he could find.

After they left, I asked Mom, "Are you hungry? Can I make you some soup?"

She shrugged her shoulders and wandered down the hallway.

I couldn't tell if that was yes or no, so I went to the kitchen and stirred a can of tomato soup with a can of two percent milk. I lost myself in the rhythm, and the soup almost bubbled over before I turned off the stove and went to get Mom.

Thin, in her white cotton pants and sweater, she looked like a ghost standing beside the hospital bed, a clinical invasion into my parents' blue and cream-colored room, a robot bed at the foot of their real, king-sized one.

Staring at Daddy, Mom said, "I'm sorry I yelled."

Daddy's eyes fluttered, his face two shades paler than its usual rich olive tone.

"Mom?"

"I think he's going, sweetie," she said so calmly that I asked, "Where?" It sounded so matter of fact, like he might be going to the store or out for ice-cream or to meet Uncle Lou at The Cozy Corner.

As soon as I asked, I understood and shut my mouth. Daddy's breathing got worse, and I said, "Should we call someone?" I crossed my fingers, willed him to open his eyes and laugh and say, "Fooled ya, pretty girl."

Mom said, "Just let it happen." And, "Say goodbye to your father."

I couldn't say anything out loud, but I tried to speak as clearly as I could in my mind. *Goodbye. I love you. Don't go. Please, I'll do anything, but don't go.*

Mom held Daddy's hand, and I held hers. I put my other hand on the sheet next to his arm and looked up at my mother.

"It's okay," she said.

I rested my hand on the upper part of his arm, close to his shoulder. "Bye," I said.

For just a second, I thought I saw him curve his lips into a smile, and then he coughed a long gravelly cough that I heard Aunt Irene call a death rattle at the funeral home two days later.

Now, it's 2:30 at Brighton Funeral Parlor, and I've sat at my desk for three hours staring at holy card samples. I hate the ones of Jesus with curly blond hair, like he stomped in from the moors of some Bronte novel. But I had to distract myself with something, even if it was stomper Jesus. Tonight, we have a full house with three viewings and an early evening consultation, but today I'm working a painfully quiet afternoon shift.

Mr. Brighton limps into my office; it's overcast today, so I imagine his bum hip is acting up. "Hey, apprentice," he says, which he's called me since I actually was an apprentice five years ago. He wants to make me a partner soon, prime me for taking over.

"I think you should go home early," he says. He sits down in the chair across from my desk, pulls at a corner of his thick white moustache. He's always reminded me of a toy we had: a white-haired, round-faced plastic head of a man with a moustache poised over a big set of pearly teeth. The plastic man-head came with an array of dental tools, and we could take out the teeth. I haven't told Mr. Brighton about this.

“Only one family coming in this afternoon,” he says. “I may be getting old, but I can handle it.”

I should argue, but all I can do is nod.

“Donna,” he says and sits up straighter. He leans toward me and pulls at his moustache again. “I know you love your uncle, but I think you need a break.”

I stop nodding. “From what?”

“From nursing home patrol. Can’t someone else pick up the slack for a while?”

His question stirs up the loneliness that keeps settling like sand inside me. “I’m not sure that’s possible,” I start. “My brother and sister are out of town, and—”

“Look,” Mr. Brighton interrupts, “I just haven’t seen you smile in two months, and no one likes a miserable mortician.”

I know he is mostly joking. But I also know I haven’t been, as Mr. Brighton likes to say, putting the fun back in funeral.

“When you’re here, I need you to be here,” he says. “You have to take care of yourself, too.”

Right, I think, it’s just that easy.

At home that night on our couch, I sit with Charlie’s arms wrapped around me.

“I might disappear,” I say. “I might float away or melt into the ground or disintegrate.”

“Maybe going there almost every day is too much,” Charlie says.

“Have you been talking to Mr. Brighton?”

“What?”

“He said I should take a break.”

“He’s right.”

I pull away from Charlie. “My uncle is dying.”

“I know, but right now you’re both alive, and I’d like to keep you that way.

You’re exhausted. You look sick yourself.”

“I’m fine,” I say, leaning back into Charlie again. His bony chin digs a little into the top of my head. It’s taken me ten years to learn the million angles of Charlie’s wiry body. But he has soft spots, too, like the back of his neck where his black hair curls smooth around my fingers.

The phone rings.

“See,” Charlie says. “It’s someone calling to tell you you’re not fine.” He unwraps his arms and kisses my cheek. He picks up the phone on the coffee table, and I touch that soft spot on the back of his neck.

“I’m sure my wife would love to talk with you. Hold on.” Grinning, he holds his hand over the receiver. “Your mother.” Then he whispers, “I’m going to get a beer and whatever’s left of the chocolate ice cream. Want some?”

I shake my head and take the phone. “Uncle Lou asked about you today,” I say to Mom.

“I was just calling to tell you that girl Mazeena took over Sal’s company. It’s in the paper.”

I run my fingers over the raised orange velvet circles on the couch. “Mom, he wants to see you.”

“Sal?”

“No.”

“Okay, I just wanted to tell you the news.” I hear a clicking and know Mom’s tapping her fingernail on the handle of her teacup. “Well, I turned down my bed. It’s late.”

“You have to visit him,” I say. What I don’t say is, I need some help.

“We’re not going to talk about this right now,” Mom says. “Goodnight. I love you.”

When Charlie comes back in with a Red Stripe and a mug of ice cream and looks at me holding the phone like I’m a caveperson with some strange new tool, I burst into tears.

“I said I’d bring you some,” Charlie says. “I’ll share,” he says before he sits down and wraps me up again in his gangly arms.

I wake at five the next morning and can’t breathe, which I’ve felt only twice before: when I got lost on side streets in Italy and when Mom told me that Daddy had cancer. When she told me that, I felt like someone had punched me twice, right in the gut and then in the face, so that first I couldn’t breathe and then all I knew was pain. I sat on the ground in the backyard, my legs getting sweaty next to the grass, watching an ant crawl over a pine cone, and I wanted to throw up.

This morning, while Charlie sleeps and softly snores, I watch the sky get lighter. When it’s light enough, I can sleep again for a little while. But not long.

When Charlie wakes up and sees me sitting in the chair by the window, he calls the office and tells them he’ll be late. Then he crouches next to me. “How ‘bout I come have coffee with you and Uncle Lou?”

We stop at Café Roma around the corner from our house, pick up three Italian roasts and a bunch of creamers and sugar packets.

At Trotsky's, Charlie pours a creamer into his coffee and offers Uncle Lou some.

"No thanks, Chaz," Uncle Lou says. "I like my coffee black." He winks. "Like my men."

I choke on my own sip of coffee.

Uncle Lou laughs. "I heard some comedian say that."

"Do you know what that means?" I ask.

"That I like to take it in the rear," he says.

"Okay, never mind," I say.

"But I'm not a gay, Donna. See, that's what makes it funny."

"All right, I get it," I say.

"Your husband gets it, right Chaz?"

"Enough," I say. "And you're being offensive."

"God, you sound like your mother," Uncle Lou says and yawns.

In a few minutes, he sleeps. Uncle Lou's eyelids flutter, revealing the whites, and for a second, he looks like some kind of demon.

"They'll start him on morphine soon," Nurse Anne told me last week, "when the pain gets to be too much. It'll help ease his way." I don't want to ease Uncle Lou's way away from me, but watching him grimace every few minutes makes me want to call in six vats of morphine right now.

Charlie links his fingers through mine, while I watch Uncle Lou's face, now cloudy, his body soft and weak, like an infant. When I went back to sleep this morning, I



dreamed I was holding a baby, taking special care to support his head. I dreamed I was the keeper of all babies' heads, making sure the soft spots weren't hurt, making sure the babies didn't fall and snap their necks like so many small twigs.

Uncle Lou is still asleep when we leave Trotsky's. Charlie goes to work, and I go to Mom's house.

When I pull into the driveway, Mom is kneeling in front of the flower bed under the dining room window, tulip bulbs spread out on a brown paper bag next to her.

She turns and wipes sweat from her forehead as I come up the sidewalk. Little clumps of dirt speckle her frizzy gray curls, tied back loose in a red bandana. "Hi, sweetie." She smiles.

She brushes the dirt from her hands, sheathed in blue cornflower gardening gloves. I'm sure she's been up since five, when I couldn't sleep but wanted to, moving from project to project, determined and deliberate and full-steam ahead, as she does everything. Usually.

"I just came from Trotsky's."

She digs a three-inch deep hole, drops a bulb in. "How are things there?" she asks, patting dirt over the bulb.

"You could find out for yourself."

"Donna Marie, enough." Her voice slices sharp, and I jump on the inside.

She stands and inhales deeply, sweeping dirt and grass off of the knees of her pink culottes. Other than her thin calves and ankles, her face is the only part of her skin I can see. Mom turns into a lobster after about two seconds in the sun. Standing, she's four inches shorter than me, but I still feel small.

“In case you forgot, right after I settled your Uncle into Trotsky’s, I buried my mother. Two months ago.” Mom’s lips press tight together. “I’m doing all I can.” She breathes through her nose like a bull about to charge. She yanks at each finger of the cornflower gloves. “Before Mom, I buried your Aunt Irene, Aunt Concetta, your grandfather, Aunt Millie, three cousins.” She speaks slowly, her eyes hard, her voice quivering. “And your father.” She pulls off the gloves. “I can’t.”

I take my own deep breath, and I take her hands, a little damp, a few renegade specks of dirt on her knuckles. As gently as I can, and not sure that I should, I say, “Daddy would want you to go.”

Mom pulls her hands away. “Don’t tell me what your father would want.” She turns from me and walks inside the house. The screen door bounces and bangs three times behind her. I want to follow her in, but I can’t.

That night, Charlie and I eat macaroni and cheese and hot dogs cut up into baked beans. “What food group are hot dogs?” Charlie asks.

I don’t think I’ve had macaroni and cheese out of a box in at least three years. Or hot dogs. But at the grocery store, I couldn’t think of anything I wanted more. I also picked up a bottle of Dewars, which I didn’t drink when I was little, but Dad did, with orange juice, and so I got that too. When all the macaroni is gone, I take another sip of my Scotch and orange juice. Charlie sips his, too. He’s a good sympathetic drinker.

“See honey, it’s nice to relax,” he says. “It’s good to take a break.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

I stand up and walk around the table to Charlie. I grab his hand, pull him up in front of me and kiss him hard. At first he pulls back and looks at me with compassion, sadness, maybe with pity. “Don’t look at me like that,” I say. “Please. Just kiss me.”

So he does, softly at first, then hard and deep, responding to my own pressure. From under my skirt, I pull off my underwear, black with white polka dots I’d bought to feel better, but there’s already a hole in one seam. I throw them to the corner.

Charlie looks at me now, but not with pity, and I’m grateful for that. I pull him down to the ground right there next to the dining room table and sit on top of him and straddle his legs and undo his belt and his zipper and pull his pants down. He’s hard, and I fit right onto him, and he moves with me, pushing up into me with his hips. And for a brief, spectacular minute, all I feel is stars exploding up through the center of me.

When the stars dissolve, I lie next to Charlie and stare up at the small cracks on our white ceiling. My back stiffens against the hardwood floor, and I’m empty again.

The next morning, I sit at Uncle Lou’s bedside, and he says, “Kid, I’ve got something to tell you.”

“You’re pregnant.”

“Ha.” He laughs. “No, but good guess. I’m gonna die.”

“Okay.” I undo and redo the clasp on my silver watch. “What do I do then?”

“Well, you move on. I mean, first you have a funeral, a party, some drinks, and then you move on.”

I can’t get my watch to relatch again, so I just hold it in my palm. “I’m tired of people dying.”

“Well, kid, then I think you might be in the wrong business.” Uncle Lou’s laugh turns into a cough.

“I don’t mean those people,” I say. “I can’t do it anymore.”

He clears his throat. “Honey, you’re not doing it, and you’re not in charge. Jesus, you worry. You worry like Aunt Irene worried, and she’s dead now and probably still worrying. Do you know what worrying will get you?”

“Nowhere.” I roll my eyes. “I know.”

“No,” Uncle Lou says. “It’ll get you a stick up your ass that makes you no fun at parties.” He shifts in the white sheets, struggles to sit up a little. He puts his good hand, the one he can still move, on top of mine. It’s warm. “Enjoy.”

“What? Trotsky’s? You like this?”

“Enjoy your life.”

I pull my hand away.

“You know what I want?” Uncle Lou asks me. “A decent lamp for this room. That fluorescent garbage is for shit.” He waves the back of his hand at the long paneled light on the ceiling.

“You could open the curtains,” I say.

“For nighttime, I need a different one. And not one that makes me feel like a lab rat or like I’m in the Goddamn public library.”

“Okay, I’ll get you a lamp.”

“Get me that red one,” he says. “Your mother still has my stuff?”

“In the basement,” I say, “with B’s stuff and Linnie’s stuff.”

“Where are those rugrats?”

I would call them something else, but I don't. "Well, probably, Linnie's smoking up in Wisconsin and B's doing aerobics with his wife in Pittsburgh." I shake my head.

"I keep telling them to come visit."

"I could use some drugs. And some aerobics." He winks. "Good for them."

I sigh. "Right. Good for them."

As Uncle Lou inhales, the right sleeve of his white hospital robe lifts, and his tattoo of a hammerhead shark juts out, revealing just one fishy, bulbous eye.

The next day, I walk like the Statue of Liberty through the halls of Trotsky's, holding before me the gargantuan lamp—big and red with a huge brown shade like an upside-down ice cream cone. The foot and a half long red base knots thickly all the way up, like tree roots, and above it the shade perches and glistens, shellacked like a piece of rootbeer candy.

"A monstrosity," Mom called it when I picked it up last night.

"That's the best Goddamn lamp I've ever seen," Uncle Lou says when I bring it into his room.

"I always wanted this lamp," I say.

"Well you can have it when I bite it," Uncle Lou says. "Right now I need to read at night."

"I wish you wouldn't say that."

"What have you got against reading?"

"I mean the other thing."

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After work, I drive home through a drizzle and try to meditate on oneness. All is one, and even a nursing home is a part of that, even the synthetic hallways and the bad, ill-fruited parfaits, the coffins at Brighton's, everyone at the viewing we had tonight. The rain picks up tempo and beats on the windshield. The wipers swish fast. Thunder cracks down, and I forget about oneness. I clench my hands around the rubber steering wheel so that my fingers are cramped when I finally pull into the driveway. And when I get out of the car, I start to shake and can't move, standing in the rain, getting wet and chaotic, all of the oneness seeping out through the suede sides of my pumps. Charlie comes to the door and stares out. He realizes it's me and not some weirdo in the driveway, and he runs over and puts his arms around me. "Baby, what are you doing? You're going to make yourself sick."

"I'm not going back there."

"Fine," Charlie says, his voice tight. "Just come inside."

"Ever," I say.

"Listen, I'm getting wet, too." He pulls away from me. "You know what? Maybe you should just stay out here tonight," he yells and then runs back into the house.

I want to follow him right away, but I can't move for another minute. When I walk upstairs to the bathroom, dripping onto the steps, I wonder where everyone is. Like B, who can't seem to drag his ass five hours from Pittsburgh to get here. Or Linnie. Sell some of your stash and buy a plane ticket already. Even Mom has disappeared.

Slow droplets fall from the faucet and send ripples across the top of the water in the bathtub I've just filled. I sit on the edge of the tub, still wet and in my jacket.

"Aren't you going to get in?" Charlie asks from the doorway.

“What?”

“You know, take a bath.”

“I’m not sure.”

“I’m sorry about outside.” He takes a step inside the bathroom. “I’m just exhausted.”

“I know. I’m sorry, too.” I stare at him and the water and him again. “What should I do?” I ask because I’m so thankful Charlie hasn’t suggested anything.

He stands me up and takes off my jacket and my shirt, undoes my bra and slides the straps down my arms. He pulls off my skirt and underwear and sits me down, slips the pumps from my feet, one at a time. Then he guides me into the tub where I sit and let the water slide around my naked body. “Breathe,” Charlie says.

I do because I realize I’ve been holding my breath. And when I let out some air from my lungs, tears make a run for it from both of my eyes, down my face and neck and into the water that holds me.

Charlie takes a wash cloth and smooths it over my shoulders and my face. He shampoos my hair and rinses it with the shower extension. When he’s done, he pats me dry with a big yellow towel and tucks me into our bed. “Go to sleep,” he says and kisses my forehead.

And I lie there because that’s all I can do.

From our bed, I hear Charlie on the hallway phone. “Hi, Martha,” he says.

Mom. Charlie called my Mom. I must be in trouble.

The next day I don’t go to work. I tell Mr. Brighton I’m taking that break. “I’m glad,” he says and tells me we have an intern this week from Chapman Mortuary College.

“A good kid, from your alma mater. Rest,” he says in his best funeral director voice, distinct even over a phone. “Spend time at home.”

“Okay,” I say, and I do. I don’t go to see Uncle Lou that day. Or the next. On the night after that, Mom shows up, standing over me, raising an eyebrow at my oldest pair of sweatpants encasing my legs on the couch. She says, “They’ve upped the morphine, sweetie.”

I cover my sweatpants-clad legs with a blue plaid blanket.

“We’re going; put your shoes on. We can’t hide from this, okay?”

I don’t look at her. “What have you been doing for the last two months?”

I feel her stare at me for a minute then hear her walk away, shoes clicking on the wood floor. I hear her say to Charlie, “Bye, honey.”

“I’m sorry,” Charlie whispers to Mom. Charlie sucks at whispering.

“She’ll come around,” Mom says to him.

“I hear you,” I say from the other room, but they don’t answer.

I wake up at six the next morning with a headache. The ibuprofen is in the kitchen, far away, but my head throbs, and so I go. My footsteps thud soft through the quiet house, mingling with the wall clock, the refrigerator hum, and my own heartbeat. A domestic quartet.

In the drawer with the extra twist ties and paper clips and the menu for Thai Paradise, is the ibuprofen bottle. Standing at the sink, I take two terra cotta tablets with a long drink of water.

Through the window, I watch the sun seep into the sky behind Mom’s ferns and bleeding hearts in the milk glass vase Aunt Irene gave me when I graduated from college.



Behind the ceramic monkey Charlie made in the second grade. Behind it all, light is rising. Fuchsia strips pulse over a light blue palette and white brushes of clouds.

In just my T-shirt, I walk out the kitchen door. The morning air slips cool around my bare legs. When I close my eyes, all of the sky colors are still there. The pounding in my head slows, and layers of fear slip off of my heart.

Two hours later, at Trotsky's, I see that Mom's brought cannoli, the kind Uncle Lou likes from that bakery in Vandalia. Uncle Lou has powdered sugar on his cheek, just to the left of a big grin.

Mom feeds Uncle Lou bites of cannoli soaked in milk on a plastic spoon. The small two percent milk carton reminds me of grade school, and I feel like I've walked into the teacher's lounge by accident. Someone should ask me if I have my hallpass and where I'm supposed to be right now, but instead Uncle Lou says, "This, Donna, is the life."

And Mom says, "Come sit down."

I pull up a chair next to Mom's. I break off a piece of one of the cannoli onto a spoon, pour a little milk on it, and slide it into my mouth.

Uncle Lou says, "You're a good kid, Donna."

"Yes," Mom agrees.

"When in Rome," I say, choking a little on the bite, delicious and difficult.

Soon, Uncle Lou nods off, and Mom says, "B will be here tomorrow, and Linnie gets in Saturday." She smiles at me. "Reinforcements," she says. "We all need them, right?"

I lace my fingers and twist them around. “I had a stick up my ass.”

“Who among us hasn’t?”

I laugh.

“I’m going to get some coffee,” she says. “Want some?”

I nod, and she kisses me on the cheek. After she goes, I lean over and kiss Uncle Lou’s good hand. Sitting back, I take a deep breath and twirl my wedding ring slowly around my finger. I feel a bump on the ring and start to pick at it. A tiny mountain peak of hardened powdered sugar.

Like me, Uncle Lou has always liked to pick at things. When I was six and feeling sad after a day at kindergarten, during which I’d gotten yelled at for talking to my neighbor, Uncle Lou was at the house waiting for Daddy to come home from work. After one look at me, Uncle Lou said, “You got any glue, kid?”

Intrigued, I brought him a big bottle of Elmer’s, and he said, “Follow me.” He led me to the front porch where we sat at the round, mint-green, Formica table. “Your dad and I were poor as rats growing up, so we made up things to do,” Uncle Lou said. “Hold out your hands.”

I did, and he squeezed huge globs of glue onto each one.

“Now rub them together.”

I squished the globs between my palms and over my fingers.

“Now what?” I asked as he squeezed glue onto his own tan hands.

“Take them apart and let them dry.”

So we took our hands apart and blew on them and sat, and I kept asking, “Are they dry?”

And he'd look real close at our hands and then at me with serious blue eyes and say, "Not yet." So I sat, blowing on my hands, enjoying the cool air and feeling the slight hardening of the glue cast, listening to the rippling lotus windchimes Mom got in Chinatown when we went to San Francisco the summer before.

Uncle Lou scratched his big Roman nose with the back of his hand. I did the same with my smaller Roman model.

Finally, when the glue had dried to a gummy, scaly solid, he said, "Now pick a spot and start peeling."

So I found a chunk at the top of my right palm, at the bottom of the v between my index and middle fingers. I peeled great long strips and little bits, and by the time I was done, it felt like my hands had been cleaned somehow, smelling of glue but fresh and soft.

I looked at the little white scales all over the table, and I couldn't help but smile. I felt air blow through the space where my front adult tooth was still growing in.

Uncle Lou grinned back at me, his grown-up teeth white and bright and even. "See," he said. "All new."

## Vita

Jen Violi currently lives in the New Orleans, Louisiana part of the world. Soon, she will live elsewhere. If you have any good ideas about where that might be or how she might fund her life, please contact her immediately. Also, she loves Jeremy and whales.