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## The Weight of Water and Other Stories

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The Weight of Water and Other Stories

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

Lindsay Maples

B.A. University of Alabama, 2006

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## **Acknowledgments**

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## **The Weight of Water**

I met Tilly when her mother dropped her off at our apartment one Friday night, after her babysitter fell through. My mom agreed to let Tilly spend the night on my trundle bed. We lived in 203— my mother, Warren, and I — and she lived in 204 with a pretty blonde lady who wore shiny red lips and curled black eyelashes like they were her uniform.

I had often seen Tilly through the front window in the evenings, while everyone else was busy. Mom spent her first hours at home fixing dinner and taking care of Warren— holding him the way no one else was allowed to, reading to him, sitting next to him on his bed while he hummed to himself and stared out the window into the courtyard pool below. And by the time she was through with all that, by the time Warren was in bed, she would collapse onto the living room sofa to watch some crime drama on TV. Half the time she fell asleep there. I would sit on the bench by the window in our kitchen, reading or writing in my diary, glancing out every once in a while at the empty landing and watching the moths swim toward the porch light.

I saw Tilly those nights through the fish tank in the window of her apartment. The place was dim, but the tank was lit with a green-tinged, fluorescent bulb. Tilly's bright red hair fell limply against her pale face as she watched the fish zig zag through the water. I don't think she ever noticed me on the other side. It was as if she was trapped behind all those layers of glass and didn't even know it— a figurine inside a shadow box.

We'd never met till that Friday night, when the pretty woman from across the landing knocked on our door. The woman, who told me to call her Mavis, didn't look like a mom at all.

Moms wore pleated khaki pants or high-waisted jeans, with tennis shoes and ponytails. Not just my mom, but all of them. PTA meetings taught me that. Mothers had wrinkles around their eyes and lips from smiling so much, and though Tilly's mom smiled way more than mine ever did, her skin was perfect.

The woman ushered the red-headed girl into our living room with a duffel bag over her shoulder. "Tilly, baby, this is Miss Cindy and Sara," she said.

The girl clapped her hands together and bowed to me grandly, like we were kings of two foreign countries meeting for the first time. "Mathilda."

The pretty woman popped the girl lightly on the butt. "No trouble-making, Miss Mathilda, O.K.? I mean it."

The girl giggled.

"Love you, dah-ling," the woman said, bending down. She and the girl exchanged an exaggerated kiss on each cheek.

"See you tomorrow, dah-ling," the girl said, and as the woman backed away, they blew more huge kisses to one another. They were in their own world. I had never seen anything like it between an adult and a kid.

"How about setting the table?" my mom said to me, snapping me back into my world.

While we sat at the table eating pizza, all I could think about was Warren, and what Tilly would think of him— and me— if she saw him. He had eaten his dinner already and was in his room, probably hiding in the little den he had made for himself under his bed. He might not come out at all this evening. The loudness of the television bothered him, like a lot of things did, even if I turned it way down. I hoped he'd stay there. As soon as we were excused from the table, I took Tilly back to my room and closed the door, just in case.

Tilly was strange and fantastic all at once, like a character from one of my books. Her father had been a Marine, and she had lived somewhere in Asia till she was three. She showed me how to fold paper into cranes and fortune cookies. Tilly liked old movies from my grandmother's era, and she believed in ghosts. When it got dark outside, she shined a flashlight on her pale face and told me stories and legends I'd never heard of, like the ghost of Mae Nak.

"Her husband, he was off fighting in the war when Mae Nak died," Tilly said. "She was having a baby. But she put a spell on her husband when he came back, so that he couldn't tell she was a ghost. And they lived just like normal, except when some of the neighbors saw Mae Nak there and tried to warn her husband. And whenever somebody did that— *kkkkkk*." She ran a finger across her throat.

"Do ghosts get older?" I asked.

"What?"

"Do ghosts get older, or do they stay the same age as when they died?" I wondered.

"Wouldn't the guy realize that when they got older, that she still looked really young?"

"Sara," Tilly whined, dropping her hands to her sides. The flashlight's beam fell from her face to the shedding carpet. "You're messing up the story."

"Sorry," I said, and Tilly held the light back up. Her green marble eyes were wide, excited.

"Anyway, it must've been part of the spell or something," Tilly continued, "'cause that's not how he found out about her. He found out when he got home one day and she didn't know it, and she dropped a lemon that fell through the floorboards while she was cooking. And she used her ghost arm to reach through the floorboards to get it!

"He ran away, and the people in the village helped him hide in this sacred place where

ghosts aren't allowed to go. But Mae Nak was mad at them for helping, so she started killing all kinds of people. They had to get a priest or something to do this really powerful spell to trap her spirit in one of her bones, like a cage. And he wrapped the bone up and carried it with him. It's been passed down every generation so that Mae Nak doesn't accidentally get out and kill people again."

"Who has it now?" I asked, doubtful.

Tilly shrugged and lowered the flashlight. "I don't think she'd want to get out anymore, anyway. All she wanted was her family back. And they're not around anymore." Tilly sounded so sure of herself, so grown up. She was different from all the other kids I'd met before. She might've held all the contents of the world bottled up inside her, like Mae Nak inside that bone. "It would have been nice for her, if it could have lasted. If they could have just lived together forever like a regular family."

"Yeah, it would have," I agreed, because it seemed important to her.

Tilly suggested a game of Truth or Dare. I had played once before at camp, where my parents had sent me last summer, before their divorce. But I didn't want to streak through the woods or moon the boys' dorm. So I picked truth every time, and even then I sometimes lied.

But it was different with Tilly, like everything was. I picked dare, and she told me to get a scoop of ice cream and eat it with my feet. I sneaked out into the kitchen, which would have been dare enough—snacks, especially sugary ones, were off-limits this late. My mother was asleep on the couch with the TV on, and she didn't even stir. Back in my room, I cupped my feet together like a bowl and shoved my face down into them while Tilly erupted into giggles.

Then it was Tilly's turn. She picked truth, so I asked where her dad was. She told me he had died five years earlier in a foreign country whose name I didn't recognize in some war that



no one had cared about. Her mother had taken down all his pictures in the apartment because they made her upset, but Tilly had kept one of them, hid it in the drawer of her nightstand, so she could say good night to him every night. She unzipped her overnight bag then and pulled his picture out to show me. The man in uniform had brown hair, combed slick, and he grinned, so that the freckles on his cheeks stood out. He looked like he could be in high school. But he looked happy. Like the kind of dad who lifted you up on his shoulders for no reason, who rode roller coasters with you when the fair came to town.

I didn't say anything about my father. Truth be told, I didn't miss him. But hearing Tilly made me wish I did.

Tilly told me she was an only child. I hesitated only a moment before I told her that I was, too. It was the same thing I told the kids at school whenever we introduced ourselves with some combination of favorite things and family members. Sara Brown. Fried chicken, the color blue, horses, Mom. Just Mom.

I wondered if Tilly had seen Warren before, if she knew I was lying to her. It didn't matter. In the middle of the night, after we had gone to sleep, Warren let out a high-pitched shriek, and I heard my mother's rapid footsteps in the hall. Tilly, on the trundle below, didn't move, but she was facing the door, her back to me. The screaming stopped after a minute, and I stared at the door. Tilly rolled over and looked up at me.

"Does he do that a lot?" Tilly whispered.

"I don't know," I said. "Sometimes."

Tilly sighed. "Poor thing."

\*\*\*

Warren and I had not attended the same school till that fall, when he started the first grade. Mom wanted me to keep an eye on him, to hold his hand after school when we headed home, and I told her O.K. But it was too much to ask. He screamed sometimes when people got too close, even if they didn't touch him. And the way people looked at him— Warren never noticed, I'm sure. But I did. So I sat near the middle of the bus on the fringe of the other fifth-graders who clustered near the back, taking an aisle seat so I could see Warren. Warren in his tiny polo shirt that swallowed him up. I watched him till he sat down and vanished, though I probably didn't need to. He chose the same seat each time, and no one ever sat next to him.

I watched, looking up from my book at each stop to make sure he didn't wander off, like Mom was afraid of. When the bus finally pulled up in front of Stone Creek Village, near the end of the route, I stopped at Warren's seat and held out my hand. He always stared at it for a moment before he took it, as if trying to locate the pattern of it, of the freckles and lines and cracked skin, in his memory. But he always took it, and then we walked together to our apartment.

Tilly went to the Catholic school up the road, so she walked home in the afternoons and still beat us by a half hour at least. Whenever she heard us clomping up the wooden stairs, Tilly ran out of her apartment and over to ours. Warren withdrew to his room, and I got him a juice box from the fridge. He didn't pay attention to it, just crawled under his raised bed and started playing with his toy cars, racing them in circles like they do on TV. Tilly and I would sit in my room and tell stories or play games for about an hour, till our mothers came home.

"We should go get a snow cone," Tilly suggested one afternoon when she came over. It was the middle of a heat wave, which wasn't uncommon in Spanish Fort, even though it was fall.

“You know we can’t,” I told her. “I have to watch Warren.”

“It’s just right up the street,” Tilly said. “We can bring one back for him. And you know he never goes anywhere, anyway.”

That was true. I peeked into his room; he was lying on his stomach under his bed, picking at the carpet.

“O.K.,” I told her finally, “but we have to be quick.”

I locked the door to the apartment so Warren couldn’t get out, and we were back in less than fifteen minutes with two Tiger’s Bloods and a Coke flavor for Warren, because that was the only thing he’d ever drink. As soon as we opened the door, I checked on Warren in his room. He was just where we’d left him, didn’t even look up.

“Told you,” Tilly said, grinning. She took the second snow cone out of my hand and traipsed past me into Warren’s room, lying down on her belly in front of his bed. “Look what we got you!” she said, holding out the Coke-flavored one. Warren didn’t look at her at first. He didn’t notice until Tilly’s arm crossed under the bed and into his space, and then it was like she’d tripped an alarm. Warren shrieked and smacked the cone away. The round blob of ice hit Tilly’s shoulder and fell to the floor.

Tilly jumped to her feet, and Warren shook his head back and forth, his short brown curls bouncing. “Out,” he said, “outoutoutoutout,” like the words were chasing each other from his mouth.

“What do we do?” Tilly asked, worried. She didn’t even notice the brown stain the cone had left on the shoulder of her T-shirt.

“Get the carpet cleaner,” I said, “or my mom will freak. It’s under the sink.”

Tilly hurried out of the room, and I lay down where she had been. “Shh,” I said. “Warren,

it's O.K." I held my hand out like I did on the school bus, but he slapped it away and wrapped his arms around himself. It was like what they teach you at swim class about people drowning, how they'll hurt the ones trying to help them because they're scared and they don't know any better.

Tilly brought the carpet cleaner and paper towels, and we soaked up what we could and scrubbed the rest. But the mark was still there, a dull brown ring.

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We didn't try to talk to Warren in the afternoons, after that. But we did get more adventurous, leaving him alone sometimes, since he didn't seem to get into any trouble when he was by himself. We never wandered far. We often walked down to the apartment pool to dip our feet in the water. Sometimes we saw blobs of things that had sunk to the bottom of the pool and we tried to guess what they were. We never found out, though, because Tilly didn't want to go in, and I didn't want to go in by myself.

When I asked her why, she just shook her head and grinned.

"Not till after I get my Trident tattoo," she said.

"What? Like from *Little Mermaid*?"

"Kinda. My daddy said that sailors used to get tattoos of Trident or Poseidon so that if they fell in they wouldn't drown. The sea gods would see themselves and save them."

"That doesn't make any sense," I said. "There's no such thing. And you can't get a tattoo, anyway."

"Says who?"

I balked. “Your mom wouldn’t let you.”

Tilly shrugged. “She doesn’t care.” Her eyes lit up. “I’m gonna get a Trident one right here,” she said, flexing her right bicep, “and a Poseidon one right here,” flexing the left one.

“You’re full of crap,” I said, but I couldn’t help laughing, and I kicked a splash of water toward her.

By five o’clock every night, we were back in my apartment, checking on Warren. More and more I found him sitting on his bed, humming and looking out the window down at the pool. I wondered if he had seen us, was watching us. Whenever you were right in front of him he seemed to look through you, but maybe he really saw us when we were far away. Maybe, to him, the window was a gateway to a giant aquarium, and we were the fish swimming through the air below.

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On weekend nights, Tilly stayed over sometimes, since I had the trundle bed. We had to stay inside when we were with my mom. Little girls didn’t need to be wandering around, she said. There was plenty to do here, though she never elaborated on what.

We chose Tilly’s apartment as our refuge on weekend afternoons. Miss Mavis — I couldn’t bring myself to call her by her first name alone, even though she’d told me to — was just the right amount of mother. She let us run about on our own without too much supervision, and when we came back, she baked cookies or cupcakes and let us watch what we wanted on TV.

Everybody loved Miss Mavis, even Mr. Alsandor, the superintendent, and he didn’t like

anybody. We once had a leaky kitchen faucet at my apartment for three weeks before he came to look at it, and it seemed like every time we had a problem after that, it took even longer. I overheard my mom on the phone calling him the laziest SOB she'd ever met, but when she saw me passing outside her room she closed the door to finish the call.

One Saturday afternoon when we were at Tilly's apartment, the air conditioner bummed out. The weather man said it was eighty-eight degrees, even though it was early October. We had just put a pan of cupcakes in the oven, and Miss Mavis picked up the phone to call Mr. Alsandor. She wrapped the cord around her finger as she talked.

"It's hot as blue blazes in here, Al," she said, pacing from the kitchen to the living room, the cord trailing behind her. "S'posed to get hotter as the day goes on. Might have to take a dip in the pool later to cool off." Miss Mavis giggled, twirled the cord some more. "Maybe I will, but I can't leave my girls here with no air."

In less than ten minutes, Mr. Alsandor was there with his tool kit, examining the unit. "You realize you got your oven on, Mavis? That don't help."

Miss Mavis dismissed him with a wave of her hand and smiled. "So just because it's hot we can't have a snack?"

Mr. Alsandor grinned and kept working, and Miss Mavis got out the frosting for decorating the cupcakes. "Blue for Miss Sara," she said, knowing that was my favorite color, "and green for my Mathilda."

We decorated the cupcakes while Mr. Alsandor finished fixing the AC. Miss Mavis offered him one, then said, "Sara, why don't y'all take some across to your mom and your brother? I bet they'd like that. And your mom might need some help cooking dinner soon, too."

She was right about that, so Tilly and I put four cupcakes on a paper plate and left Miss

Mavis and Mr. Alsandor alone. We crossed over to my apartment, where my mom was already browning the pork chops.

“Here, Mama,” I said, offering her a cupcake, “I brought one for you and Warren.”

She took the one I was giving her and set it back on the plate, then took the entire plate from my hands. “Not till after dinner,” she said, setting them on the counter. “It’ll be ready in half an hour or so. Why don’t you girls go play for a little bit longer, and I’ll call you when it’s about done?”

I moaned. “Can’t we just have one? One teeny, tiny one? We could split it, even.”

“Sara.” The way she said it sounded like a dirty word. She pushed her hair out of her face and sighed. “I said no.” She turned to Tilly. “Are you staying for dinner, sweetie?”

“Sure,” Tilly said, leaning her elbows on the counter. She took a whiff of the stovetop. “Smells really good.”

I missed Tilly’s place.

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One Friday afternoon, as Tilly and I were reading magazines on the sofa, my mom came home flustered. She walked in without closing the door, asked if Tilly’s mom was home, and walked back out and across the landing, closing the door behind her.

Whenever my mom was anxious, her words came out faster and harder like a train picking up speed. I couldn’t tell what my mom was saying, but Miss Mavis was leaning back like my mom was running her over. She looked concerned but she nodded, and then my mom was coming full-speed back through our door.

“Warren, baby,” she called, bypassing me again. “Come wash up for dinner, O.K.?” In a few minutes, she was pulling Warren by the hand into the kitchen, and he sat down at the table. My mom put down a paper plate in front of him with some slices of honey ham on it. That had been his dinner every night for months. Honey ham— not regular or smoked— sliced extra razor thin. He tore it into smaller pieces with his fingers before he ate it.

My mom put the honey ham in the fridge, closed the door, and took a step back. A deep breath. She noticed me then, and she crossed into the living room, perching on the edge of the coffee table across from me.

“Sara, I have to go back to the hotel tonight. Probably till about midnight. Miss Ally is sick, and we’ve got a big group coming in for the high school play-offs.” She turned toward Tilly. “Miss Mavis said you can stay over there with them.”

I was ecstatic, till I remembered Warren sitting at the table. “What are we doing with him?” I asked, nodding toward him.

“Sara, don’t talk about your brother that way,” my mom said firmly.

“What way?”

“You know,” she said. My mom closed her eyes and exhaled slowly, her face empty and pale. She looked like one of the statues in our social studies book, the one of the guy who can’t even stand up straight because he’s trying to balance the whole world on his back. When she opened her eyes they were a dull brown.

“Sara, this is important, O.K.?” my mom said evenly. “Please. I need your help tonight. Miss Mavis said it’s O.K. for Warren to stay with you over there till I get home. That’ll probably be around midnight, and then I can take him back here and tuck him in, and you girls can stay up and gossip or whatever.”



“What are we supposed to do with him over there?”

“Just think of it as what you do every day in the afternoons while I’m still at work. I’ve got to go, baby, but just go ahead and take him on over whenever he finishes eating, O.K.?”

“O.K.”

“I love you,” my mom said, kissing me on the forehead, and she kissed Warren, too, even though he pulled away.

After he ate, I got some of his race car toys from his room, a coloring book, some crayons, and packed them all in his tiny backpack.

“Come on, Warren,” I called, and when he saw me zipping up his backpack like Mom did in the mornings before school, he grabbed it and put it on his shoulders. I held out my hand, and he took it.

When we got to Tilly’s apartment, Miss Mavis didn’t have time to fix us dinner, so Tilly and I made toaster oven pizzas on hamburger buns. Miss Mavis went back to her room, and Warren walked the perimeter of the living room, brushing his fingers over the walls.

Tilly didn’t have an extra bed, so we put a pallet of sleeping bags and blankets on the floor in the living room. As we ate there, in front of the TV, Miss Mavis came out in a short black skirt and tank top, fastening some earrings. Warren lay on his stomach under the kitchen table, coloring.

“Is she leaving?” I whispered.

Tilly shrugged. “Probably.”

“Don’t you have a babysitter or something?”

“Sometimes,” Tilly said. “Mostly just when she’s not coming home.”

“Why wouldn’t she come home?” I asked, but Miss Mavis interrupted before Tilly could

answer.

“Girls, I’ve gotta run out for a bit,” Miss Mavis said, slipping on a pair of high heeled sandals. She looked around. “Where’s your brother, Sara?”

I pointed to the kitchen. “He’s coloring. He kind of likes to hide.”

“Well, as long as everyone’s O.K.,” Miss Mavis said, smiling. She had an easy smile, Miss Mavis, the kind that made you forget that anything might be wrong. “You said he only drinks Cokes, right, Sara?”

I nodded.

“Well, we’ve got some in the fridge, and some ice cream, too, if y’all want to make floats. But just one each, O.K.?”

“O.K.”

Miss Mavis stopped in front of Tilly and put her arms around her. “Do you remember the rules, Miss Mathilda?”

“Lock the door and stay inside,” Tilly said.

“And?”

“Don’t open the door for anyone.”

“Fabulous, dah-ling,” Miss Mavis said, squeezing Tilly tightly. She kissed her on the forehead, then pulled back to look at her face. “And go to bed at a decent hour.” She kissed Tilly on the forehead again, stood up and grabbed her purse from the sofa. “I’ll be back in just a little bit, girls.”

She left, waiting on the landing for Tilly to lock the door behind her. Then she was gone.

“She doesn’t mean that last one, you know,” Tilly said.

“Which one?” I asked. “Going to bed early or being back soon?”

Tilly sighed. “Both.”

I wanted to ask Tilly if we should call my mom, let her know that we were alone, but I didn’t know what Tilly would say. “My mom might freak out if she knew we were here alone tonight,” I said casually. “No, she would *definitely* freak out.”

“Sara, we don’t need to tell her anything,” Tilly said in the exasperated tone my mother often used. “What’s she gonna do, anyway? She’s at work. I’ve been here by myself before, and nothing ever happens.”

Tilly was in a mood the rest of the night, and I couldn’t tell if it was because of her mom leaving or because of my reaction to it. We knelt in the oversized stuffed chair in front of the fish tank and fed her goldfish, Sparky and Buddy the Second, and watched them swim up to the surface to eat the little flakes.

“Mama got me these after daddy didn’t come back,” Tilly said. “Well, not these ones. The first Sparky and Buddy.”

“I want a fish,” I said. “Or an anything, really. My mom won’t let me get any animals. She says I wouldn’t take care of it. I would, though.”

As I spoke, Tilly put a finger against the glass and traced the path Sparky the fish made, swimming from side to side but spiraling lower each time, so that Tilly’s finger left a clear curlicue in the dust. She paused as Sparky swam toward her finger. Then she stabbed the glass, and the fish fled under the plastic shipwreck at the bottom of his tank. “Daddy was going to get me a puppy,” she said.

We turned a movie on, but the TV was too loud for Warren, and he ran back into Miss Mavis’s room and closed the door. It was the last room, the room overlooking the courtyard and the pool—the one that would have been his in our mirrored apartment.

“Turn it down,” I told Tilly and got up to get Warren, but Tilly shook her head.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said.

“He might mess up her room,” I said. “He might stay in there all night.”

Tilly shook her head again, like it wouldn’t matter if he did, and I sat back down next to her.

Much later, after I had fallen asleep on the pallet with the TV on, Tilly’s mom returned home. I awoke to a jingling sound in the door, then a *clank* of keys hitting the wooden landing. Tilly was curled up in the big chair, staring down at what I supposed was a book in her lap, reading by the combined glow of the fish tank and the porch light shining through the window. She unlocked the door and opened it, and Miss Mavis stumbled in, struggling to take her heels off while walking. Tilly turned on the overhead light, but Miss Mavis still tripped and almost fell to the floor. She caught herself on the sofa, though, and giggled as she tried to sit down. She pushed the hair off her face and in an instant became very serious. She looked back and forth between Tilly and me, then reached toward Tilly and touched her face.

“What are you doing still up, baby?” she asked.

“I couldn’t sleep. I’m gonna get you some water, Mama.”

“O.K.,” Miss Mavis said, to neither of us in particular. “Yes, water. Good. I’m so thirsty.” She lowered her head onto the arm of the couch.

Tilly was back a moment later with the drink. “No, Mama, don’t lay down yet. You need to drink some water first.” She sat on the couch by her mom’s feet and pulled her arm till she was up in a sitting position.

“Drink some of this,” Tilly said, handing her the glass of water. She flipped through the channels on TV till she found the classic movie one. “Old movies are the only good stuff that’s

on this late,” she explained to me. A black-and-white detective movie was playing.

“Look, Mama, it’s *Laura*,” Tilly said, stroking her mom’s hair while Miss Mavis sipped the water.

“*Laura*,” Miss Mavis mumbled. She smiled, touched Tilly’s face. “We almost called you *Laura*, you know.” Miss Mavis leaned down to set the glass on the floor but tipped it over without meaning to and without realizing it. I ran into the kitchen to grab paper towels, and when I got back Miss Mavis’s head was in Tilly’s lap, and she was trying to explain something about the movie to Tilly. I mopped up the water.

“But it’s not... not really... murder, you know,” Miss Mavis said, pointing to the screen. “One of your daddy’s favorites...” After a few more minutes, she had talked herself into a sound sleep.

I turned off the overhead light and looked back at them— Miss Mavis lying on the couch, her head in Tilly’s lap, her face tinged a watery green in the glow of the fish tank, and the rest of her body flickering in the television light.

“Is she O.K.?” I asked, sitting down on the pallet.

“Let’s go outside,” Tilly said suddenly, ignoring me. She cradled her mom’s head in her hands and lifted it gently, sliding out from under her.

“What?” I asked. “Tilly, we can’t—”

“It’s too hot in here,” she said. “Come on.” And she unlocked the door and walked out without waiting for me to join her.

I followed her. Of course I followed her. She was my best friend, my only friend, and I’d follow her just about anywhere. I pulled the door to behind me.

It was warmer outside than in, even though it was October, and humid, the kind of air that

stuck to you. Tilly was waiting for me on the steps. She turned and walked down toward the pool as if the sun were still shining bright above us, as if we weren't alone in the world, in the blackness.

We sat by the edge of the pool and dipped our feet in. The trees hung over us and cast shadows in the blue-white water. Here in the dark, looking into the lit pool, we could see better all the gunk that had gathered on the bottom. Mostly just plain old leaves, but also a diving stick, a few coins.

"Is that a penny down there?" I asked Tilly, pointing.

"It's like someone tried to make a wish." Tilly started giggling and couldn't stop, like this crazy, silly, goofy laughter was filling her up inside and spilling out all over the place. Finally it slowed to a trickle and then died out all together. Tilly swished her feet in the water. "My daddy said that people in Asia make wishes on paper lanterns. That they have these festivals where hundreds of people light candles in them and then let their wishes up into the air, all at once. Isn't that pretty to think about? Way better than a dirty old penny."

I glanced up at Tilly, but she was watching her feet.

"Does your mom— does she do that a lot?" I asked.

"I don't know," Tilly said. *Swish swish swish*. "Sometimes."

Her long hair fell flat against her face like someone had taken all the life out of it. I had a vision of her suddenly— of Tilly in the pool, sinking to the bottom, the weight of the water pressing down on her lungs.

"Hey, Sara," Tilly said, grinning suddenly. "Wanna play truth or dare?"

I didn't, really, but I said O.K.

"I dare you to dive down there and get that penny," she said.

“No way,” I said. “I don’t even have my swimsuit on. And you didn’t even let me pick.”

“You always pick dare,” Tilly said, but she stood without further argument. “Fine,” she said. “I’ll do it.”

“Tilly, they haven’t cleaned that in like a month,” I started, but Tilly was already standing up. She took a deep breath, held her nose, and jumped in feet first, one hand in the air.

I stood up and looked in the pool, and Tilly surfaced immediately, giggling.

“That is so gross!” I said, but I couldn’t keep from laughing. “Tilly, get out of there!”

She just shook her head, took a deep breath, and dipped under again. I watched her glide down, down, down to the bottom. Then she kicked her feet and shot straight up and broke through the water again, holding the penny like it was some kind of prize. She spit some water out and wiped her mouth, but she was laughing again.

Tilly set the penny down on the side of the pool and pushed herself out of the water, then stood with the penny in her hand, dripping all over the concrete.

“I, Tilly Tesla, reclaim this wish!” Tilly called, loud, holding the penny in the air to the gods or whoever was listening.

“Shhh!” I said. “You’re going to wake everybody up!”

A light came on in an apartment across the courtyard, and Tilly laughed again and grabbed my arm with her wet hand, and we started running back to the stairs. I glanced up and saw a pale face in the window of Tilly’s apartment, watching us. Warren.

I paused at the foot of the stairs, and Tilly turned around, waiting. “We shouldn’t have just left him there,” I said, nodding toward the window. “We shouldn’t have left him alone.”

“Then go get him,” Tilly said, grabbing my hand, and we ran into the apartment with what felt like thundering footsteps. Miss Mavis didn’t stir, though. Tilly got a towel from the

bathroom and stripped out of her wet clothes. I opened the door to Miss Mavis's room slowly, and Warren, sitting on the bed, turned. He looked toward me but not directly at me. I held my hand out to him, and he studied it, like he always did. But he took it, hopped down from the bed, and followed me back into the living room.

I met Tilly in the hall coming out of her room, wearing a clean T-shirt and toweling her hair. We all sat down on the pallet in the living room. Warren lay down on the pillow and turned away from us.

"What should we do about her?" I asked Tilly, nodding to Miss Mavis.

Tilly shrugged. "We'll have to try to wake her up," she said. "Walk her back to her room. And we can just tell your mom she didn't feel good."

Before we could move, though, there was a knock at the door. Tilly and I stared at one another for a long time, then Tilly jumped up and went to the door, and I held out my hand to Warren.

"Just a second, Miss Cindy," I heard Tilly say through the door. "Sara's getting Warren and his stuff."

I grabbed Warren's backpack and walked him to the door, my heart pounding. My mom would know something was wrong. I just knew she would. She had a way of looking right into the center of things when she wanted to, into the darkest, most hidden part.

"Hey, baby," my mom said when we opened the door. She wrapped Warren in a big hug as he stepped across the threshold. "Oh, I'm so glad you're all right." She let him go and reached up to hug me and gave me a kiss on the head. "Everything go O.K.? Where's Mavis? I wanted to tell her thank you."

"She wasn't feeling well," I said, nodding back into the apartment. I was surprised how



easy the lie came out. “She just fell asleep on the couch.”

Tilly nodded. “But I’ll tell her you said so in the morning.”

“O.K.,” my mom said. “Thanks, sweetie. You just going to stay here, Sara, or you want to come home and sleep in your own bed?”

I looked back at the empty pallet on the floor in front of Miss Mavis. It felt so lonely. I couldn’t just leave Tilly there by herself. And I couldn’t tell my mother why. I shook my head. “I’ll just stay here. I’ll see you in the morning, Mama.”

My mom walked back across the landing, and I closed the door. Tilly clicked the deadbolt into place. Then we both lay down on the pallet but didn’t say anything, alone again in the dark.

## **Almost-Dreams**

On the morning the wave destroyed Betu Monga, Jaya dreamt he was walking across the palm trees under the moonlight. He could see the ground far below the trees as he passed above dirt and sand and thatched roofs, but the fronds were firm as grass. Jaya reached below him and picked a coconut, and it opened easily between his fingers. After he had drunk its sweet water, he threw the two halves into the sky, where they stuck between the stars and glowed white. And then something shook the tree and Jaya was falling, falling, till he awoke in his bed in a sweat, and it seemed like the room was moving around him.

But as he sat up, the world became still. The night was not yet through; the three-quarter moon was hanging in the sparse palms sprinkled among the houses, though the sky was brightening by the minute. Jaya waited till the sun began to show its face before he walked to the edge of the village that bordered the water, where Simorangkir lived.

On days when he did not have school, Jaya's father allowed him to spend the early morning with old Simorangkir, one of the village fishermen. His father's only condition was that Jaya must return home by midday to begin his chores. And on the days Jaya went fishing, he returned home much happier. It was not that he felt any particular affection for Simorangkir, but only on the water with the old fisherman could Jaya spread himself out like the open sky, thinking about everything in the world or nothing at all.

Jaya needed this small time away. His house was too crowded otherwise. He did not mind serving food to his grandparents or fetching things they needed. He did not mind keeping an eye on his younger siblings while his father was out plowing the fields with the buffalo. He

was ten, the oldest among the four children; these were his responsibilities. But sometimes in the night, when Jaya's newborn baby sister let out a scream that cut through the thin walls and circled inside his ears, when his muscles were tired and aching and only wanted sleep, then he would picture himself alone on a canoe surrounded by ocean like Simorangkir, with no one to disturb him, and only the gentle lull of the waves around him. But in these almost-dreams he was never old like Simorangkir.

When he reached the shore next to Simorangkir's home, Jaya saw the old fisherman dragging his canoe toward the water, next to the smattering of piers and shanties that stored used boats some of the locals had bought from Sumatra to fish or to ease the burden of travel. The jungle slowed trips to other villages on the island, and it was much too far to paddle to Sumatra or Pagai Utara in a canoe, though there was rarely any reason to leave Pagai Selatan in the first place. Jaya had never left the island.

But old Simorangkir said the boats were unnecessary. He said that his father had fished in a dugout canoe, and that his father's father had before him. He said it was the only way to really feel the water. He said the new boats disturbed the fish. And even after his children and grandchildren migrated north to Pagai Utara, he still refused to buy one.

Simorangkir's head was bowed beneath a wide-brimmed straw hat. The old man moved slowly, and the canoe left a long drag mark on the beach as he went.

"The net," Simorangkir puffed when he noticed Jaya. Simorangkir's skin stretched wide across his cheekbones, narrowing into a gaunt mouth, and when he spoke his too-large teeth poked out. Jaya quickly found the net beneath the raised house.

When they had settled the canoe in the water, they paddled toward the shallow reef and let the canoe rest. "We must become part of the surroundings," Simorangkir said, as he always

did. They sat in the stillness a while.

Jaya peered over the edge of the canoe, but he could not see any fish. The waves were opaque, like light blue glass reflecting the sky. Jaya looked up. No clouds today. He hoped the sun would not blister over him later when he tended the buffalo.

Simorangkir was lifting the net to cast into the water when Jaya heard it— something like a large beast sucking in a mouthful of air. The water began to pull back away from the shore, then from underneath the boat, and it was left sitting on a wide stretch of wet sand as immobile as if it had never left Simorangkir's house. It was like nothing Jaya had ever seen or heard of, even in ancient legends that he knew were not true.

He heard a smaller noise, myriad plunking sounds, and he peeked just over the edge of the boat. A rainbow of fish that he had not seen under the water now flopped on the sand. Pinkish fish with deep red manes, bright blue fish with long stripes running from fin to eye. And just next to the boat, a large, flat fish, covered in blocks of black and yellow and white.

Jaya looked more closely at this one, as it drowned in the open air. The eye was black and round and desperate. It was an eye that knew it was dying. The body continued to twitch.

Jaya was reaching out for it when something gripped his arm forcefully. He looked down to see Simorangkir's hand.

"Come on, boy!" The old fisherman, whose arms were thin like the stilts that protected his house from high tide, was pulling him.

"But— but the fish," Jaya began, looking out at them with regret. They were just lying there, waiting to be collected. It would be easy— so many fish that they might not even fit in the canoe. Jaya could sell them at the market. He could feed his family for a month.

But Simorangkir shook his head and, with a great heave, dragged Jaya out of the boat,

and then they were running back to the shore, and the muddy sand was warm and squishy between Jaya's toes and he wondered how the old fisherman was moving so fast. They did not stop at Simorangkir's house, and the sucking sound grew louder and angrier and more like a bear's growl— dangerous, like hundreds of bears growling all at once. "Run!" the old man shouted as he whisked Jaya through the village, shouted to anyone who might be listening. "Run!" But he did not slow down, did not stop to check who heard him. They did not pass Jaya's house. And then they entered the jungle, where branches dense with leaves slapped Jaya in the face, and soon they were going up, up the hill behind the village.

A little way up, a break in the trees opened, and Jaya grabbed a branch and rooted himself next to it, so that Simorangkir could not drag him any further. The old man was yelling something to Jaya, and he was close, so close, Jaya could feel his hot breath in his ear. But Jaya could not hear him; the noise coming from the water was deafening. The village below was now awake and people were running, without destination it seemed. Jaya tried to locate his house and thought for a moment he had, but no one came in or out as he watched. Maybe his family had already left. He did not know what was happening, but surely it was something terrible. He wanted his family away. He wanted them here.

Jaya scanned the wide paths of flat dirt among the houses, but the people looked very small, and Jaya found it impossible to recognize anyone for certain. Maybe his family had already reached the jungle, where they were hidden from his view. Jaya gripped the branch more tightly. He could feel the booming noise vibrating in his bones.

And then Jaya saw the water that had been sucked away, coming back all at once in a giant wall. The first wave was not quite as tall as the raised houses closest to the beach, but when it stretched over the land and fell, it covered half of the village. Water and arms and legs and bits

of houses, all dragged to sea. The people must be screaming, but still Jaya could hear nothing over the roar of the water. When the second wave came, some of the people ran harder, while some stopped running altogether. Three people, a family maybe, hugged tightly to the thin trunk of a teak tree. This wave was taller than the tree, and after it crashed and drew back, the family was gone. But the third wave covered the entirety of the land below, sweeping inland to the base of the hill from which Jaya stood watching, making everything a part of the vast ocean for a moment. Then the water slipped away as it had before, taking the village with it, and the noise quieted. And only pieces of roof and palms remained.

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Only forty people or so were collected at the top of the hill by the late afternoon, and hundreds missing. Jaya recognized faces of some of the other villagers. But he kept watching for his family or school friends or anyone who really knew him. None of them appeared.

Men around him argued over whether they were safe here, whether they needed to move further inland, whether they should go back to their homes to find loved ones who had been right behind them; people pushed one another aside when they realized the person in front of them was not the brother or sister or father or uncle they had been searching for; some were injured, and no one knew what to do about it. One of the old women concocted a remedy of water steeped with bitter herbs and poured it over a man with sour-smelling patches of ripped flesh.

Before the night fell it began to rain. The villagers huddled together in small groups and tried to shelter themselves with palm fronds that had fallen when the waves shook the hill. Jaya watched as Simorangkir drifted to the outskirts and then a little more and settled beneath a

sandalwood tree dense with foliage. He drew his knees to his chest and rested his head against the trunk and closed his eyes. He did not stir when Jaya sat down next to him.

Jaya waited until he thought Simorangkir was asleep before he leaned into him, shivering. A strange sort of silence had set in, with the smoothness of the rain, *shhh*, calling for quiet. Jaya could not sleep. He looked off into the jungle, into the shadows that dotted the lush greenery. Jaya imagined any one of them might be his father emerging at the top of the hill.

His father would sit down on the earth next to him. He would put his arm around Jaya's shoulders, but Jaya would not laugh and shake it off as he usually did. He would curl up next to his father, not caring that he was too old.

And Jaya almost believed this dream, at least enough to fall asleep.

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The second day was filled with waiting, but Jaya did not know for what. He did not know if the rain meant more waves were coming. Even at the top of this hill he did not feel safe. The water had risen higher than he knew was possible the day before; who knew if it could rise higher still? And it seemed to him that he was not the only one who felt afraid.

"Someone will come," said Rio, the village pastor's grown grandson, after a number of the villagers had voiced their worries. He gripped his wife's hand with a stiff arm. Jaya had not seen the pastor since the wave came. "Probably help could not make it to the island through the storms, but someone will come. God has not abandoned us."

As if to prove him right, a handful of other villagers came forward from the jungle throughout the day, many of them wounded, and each was met first with shouts of "Praise

God!”, then with attention from the old woman with the bitter medicine, then with ceaseless questions about who they had seen, dead or alive. Old Simorangkir only shook his head. “I don’t know why they are all thanking God,” he said, “as if He has done something miraculous, by sending more survivors that we cannot feed.”

But Jaya was thinking of the bodies. He had assumed the other villagers had either escaped somewhere or washed away. Now Jaya remembered the broken pieces of houses he’d seen from the hill when the third wave struck and wondered if a body could be broken in such a way by the water. He thought about his own body; it was much weaker than a house. His mind conjured horrific images of arms chopped off like tree branches, hair loosened from scalps like the foliage shaken from the trees. And the more he tried to make his mind stop thinking these things, the harder it became to do so.

To occupy his mind and to make himself useful, Jaya joined a group of young women and several boys in searching for fruit, though they had been warned not to stray too far. (“Who knows what has been knocked loose in these storms?” Rio had said.) This high up the hill, the foliage had been ripped from the trees and strewn about, and Jaya had to tread carefully, but not much other debris littered the ground. He discovered a papaya tree and climbed the branches of the tree next to it. When he felt he was close enough, he leaned toward the other tree to shake the papayas down. As he watched them drop, he noticed the edge of a straw hat poking out from under the brush. He had probably stepped on it earlier.

Dropping from the tree, he reached down and cautiously picked the hat up. There was nothing around it. Jaya swept the dirt away with his hand. The hat had a conical shape to it, and it was very much like the one his mother wore when she helped in the fields. She kept it in place with a wide silk scarf, pink with gold embroidery, that she tied under her chin. Jaya tucked the



hat under his arm and called out to the others to help carry the papayas.

They fed the injured and the elderly first, then the women, then the healthy and young. By nightfall, no help had come, but at least the rain did not return.

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On the third day, after waiting all morning, Jaya could not sit still any longer. His family was out there somewhere. Maybe his grandmother was hurt, and they could not move her. Or maybe his father was trying to round up their water buffalo. Maybe his family had escaped but returned to the village and were looking for him there. Yes. Almost certainly they were wandering through the village looking for him, unaware that he had climbed the hill. How would they know to look for him up here? They might never find him. Jaya stared off into the jungle.

Simorangkir told him he could not go.

“What?” Jaya asked, surprised both that Simorangkir was watching him and commanding him.

“I have seen this before, a long time ago,” Simorangkir said. “There is nothing down there for a boy to see.” He put his hand on Jaya’s shoulder. “Come,” he said.

Jaya did not move.

“It will do you no good to harbor hope,” Simorangkir said.

Jaya said nothing.

“If they had survived, and were able, they would have joined us by now. If they survived, but were unable to move, they are probably not alive anymore. And if they are alive still, but trapped— what do you suppose you will be able to do about it?”

Jaya felt his body grow tense.

“What is done is done,” Simorangkir said. “Leave it be.”

But Jaya could not go back to waiting, not while hope remained. He put on the hat he had found, shook off the old man’s arm, and stepped into the jungle.

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After hours of walking, Jaya did not know where he was anymore. He continued down, but he was taking long detours to avoid fallen trees and ditches that had been carved into the hill by the elements. But Jaya was small for his age and could meander without disturbing too much. The smell was the worst part— mold and sweat and rot, mixed with days-old fish at the market. He pulled his T-shirt over his nose as he climbed, but it would not stay put, and he found himself gripping the T-shirt over his nose with one hand and pushing away branches with the other.

It was late afternoon when he saw the baby. Well, it was not a baby, not really; if Jaya set him upright on the ground, he would probably not fall immediately. He would teeter, maybe take a few steps first.

The little thing was lying on top of the brush, his face a patchwork of mud and skin, and he slapped at the palm fronds beneath him. He did not cry; Jaya could not even hear him breathing. Only the mechanical *tap, tap, tap* against something hollow like a log, and the barely audible swish of the palms under his tiny fingers.

When Jaya came closer he saw skin through the ribs of the palm leaves. A bloated arm reached from beneath the palm, grasping at something that was no longer there. A tangle of dark hair escaped from the brush, but the woman’s face was turned away. Jaya was glad he could not

see her eyes. He remembered the desperate eyes of the dying fish.

“Hello,” Jaya said awkwardly, his voice cracking.

The child looked at him but continued tapping.

Jaya remembered how his mother talked to his baby sister and adjusted his voice to sound more gentle. “It’s OK,” Jaya told the child, and leaned in slowly to pick him up under the arms. The child began to cry as soon as Jaya lifted him off the woman. He bounced the little boy in his arms, but the child only screamed more loudly. Jaya adjusted, put the child’s legs around his waist, held him more tightly, and the child leaned his head against Jaya’s warm chest, and did not cry as loudly.

Jaya turned in a circle and looked around him. He had to get out of this clearing, and then the child would surely need something to eat. Why hadn’t he brought any fruit with him? A few steps back into the jungle, Jaya spotted a plantain tree. He did not have a knife to cut down the fruit, but he set the child down softly and picked up two sticks. He batted the plantains delicately at first, afraid of damaging the fruit. Then he began to swing harder, and when the fruit was dangling by a threadlike thinness and he could simply break them off he swung harder still, till the whole bunch fell at his feet with a muffled *thwap*. His chest was heaving and his face wet.

He sat down next to the child and tore the bits of plantain into small pieces. Jaya thought again of the dead bloated woman, the dying fish eyes. He could not eat.

The jungle was beginning to look murky around him as the sun descended. It would be dark soon, and the thought of sleeping alone out here frightened Jaya in a way it never had before. The village should be close now. He could find shelter there, somewhere. Jaya continued on, the child bouncing on his hip as he walked.

When Jaya finally emerged from the jungle, he saw amongst the boards and thatched

roofs and downed trees a solid foundation, and he knew then that this was where the western half of the village had stood. The village school, built by foreigners who had come to visit the church, was the only building with a concrete foundation. The grassy area next to it, where Jaya often played football with the other children in the twilight before dinner, was now filled with debris. Someone was lying face down on top of the mess, but when Jaya called out, the person did not move or respond. Jaya was too frightened to look more closely.

He walked further out, through the rubble, till he could see, in the distance, the sea. Then he turned and began walking eastward, toward where his house should be. But it was dark, and Jaya could no longer see any markers, if they even existed— no familiar houses, no community buildings like the church. No paths existed anymore except the one he made for himself. It seemed that everything had been turned to pieces of nothing and scattered about. It all looked the same.

The child had stopped crying and was snoring quietly against his chest, and Jaya had nearly given up for the night to rest as well when he saw what must be the remains of the market, located at just the spot where the island began to curve. This was the only place in the village with so many large iceboxes for storing fish, and the iceboxes were still whole, though the one was missing its door. As Jaya walked closer, he saw something dry and red caked onto one of the doors, and the arms and feet of a body that was not moving and was pinned beneath it.

Jaya was sick. He needed his mother and father. His house should be close, just beyond this bend, seven or eight houses down. He began to run, though it was really more of a stumble as he tried to balance the child, and Jaya tripped on something— he did not look to see what, did not want to know what— and fell onto the sand. The child spilled out of his arms and began to wail, and Jaya picked him up again and continued to run, but when he rounded the bend he

stopped. He blinked his eyes hard to be sure, but the full moon and stars illuminated the whole beach. Now it was only vacant sand and rock. A couple of palms swayed alone in the wind. Piles of boards from the pier were strewn across the beach; everything else on the east end of the village, including Jaya's house, had been washed out to sea. The child continued to cry.

The moon cast a glowing reflection in the black water. Jaya walked toward it, gently bouncing the child on his hip and whispering, "Shhh." The water was calm now, and the waves crashed lightly in the quiet hum that had once lulled Jaya to sleep. He eased the child onto the sand and took a few steps into the sea. He took the too-big straw hat off his head and dipped it into the water. This was how his mother stayed cool on hot days: She would come down to the waterfront and dip the hat in the water, then close her eyes and smile as she placed it back on her head. Jaya did the same now and felt instantly cooler. And when he turned around to face the long expanse of beach and jungle, he imagined his mother and father trapped here in this washed-out, empty place, on the other side of things visible to the living. The child began to cry again.

Jaya picked up the child and carried him to the edge of the jungle, setting him down next to a large rock. Jaya collapsed next to him and leaned against the rock, closing his eyes, and the child crawled toward him and pressed up against his chest. Jaya thought about when he was younger and had once tried on his mother's hat on a hot day, had even used the pink sash to tie it to his head. She had laughed and pulled him close, then pushed him to armslength to observe him again and laugh. Jaya tried to hear it now, his mother's laugh. But he could not. He curled into himself even though it was not cold and fell asleep on the sand to the sound of his own sobbing.

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In the morning, the child tapped Jaya's chest until he awoke. He gurgled some kind of gibberish, and Jaya felt his stomach growl. He carried the child and walked down the beach until he found another papaya tree, then shook the fruit down. They ate.

Jaya turned back to the jungle with the child on his hip. He needed to get the child back to the camp. The baby needed someone else, someone to care for him. Jaya's arms were tired now, and the foul smell was worsening. It had been less pungent on the beach, where the air had room to move about, but back among the trees it was overpowering, even more than Jaya remembered. He felt faint and hoped he would not pass out and fall on the child. He did not know where he was going but up. The daylight exposed more bodies, but Jaya tried not to look at them. He knew that they were not people now. They were empty like the beach where his home once stood. Where his family once lived. They were nothing.

It was late afternoon when Jaya reached the point where the survivors had gathered, but there were more people now than when he had left. Men in brown military uniforms leaned against a truck that must have come from the other side of the island. Cartons in the back of the truck held food and bottles of water, and some of the military men were wearing white masks over their mouths and carrying long, yellow bags toward the jungle.

Jaya set the child down and collapsed next to it. The child began to wail and Rio, who was talking to one of the military men, turned at the sound. He looked at Jaya and the child curiously and walked toward them. As he came closer his pace quickened. "Is that my son?" He called out to his wife, and she began running toward them.

Rio dropped to his knees and lifted the child to his feet. Rio held his face close to the

child's, and for a moment they only stared at one another. Then all the brightness and hope in Rio's face fell away, and his wife was there behind him. He let go of the child, turned away from Jaya and sobbed, his head pressed against his wife's waist. She looked down on him in what seemed to be a mixture of pity and pain. She stroked Rio's hair.

"I recognize you from the church, don't I?" she asked Jaya.

Jaya nodded.

"You are Ramalan's son," she said.

Again, Jaya nodded. "Yes."

Rio pulled his head away from his wife but still faced her. He breathed long, deep breaths that seemed very loud.

Rio's wife looked down at him and rested her hand against his cheek for a moment. Then she knelt down facing Jaya and lifted the child into her arms. "I'll see that he gets cleaned up," she said, "and try to find out if his mother is here." She stood and began cooing to the child and walked away.

"I do not think she is going to find his mother here," Jaya said.

Rio turned toward him. "What makes you think that?"

"Because I found her already," Jaya said. "She was covered in branches and brush." As he spoke, he felt as though the words were coming from someplace else. He was not thinking about them at all.

Rio shook his head. "Why were you wandering in the jungle alone?"

"I was looking for my family. They were not there."

Rio stared at Jaya for a long moment. The military men behind him had begun setting up tents, and a few others pulled cots out of the truck beds.

“Just rest here for now,” Rio said finally. “I will find you when the tents are prepared.”

When Rio shook Jaya awake later, it was night again, and the tents and cots were already set up. Jaya could barely move. His muscles begged for rest. Rio held Jaya by one arm and Simorangkir held him by the other, and they walked him to their tent, where Jaya collapsed on a cot. As he closed his eyes, voices from outside the tent blended into quiet mumbles like those of his family through the thin walls of their house. Jaya thought he heard the child crying, somewhere. It was a sad and beautiful sound, that crying— the sound of wanting something so badly that it hurts. And yet, a sound that meant you were alive, and this gave Jaya comfort. He strained to listen, let the sound seep into his ears and skin and bones until it settled softly in his heart, and fell asleep.



## Summer Sol

Estrella has always disliked the early summer in Acapulco. Hot days stretch out at the ends, so tight and thin it feels like they might pop. Tourists swarm the city, and Estrella's father is home less. Without the routine of school, she is never sure of how to spend her days, and she would rather spend them almost anywhere than in the company of Tía Clara, who hovers over her with narrowed eyes. There was a time when Estrella and her older brother, Daniel, would ride bikes or build fortresses or explore abandoned lots for hours, until the sun began to sink and they knew their father would be coming home. But now Daniel will be gone, too; he is learning how to fix air conditioners this summer at an auto repair shop.

"I'll be down in the city every day," Daniel tells her.

They sit together on the ground in front of their house, surrounded by the deep nighttime, the way they often do. The house is situated on a cliffside, and the ground is a patchwork of grass and dirt. Even the moon is asleep tonight, curled up under blankets of gray clouds. Estrella has always felt a strange comfort out here in the blackness, as if the entire city has been wiped clean. Across the cliffs, each house gives off a faint glow, and they become tangled in strands on the mountains like Christmas tree lights.

"I'll be out in the middle of things," Daniel continues. "Seeing new people." He says this with a smile that he cannot hide, even in the dark. It's in his voice, the way that he draws out the words as if he likes the taste of them in his mouth, as if he wants them to last forever.

"What are you going to do all day without me, *flaquita*?" Daniel teases, passing Estrella a mango.

Estrella shrugs. Peels away the bitter rind with her fingers. But then the sweet scent of the mango twirls and dances up to Estrella's nose, and she cannot help smiling, too.

"Do you remember the summer after you finished *primaria*?" she asks.

Daniel thinks for a moment. "When Papá let me go with him on tours?"

Estrella nods. "I wanted to go that summer, too."

"You were too young," Daniel says.

Estrella looks at Daniel, but she cannot see his eyes in the darkness, only his outline— his round face, his hair fixed into little spikes all over his head, like a porcupine.

"Maybe Papá will let me ride with him this summer," she says, biting into the mango.

The sweetness explodes in her mouth, and she holds onto it for a moment before going on.

"Maybe," she says finally, "we will each have our own adventures."

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Estrella watches as Daniel leans over the old Toyota's open hood, careful to avoid the soft currents of smoke that curl upward, then disappear. It's warm out, but not hot— not yet. The sun is still slinking around corners of the mountains, but it will be bright soon, and Estrella's father has agreed to let her ride with him to pick up the tourists at Acapulco Real.

Daniel crosses his arms. His right hand hugs the opposite elbow, fingering the mole just above it, a nervous habit. He looks over at Estrella then, notices that she is watching him. "Eh, *flaquita*!" he calls. "Grab the freon, on the shelf over there." He points to the side door of the house, where a three-level shelf is littered with bottles and metal tools of different shapes and sizes. "The green one."

Estrella stands up and dusts off the bottom of her jeans, then fetches the bottle. Daniel pours its contents into one of the many compartments hidden beneath the car's hood. He has just started his summer work at the air conditioning repair shop. It will be a lucrative job for him in this humid city, their father has always said. Not that locals worry with such things, but tourists want air, he'd say; they have not been told that they can survive without it.

The car rumbles as Daniel starts it up, and the air blasts on. Daniel laughs. "Feel that, *flaquita?*"

Estrella meets him on the driver's side and leans in. The rush of air startles her, blows her hair back into Daniel.

"Hey, hey, watch out!" Daniel says, spitting her hair out of his mouth, still laughing.

"You fixed it easy!" Estrella exclaims, genuinely impressed. She does not know anything about what happens under the hood of a car. It all looks the same— mountains and valleys of mechanical gray, relieved occasionally by rivers of black.

As she looks up, their neighbor, Chucho, rolls by in his car, and Estrella beeps the horn twice. She likes Chucho. He seems about her father's age and feels very much like an uncle, and he often brings a couple of mangos for Estrella and Daniel whenever he comes to their house.

His window is already down. Chucho waves at them. "Eh, *chicos*, ¿*que onda?*" He points to Daniel. "A week on the job, no? And Hector's already putting you to work? Bah, I hope you're charging him!"

Daniel steps out of the car next to Estrella. He rests his arms on the open door and leans over it. "Just practicing, Chucho. Hey, looks like you could use a fix too, huh?" He points to Chucho's rolled down windows. "When are you going to bring this old donkey into the shop?"

"There's nothing wrong with this old donkey," Chucho laughs, waving him off.

“Anyway, if she was perfect, I couldn’t entertain you with my singing.” He turns the volume louder and picks up in the chorus of the song playing on the radio: “*Buscando guayaba ando yo, que tenga sabor...*,” he sings, his shoulders swaying to the beat, his eyebrows waggling. He laughs again and guns the engine, waving as he drives off.

“Estrella, let’s go!” her father calls, clapping his hands. He emerges from the side door of the house, his eyes focused back inside. He turns around and stops short when he sees Estrella by the car with Daniel, waiting for him.

She smiles. “I’m ready, Papá.” But when she sees her aunt emerge from the house behind him, Estrella feels her heart pound hard for one beat. Two. She cannot keep her smile from running away.

Tía Clara reminds Estrella of the nuns— she is stern and stiff like their robes. Like the starched sheets Tía Clara used to make white and crisp each day, when she worked in the laundry room at Acapulco Real. The job has taken its toll on her back, and she can no longer work; most days she sits in one of the wooden dining chairs, observing and judging the children who move around her while Estrella’s father is away at work.

“That hair,” Tía Clara says, in a way that means, You are not fit for public view, young lady. Tía Clara sits in one of the chairs outside near the door and motions for Estrella to come to her. Estrella kneels in front of her, as she has been taught to do. *Dios te salve María*, Estrella thinks. Tía Clara pulls Estrella’s hair into a high ponytail, smoothing out the bumps with brittle fingernails that scratch her head. Tía Clara sighs, meaning, I suppose this will have to do.

Estrella considers herself dismissed and does not look back. She bounds into the passenger seat of the car as Daniel closes the hood.

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When they pull in front of Acapulco Real twenty minutes later, her father leaves the motor running and asks Estrella to wait in the car. “Tomorrow, I will bring you inside, but for today, stay here, OK?”

Estrella nods. She must be perfect today, behave just as her father asks, so that he will bring her with him again tomorrow, maybe every day until the summer is over and school starts again. She watches her father as he approaches one of the doormen. They all look the same in their spotless white uniforms from head to toe. Her father slaps the man on the back. “Good to see you, Hector,” the man says and opens the door for him with a smile.

A few minutes later, Estrella’s father comes through the door again, followed by two young American women. The women, one tall and blonde and the other short with red hair, seem to take in everything around them as they step outside. At once excited and skittish. Estrella has not seen women like this before, not really; women like this do not come to her neighborhood.

Her father opens the back door for them, and they smile politely as he introduces Estrella. Estrella nods to acknowledge them and tries not to stare. Staring is not polite. She returns her gaze to the window, pretending she cannot understand a word of English, which her father has said puts the tourists more at ease. They drive through the hotel gates that proclaim “¡Adios! Bye Bye!” in bold letters at the top.

At the first stop light, a duo of young men approaches the car with spray bottles and dirty rags, asking to clean the windshield. “No, *amigos*, no,” her father says, though they have already launched a sudsy liquid onto the glass. Her father smiles at the men, revealing rows of crooked and chipped teeth. Estrella loves his broken smile. There is something so easy about it, that

smile, which he always gives Estrella when he comes home in the evenings and sees her waiting at the window.

Now, though, up close, the smile looks strained, and her father rolls his window down a little ways. “No, *amigos*,” he repeats, and reaches a hand out the window to tap one man lightly on the shoulder. At his touch, the man throws up his hands. He and his friend wave apologetically and walk away. Estrella can see, in the car’s side mirror, the red-headed American sitting behind her; the woman is smiling the same strained smile, and one hand is resting on her purse.

The light changes colors. Her father beeps his horn to alert the car in front of him and urges his own car forward. “That’s why it’s good to figure out a job early,” he says conversationally, glancing at the young women in his rearview mirror. “So you don’t end up on the streets doing something like this. These guys— they don’t mean any harm. They just can’t find any other work.”

Estrella looks back in the mirror at the red-headed lady. She has let her purse slide onto the seat next to her, her hands still in her lap.

“Where is it we’re going to again?” the blonde girl asks. “The first place, I mean.”

Estrella hears her fumbling with some kind of paper. Brochures, maybe, or a map. Her father has them all over the house, takes them to the airport sometimes to hand out as the tourists walk through the lobby.

“It’s called *La Capilla de la Paz*,” Estrella’s father answers. “Chapel of Peace. It was built by this rich couple from Mexico City. Really a beautiful place, though, whether or not you are religious. It has sculptures, a garden. And also one of the best views of the city, so you can take pictures.

“See over there? *Las Brisas*?” He points out Estrella’s window to the palatial hotel that covers the cliffside on their right. It looks like squat white boxes stacked on top of one another, each with a flat pink roof that supports the level behind it. Every little house has its own terrace and small swimming pool, and they are staggered, so that the people inside must feel like they are in a house all to themselves. It is at once beautiful and strange— strange to be so close to so many other people and yet not see them.

“That is what we call the Babymaker, ha,” her father is saying. “A lot of couples come here for their honeymoon, and, you know, nine months later...”

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The tourists spend an hour at the Chapel of Peace, so the blonde girl can take pictures from every imaginable angle. Estrella’s father lets them wander without hovering.

“We don’t want them to think we’re in a hurry,” he says, walking slowly next to Estrella, his hands in his pockets. Occasionally, when the Americans are nearing some important feature, he will close in and explain its history, its importance. But when they wander off again, he points out different things to Estrella— the shape of the trees and the chitter of the birds, singing happily. They play a game, trying to find where the birds are hiding in all the green. It’s something he rarely has time to do these days, play a game with her, and something Estrella is almost too old to do herself. But she likes this feeling, as if she and her father are alone together with the whole world at their fingertips.

Estrella could stay here for hours more. She can see the whole city from here, but it’s different than looking at it from her own house, where the city is right below and the water too

far away to be seen. Here, the water is sitting right on the foot of the mountain, and it looks blue, so blue.

“We will see it from even closer,” Estrella’s father says, knowing she does not want to leave, though she does not say this out loud.

“From where?” she asks in Spanish, as they walk with the Americans back to the car.

“*La Quebrada*,” he says.

That’s where the divers are. Estrella knows of them, but she has never seen them. When Estrella’s father pulls up to the cliffs, there are people everywhere blocking her view of the water, and she wonders if she will actually see them today. But of course her father will make sure the Americans can see.

They make their way through the parking lot, where a couple of barefoot children are chasing one another and an old man sits on a blanket near the sidewalk with some sort of bandage wrapped around his leg. He doesn’t look up as they pass.

They work their way closer, around the little building with the restrooms, past the man in the dirty white T-shirt sitting just outside, selling pieces of toilet paper for a dollar each. They make it nearly to the rail, and Estrella can see that tourists line the steps that have been carved down the mountainside, and those at the lowest level are mere dots of colored clothing from where Estrella stands. And yet some of the divers, already lined up on the cliff opposite, are higher than she is.

In the thin strip of ocean separating them, the blue-green water lies still, sunsplashed diamonds in a mouth of jagged rocks. The layer of water is thin, her father explains to the Americans, perhaps thirteen feet in the very best case, and sometimes as shallow as ten. Estrella feels dizzy, afraid for the divers, and afraid of slipping over the edge herself.



Six divers are lined up at various heights. The lowest will jump first, her father says, building up to the final diver, who will fall from the full height of the cliff. There is something different about the lowest figure across the water, and as she looks more closely, Estrella sees that it is a woman, the only female diver, curved in a way that the scarecrow men perched on the cliff are not. The woman leans forward but keeps her shoulders back; it is clear she is watching something in the water. Estrella squeezes forward until she is just in front of the guard rail, though she is too frightened to lean against it. Looking down, she cannot see anything but meaningless waves. But as Estrella looks up, the woman thrusts her body forward with her arms stretched behind her like wings, and for a moment she is like an oversized gull plunging into the sea to catch a fish.

Half of the audience erupts in applause; it seems the other half did not realize the show was starting. The rest of the divers follow suit— watching and waiting and then plummeting into the ocean without warning. Lastly comes the diver on the peak of the cliff, who waits until he has stirred up enough applause to satisfy him. Then he dives, flips, drops, splashes.

After the show, Estrella's father tells the Americans that photos of the divers are sold in the adjacent restaurant, *La Perla*, and that the divers will typically sign autographs. But the young women want to peruse the tents at the top of the steps instead; Estrella can see just inside, through the flap, oversized refrigerator magnets of bright green frogs with flopping legs, and little glasses with sayings about tequila. Estrella's father recognizes a waiter he knows at *La Perla* and steps over to its patio. "Stay close, Estrella," he warns, and is gone.

For a moment, Estrella stands locked in place, contemplating what might qualify as "close," but she decides the divers will be close enough. Estrella wades through the crowd of floppy hats and visors and tennis shoes and oversized cameras to the side door of *La Perla*.

There, in the lobby, surrounded by a small crowd of local children and tourists, are the divers, signing autographs and pocketing tips.

Estrella recognizes the highest diver, grinning like one of the neighborhood boys. He leans in toward the young female diver and whispers something that Estrella cannot hear, placing his hand on the low part of the woman's back. The woman slaps it away, frowning.

The young woman walks toward the ladies' room, and Estrella does not know why, but she follows her. In front of the mirror inside, the woman releases her hair from its ponytail. It is a rich black, like soil hidden deep in the earth, and she begins smoothing it with her fingers. Her fingers stop when she notices Estrella shadowing her. "What, did you want an autograph or something?" she asks, without turning around.

"No," Estrella says. She knows she can't buy a picture. They cost too much.

The woman returns her attention to her own reflection.

"You looked like a bird," Estrella says.

The woman's fingers stop again. "What?" She turns around this time.

"When you were diving," Estrella says, "you looked like a bird. Like a beautiful bird."

The woman's laugh engulfs the air like a flame, surrounds them. Her face softens. "Is this the first time you've seen the show?"

Estrella nods.

"And you enjoyed it?"

Another nod. "It seems so high, though. Aren't you afraid of getting hurt?"

The young woman laughs again. "Not by the rocks. What is your name, *señorita*?"

"Estrella Delmar López."

"Nice to meet you, Estrella Delmar López." The young woman extends her hand

ceremoniously. “My name is Marisol— Sol.” Sol leans back against the bathroom counter, her arms holding her weight behind her. “How do I explain it? Tell me, Estrella, if you had one day all to yourself, what would you do for that one day?”

Estrella thinks for a moment. “Probably go to work with my papá, like today.”

“No, no, no,” Sol tries again, “what I mean is— let’s say you had all the money you ever wanted, and you could do anything, no questions asked, no restrictions from your papá, anything was possible. What would you do?”

Estrella has never thought like this before. She does not know the answer that is expected of her. She tells Sol that she would eat fresh baked tamales for breakfast like her mama used to make. She would go to the silver shops and buy all of the jewelry with the pretty lavender stones, like Chucho sells in his shop. She would glide through the surf with the dolphins, maybe kiss their long, funny noses. She would stay up late eating mangos with Daniel, pelting him with the pits without her father and Tía Clara there to stop them, tossing the yellow skins off the edge of the cliff on which she lived and watching them disappear into nothing.

Sol’s face becomes sunshine. “You remind me of my little sister back home, Estrella Delmar López. I have not seen her in a long time.” Sol closes her eyes. “Diving is like all of those things packed into one moment. It is the freest you will ever be. I would dive from the top of the cliff and then some if they would let me.” She opens her eyes and turns back to the mirror. She begins smoothing her hair into a loose ponytail. “I suppose I should be glad they let me in this little boys’ club at all.”

“You should be glad you don’t have to jump from the highest point,” Estrella says. She thinks of the view from where she stood and tries to imagine that the water is twice as far down, its opening between the rocks twice as small. Her stomach turns, and she feels a little dizzy.

Estrella shakes her head. “I would be frightened.”

Sol frowns, and her eyes meet Estrella’s in the mirror. She turns toward her. “It’s more frightening to be kept from trying, *cariño*,” she says, brushing Estrella’s cheek. “But if you can find something that gives you that feeling— well, I suppose you can do without anything else.”

Estrella is not sure what Sol means by this— what things Sol must do without. But before she can ask, Sol glances at the door.

“I have to get back,” Sol says, “but come see me if your papá brings you down here again, OK?”

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“Let’s go! Let’s go, Estrella!” her father calls, clapping.

It isn’t Estrella’s fault that she is running late, it’s Tía Clara’s, but Estrella does not say this out loud. Estrella is kneeling in front of Tía Clara like usual, awaiting the long fingernails scraping against her head. She is surprised to feel that her aunt’s hands today are soft and damp. Estrella’s body shrugs away involuntarily at the touch, and her aunt taps her lightly on the head.

“Settle down, settle down,” Tía Clara says, “it’s only a little gel.” Tía Clara smooths Estrella’s hair back into its ponytail, but it is different, Estrella can tell. No little strands are flying away from her head, and she can feel the gel hardening already into a helmet, perfectly fitted to her head. It doesn’t feel right. But maybe Tía Clara is trying to make Estrella look older, or nicer somehow, for the tours.

When she is released from her aunt’s grip, Estrella bounds to her father’s car with a skip of excitement. Today will be a different set of tourists at Acapulco Real, but Estrella will be able

to see all of its luxury from the inside. She hopes they will again go to *La Quebrada*. She is anxious to see Marisol.

Estrella's heart flutters as she walks into Acapulco Real. She has never been inside any of the extravagant hotels in the city, so she has nothing with which to compare it, but she likes this one. It has an openness about it—ceilings that reach up to the sky and no walls on the far end of the lobby, only a balcony space. The lush green leaves of the palm trees from the level below drift in and out of sight in the mild breeze. A bustle of bellhops transport suitcases across the marble floors. And in the middle of the lobby, a trio of young women is sunk into stuffed purple chairs. They chatter and giggle in shrill voices that bounce from floor to ceiling and back.

Estrella feels strong hands resting on her shoulders and turns around.

"Estrella, this is Señora Antonia," her father says.

The woman called Antonia has a worn-in smile like crinkled bed sheets, and she waits for Estrella to address her.

"Estrella," her father repeats. He smiles his wide, broken smile. He squeezes her shoulder. "Say hello to Señora Antonia."

"Hello," Estrella murmurs, wondering why her father is not in his usual hurry, why they are keeping the tourists waiting so he can introduce her to some friend.

Sra. Antonia replies that she is delighted to meet the young lady she has heard so much about.

"I've worked with your Tía Clara for many years," Sra. Antonia adds. "She always said you were such a nice, well-mannered child."

Estrella finds it difficult to believe that Tía Clara has said anything of the sort, but she does not argue. Talking back is not polite, and that would upset her father. And then Estrella

would no longer be able to keep him company, would no longer be able to see the city, the divers. Marisol.

“Estrella,” her father begins, “I’m letting you stay here today. Señora Antonia has agreed to let you help her out around the hotel. Teach you a little about what she does. You may even be able to help her more this summer. I will pick you up in a few hours, after the tour, OK?”

It is not OK. Estrella wonders if he means she must help every day this summer, the way Daniel is helping in the auto shop. Estrella does not know what it means to work in a hotel, but she knows it is not what she wants. Not right now, anyway. Maybe not ever. This was *their* summer, their summer for adventure. Their summer to see the city together.

But Estrella cannot say this to her father. She does not want him to look at her like Tía Clara so often does, with disappointment in his eyes. At any rate, her father has already turned toward the young women in the purple chairs and is greeting them with “¡Hola, chicas!” and a hearty smile.

“Follow me, Estrella.” Sra. Antonia’s smiling face is stretched into a daze of the sort Estrella has seen on some local men after they have whiled away long hours at the cantina—tired and maybe something like content. Sra. Antonia ushers Estrella across the lobby to retrieve her housekeeping cart from one of the staff closets, and together they begin rounds.

In one room, the uncovered remains of breakfast on the balcony have attracted flies and clusters of ants that are drowning in sticky streams of syrup. In another, Sra. Antonia makes Estrella wear plastic gloves to pick up the torn wrappers and wet, colored pieces of rubber that have fallen to the floor. And in all of the rooms, Sra. Antonia shows Estrella the way to tuck, tuck, fold the sheets onto the bed so that they became a part of it, one solid, immovable mass.

“Tomorrow, I’ll show you the washroom, eh? Like your Tía Clara,” Sra. Antonia says

when Estrella's father arrives to pick her up. "See what you like best, eh?"

Estrella does not want to come back tomorrow or any day. But she cannot say this to her father. He would not ask her to do this unless it was very important.

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"What did you think about Acapulco Real, Estrella?" Tía Clara's tone indicates the correct answer: The hotel was lovely, Sra. Antonia was a fine lady, and Estrella could not wait to go back and learn more from her tomorrow.

"The hotel was lovely," Estrella says, staring down at the kitchen countertop. The dull, fluorescent light overhead, and maybe the orange color of the walls, make the white counter take on a sickly green tint. "And Sra. Antonia, too," Estrella adds. But this is as much enthusiasm as she can muster.

"That is very mature of you, Estrella," Tía Clara says, and stirs the pork *carnitas*. "Tomorrow, you will see the hotel laundromat, no?"

Estrella nods.

"We will find something for you." Tía Clara takes stock of Estrella from head to toe. "I would say you should observe one of the ladies at the front desk, but you are a little too mousy for that, huh? Like your mother too much, I think. Yes, it will be much better for you to stay behind the scenes. You are a good little worker," she says, but Estrella knows this is not a compliment. Her aunt stirs some more, one hand on her hip, then whaps the wooden spoon against the stovetop. Estrella watches the little grains of rice on the spoon go flying back into the boiling water. Tía Clara looks down. "Set the table, please."

Estrella opens the cabinet that holds the plates. They are white with little blue and green swirls of flowers around the border, and they are chipped in places like her father's teeth. Still, she does not want to risk dropping them, so she takes two trips to carry them to the table.

She sees her father and Daniel outside in the melting twilight. Her father must have just picked him up from work. They are walking toward the house, her father's arm around Daniel's shoulders, shaking him playfully. But Daniel doesn't look happy and excited the way he did a couple of weeks ago. He just looks tired. Estrella thinks about Sra. Antonia.

The front door closes, and Estrella's father calls out to her. She makes her escape from the tight kitchen. Her father leans down and swallows Estrella in a hug.

"I am taking a couple down to *La Quebrada* for the nighttime diving show," he says, smiling. "I know you already saw it yesterday, but the night show is a bit different, so I thought you might want—" He cannot even finish his sentence before Estrella says yes.

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The night show draws a very different crowd. Couples dine on the balconies at La Perla, which overlooks the water. Women wear heels instead of sneakers. And Estrella can only see the divers' faces and arms, illuminated by their torches against the stark blackness of the cliffs. They jump with the torches at night, her father says, to guide their way. Estrella counts only five divers this time, but Marisol, with her long bathing suit, is among them.

Estrella presses herself against the guard rail and leans forward, her elbows resting atop the railing. A warm wind flutters through her hair. One by one, the divers drop into the water below, leaving the opposite cliff a little dimmer. Estrella thinks of Acapulco Real and Sra.



Antonia and the blankness on Daniel's face when he came home. Her heart sinks deeper as the last flame dies.

After the show, as Estrella and her father wait for the tourists to finish dinner, Estrella searches for the divers. But they are not poised in the lobby signing autographs as they were yesterday afternoon.

"¡Ay, *cariño!*" a pleasant voice calls, and when Estrella turns, Sol is waving to her from across the lobby. She is out of place tonight, in her swimsuit and sandals within the candlelit restaurant, but she does not seem to notice. Sol's hair is down, and she coaxes the water out of it with an oversized yellow towel. "Back so soon, Señorita Estrella?"

Estrella does not know why, but she runs to Sol and throws her arms around her.

Sol laughs. "What is this? What is the matter?"

Estrella cannot say; her chest is rising and falling too quickly, and she cannot get a deep enough breath to form words. Her eyes are watery, and the warm brown of Sol's sun-soaked skin becomes a blur.

"Did you notice anything different about my dive tonight?" Sol asks, and her voice is smiling.

Estrella shakes her head, and Sol pushes her back to an arm's length.

"Alonso was sick and could not dive. They did not let me have his spot, but everyone moved up a spot higher. So I was able to jump from ten feet more than normal! And that breeze, the breeze that was only ten feet higher —" she leans her head back and breathes deeply — "*¡magnífico!*"

Estrella tries to smile but must be unconvincing, because Sol frowns and points to a bench in the waiting area across from them. They sit there together, and Sol strokes Estrella's

hair a couple of times and rests her head against the concrete wall behind them.

“I know I’ve said this before, but you are very much like my sister, Estrella Delmar López,” Sol says. “So sweet-spirited. Easily broken, too, but it won’t always be so.”

Estrella wonders if Marisol is right. If Sol always had such a sharp look about her, or if it built up over time. But it feels like too personal a question to ask. “Does she come here often?” Estrella asks instead. “To watch you dive, I mean?”

Sol looks surprised, then shakes her head. “No, *cariño*. She lives farther north, in Chihuahua, with the rest of my family. It’s been several years since I’ve even seen her. She might be someone completely different now.” Sol nods to herself. “Yes, almost certainly she is someone different.”

Estrella would relish the chance to escape Tía Clara, but she wonders what it would be like to come home every day without her father and Daniel there. To have no one to watch for through the window in the early evening, no one to cook for and eat with each night. No one to make her feel better when she was sick or tired. No one to talk to about little things. No one to sit with in the darkness.

“Do you miss them?” Estrella asks.

“Sometimes,” Sol says, then shakes her head. “Often. Some more than others, I suppose. But you will find one day, Estrella, that you can jump, or you can stay— but you cannot do both.”

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Estrella lies in bed, thinking about what Marisol told her, and even after the moon has risen high

in the black night and casts a soft glow over the mattress, she cannot sleep. She hears a rustling sound in the hallway and wonders who is up. She opens the door to a slit and peeks out. No shadows lurk in the hallway, but the noise has moved into the kitchen. She sneaks around the corner and sees a figure with its head shoved deep into a cabinet. When the head emerges, the moonlight illuminates Daniel's porcupine hair.

"I hope you're getting enough to share," Estrella whispers loudly.

Daniel jumps, dropping the mangos with a series of plunks and a long rolling sound.

"Estrella? What are you doing up?"

"I can't sleep." She steps into the kitchen and helps him pick up the fruit, cradling it in her T-shirt. "When did we get these?"

Daniel sighs. "Chucho brought them over earlier, when you were out with Papá."

"And you were going to eat all of them?"

"Maybe I got some extra in case you woke up," Daniel says with a shrug. He is smiling.

"Come on, *flaquita*."

They move outside where they will not wake anyone, close to the edge of the hill, and the air is quiet except for the rumbles and acceleration of distant car engines below them. Estrella tries to look past the city below to the water, but she cannot see it from here. It must be black now, she imagines, but sparkling with moonlight. With possibilities.

"Everything is going to change, isn't it?" Estrella asks, not knowing if Daniel will understand. Estrella can feel it deep inside her, something shifting around, like a top that has lost its speed and become wobbly. She can feel that it is about to fall. That no matter what happens this summer, things will never again be what they were.

Daniel shakes his head as he peels a mango. "I think everything is what it was always

going to be. We're not any different, anyway. We're still you and me."

Estrella tears at the yellow skin of the mango with her fingernails, peeling off large chunks at a time. "I guess we are," she says. "Look, Daniel! You peeled a perfect strip!" Estrella points at the long, thin flap of skin in his hands.

Daniel circles the strip around his ring finger like a streamer, then pulls it off and holds it to his lips. He blows out through it, and Estrella giggles as the peel soars over the edge of the cliff into the nothing. The next flap of skin is a wider piece, and he tosses it into Estrella's hair.

Estrella does not squeal; she only laughs and pelts it back into his face, and then they are through. Estrella bites into the open top of the mango, and its sweet juice runs down her lips.

## Night Glow

By the time the final bell rang on the last day of school, most everyone was already gone— early dismissals and then parties to celebrate the end of junior high and the start of summer. I hated summertime. The dry Arizona heat scorched everything to a yellow-brown, and night winds kicked up loose dirt into my eyes.

I knelt down in front of my locker in the empty hallway to clean it before walking home to Gran's.

“Hey, assface.” A hand shook my backpack hard, but I recognized Trey's high-pitched voice. I shrugged him off without turning around.

“Hey,” I said, unwadding a piece of paper from my locker. Notes from algebra. I crumpled it into a ball and dropped it on the floor. “How come you're still here?”

“My mom couldn't take off to come pick me up.” Trey reached down for my algebra notes and started bouncing them in the palm of his hand. “You coming to Sandy's swim party?” He popped the ball too hard and it fell to the floor again a few lockers down. He didn't bother picking it up.

“She didn't ask me,” I said, knowing good and well that didn't matter. But maybe it would get Trey off my back.

“Don't be stupid,” Trey said, “it's not like she sent out invitations. Everybody's just going.” He knelt down and reached his hand absently into my locker, withdrawing a wad of paper. He started to open it. “If your grandma could drop you off, we could probably drive you home later. God, that's disgusting, dude,” he said, seeing the sticky guts of some old chewing

gum hanging out. He leaned forward a little and sniffed. “You know you don’t have to wait an entire year to throw things out, right? Seriously, this is how diseases start.”

I pushed him harder than I meant to. Trey was scrawny, and his backpack made him a little top-heavy. He fell backwards and caught himself on one arm.

“What the hell, man? I was just messing around. Jesus.” Trey stood up, shaking his head. He slung his backpack over the other shoulder. “Look, I gotta catch the bus.” He walked off without saying goodbye but turned around after a few steps. “Just call or something if you want to come, OK?”

I nodded, letting the possibility hang in the air between us. “Later.” I closed the door on my locker and the pool party.

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By the time I got home, the heat of the day had passed. I went into the kitchen to pour some lemonade. I could see Gran out back through the kitchen window, tending her garden. She hovered over her pink flowers, snipping some of the buds to bring into the house.

She tried this often, bringing some sense of young and fresh inside, but some measly flowers couldn’t hold up against the musty smell that soaked the whole house, the stench of furniture and clutter that hadn’t shifted in fifty years. And piss. No pets, a working toilet, but somehow that smell was always there, digging its way into your nose and setting up camp.

It was fine when we just came here to visit. But then Mom lost her job a couple of years ago, and we had to move in. And even after she found a job later, she didn’t want to move out after the accident. Like she couldn’t stand the thought of moving somewhere that Ronnie had

never been before and never would be, ever.

I went to my room— not really *my* room, but the room Gran had given to Ronnie and me when we moved in— and closed the door, without telling Gran hello. I could start summer reading. Even summer reading was better than answering questions about school or anything else.

No one bothered me till Mom got home from work around six. I heard the sound of the door opening and closing against the noise of the television. *Wheel of Fortune* and whispering voices. And finally a knock at my door.

After a couple of seconds, Gran opened it. She looked all around the room before she looked at me, like she was searching for something. Gran was like a soldier sometimes. Her voice was never anything but sweet, but those eyes. They were tough, like the brown rock outside that had built up into cliffs ages ago. Crumbling, but tough. Much more than Mom's.

"Chuck, your mother's home, baby," Gran said. "She brought some dinner. Why don't you come eat."

"Can I just eat in here, Gran? I'm at a really good part," I said, waving the book around, though I'd been daydreaming for hours.

Gran leaned against the door frame. "How about just finish the chapter," she said. "It'll be there when you get back." She pulled the door to.

In the kitchen, Mom was opening the Styrofoam containers. "Hey, baby," Mom said when I came in, kissing me on the forehead. "Grab some plates, will you?"

I pulled down the plates, old and off-white and chipped, with little blue birds chasing one another in an endless circle around the edges. I hated those plates. Mom changed over the burgers.

“How was the last day of junior high?” she asked, getting the ketchup out of the pantry.

“Fine,” I said.

“What?”

“Fine,” I repeated, louder.

I glanced over at *Wheel of Fortune*, forgetting how the table behind the sofa blocked the bottom of the TV from here. It was a plain old wooden table, tall as the sofa, covered in nicks and scratches. It had been my great-grandmother’s. Now it was home to gray-skinned porcelain angels, kneeling, bowing, praying, set so close together they couldn’t breathe. So close you couldn’t tell if they were friendly or fighting. And in the middle of them all, pictures of Ronnie with his baseball team, with his school friends. Sympathy cards that had been collecting dust for months.

I picked up my plate and took a seat on the sofa.

“Trey’s mom called,” my mom said.

I didn’t say anything, just took a big bite of my burger.

“She wanted me to know that she could drop you back off here anytime if you and Trey wanted to get together at all.” I could hear Mom throwing the dinner boxes in the trash, opening the fridge for drinks. “Was there something going on over there today?”

I shrugged. “I dunno.”

“Lemonade?” she asked, though she was already pouring it.

“Yeah.”

Mom sat down on the loveseat catercorner from me, putting our drinks on the coffee table. “Mrs. Ludo said one of the girls from your class was having a pool party today for the last day of school. She said Trey was going and wanted you to come.”



My stomach clenched down on itself tight and quick, before my mind had time to catch up. “I didn’t want to.” I didn’t want to go to a party ever again. I put my burger back on the plate.

“Chuck, if you don’t start getting out of the house again— you’ve got to start going to some of these things. Or, you know, people are going to stop inviting you.”

“Good.”

“Do you really want to start high school with no friends? Chuckie—”

I jumped up so fast the sofa slid back a little. “Don’t call me that!” Something clattered to the floor.

Mom ran to the table behind me.

“You know I hate being called that,” I said, kind of sorry now, but she wasn’t listening anymore. Some of the angels had tipped over on the table. One facedown, arms outstretched, drowning. Another curled up on its side.

“Goddamit, Chuck,” Mom whispered, so soft I almost didn’t hear her. She knelt down. “Just— go to your room.” She picked up Ronnie’s baseball picture from the floor and held it, her head bent forward like one of the lifeless figurines.

I left my dinner on the coffee table and closed the door to my room behind me, turned on my Playstation. My brother Ronnie and I used to play Mortal Kombat together every night after homework, before he got too old and started driving and meeting girls from school at Applebee’s instead. He always liked to play Scorpion, and I played Raiden so I could teleport behind him when he tried to use his spear move. “Ooo, that’s *so sneaky*, Chuckie!” he’d always say, even though I hated being called Chuckie and he knew it. He was always on offense, and I was always on defense. Half the time we never finished a game anyway, because Ronnie would turn to me and say, “Get over here!” in Scorpion’s voice— deep and gravelly. He’d grab me by the neck

and toss me to the ground, and we'd reenact the game till Mom got tired of the noise and broke us up.

Now I liked to play as Sub-Zero. He was way cooler. And once I turned the game on, I spent hours in front of it till I beat the whole thing. By that time, the sky would be black outside, and my mind would be numb and my fingers exhausted, and I could sleep through the night without any dreams. Or at least, none that I could remember.

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When I woke up at noon, Mom had already left for work, and Gran kicked me out. She said she wanted to clean the floors without me tracking dirt through the house. I told her I didn't mind just staying in my room anyway, but she said she wanted to clean the whole house, and I could go anywhere I wanted as long as it was outside.

I walked up our street, past the other ranch-style houses and double-wide trailers. The main road at the top was desolate. Businesses were scattered on my side of the street, but the other side was nothing but green-brown brush and dust, and the silhouette of the mountains in the distance. Everything that I knew in the world was to the left— my junior high school down the road and then, closer to the city, the skating rink, my old neighborhood, my brother's high school. I turned right.

After a few blocks of houses, I saw a stand-alone building made of old wood, weatherbeaten, its side lined with stalks of purple flowers that grew to midway up my chest. "Old Towne Ice Cream Shoppe" was painted on the big front windows in icy blue letters. The place looked almost empty— just a woman with two small kids sitting at a table inside.

I scrounged around in my pockets. I had about two dollars. That might be enough for a scoop. And even if it wasn't, the cool blast of the AC would be worth it.

A bell jingled when I entered, and a blonde girl stepped behind the counter from the back room. She was tall and skinny with long hair, and might have been pretty if she'd smiled. She was frowning, though, and her face looked narrow and squirrely, but at least her hair covered some of it up.

"Can I help you?" she asked when I didn't say anything. She shifted her weight to the side and stared hard at her fingernails.

I ordered an orange sherbet and looked for a table, but one of the kids in the shop started crying, and the lady was coddling him. The girl behind the counter was staring at the scene like it was on television, and the lady's other kid was staring right at me the same way. I remembered my mom crying, loudly, and the eyes of all the people I didn't even know looking at us, *into* us. My chest started clamping down, and I couldn't breathe. Sunlight came through the little white doors on the back wall of the shop, so I rushed outside and took a deep breath and let the dry, dusty air settle in my lungs.

It was prettier out here than the storefront let on. Bright, white umbrellas shaded the empty tables on the deck. Tall hedges lined a fence that blocked the patio from the outside world and made me feel hidden away, but at the same time excited, like I could be just on the other side of anywhere. Inside the hedge, another layer of the tall purple and green stalks was planted like out front. Flowers with bright pink blooms crept up the patio. Gran would like those. She'd like this whole place a lot.

The purple stalks twitched in the corner of my eye, and when I turned, a girl was standing up, garden gloves on her hands. She couldn't have been more than a year older than me, and a

few inches taller. Her black hair was short and choppy so that you could see her whole face, and she wore a tank top that showed off her tan skin, her arms, her chest. She was pretty. She was really pretty.

She was also smiling at me, and I realized how goofy I must look to her, a boy so short and stocky and pale staring at all the flowers. “We have some of these at my house,” I said, gazing down at the churned soil and feeling my cheeks flush. “My grandma’s into gardening.” The girl laughed, but it didn’t sound mean, and when I risked looking up, her eyes were green and bright. She took her gloves off and stepped over to a nearby table to set them down. I noticed then the little plastic boxes of flowers she had still to plant.

She wiped her hands on her cargo pants, leaving behind a little stain of sweat that would dry off quick out here, and sat down in one of the patio chairs, pulling her legs up to her chest. She took a long drink of water from a paper cup.

“What all does your grandma like to grow?” she asked, and she looked up into my eyes like she actually cared about the answer.

My heart was beating so loud I was afraid for a second she would hear it and laugh.

“She has some like these,” I said, pointing to a little white flower that was all bunched up on itself, “but they’re pink.”

“It’s hard to grow much else, with the weather like it is,” the girl said. “The flowers here just look like weeds. See that?” She pointed to the stalks. “That’s why they’re so tall. And why they have all those leaves. They use them to catch water. They’re more plant than flower.”

“You know a lot about this stuff,” I said, venturing closer to the table.

“Parents,” she said, nodding toward a little wagon filled with bags of soil and potted plants. *Oxendine Nursery*. “You try not to learn anything from them, but it happens anyway.”

The girl made a face. “Everything here’s all dust. Even the mountains are just dry rock. I miss all the wildflowers back home.”

Oxendine. Something Oxendine. I was thinking so hard about how much I wanted to know her first name that I almost missed what she said. “You’re not from here?” I asked, when my brain had caught up.

She shook her head. “Alaska,” she said, and I couldn’t help smiling, picturing her tall cheeks surrounded by a fur hood, a huge parka wrapped around her tiny body. “What?”

“Nothing. Isn’t everything there ice?”

The girl rolled her eyes. “That can’t be a serious question.”

I shrugged. “It’s not like I’ve ever been.” Only a puddle of orange remained in my paper cup, so I set it down on the table, then stood behind the chair across from her, holding on tight to its back.

The girl sighed. “The mountains are green, like really lush green, with wildflowers in every color you can imagine. Except at the very top. The tops are white, even in the summer when the weather’s perfect. If you drive up high enough, you can go sledding all year.”

I shook my head. I had never seen snow in my life, except on TV. “I can’t even imagine,” I told her.

“I mean, in the winter, the days are really short, and you have to make up games and stuff indoors to keep from going stir crazy. But in the summer—” She shook her head. “The days are long and the weather’s perfect, and you can shoot fireworks at midnight on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July with the sun still shining.”

“Alaska.” The other side of the world, or just about.

“I should get back to work,” the girl said, standing. “My parents wanted me to finish up

here today.” She grinned. “Call me if you’re ever headed up that way, and I’ll hitch a ride.”

We’d have to ride my bike there, I thought. I pictured the girl sitting on the bars between the handles. I pictured the tan legs that must be hidden under those cargo pants dangling carelessly. Her shoulders against my chest to keep her balance.

Out to the coast, we’d ride, then straight up to the top.

“My handlebars have got your name on them,” I said and instantly felt stupid. I picked up my cup from the table and stirred little swirls with my plastic spoon till it started looking like some kind of sunburst. “What *is* your name?” I asked, looking up.

The girl paused in putting on her garden gloves. “Leah.”

“Leah,” I repeated. Leah Oxendine. Leah Oxendine. “I’m Chuck.”

“See you around, Chuck,” she said, and smiled at me.

That night I played Mortal Kombat like usual, but my mind was still wide awake after, and when I did sleep, it was like I saw Leah on every channel— Leah in a fur-lined parka, Leah with her nose buried in a bouquet of fresh pink flowers. Leah in a swimsuit by a river with fireworks against the orange setting sun and a glacier slowly melting into the water under its heat.

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I went back to the ice cream shop the next afternoon, thinking in my head over and over all the things I might ask her about. What did she like to do for fun? What kind of movies did she like? Did she like working for her parents? I’d thought of at least twenty questions, studied them more than I had for any test. I bought a cone of strawberry ice cream and took it onto the back patio,

but Leah wasn't there. I felt silly for expecting her to be. She'd told me she would be finished yesterday.

I sat on the patio a while anyway, since it was empty, looking at all the flowers Leah had planted. Even the fence and the hedges didn't block the mountains in the distance, so I picked one of the little white flowers and held it up in front of me, to where it looked like fluff on the mountaintop. There's your Alaska, I would have told Leah. There's your snow.

I walked home after the heat of the day had passed and was surprised to see Mom's car in the driveway. Inside, she was sitting on the sofa with a blonde girl, flipping through a photo album. They both looked up when I closed the front door, and I recognized the girl immediately, though I hadn't seen her since the funeral. Mary Jo. Her hair was a little longer, but mostly she looked frozen in time. Someday, I imagined, she might change her hair, and grow taller, and her skin would get tighter like Mom's and then looser like Gran's, and she would leave Ronnie behind at sixteen. But not yet.

The girl smiled, even though her eyes looked red. "Hey, Chuck," she said, giving me a half-wave.

"Hey," I said, and started toward my room.

"Chuck," Mom said, and I had to stop. "Come sit down for a minute."

I did as she said, sat down on the recliner, separated from them by the length of the coffee table.

"Mary Jo was helping me pick out pictures," Mom said.

I looked down at my shoes, tried to count the specks of dirt on the laces.

"We're going to have a memorial next week," Mom said. "Just family and close friends."

The chapel where the funeral was held had been small and dim and stifling. It was like

another layer of my scratchy black suit, which was stiff and new. Mary Jo sat next to Mom and held her hand and stroked her hair. A big framed photo of Ronnie in front of them on top of the closed casket. His school portrait. Me behind them with Gran, a reminder of what was still here. What was taken and what was left, the past and the future, all shoved in a tiny room together with no one sure which to look at. And me knowing I should be right there next to him, and if I had been, I wouldn't have had to see them like that, Mom and Gran and Mary Jo, not on that day or any of the ones after.

“— one that means something to you,” Mom was saying.

I looked up.

“Chuck? Do you think you can do that?”

I opened my mouth but couldn't think of what to say.

“The pictures, Chuck,” Mom said, leaning over, looking at me dead-on. “I would like for everyone to pick one out that's special to them. For the service. Do you think you can do that?” She reached out and took my hand. “I think Ronnie would have liked that a lot.”

My throat felt tight. “Sure.”

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After breakfast the next morning, I pulled out Gran's phone book and flipped through the yellow pages looking at gardening places till I found Oxendine Nursery. I wrote the address down on the palm of my hand. It was a few miles away, but I could ride my bike there.

Gran was sitting in the living room watching TV. “I'm going out for a little bit, Gran,” I called, opening the back door that led onto the carport.



“Where to?” she asked, before I could close the door behind me.

I shrugged. “Just ride my bike a little.”

Gran smiled. “Have fun. And be careful.”

By the time I got to the nursery, I was sweaty and gross and out of breath. My head hurt from the brightness of the sun. The building was short and looked more like a house, surrounded by a chain link fence. On the side, plants waited in little plastic bins, sheltered by a canopy from the sun.

Across the street, I hovered over my bike, not sure yet if I should go inside the gate. Before I could make up my mind, Leah was there, on the other side of the chain link fence, walking out to water the plants. She wore a different tank top but the same dark green, soil-stained cargo pants she’d worn earlier in the week.

I decided I should be casual, ride by and let her notice me passing. But I passed her house and then the neighbor’s and she still hadn’t seen me. I turned around and rode back, this time on her side of the street, but she’d already gone back inside.

I didn’t know what to do then. I couldn’t be casual anymore. I couldn’t even call out to her like I’d just happened to see her. I’d have to knock on the door, and she’d know. She’d know that I had looked her up and come there just to see her.

Another thought hammered its way into my gut. Maybe she *had* seen me. Maybe she just didn’t want to say anything. Maybe I’d knock on the door and she’d roll her eyes or tell me to get lost, and then laugh with her friends, telling them for years to come about the loser fat kid who stalked her that one time.

And then a pain hit me that I hadn’t expected. I missed my brother. I missed him bad. It’s not like I didn’t know that already; it was a constant ache that I had managed to push behind a

locked door somewhere deep inside me. But it broke out and rushed over me then like a wave of nausea. This was the sort of thing I could have asked Ronnie about. Funny thing is, we'd never talked much about girls. It hadn't been important then, at least to me.

What would Ronnie do? He'd go get her. He told me about Mary Jo. How he'd gone over to her house the first time, knocked. Then when she answered, he'd turned around and started walking away. *Wait*, she'd said. *Ronnie? Is that you? Where you going?* And he'd turned around and looked her right in the eye. *I just wanted to see you smile*, he'd said. *That's all*. He started walking away again, and Mary Jo called after him. When he turned around, she was smiling again, and told him she wasn't done yet, so he didn't have to go.

It was so easy for him. How was it so easy for him? *Just do it, Chuckie*. That's what he'd say if he were here. He was all clever with Mary Jo, but he never saved any of that for me. He'd be standing next to me making chicken noises right now.

So I marched up to the door and knocked before I could change my mind. I heard a chair push back inside, feet shuffling. And then Leah was there.

She looked surprised, but not mad. She even smiled a little. I couldn't think of what to say, though. I could only think that she was so close that I could reach out and touch her, and I wanted to. Man, I wanted to.

"Hey, Chuck," she said with a little wave. "What's going on?"

I still didn't know what to say. "Hey," I said finally, but I heard the shakiness in my voice.

"Hey again," Leah said. She leaned against the door frame and crossed her arms. "Looking for some flowers for your grandma?"

Flowers for Gran? Why hadn't I thought of that? "Yeah," I said. Sure. Why not?

She nodded toward the canopy. “Why don’t you come around back and have a look? There’s a lot more than just the stuff we were planting at the ice cream place.” She turned to walk into the house, but I didn’t follow.

“No,” I said, shaking my head.

She turned around. “No what?”

“I mean, no, that’s not why I came here.”

Leah bit her lip. “Okaaay.”

“I mean, I just— I kind of wanted to see you, is all.” I looked down at my feet. They were too wide in my dirty, white tennis shoes. But Leah— even her feet were beautiful. She wore these brown sandals with at least an inch of space left over on the back where her foot didn’t reach.

“So, what do you like to do for fun?” I asked, remembering one of the questions I’d practiced.

Leah laughed, and I looked up at her then. Her whole face was smiling.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Different stuff. Movies... parks... Hey, what are you doing Saturday night?”

I hesitated for a moment, not wanting to look like a loser jumping at the chance to see her again, not knowing if I should pretend I was busy.

“You know, nevermind,” she said, waving me off.

“No, what?” I asked quickly. “I don’t think I have anything planned Saturday.”

Leah shifted her weight. “Well, there’s this hot air balloon thing at the park Saturday. Night glow, I think it’s called. I just don’t really know anybody yet, you know?”

I nodded. I had no idea what the hell a night glow was. “Let’s go,” I said.

“Really?” Leah smiled. “It’s at the park. We can probably just ride our bikes there.”

I nodded. I was going to die. I wasn’t in shape enough to ride my bike a few miles to Leah’s house and then a few miles more to the park. But I would do it. I would. “When is it?”

“I think they start launching the balloons at sunset, and there’s supposed to be fireworks later on. Want to leave at— I don’t know— 6:30 or something?”

6:30. Yes. I agreed. 6:30. I waved goodbye, and Leah went back to work, and when I got home, I tried to keep my mind occupied with TV and video games and chores around the house while I waited to see her again.

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When Leah and I left her house Saturday, the whole sky was pink-orange, and the mountains looked like a cardboard cutout in the background. It was almost dark when we got to the park, and the balloons were getting ready to launch.

“Come on, let’s find a place to watch,” Leah said, and she led the way over the dirt and sand and through the patches of cacti and shrubs. It was getting cooler out, and I could hardly hear her over the roar of the balloons firing up all at once on the one side and the chirping of the cicadas on the other. She stopped a little ways outside the throng that had gathered to watch the balloons, families with young children and quilts and picnic baskets, young men and women lying side by side holding hands. She sat down beneath a bushy tree and leaned against it, drawing her knees up to her chest.

I sat down next to her cross-legged and felt hunched compared to the way she sat against the tree. “What happens now?”

“They’re starting to launch the balloons,” she answered, pointing toward the forty or so hot air balloons on the horizon, scattered between the ground and the height of the sky at various stages of take-off.

“Where are they going?” I asked, following her gaze. I tried to imagine how far they could travel with the fuel they had in that little basket. Not as far as Alaska, probably. Could any of them travel over the ocean? Or maybe they would be going east, someplace like Virginia with its oaks and moss or Pennsylvania with its steel and steam.

Leah turned toward me, giving me a funny look. “Nowhere. That’s what a night glow is.” She pointed to the balloon that was floating highest, and as we watched, it stayed stuck like a dart in the sky. “See, that’s as high as it’s gonna go. There’s sand bags on the ground to weigh it down so it doesn’t float off.”

I leaned back so that I was lying on the ground with my hands behind my head, and I could see only a few balloons then, the ones that were floating the highest. They were red and blue and yellow and reminded me of birthday party balloons. I closed my eyes and tried to erase them, but they still floated in my mind. I had not been to a party since Trey’s fourteenth birthday, almost six months ago now.

I could have gone with Ronnie that night. He had tickets to see the Diamondbacks play in Phoenix. Of course, he didn’t ask me to go when he bought the tickets. Didn’t want me tagging along. But when his friend got a stomach bug and couldn’t go anymore, he had that extra ticket. C’mon, Chuckie, he said. It’ll be fun. Like old times.

I didn’t learn about the crash till long after I’d gotten home, but the man on the phone told Mom it had happened at 4:30. Right in the middle of Trey’s party. I’d tried to reconstruct the day’s events, to figure out what I was doing at the exact moment Ronnie had rounded a curve on

the interstate to find traffic at a complete standstill, the exact moment when his braking car had slid under an eighteen-wheeler. Was I eating a piece of cake and talking to Bobby Fredericks about how much better Virtua Fighter was than Ghosts ‘n’ Goblins and all those other crappy old arcade games he liked? Was I watching Trey take the ribbon off the new bike his parents had given him? Was I helping him throw Sandy Slater into the pool?

“Hey, you’re missing it!”

I opened my eyes to find Leah’s face close to mine.

She pointed. “See? The sun’s almost down.”

I sat up. All of the balloons were bobbing in the nearly dark blue sky. They looked like upside down teardrops to me. But there was a tiny glow, where the fire was. And as the heat filled up the balloon, the light spread, and they lit up the whole sky.

## **Touch**

My best friend Tilly moved away halfway through our fifth grade year and left me alone again. My mom felt bad, she told me, that I'd have nothing to do at home anymore in the afternoons. And it wasn't fair for me to have to look after my brother Warren all by myself. A couple of spots opened up in the after-care program at school after Christmas break, so Mom signed us up.

I don't know what she thought the program was going to be, but one day she came to pick us up early and saw the chaos in the gym first-hand: Kids chased one another in zig zags, running in and out of the spires of sunlight that angled down from the high windows. Some played a game of Horse around the basketball goal or toed the painted lines as though they were walking a high wire. Others roamed the gym with red rubber balls in their hands seeking unwitting dodgeball players. The combined noise bounced off the high ceiling and zeroed back down on us like a doomed airplane, shattering against the hardwood floor.

Worse, when Mom got there, we couldn't find Warren right away, and no one had seen him. He could have been anywhere in the building, but we finally found him behind the bleachers where he sat in the half shadows, rocking back and forth with his hands covering his ears.

After that, I overheard my mother complaining on the phone a few times to ladies from her support group. About how the school treated Warren like some kind of alley cat. She cried a couple of times, something I'd hardly ever seen her do, angry tears that she shoved away with the heel of her hand.

But school was almost out by then, anyway, and Warren would spend his summer days at a church camp for special kids. That summer — the summer before I started sixth grade — Mom let me stay at home by myself, with one of our elderly neighbors, Miss Lynn, checking in on me every once in a while. “I’m trusting you, Sara,” Mom told me. “You’re not a little kid anymore.”

I wanted so badly to prove her right. To show that I was responsible, that she could trust me. Mom would leave me a note to set the chicken out to defrost for a few hours, and I’d do it. She’d ask me to sweep off the landing, and I’d have it looking neat and tidy before she got home.

Mom wouldn’t have to worry anymore about who would take care of Warren once school started up again. She had me. But a week or so before I was to start sixth grade, Hope came to dinner.

As my mother stood over the stove cooking that Sunday night, she explained to me that Hope was studying special education at Spring Hill College. Learning how to teach kids like Warren. It was important that Hope wanted to teach them, Mom said, that she had used that exact word, *teach*. You could tell what kind of person someone was by the way they spoke of interacting with kids like Warren. If someone said they were learning how to handle those kinds of kids, Mom would say, Switch majors now. Handling is for zookeepers.

Hope might start helping out around the house and taking care of Warren and me, Mom said, but mostly Warren. Hope could pick me up from school in the afternoons, though, so I wouldn’t have to ride the bus home. And then I would be free to go out and have fun with kids my own age, Mom said, but I didn’t have friends here anyway now that Tilly was gone.

There was a knock at the door then, and Mom asked me to let Hope in.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t her. She had the dark brown corkscrew curls of a girl younger than I was and a raspy voice that was deeper, older than what I expected



to come out of her throat. She was thin, but when she walked into the room, she took up the whole space to where there was no room for me anymore. It was like I couldn't breathe.

Mom was busy over the stove, finishing up the pork chops. She chatted with Hope about Warren. I filled up glasses with ice like Mom asked me to.

"He finds his way by feeling it," Mom told her.

Hope nodded enthusiastically, her curls bouncing. "A lot of the kids we work with at school are like that. Really tactile."

"You've got to be careful, though, with Warren. We found him trying to pick through the ashes in the fireplace at his aunt's house once."

Hope gasped. "Oh my god. Did he hurt himself?"

Mom shook her head. "Not that time." She put an arm around me as I moved by her, on my way from the fridge to the table. "But we've had some close calls, haven't we?"

I nodded.

"And there was this little black girl at school," Mom said, dropping her arm, "in his class. They called me up to get him one day because he wouldn't stop touching her hair. Can you imagine that?" Mom picked up the spoon and stirred the green beans. "She's sitting in front of him, and he reaches out to touch her little braids, and he can't stop. I told him when we got to the car, You can't do that, Warren. You can't do that to people. You can't just reach out and touch them like that for no reason. And you know what he said?"

Hope shook her head.

"He said he liked the way it felt. That it was different. That it wasn't slippery — that's the word he used — wasn't slippery like mine, like Sara's. I'm just giving you fair warning. He

used to run his fingers through Sara's hair all the time. I know he's going to want to touch that pretty hair of yours. No one in our family has curls like that."

Hope laughed. "Well, I've been looking for a hairdresser since I moved back down here," she said, wiping her hands together as if to say, It's settled. That's that. "One less thing to spend money on."

My mother laughed. More than the joke required. She was hooked.

I set the last glass on the table and walked back to Warren's room to get him for dinner, without Mom asking me to.

When I walked in, Warren was sitting on the carpet cross-legged, facing away from the door. As I came closer, I could see he was sculpting something out of red modeling clay. He hunched over, holding it close to his face as he molded it, as if to block out the rest of the room, as if he and that clay were alone in a void.

I sat down next to him on the gray carpet. It was thinning in spots, from where he'd nervously twist his toe down into it sometimes or pick at it with his fingers.

"Warren," I said, "it's time for dinner. We gotta go wash up."

He didn't say anything. It was like I wasn't there. He flattened a circle of clay meticulously, pinching down one part and moving his fingers around the circle like a ticking clock.

I moved so that I was sitting across from him. "Warren," I tried again, leaning toward him.

"Vroom vroom vroom," he said, which I think was his way of acknowledging me. I guessed then that he was making wheels for a car. Warren loved his toy cars more than anything else. He'd race them in circles in his room or lie down on his back with the car above him,

spinning its wheels. Mesmerized. I think it was the wheels he liked the most; in fact, he'd started picking up round things from around the house, like bottle caps and Mom's old watch face, and hiding them under his bed.

I looked at the clay in his hands and thought for some reason about that song we sang at church sometimes, about God being the potter and us being the clay. Mold me and make me, the song went. The clay in Warren's hands was taking shape as I watched. He used his fingernail to make little outlines of windows on the car. It wasn't perfect by any means, but it had little details like that, things that I wouldn't have thought to do.

"Warren, Mama says we gotta go eat dinner, OK?" I leaned over and grabbed the little poster resting by the door. Something Mom had read about in a magazine, to get him into a routine. A timeline of cutout images, from brushing his teeth first thing in the morning to putting on his pajamas for bed at night, and a clothespin Warren was supposed to move to the next image as the day went on.

Right now, the pin was over the image of a little boy building houses out of blocks: "Playtime." The next image was a woman washing her hands under the sink, and then a picture of a meal.

"See?" I asked. "Where does your clip go next, Warren?" I held the poster in front of him, but he wasn't looking past the clay. "See, it needs to go here next so we can wash our hands for dinner." I started to move the clothespin myself to the next image, and when I did Warren shrieked.

He swatted the poster down to the floor. "It's mine," he shouted. "You don't touch it. It's mine."

A pounding of footsteps, and my mom and Hope were in the doorway.

“Sara, what are you doing, baby?” my mom asked, as if I’d just tried to bash Warren over the head with a blunt object.

“Nothing!” I stood up and met her at the door. “All I did was move his clip. I was just trying to get him ready for dinner.”

A smile spread across my mother’s thin lips. I followed her gaze. Hope had crossed behind me and was kneeling next to Warren.

“Hey there, Warren!” she was saying. “My name’s Hope.”

“Vroom vroom,” Warren said again, loudly, though Hope was right next to him.

“Whoa,” Hope said. “Is that a car? Is that a race car?”

Warren nodded.

“That is an awesome car,” Hope said. “I mean, that’s way better than anything I can make. You must have the spirit of a true ar-TEEST, huh?”

Warren made a sound that was something like a hiccup mixed with a gasping for air. I took a couple of steps so I could see if he was crying but found instead that he was giggling.

“Can I help make another wheel?” Hope asked. “Can I?”

After a moment, Warren nodded, and Hope rolled a ball of clay, then flattened it and placed it next to Warren’s. Warren turned the car over and pressed the two wheels into it.

“All right,” Hope said, “good job. Now, if this is a real car... and it *is* a real car, right?”

Warren hesitated a second, then nodded.

“Well, then, this real car was born to do one thing... race!” She pointed out the door.

“Think you can race to the kitchen? That’s where the finish line is. OK?”

Warren giggled.

“OK, Warren, on your mark... get set... go!”

Warren scrambled to his feet, and Mom and I backed out of the doorway and pressed our backs against the hallway.

“Good job, buddy!” Hope called as she breezed by us. She was carrying Warren’s poster. “We have a winner! *Raaaaaaah*,” she whisper-shouted like her voice was a crowd of hundreds. “OK, Warren, while we’re in the kitchen we can go ahead and eat dinner. But there’s something we need to do first. Do you know what that is?” Hope held the poster in front of Warren. “Do you know?”

Warren sat still for a minute, then moved his clothesline clip to the next picture, the hand washing one.

“That is so right! Good job, buddy!”

Warren looked down at his feet as he often did, but I could tell he was grinning.

“C’mon, let’s go wash our hands for dinner.” Hope held out her hand, and Warren took it without even looking at it.

“He just likes to eat lunch meat for dinner, instead of whatever we’re having,” my mom said, walking down to the kitchen. She was smiling, too.

Hope had won both of them over. I looked down at my watch. She’d only been at our house twenty minutes.

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A couple of weeks later, I started at my new school, Spanish Fort Middle. I was late to half my classes, and even though the teachers excused us for the first day, I still hated walking in and

knowing everyone was looking right at me. It made my cheeks feel warm and tingly, a pins and needles kind of feeling, like when you finally get up after you've been sitting still too long.

I ate lunch by myself, reading a copy of *The Secret Garden* that I'd checked out from the library. It was less stressful than trying to make friends with the other girls and worrying all the while what everyone was thinking about me. The girls were meaner here than at my old school. I saw three of them walking down the halls arm in arm, and then when two of them split off to go to the bathroom, they talked about how terrible the third one's hair looked today. The boys were mean, too, but they didn't try to hide it like the girls did. "You know there are, like, a hundred of us that have to eat still, right?" a cute blond boy from my English class said to an overweight kid in the lunch line, after the kid got a second basket of French fries.

I just hoped I would blend into the pasty white lunch table. If I kept to myself, no one would have a reason to say anything to me or about me at all.

After school, Hope was waiting out front in her old gray car to pick me up.

It was one of those two-door cars that had a back seat but probably shouldn't, like a normal car that had been shoved through a giant trash compactor.

"Hey, Sara," Hope said, leaning across the passenger seat to open the door. As if I couldn't open it myself.

I lowered myself into the passenger seat, and the leather and incline of the seat made me slide back. My great day crumbled into a "fine," when she asked how it was. We drove to pick up Warren with the windows down because Hope's car didn't have air conditioning.

"How are your teachers?" Hope asked, easing the car onto the main road. "Any that are going to be really hard, you think?"

“I dunno,” I said. “It’s the first day.” The seats were too low and the seatbelt at too steep of an angle. The stiff material scratched my neck. I tugged the bottom forward to keep it at bay. “It’s really hot in here, Hope.”

“I know, hon, I’m sorry,” Hope said. “I’m going to get it fixed as soon as I can. Don’t do that, sweetie.” She’d noticed my toying with the seatbelt and leaned over me to pull it straight. The car swerved a little, and she straightened out. “It’s gotta fit tight, just in case we got into some kind of accident.”

*With the way you’re driving,* I thought, but kept my mouth closed. The seats were too low, and my knees were almost up to my chest, and I couldn’t sit up straight. I turned toward the outside. The warm, muggy air slapped against my face as we gained speed.

After we picked up Warren and drove home, Hope directed me to do my homework before anything else.

“I finished at school,” I said, slinging my backpack onto the couch and clicking the TV on.

“Did you really?” Hope asked but didn’t follow up. Instead, she sat with Warren at the kitchen table with a picture book about animals, one of those with texture where the bear had fur and the fish felt slimy.

“Do you know what sound the bear makes?” Hope asked.

“Roo roo roo roo roo!” Warren said in a high-pitched doggie voice.

“Not exactly,” Hope said, “but you’re close. The doggie makes that noise, but the bear goes, RAAAWR!” She put her hands up to make bear claws as she said this.

Warren’s eyes followed her hands. “RAAAWR!” Warren copied, holding his hands up too. He giggled.

“This one’s a froggie. Have you ever seen a froggie before?”

Warren shook his head.

“Do you know where a froggie lives?”

“Water,” Warren said, tracing his finger across the river drawn on the page.

“Hey, I know a fun song about a froggie. Want to hear it?”

Warren nodded, but his eyes were still focused on the book on the table.

“You’ve got to look up at me, though, so you can see,” Hope said. “’Cause there’s a whole fun dance that goes with it, too. Ready?” she asked when Warren had lifted his eyes from the table. “Oh, that’s so great, Warren! I love seeing that beautiful face. It goes like this…” Hope closed her eyes hard and stuck her tongue out and sang about a little green frog.

They were slipping further away from me, like ships getting smaller and smaller on the horizon. I turned back to the TV.

It’s good for him, Mom told me, that first night after Hope left. She combed my hair after my bath, the first time she’d done that in ages. She used to do it every night after she put Warren down, when he was a baby. I sat in front of her on Warren’s bed, and she pulled out the tangles as we watched him arrange his toy car collection, putting the like colors next to each other. It’s good for him to have someone who’s not afraid to join Warren in his world, Mom said, someone who doesn’t pull their hair out trying to bring him to ours.

And I supposed that was what Hope did with her silly faces and goofy songs and dances that I hadn’t seen grown-ups do before. I knew I could never do those things. Even if Warren and I were alone, I would always feel like someone somewhere was watching and laughing.

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“There’s no point complaining, Sara,” my mom said. “You’re picking one of them.”

We stood in the middle of Eyeglass World at the mall, where the frames crawled up the wall like insects. At any moment, a pair might leap onto my face like a giant leach and never let go.

“I just don’t think we need to be spending money on it, is all,” I said, crossing my arms. “If I just sit close to the board, it’s fine. If you just talk to Ms. Bowlerjack—”

“Sara,” my mom said, crossing her arms right back, “the doctor did not prescribe a seating assignment. He prescribed a pair of glasses. And that is what we are going to get. Don’t you worry about what I’m spending on them.”

It was all the stupid school’s fault for being so scattered and making me late to class so that the only seat left was in the back. It was all Ms. Bowlerjack’s fault for making me read the board in front of everyone even after I told her I didn’t want to.

“How about these?” my mom asked, pulling a pair of purple frames off the rack. “These are a pretty color.”

“No way,” I said. Purple was way too loud. Purple was like setting off firecrackers all around me. “Not purple.”

“Well, what color are you thinking about?”

“I don’t want a color. Can I just get contacts?”

“Sara, we’ve been over this. You can try them when you’re older, but not yet. How about these gold ones?” Mom pulled down a pair of squared rims. “Kind of funky, huh?”

“I don’t want funky, Mom.”

“Sara, we don’t have all day. Hope can only stay till two.”

I finally picked out a pair of oval glasses with no rims. At the counter, they looked at my prescription and told me it would really work best with a round lens.

“OK,” my mom said, without asking me. “We’ll do that.”

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The good part about sitting in the back in half of my classes was that I could wait till everyone was seated and facing the blackboard before I put my glasses on. And even then I only wore them in moments of desperation, except in Ms. Bowlerjack’s class, because she knew I needed them.

The bad part about sitting in the back of my classes was the way everyone could turn around and look at me all at once, and I had nowhere to look but forward. Like when Ms. Bowlerjack said, loudly, “Those are some lovely glasses, Sara,” and everyone turned around and snickered. I could tell Ms. Bowlerjack meant well, like I would somehow be more confident knowing she was behind me. What she didn’t get was that her opinion wasn’t the one that mattered. And as the class went on, whenever I raised my hand to answer a question, I saw the cute blond boy pantomiming to one of his friends like he was pushing glasses up his nose, and they laughed into their desks so Ms. Bowlerjack wouldn’t notice. I finally stopped raising my hand, and they lost interest.

I found a heads up penny that day in the parking lot at school when I walked out to Hope’s car. A lucky penny, as they say, though I had never believed in superstitions. After all, it would have been a lot luckier if I had found it on the way in to school instead of out, but I picked it up anyway and put it in my pocket.

Continuing the unlucky streak, Mom wasn't feeling well that night, so Hope stayed a little later and fixed dinner for us. After she left, Mom took some cough syrup and curled up on the couch. I changed into my pajamas and when I took my school pants off, the penny dropped out of my pocket. It barely made a noise as it landed on the carpet. I picked it up and examined it. There was a little bit of a smudge across Abe Lincoln's chin, and the outline of his face had begun to fade away.

I thought about Warren then and his love of cars and wheels and circles. Maybe he could find a use for it. I walked down the hall to his room, and the door was open. He was lying under his raised bed, playing, I supposed, with his toy cars. His back was to me. I knelt down next to his bed without going under it.

"Warren," I said, "I found something for you." I offered him my hand, cupped around the penny.

A memory came to me then, slowly, pushing aside heavy thoughts and digging its way out of my mind, and I felt almost like I was watching it happen. It went like this: A little girl playing outside with a much littler boy, one who had only just learned to walk steadily on his own. They sat outside in the shadow of a brick house, picking all the little yellow flowers that grew wild through the grass. The little girl was so busy trying not to hear the yelling going on inside the house that she didn't notice the storm clouds stretching their fingertips across the sky and pulling themselves closer. She didn't notice until the little boy cried out. That's when she felt a drop of rain.

She picked him up even though he didn't want her to and ran with him under the shelter of the porch, and they watched the rain fall down like gray metal sheets over the yard. In front of them, it ran down off the roof in a steady drizzle. The girl reached her hand out like a cup and

brought back a handful of rain to show the little boy. He plunked his finger in the water and watched it run through her fingers. He ran to the edge of the porch and tilted his head out and let the water drip into his mouth and giggled. The little girl did the same. And they fell back laughing onto the porch and stayed there the afternoon, watching the storm outside and listening to the arguments behind them.

It was Warren and me.

Warren took the penny from me and turned it over between his fingers, watching the light catch on it. Then he turned away from me and crawled to the right side of the space under the bed, making room for me, so I followed him under.

I felt like Mary walking into the secret garden for the first time. Warren must have been saving them for months now. All different sorts of bottle caps, to start— big black plastic ones, and little white ones, and the gray aluminum kind from an old Coke bottle. He had mason jar lids and covers from my mom's candles stacked on tiny spools of thread from my mother's "emergency" sewing kit that she had never actually used— red and blue and green and black and purple mushrooms sprouting from his carpet.

Warren set the penny inside a bottle cap and turned back to me. He picked up two of his toy race cars and gave me one.

"Do you want to race?" I asked. "We could race to the door."

He didn't answer me; he lay down on his back and started spinning his car's wheels. I started to get up, but Warren put his hand, little but firm, on my arm. "Race, Sara," he said.

I didn't know how we were supposed to race when our wheels were spinning but going nowhere. But I eased my back down onto the carpet so that my head was next to his and held my car up, too. I could see what he saw then, through the slats of wood that held his bed together.

His bed sheets, hidden from the top of the bed by a mismatched comforter, were visible from the bottom. They were filled with spaceships launching across a starry evening sky. It was like we were racing across the moon.

“On marks, get set, GO!” Warren said, without pausing. “I win!” he said a moment later, though nothing had actually happened.

I didn’t know what the rules were, but for a moment, it didn’t really matter.

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“This tree,” Warren said precisely, as though he were reading it from a paper. “I like this tree.”

“That’s a really pretty tree,” Hope said, kneeling next to him. She reached her own hand out to touch it. “It’s a great big tree. See that? Look.” She pointed up to the branches.

The only open area at Stone Creek Village was the common area around the pool, so when Warren wanted to play outside, Hope drove us to the park a few minutes away.

I was lying on a bench nearby, holding my copy of *The Secret Garden* above me, open, but more to block the sun. I had my glasses on because Hope made me, because Mom told her to make me, so I suppose I was using the book, too, as a mask. When I looked directly up at it, the brightness of the sun bled through the pages and hurt my eyes, so I looked instead at Hope and Warren. The thinning leaves made the tree branches visible, and the lines of it tapered upward like the veins of a leaf.

“This is a big tree,” Warren said, pressing his fingers into the bark and stroking the tree. He suddenly wrapped his arms around it. Pulled on the trunk. “My tree.”

Hope laughed. “We can’t take the tree with us, hon,” she said, standing up.

I spotted some girls from school then, a couple of junior cheerleaders. They were rollerblading down the sidewalk toward us— no helmets, of course, so their long, brown hair could blow in the wind. I wished I had brought my glasses case so I could take them off.

Hope either didn't see them or didn't care; she started doing the little green frog song with Warren, doing all the little motions and faces. The girls giggled as they bladed past, slowing down when they saw me.

"You here with the freak show?" one of them asked, nodding to Hope and Warren, who were right there but at the same time someplace far away.

Warren's eyes were trained on Hope's shoulder, and he was a full beat behind everything that Hope did. But he was smiling, and he wasn't alone. He looked— well, happy.

I turned back to them and shrugged, because I couldn't think of what to say. I hoped it was a shrug that looked tough, that said *so what if I am?* I hoped that it didn't look afraid, the way I felt.

"Who wants some Gatorade?" Hope called over my shoulder. She and Warren were walking back to the bench now. She smiled at the cheerleaders when she got back to the bench. Not her usual energetic, happy Hope smile. This one was bold and armored. It was daring those girls to try to take it from her.

"We've got some in the car," Hope said. Still smiling. "Anyone?"

The girls smirked and shook their heads and bladed off. Hope stayed there for a minute, watching them fade away. "Warren, stay here with Sara for a minute, OK?"

"OK," Warren said, and sat next to me on the bench.

"Where are you going?" I asked, wondering for a second if she was going to hunt those girls down or something.

Hope shrugged. “To get the Gatorade, silly.” And she walked back to the car.

It was over. She wasn’t even thinking about those girls anymore. It felt like she’d won, though, somehow.

Warren folded up his legs under him and studied his knees. Seeing something, he reached down to the ground and picked up a shelled pecan from the tree. “What is it?” he asked.

I closed my book and took the shell from him. It looked rotten and felt fragile, like an ornament of blown glass. “It’s a pecan,” I told him. I turned it in my hand, looked through the slit that bulged open on one side. It was empty. “Well, it *was* a pecan.”

“What happened?”

I shrugged. “I dunno. Probably a squirrel ate it.”

Warren held his hand out toward me, palm up, waiting. He wanted it back. His small fingers were red and dented from the bark of the tree.

“Don’t eat it,” I warned him, and he nodded. I dropped the shell into his hand, and his little fingers closed around it.

Warren held it up close to his face, rubbing it between his fingers. Suddenly he clamped them together, and the shell popped. He was making that strange hiccup-gasp sound, and, leaning over, I saw that he was giggling.

More pecan shells dotted the ground near the bench. I stood up and grazed one with the bottom of my toe, then leaned all my weight on that foot. The shell crunched easily beneath my foot.

Warren was jittery with laughter. He stood and jumped onto another pecan. *Crunch*. And another. *Crack*.

And then we were racing, without even looking to see who might be around us, watching us. We were only running around the tree as fast as we could, trying to destroy as many shells as possible, trying to feel them all give beneath our weight. And Warren tripped and fell, but instead of crying, he was still giddy, still laughing, and he rolled around in the grass like a wet dog, and I threw myself down and rolled next to him, feeling the long blades of grass scratch my arms and then pleasantly collapse into a soft cushion beneath me. Warren reached out and touched me, touched my hand, and I squeezed it back.



## Out of the Ashes

Rock fever, is what they call it. That feeling of being stuck. As he walks down Alligator Beach, Kai feels heavy. He looks off into the distance, past the surfers swimming out to catch a wave, and imagines he can see new land. Of course, this is the windward side of the island, and he knows there is nothing but more water for miles and miles, thousands of them, in this direction. But something about the way the sun comes off the water out there, the way the fog is seeping in from behind — it blots out shapes like mountains on the horizon.

Kai has been to Big Island once, when his parents were still around, to visit family. Other than that, his life has been spent here. This place is his own. He knows the temperament of the ocean, the dips that appear in the mountains from far away and the ones that are buried under green close up. He knows which roads off the main highway aren't safe to take without his big brother Hiapo. But Kai thinks sometimes that he would like the feeling of not knowing.

Up ahead on the empty beach sit a pile of towels and a canvas bag. Kai glances back at the water. The surfers are paddling far into the distance, more than Kai thinks is probably safe in this weather that is on the brink of stormy. But then, that's why they come here. This side of the island catches the wind and rain. The water is rougher.

Kai squats down and opens the bag. Underneath a couple of T-shirts are a cell phone, keys, a wallet. Inside the wallet are a twenty dollar bill and a few credit cards. The wallet itself is nice, too. Leather.

Kai empties the wallet of all its contents except the cash. Never take credit cards, Hiapo says. Nowhere to go with them. Same goes for the keys.

Kai turns the cell phone off and puts it in his pocket with the wallet. He closes the bag to keep the sand out and goes back to retrieve his bike, then rides down to McDonald's and orders some rice with shoyu and scrambled eggs. He's been starving all morning.

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After breakfast, Kai rides farther down the beach, hides his bike under some scrub on the other side of the road. Continuing along the shore, he finds a few more bags, lifts a few more wallets. Soon it starts to drizzle. Kai blinks against the raindrops but keeps walking, knows he has not yet collected enough. The beach has emptied, though. The rain rushes down all at once, and he must hold his arm over his eyes. He walks for what feels like miles, but there are no more surfers and none in the distance, either. Kai shivers.

He crosses into the green overgrowth on the other side of the road, peeling back branches and leaves but no longer fighting the rain. When he reaches his bike he must return to the road, but the rain is not so bad anymore. He rides home and leaves his bike under the overhang on the side of the house.

He'd like to go in. Luanu would be there. She'd offer him a fresh towel from the pantry to dry off and make him look out the kitchen window to check on her flowers, nervous about the way they bow under the rain. But he knows he should not give up so easy now. It isn't raining on the other side of the island, he figures; it hardly ever does. He will take the bus into town and try the beaches there.

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When he steps off the bus, there are people everywhere all at once. Kai does not like it here. The sun is bright, and the streets are crowded. People bump into him without meaning to. They are stopping to look at the food vendors or walking backwards with their cameras held up in front of their faces.

Kai makes his way along the alleys of the hotels and down the beach, hands in his pockets. Surfers and swimmers share the sea, girls in bikinis sunbathe on the beach, and children chase one another and make sand castles too close to the water. But the beach is thin here and broken apart from everything else, like the small strips that come off when you peel a banana.

Kai spots a multi-colored tote bag, maybe twenty yards away, abandoned in the sand. He moves in toward it, searching the area with his eyes, but stops short. An older woman is suddenly there, rifling through the bag. She pulls out a bottle of sun block.

Kai turns away. He feels trapped by the wall of tall hotels. His eyes are drawn back out to the open water. A young child stands in it calf-deep, splashing about, and looks up at him. Watches him. Kai feels exposed. He turns back to the hotels, squeezes back onto the street and finds the bus stop.

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It is almost nine o'clock at night when Kai bikes up to the Shimmy Shack. Inside, Hiapo is sitting alone at a round table in the middle of the restaurant, two plates of food in front of him. He still has his white apron on, and his shaggy hair is held back by a headband, wrapped tight over his forehead like in old karate movies. He is dipping a bread roll in shoyu when Kai sits

down across from him.

“Hey, uncle,” Kai says.

“Hey, cuz,” Hiapo says, mouth full of bread. “Eat up.” He nudges the other plate toward Kai. It’s filled with leftovers and scraps from the day— fish, rice, bread, French fries.

Kai is starving again but doesn’t want his brother to know it, so he reaches casually for a couple of fries.

“What’s the haps?” Hiapo asks.

Kai shrugs, passes a canvas bag over to him.

Hiapo brushes his hands together, then wipes them against his thigh before he rummages through the bag, opening wallets to make sure they are empty, to see if they are a brand name. He brings one up to his nose and sniffs. Hiapo smiles. “Real leather, man.” He tosses the wallet back in the bag and flips it closed. “*Kale?*”

Kai pulls it out of his pocket and hands it over. “Ninety-seven dollars.”

Hiapo nods, thoughtful, and hastily slides the money into his back pocket when another man in an apron approaches the table.

“Better clean up your station, brother,” the man says, “before bossman get back, you know?”

“And then?” Hiapo says, standing. “I thought I was forgetting something. Ho, box this up, cuz.” Kai grabs his dinner roll as Hiapo takes the plate and dumps its food onto his own, then hands it to the other man, giving him a playful slap on the cheek. The man doesn’t look happy, but he takes the plate to the stack of styrofoam containers by the cash register and chucks its contents inside.

“C’mon,” Hiapo says, and Kai follows him into the kitchen, passing under the clothesline

where the cooks hang the orders. Hiapo dumps frying pans and pots into the big sink. The kitchen smells foul, like fish and sweat. Grease is caked in swirly patterns on the countertops. Kai cannot fathom what it would be like to work in here for ten hours a day, like Hiapo does.

Kai drizzles dish soap into the pots and turns the hot water on, all the way up, leaning down to let the steam and the lemon-scented soap fill his nostrils. He scrubs out the pots and pans and passes them to Hiapo, who dries them.

“We got one more thing to do for tonight,” Hiapo says as he towels off a pan. “Just a house or two. Shouldn’t take long, and then we’ll get home and eat with Luanu, OK?”

Kai nods. He has known for a while what Hiapo does at night sometimes, though Hiapo has never told him or brought him along. But it is an understood secret that they keep from Luanu. Kai pours soap into a deep pot, watches the water rush down from the faucet to fill it up.

Hiapo slaps Kai playfully like he did the other man, but now his hands are hot and damp. “Don’t worry, OK? These people, they got plenty. They can get new of whatever anybody take from them, OK?”

“I thought you said only take from *haole*, uncle.”

“This is *haole*, cuz. Just some that stayed on longer than the others.”

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Hiapo drives his old hatchback down to the leeward side of the island, the side with the hotels, the people with money.

Kai watches silently out the window and thinks how much downtown looks like the sky at night, the yellow lights of hotel rooms and condominiums bright against the blue-gray smudge

of buildings. And it's just as far away. Even Hiapo does not dare touch these places. Too nice, he says; then you have to start worrying about alarms, and cameras, even.

Hiapo turns in from the coast, drives toward the mountains. It's darker here, in their shadow, and Hiapo drives in something like a grid. Kai is not sure exactly what he is looking for— a secluded area, maybe, someone who is out for the night. Hiapo only goes out on nights like this, just before rent is due.

It feels like an hour has passed when Hiapo suddenly cuts the motor. "Here," he says. "C'mon."

Hiapo has parked in front of an overgrown lot, full of small pink flowers and wild green plants. But the house he points to is ahead of them. It's a single story, wooden, and a leafy tree droops down in front like a crippled protector. There are no cars outside, except Hiapo's.

"Ho, grab those pillowcases," Hiapo says, motioning for Kai to follow him around back. The back door has a window in it, with one of those short, white curtains covering it, so they can't see inside. Luanu has been wanting curtains like these, Kai remembers. She said she would sew them herself, but Hiapo has not been able to buy the fabric.

Hiapo puts the pillowcase over his elbow and smashes it through the window. It sounds louder than a car crash to Kai on this quiet road where the only noise is the chirping of crickets and frogs. He peers into the overgrowth of the neighboring lot. Feels like someone is watching. Kai hears Hiapo unlocking the door, and when he turns, Hiapo is already inside. Kai hurries to follow him.

"Just take what'll fit in there," Hiapo whispers, pointing to the pillowcase. "Just what you can carry. Ten minutes." Hiapo glances down and smacks Kai's head. "Slippers off, *kolohe*. Have some respect."

Kai looks down at his feet and flips his sandals off. He sets them outside the back door next to Hiapo's, then follows his brother into the living room. Hiapo is examining the entertainment center, fidgeting with wires.

The moonlight from a window catches something on the mantle, and Kai moves in to examine it. A silver frame around a picture of a baby. He turns it over, fidgets with the back, but hears Hiapo call, "What are you doing? Fast, cuz. Everything in, long as you don't break it."

Kai gives up and drops the frame in the bag. He grabs a nice-looking watch sitting near it. Kai turns around in time to see Hiapo dump a laptop into his pillowcase.

"Let's go," Hiapo says.

As they pass through the back door, Kai sees the little white curtain again. He will bring it back for their kitchen. He sets his pillowcase down and fumbles with the curtain rod over the door. Hiapo is already moving to the car. The stick-like rod breaks as Kai tears it down, but he stuffs it all into the pillowcase, then closes the door behind him.

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Luanu is lounging on the sofa with only the lamp on when Hiapo and Kai get home. Hiapo has put everything in the trunk, has told Kai he will go through it first thing in the morning and will take it all to the pawn shop before work. Kai carries the styrofoam containers from the Shimmy Shack inside.

Luanu stirs when they enter, lifts her head so that the dark, easy waves of her hair fall back from her face. She smiles warmly in the glow of the lamplight, and her skin is smooth and perfect like stone. She is like Po, Kai thinks, Mother Earth from the legends.

Her belly is big now. She's wearing sweatpants and a baggy T-shirt. Her feet are encased in little white socks that show how tiny she once was, and will be again, after the baby is here.

Hiapo kisses Luanu's belly over the T-shirt, and Kai turns away. She is like family, but the things that pass between her and Hiapo, a kiss or a glance, are too personal and make Kai feel more alone. Even as she calls Kai's name and he turns, even as she opens her arms for a hug and he crosses the room to greet her, he knows that he is the extra piece, the one that's not needed.

"We brought dinner," Hiapo says. He moves to sit on the couch, and Luanu lifts her feet for a moment, sets them in his lap.

"Dinner time was hours ago," Luanu says. "Where you been?"

Kai sits on the floor in front of the coffee table, across from the sofa, and opens up his box of food. He shovels some fries into his mouth, but they're barely warm now. He wishes they could go back to the Shimmy Shack to heat everything up.

"The car was making noises again," Hiapo says. He rubs his fingers in little circles on the bottom of Luanu's feet. "We tried to look at it, but it was too dark."

"Ai yah! That car," Luanu says, shaking her head. The other styrofoam box is in her lap, and she takes a bite of the fish. "That car drives me *huhu*. It's more trouble than it's worth. This baby is not riding in that thing till it's fixed."

"Don't worry, *ke aloha*," Hiapo says. "Me and Kai gonna look at it later."

Luanu turns to Kai, and he nods.

"We'll fix it like there never was any problem," Kai says.

"That's good to hear," Luanu says. They're quiet through the rest of the meal; exhaustion has settled in.

"Anyone want to play sakura?" Kai asks when they are finished, nodding to the deck of



cards on the coffee table.

Luanu shakes her head. She presses her hands down into the sofa cushion and pushes herself up, taking a moment to steady herself on her feet. Hiapo holds his arm out behind her.

“You OK?” Hiapo asks.

“Sure,” Luanu says, “just sleepy. It’s late. I’m going to bed, OK?”

Hiapo nods. “I’ll be there soon.” Another kiss.

Kai turns away. When he looks back, Luanu waves to him, and Hiapo is staring at him as she walks away toward the bedroom.

“You did good tonight,” Hiapo says once Luanu has closed the door.

“But you haven’t even seen what I got,” Kai says. He’s worried that it’s not enough. That it won’t ever be enough. “I just kind of ran out of time.”

Hiapo is shaking his head. “Nah, cuz. You helped out, and you kept your cool.” He puts his arm on Kai’s shoulder. “Can’t ask for more than that, huh?”

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Kai doesn’t go to sleep right away when he lies down on the sofa, even though he’s tired. Kai stares up at the gray ceiling and listens to the wind outside and waits until he thinks Hiapo is asleep. Then he picks up Hiapo’s car keys from the coffee table by the door and walks quietly out to the car. Opens the trunk and the pillowcase, finds the curtains, the broken rod.

He didn’t tell Hiapo about them in the car, driving back. He doesn’t know why; he told his brother about everything else he’d taken. But not those curtains.

Inside, Kai finds duct tape in a kitchen drawer and wraps it around the broken piece of

the curtain rod. When he strings the white curtains over it now, there's a bump near the center, where the tape is. But it's holding, at least for now.

Brackets wait on either side of the little kitchen window over the sink. He hangs the curtains up and watches them a minute to see if they're going to fall.

Hiapo might not even notice them in the morning, but Luanu will. Kai imagines her face when she sees the fabric, how the glow will start in her eyes and spill down her face until she is covered in happiness. She will maybe even pick some flowers from the side of the house and have them waiting when he gets home the next day. Something bright for him. "Even steven," she'll say, smiling.

He imagines Luanu when her baby comes, cradling it in her arms, pulling the new curtains aside to show the baby the rainbow of flowers that grows outside their house. Luanu told him once why the flowers in Hawaii are prettier than flowers anywhere else in the whole world, though she has never been off the island at all. It's because of all the volcanoes, she said. It's because the flowers grow out of the ashes.

Kai lifts the curtain and looks out into the blackness. One thing he knows from living on the windward side of the island is how pretty the sky gets after the storm passes. Instead of regular golden sunshine, the sky turns fierce shades of purple and orange. It makes his heart hurt sometimes to see how beautiful it is. Kai imagines holding his nephew here by the window and peeling the curtains back after rainy days like today to show him.

## **Vita**

Lindsay Maples is a native of Mobile, AL, and holds a B.A. in journalism and Spanish from the University of Alabama. After working briefly at the Mobile Press-Register, she joined Teach for America and spent two years teaching high school English in Opelousas, LA. Teaching literature rekindled her love of creative writing and led her to New Orleans. While earning her MFA, she has worked at UNO Press, The Times-Picayune, and as a school librarian with ReNew schools.