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Fated Extraction

by

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Abstract

Fated Extraction is a collection of three short stories. This collection acts as a case study in examining the way that a writer’s work is influenced by things both beyond them and within them. These pieces explore patterns and manifestations of externalization and detachment; the consequences of relationship and communication degradation in the modern world; and themes of shame, guilt, and isolation. Each touches on these issues in a different way, though each piece maintains a common thread when they are examined collectively.
Writing is a strange thing, language itself is a strange thing. It’s a tool, a translator between our thoughts as abstract notions and our thoughts as defined ideas. We use it to think, to communicate, to remember. Its objective definitions act as a medium, allowing us to construct our thoughts as external entities. They become something we can specify, scrutinize, synthesize. As we use language to try and explain ourselves we are forced to make decisions—one word has to follow the next. If you want to be understood you have to choose the right word for what you are thinking, and in order to do that, you have to understand what you are thinking. Writing is simply recorded language, often done not in direct correspondence with another person, but in solitude. It is, effectively, a communion with oneself. Instead of choosing the words which will help others understand you, you are working to find the words that best help you understand yourself. It becomes a distillation of your own thoughts into something you can reflect on.

When writing fiction, the writer may be trying to construct thoughts that are not their own, but it’s impossible to stop their own from coming through. To think that you could understand everything influencing you well enough to remove all traces of it would be rather arrogant. In creating characters—creating people—a writer pulls from influences outside of themselves, both consciously and unconsciously. When we view writing as an art of pulling words, pulling meaning, pulling ideas, out of that somewhere just beyond our consciousness—our subconscious, our environment, the divine, or perhaps something else entirely—we might say that the writing is some fated extraction of writer themselves: inevitable. This inevitable extraction emerges as patterns, themes, and undertones. Rather than the writer leaving a trail of breadcrumbs, these unplanned anomalies seem to be leaving a trail of their own. Where does this trail take us? To our subconscious, to our environment, to the divine—to what we ate for
breakfast that morning? Though the influencing agents inevitably remain a mystery, we can gain something from the undercurrents they create, from the breadcrumbs they leave behind. As language is the translator between one consciousness to another, writing is the translator between the writer and the something just out of reach.

This collection is comprised of three pieces, each written at a different time, in a different state of mind, though many of the same threads weave through each of them. Some threads are more technical, some are more thematic, some are more stylistic. These threads exist outside of my conscious intent for the pieces— they weren’t mapped out in diagrams or developed to press up against some grand, profound conclusion. As I am the only constant between the three, what’s bringing these threads to life must then come from something within me, from that place just out of reach—beneath the fabric of each piece there is something else trying to push through. The three pieces, titled “Penance,” “Reprisal,” and “Culmination,” even at a distance seem to move through a timeline: an attempted atonement for sins, an act of retaliation, and an end without resolution. Looking at the three pieces collectively, rather than individually, allows for these greater patterns to emerge.

One of these elements present across the three stories is a sense of externalization and detachment. This emerges in various ways, even from the very beginning. In each piece, I open with a survey of the surroundings. For a moment, the characters exist as nothing more than a lens looking into the world. They are observers, not actors. The final two pieces, written closer together, especially embody this. The first has the same moment of stillness, of simply existing within an external world, but involves more characters, more action, more reaction initially—there’s a reasonable reason why the moment exists. In the second piece, a reason is also there,
but it’s muddied. In some ways, the reason doesn’t even exist yet—in the moment of detachment—but rather it emerges in the moments following. In the final piece, the detachment is the most pronounced, the most self-depreciating. Just as the pieces progress in their titles, they seem to progress in their openings as well, slipping a bit more each time. This trend emerges despite the differences across the pieces. In the first opening, there is a pungent sense of guilt and shame; in the second there is numbness and regret; and in the third there is isolation, nihilism—the character is lost. The connecting thread is that the internal becomes unbearable, unmanageable, so the focus is turned to the exterior, to the surroundings. If I am in full control of each of these characters, then why have I allowed them all to turn their focus outwards? In some ways, it seems like these stories are following a common thread independent of each of them entirely. Moving through guilt, shame, regret, numbness, and isolation, to finally wandering through life in a nihilistic haze—they seem to flow chronologically.

I maintain a certain style of describing the characters’ emotions and experiences with others that continues to tug on threads of externalization and detachment. Rather than stating an emotion outright, I tend to characterize the emotion as a physical experience from an external force, or a purely physiological sensation. A familiar example of this might be when a “chill” runs down your spine. Rather than stating that the character is uncomfortable or unsettled, the experience is described by an external factor, a “chill”, acting upon the character. This style, when used consistently, creates the sense of externalization and detachment because it’s as if the characters cannot process their emotions unless they view them as the actions of external factors, essentially removing their own agency, responsibility, and connection to anything they feel. This
way of depicting emotions could be used for both positive and negative emotions, but the sense of futility it lends tends to be less than happy-go-lucky.

While I have discussed the ways that patterns can appear in writing unintentionally, this method of description isn’t something I am entirely unaware of. When depicting an emotion, I dislike stating what it is outright. Being able to experience an emotion—as a reader—seems more compelling than just being told what it is. I might say a character feels joy, but what does joy mean to me, and what does it mean to someone else? When I think of “joy” I think of a certain emotional experience, but “joy” can be a functional label for a wide range of experiences within that emotion. To avoid falling flat, I prefer to give the physical description of how it might feel to be joyous, for example. Without a label, the reader can identify with the specific physical experience, rather than the superficial category.

I may rationalize my choices this way, but must consider other potential influencing factors. Perhaps, rather than being proficient at depicting emotions through the body, I am simply insufficient at depicting them in a more direct way. I suspect this may be part of the case, that while it is easy to feel my own body—to remember, to imagine, how it feels to be angry, to be sad, to be happy—I may just lack the skill to be more forward with it without falling into the classic “I feel sad” that I believe I am effectively avoiding. Where the line is between feeling something in your body, and feeling it in your mind? Most of us know that when something is intense enough, there is no way to keep the sensation solely in our “heads” (in our consciousness, if you will). Perhaps my method of description is an attempt to make the emotions of the characters extra heightened, but I am neglecting to tone it down to appropriately convey the emotions that come in-between. The ones that might just be a bit unpleasant, rather than sending
you into cold sweats. Skipping the resentment and hightailing it to the rage. It’s not very realistic for every character to feel so strongly all the time, to suddenly slam into a brick wall of anger only to turn around and slam into an opposite brick wall of delight. Perhaps my shortcomings are in describing the in-betweens without being too escalated or too sluggish.

Each of these pieces has been workshopped on separate occasions, and my description of emotions is often remarked on. Usually this manifests as comments on a lack of “interiority.” In general this has seemed to point to a lack of interior dialogue and a lack of direct emotional expression. When I first heard this criticism, I was somewhat surprised by it. No doubt, to some degree, I was simply too close to the pieces — that my mind, already knowing the story, could easily fill in the gaps where other readers didn’t have the same inside knowledge. However, I don’t think that is the whole story. While I could see that there may not have been many explicit lines declaring direct emotions, I hadn’t realized that I wasn’t including a lot of internal monologue. I suppose, in some instances, it goes along with the same reason that I wouldn’t directly have a character state “I am sad.” If I, for example, wanted to demonstrate that my character hated another character, I likely wouldn’t have them declare that they hate the other person, I would have them react to the character’s presence, to things about them, to someone mentioning their name. To me, it seems like so many of these things are easily communicated by the character’s experience that writing them out so bluntly ruins the effect. There are many cases where the nature of a character’s internal dialogue should be made clear by their actions, but perhaps I am making assumptions. Trusting the reader is an idea that comes up often, but it’s possible that I have been “trusting the reader” and trusting my own assumptions overzealously. Based on feedback I have received, it would seem that explicit internality is a missing link for
some readers—or perhaps it is a missing link for me. It’s not unreasonable to assume there will be differences in the ways that readers process depictions of emotion, just as there are differences in the ways people process emotions themselves.

This discrepancy with internal dialogue then connects back to externalization and detachment. I have my own moments where I have thoughts that I don’t allow myself to put into words as an internal dialogue. These moments are primarily instances where I want to delay an emotional reaction (positive or negative) or I don’t want to think something through (for better or worse). Because the characters are so emotionally detached, and because they do try to turn their emotions into external entities, the lack of internal dialogue is consistent with the characters beyond stylistic choices. It follows my earlier comments on writing, and therefore language, and therefore internal dialogue, as a forced communion with oneself. If a character knows where their thoughts are leading, and it’s not somewhere they want to go, then avoiding the use of language allows the idea to remain vague, undefined, and less imminent.

In addition to externalization and detachment, relationship degradation is a recurring element across the three pieces. Not just in romantic relationships, but in family relationships as well. There is an absence in all three pieces of a strong, guiding role model. In the first piece, there is the absence of the husband; in the second, there is the absence of a father, the partial absence of a companion; in the last there is an absence of both parents, and an absence of a companion. Just as the emotional threads of each of the pieces seem to escalate, the threads of absence seems to escalate as well. However not only does the absence of these guiding figures escalate, but the way they seem to “come back” escalates. In the first, the husband comes back as, essentially, a ghost of himself; in the second, the returning companion is more than a ghost,
but no longer a companion; and in the third, there is a hope of return, which only ends up broken. There is a movement from the image of the lost, the literal haunting of the lost, to cruel punishment from the lost—a reminder that the character has lost them, and a sense that the character themselves is not up to snuff enough to keep them. A resignation to hopelessness, to a life of shameful servitude; a terror of retribution, of paranoia; a beautiful flicker of hope in the dark—quickly extinguished. Is it not worse to have hope, only to lose it, than to just be without it at all?

This topic of relationship degradation works its way into other themes found throughout the three stories, some primary ones being shame, guilt, and isolation. In viewing degradation as a societal phenomena, individuals are not always completely aware of why things are happening the way they are, or why they are doing the things they are. We become removed from a healthy relationship mindset without even realizing it, maybe some of us have never even been there. This affects more than just our relationships, because our interactions with other people are part of what allows us to understand our own identity and role in greater society. When our relationships with others break down, our sense of self often suffers as well, for we need others in order to orient ourselves. When we don’t have healthy communities, healthy families, and healthy relationships, we turn elsewhere for our expectations. We turn to selfish faux-individualism that acts as a substitute for a true sense of self. Shame arises not only from our direct actions, but from a feeling of inadequacy, from an underlying sense that we are doing something wrong, that the way we are living is wrong. Shame also emerges from the isolation that comes with the degradation relationships, we feel like we are the only ones out of sync. Shame becomes more of a reflection of the internal, while guilt becomes more of a reflection of
our actions with others and our external consequences. Isolation is an inevitable side effect of relationship degradation, we no longer know how to truly engage with one another, so we become isolated, sometimes by choice, sometimes not. Even when we are around other people, if we are not able to truly engage or interact on a genuine level, we might as well be alone.

When looking at these themes and patterns, the question then becomes how much of them comes from my habits and tendencies in craft, and how much comes from somewhere else. These elements seem to be working together, they seem to be part of a timeline, of a story lurking underneath the foundations of the three—perhaps from my subconscious, perhaps from somewhere else—which seems to almost handicap each of them independently. It is as if each time this underlying story is trying to claw its way out, but falls short in some way.

There is a unsettling sense of inevitability. Each story, as it draws to a close, has no solution, no answers, no way out. It is appropriate that the final piece is titled “Culmination” rather than “Resolution,” for we don’t get to understand why things are the way they are, we don’t get to fix things— we just end up what’s left, and we have to live with it.
Penance
I watched John through my bedroom window. He shuffled hot dogs along the grooves of the grill, wearing a button up shirt and khaki shorts. He was different now, muscular, straining against his old clothes. Purple paisley distorted and buckled over his back as the polyester fought against the girth of his arms. The man on the phone repeated his question and I said yes, I was Mrs. Winters. He continued, his voice cloudy.

Charlotte stepped into the backyard in a yellow sundress. Gliding through the overgrown lawn to the grill with a hefty Dixie plate of buns, ready to be toasted. She gave John a big smile and something funny rolled from her tongue and trembled against her chest in a laugh. The hard edge of the window frame cut into my fingers. Slightly ajar, the glass reflected my face back to me from an unfamiliar angle. I took the handle and pulled it shut. It had been pointless to open it at all. John gave her a taught, toothy smile and began placing buns over the heat. Her shoulders ticked down into her chest, and she tucked her hair behind her ear. Once, twice, then once again. Staring up at her husband through her eyelashes. She touched his shoulder so cautiously with her fingertips, as if to test the burner on a stove that might have been recently used.

"Mrs. Winters, I have some news about your husband," the man on the phone repeated.

"What?"

"Mrs. Winters, your husband has been injured in combat."

My face rippled in the reflection as I pulled on the window again, shaking the glass in its frame. The back of my throat tasted like sour bread. I blinked and dug my forehead down into my eyebrows, turning away from the window.

"David?" My heart thumped against the inside of my chest, slow, deliberate—as if in slow motion. The bread taste was mucous, my breath catching in its net at the top of my throat.
"Is he—"

What had I done? My hand pressed against the wall. I wanted to look back out the window, but I didn’t, staring into the unvacuumed carpet. Crumbs of breakfast toast, bundles of hairs tangling with each other against the baseboard.

The man on the phone, he told me my husband was alive. I released my breath, chest collapsing. I only noticed the warm prickling under my skin when it started to fade into goosebumps. My ear was hot as I touched it with cold fingers. Outside a car door slammed. I could hear her laughing. “How—” I took a shaky breath and sank against the wall. “How severe?”

"Mrs. Winters, he is alive, but he has sustained significant injury to the brain and spinal column. He may improve, but I'm afraid he will never walk, and likely never speak again. We will have more information from the doctors soon.” Then he said something else. The date that David would come back? A Thursday, a Friday. The 12th? Maybe the 22nd. I hung up.

I couldn’t feel the bumps of the carpet under me as I lowered myself to the floor, like I was floating. The sun beaming through the four panels of the window cast misshapen rectangles on the ceiling. I reached out and dangled my fingers in the hem of the curtains, wavering their sharp edges.

There was his dresser. A shirt on top, crumpled in a pile, that didn’t belong to him. The bed, unmade. Decorative pillows, embroidered with creamy daisies, were greying with dust in the corner of the room. My wedding shoes, marred with grass stains, lying next to me on the floor, taken from the glass box meant to preserve them forever. One stood upright on its point, the other flat on its side, sole facing me. Something was stuck to it.
I itched at the cotton slumped around my midsection, grazing the tiny hairs on my stomach. I heard her laugh again. Or maybe I didn’t. The sound of my own breath grated in my ears, much too loud to hear over. Mucous funneled each breath into a wheeze. The shoes fell out of focus as I pulled my vision first to the scraggly carpet fibers before me, and then out to nothing. Nothing was just everything at once, but underwater. The sun shapes lengthened over the ceiling.

I rolled to a seat, then over to the window. A set of shaking hands, my hands, gripped the edge of the windowsill and the yard spread out before me. No one. The barbecue was still open, still smoking. Why was she laughing? John had just returned, and she was a flapping around him like a moth. Smiling into his eyes and dancing barefoot through the lawn. I shut the curtains, darkening the room. A sliver of sun slipped through, catching the dust as it spun.

With my arms wrapped around me I wandered into the hallway, ducking my eyes away from the photographs. It was bright, the window where the stairs looped down in to the foyer was the biggest in the house, facing south. I stepped down to it and tucked my shoulder against the wall, squinting.

Their kitchen window was open, the lace curtains drawn, obscuring the inside. The space beneath my collarbones was cold, like my skin had been peeled back and the wet beneath had been whipped raw under the wind. The bushes beneath their windows were neatly trimmed, straight as a ruler.

I stepped down the rest of the stairs and my feet, clammy, sucked against the wooden floor on my way to the kitchen. Dirty dishes peeked over the top of the sink, an 8” by 12” Pyrex pan was crusted with old pieces of brownie in the middle of the island. I wedged it beneath the
faucet, on top of a bowl half filled with soapy water, and half with chunks of old lasagna. My hands were stiff as I forced my fingers to move. The fence outside was covered in vines, in pink flowers with teardrop petals and yellow-green centers, too tall to see over. I watched the water fill the pan, overflowing into the dishes below, bits of waterlogged noodles and oatmeal chunks spilling over, creeping along the bottom of the sink towards the drain.

The phone rang from the hallway. The drain started to slow, cloudy water rising up around the plates and cereal bowls. I slammed down the handle on the faucet and took a fork from where it was wedged between two plates to dig at the drain. The metal clanged and my arm knocked over the brownie pan, the dishes clattering against each other and dirty water splashing across the counter. The phone kept ringing. It would stop. It has to stop.

It did. I hadn’t noticed the air conditioner was on, heaving softly. The water in the sink gurgled. The ringing began again.

I crossed the room to the answering machine in the hall, the ringing echoing, my footsteps echoing. It read “Charlotte and John.” I stood staring at it, waiting. The silence between each ring seemed to grow longer, each time I thought it was over it wasn’t. Water from my arms was dripping to the floor, seeping into the sleeves of my shirt where it was cold and sticky against me.

The machine beeped and my throat closed up as David’s voice filled the hallway. Hi, you’ve reached Emily and David Winters, we can’t come to the phone right now, but leave a message, we’ll get back to ya. My body grew tense, my hands shaking as they wound against my chest.
“Hey, Emily. It’s John. We wanted to see if you were home, but— well, I guess we just got a call about David. Let us know when you get back, okay? We’re making cobbler for dessert later and we can have you for dinner—” He grew quiet and there was something muffled in the background, “Oh, yeah, you’re right,” he said to someone else, to her. “But, uh, Emily it’s okay if you need space too, just let us know when you get this? Okay?” He was silent for a few seconds, and then the line cut.

I deleted the message. He called one more time, I didn’t answer.

* 

The dandelion in the back garden bit through my garden gloves, I pulled harder, ignoring the sting. The stem broke with a loud snap like a stick of sidewalk chalk, the broken flesh white and weeping. I crooked my fingers under the necks of the roots and pulled. It was too deep, I should’ve dug it out when it first appeared months ago. Taking hold of the trowel I hacked into the hard soil, flinging dirt and dismembered earthworms. I slotted my hand into the loosened dirt and gripped tightly.

"It’s a shame," she said from behind me. I froze in a surge of panic, then pulled my hand from the ground, brushing the dirt off myself.

“What is?” My voice was gruff and unfriendly, which wasn't particularly fair to her. The two towering platform sandals circled around me, which were strapped onto her feet, which in some way had to be connected to her legs, and then to the rest of her. The red linen dress cinched around her chest splayed out as she dropped onto her heels in front of me. My brow furrowed and I reoccupied myself with a nefarious streak of dirt on my jeans.
"Something wild pops up in suburbia, and we hack at it like a weed." The hem of her
dress fluttered around her ankles and she leaned closer to me.

"It is a weed."

"Just because we see it as a weed, doesn't mean it is. It's a survivor, taking root, even as
you spite it." I could feel her cold stare parsing out the fragments of my expression, waiting for a
reaction.

"Don’t patronize me.” My arms started to cross over my chest as I looked up at her, but I
put my hands on my hips instead. Her eyes blinked at me like she was taking photographs.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

My jaw muscle clenched, I’m sure she saw it. “If you want to say something, then say it.
I’m not going to play cryptic games with you.” She had the beginnings of freckles dusted
beneath her eyes and across her nose. Her red eyelashes matched her hair. She blinked three
times. “What do you want?”

“Nothing.” The side of my face buzzed as she lifted a strand of hair and tucked it behind
my ear. Pricking moved down the back of my neck and I swallowed. "Do you want to talk about
it?" she said softly, running her fingers through the ends of my hair.

"No," I whispered, my face flushing. As I pushed her hand away she scowled, her brows
jutting together in ugly wrinkle of skin before she took a hissing breath and tried to soften her
eyes. I stood quickly when she opened her mouth to speak, nearly knocking her over.

"Emily!" She said, standing and reaching out to snap her fingers around my wrist.

"I said no!" I pulled from her grasp and held my arm tightly against me. She called my
name again, but I snatched the trowel and retreated towards the garden shed. I threw the door
open and it shook in its hinges, banging loudly against the siding. My neck was tying itself up in knots as my shoulders crept towards my ears.

“Emily, come on!” She stood in the doorway, still talking.

Somewhere, it has to be somewhere. If I didn’t kill it, it would only grow back. I ripped a plastic bin from the shelf and slammed it into the floor, sending clouds of dust into the air. No weed killer. Daffodil bulbs and cucumber seeds and fertilizer and a watering can and a frog statue and a bag of golf tees and another frog and a part to the lawnmower and another and another and—

“Stop!” I hurled the watering can, and David's neatly organized wrenches clattered to the floor, his coffee tin of sketching pencils scattering across the desk. I could see the shadow of him against the wall, working fervently past midnight as I brought him lavender tea, and a slice of meatloaf. She stared at me, silent. Everything in her face was pulled tight.

I took the shovel off the far wall and stormed back to the garden, ignoring her call to me again and say please a dozen times. The sky was starting to darken, but it all seemed blurry as I found the weed and rammed the blade of the shovel into the grass. At once I jumped onto its stirrups, slicing into the dirt. Splinters broke off into my palms, gripping the old shovel and prying the roots from the lawn. Then I went in again, all for good measure. My chest shook with heavy breath and I dropped the shovel, looking at my new hole the size of a beach ball. Then I looked up at her, looking at me. The air between us pulled taut and I watched her think about what she was going to say.
"You can try to remove it,” she said as she crossed her arms, “but all you're going to do is leave a hole you can't fill." She sank her weight into one foot. I wondered how hard it had been for her to think up that line.

“Maybe you should stop projecting, and worry about John instead!” I stepped towards her and she struggled to retreat in her heels. She shook her head. Trying not to look hurt. She was hurt. She was.

"When you're ready to talk, you can crawl yourself up to my front door and beg!” She yelled, shoving me and storming to the back gate.

"Fuck you!"

The gate slammed behind her as she disappeared in a flash of red linen and glinting auburn hair, a tropical bird flitting away into the jungle. A snake’s tongue zipping back into its mouth. I dropped to my knees and ripped at the loosened roots in the new hole. How dare she. My eyes were raw, and the muscles between my eyebrows were painfully tense with overuse. My husband returned two days from now. I couldn't have weeds growing up in his garden.

*

David’s mother, Mrs. Winters, had made her sign from pink poster board, orange construction paper, and green glitter glue. It was almost as if she was excited for her son to return. She hadn’t cried in front of me once since we’d heard the news. Wide-eyed passersbys toting their suitcases were imagining a heartwarming reunion of a strong army man coming home to his sweet family. My mail said Mrs. Winters too. Emily Winters. My ID, my passport, my Costco card. The big digital clock mounted to the ceiling blinked from 12:45 to 12:46. His plane had officially landed. Mrs. Winters chirped to the other Winters, and I smiled back at her.
when she squeezed my arm and said something sweet. They continued to chatter like white noise on a television turned up too loud.

At first, I didn’t realize it was him when I saw the wheelchair. He was paralyzed, I don’t know what I was expecting. I hadn’t seen him. I tried to remember the last time I had, in the same airport. But his face was all fuzzy, I couldn’t remember his haircut. Mrs. Winters started to snuffle. My shoulders rose up, my hands fidgeting with each other as the airport closed in around me. His body was still, his head had fallen to one side. Anger burned in my stomach as my heart had the gall to flicker with a spark of hope. I couldn’t have the blind hope Mrs. Winters had. She was allowed to run to her son, to wish that maybe a part of him was still there for her. She was determined that he was, though the doctors told us the brain scans were inconclusive. The rest of the Winters followed her. People would start to stare if I didn’t go, didn’t join them, but my legs wouldn’t move. Mrs. Winters turned to me, and my name moved across her lips. Everyone would know. With all of the kissing, and the hugging, David’s head had been jostled upright, and two pale eyes met mine. Was he still in there? The closer I got the more they pierced me. Every step took my body closer, but the rest of me flew the other direction, caught on the point of a long arrow.

Mrs. Winters held her arms around David, and as as she shook with tears his body jostled like she was jiggling a plate of jello. He was like John. Larger now, stronger. His body, this new one, or the one I had known, should never have moved like that. Something burned and I realized I had been holding my breath.

“Emily!” Mrs. Winters cried, taking my hand and reeling me towards him. She wanted me to hug him, to kiss him, to do something. I dropped to my knees next to the wheelchair, my
face level with his. But his face had turned away from me. Mrs. Winter’s cries grew until David’s uncle finally took hold of her. I stood and watched the caretaker wheel him away to a new handicap van. I looked at the time on the big clock. Mrs. Winters wailed.

The caretaker that came off the plane with David helped get him back home. His mother sat in the van with him, and I drove home behind them. Alone. Another caretaker was already assigned to come by the house daily. To take care of my husband. We pulled into the neighborhood and the big white van harshly reflected the sun against each house it passed. It pulled into the driveway and I parked my car across the street. The van beeped as the chair lift was lowered, and my husband was rolled out. I watched through the passenger window with my fingers gripped around the steering wheel. That’s not him.

How could I think that way? Of course it was him.

Mrs. Winters bent down to kiss his head, and it lolled from one side to the other. I pressed my palm into my mouth and turned away. His name sat heavy on the back of my tongue, but I couldn’t let it slip out. Calling for him now? It’s too late. I’d hardly called him at all these past few months. I couldn’t even remember the last time.

The other relatives started to pull up and I forced myself out of the car, forced myself across the street and up the front steps. Three of them had to lift the chair to get him up the front porch. And then again through the front door. They had to move his favorite armchair to park him in the living room. It was a big wingback chair upholstered in woven tartan. Deep blues and bands of burly browns and winter greens. Thin strips of scarlet red which, according to him, could be done without entirely. I placed my hands on the back of the chair as I used to do. David would never sit and read in that chair again.
Friends and relatives sat around him on the sofas and at the edges of end tables. Their faces were all blank, watching Mrs. Winters coo at him like he was a baby, or an animal at the zoo. David still didn’t move, his eyes up in the ceiling. He would’ve hated this.

The doorbell echoed through the house, so hollow but so full of people. I quickly left my spot at the edge of the living room to answer it.

“Hey, Emily.” John and Charlotte stood on the porch, dressed in their church clothes. His old suit didn’t fit him well, their heavy clothes were more fitting for a wake. Charlotte looked down at her feet. “We’re here to see David.”

“Come in,” I said. His lips slid into a momentary smile as he came through the door with his hands held together against his stomach. Polite, nothing more. Charlotte paused in the entryway. She was trying to look as calm as her husband, but then she met my eyes. She wanted to say something, but only bit the inside of her lip between her teeth and stepped inside. She hadn’t been in the house since John had come back, and I hadn’t seen her wear her church clothes since he left. I closed the door softly and stood there staring at it, beyond it, for more than a moment.

The house was immaculate—scrubbed, and swept, and double scrubbed. I went through it in my head. I couldn’t have missed anything. Power washed the driveway, mowed the lawn, planted fresh flowers in the flower beds. All of the ones I had grown from seeds were withered away, so I just bought the cheap ones at Home Depot.

Everyone would know, everyone could spot cheap flowers from Home Depot. My wedding shoes that cost me an entire paycheck were sitting in the garbage can, I couldn’t buy the cheap ones, everyone would know. But the new ones in my memorabilia box weren’t wedding
shoes. I never wore them at my wedding, how could they be wedding shoes if I never wore them at my wedding.

John was sitting next to my husband when I came back to the living room. It looked like he had tried to take David’s hand, but was now gently setting it back into place, a disturbed exhibit in need of adjustment. Charlotte asked if anyone wanted something to eat, offering to make some sandwiches and lemonade. I told her I didn’t have any groceries, that everything had gone bad. She watched me from across the room, she was uncomfortable. She had on her locket, a gift from John on their honeymoon. I met her stare and she gave me a smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. I wished she hadn’t come at all.

After the first guests left, everyone soon followed. No one wanted to be the first, but everyone wanted to leave. When only Mrs. Winters was left she said her goodbyes to David. I asked if she wanted to stay the night, but she said she could never sleep here with her poor son like that. She had positioned David towards the back door, where the last rays of sun were turning from yellow, to pink, to orange. David’s tartan chair was set off to the side of him. I sat quietly, pulling my knees up to my chin. He stared out the back door into the soft light. David always loved sunsets. But he wasn’t staring at all, his eyes only happened to drift in that direction. He wasn’t. A tear rolled over my cheek, and dangled precariously from the edge of my jaw. I felt stupid as I whispered his name, watching the shadows of his face deepen in the setting sun as if he were frowning at me.

I sat there until dark, looking for any sign of him, but even his body was different. Hard, unforgiving. Mrs. Winters saw her son, but he was gone, and in his place God had filled his empty body. You could hide nothing from God.
I didn’t see Charlotte for another two days. Two days of flowers, of Mrs. Winters camping in the living room, of strangers from the VA. David was a veteran now. Before David and John left, we would double date. Me, David, John, Charlotte. Always home-cooked meals, or sometimes pizza delivery. David's favorite was her homemade ravioli. We would go walking in the park, down by the river, through the town square. What is there left to do when things are already how they should be?

Things continued after they had gone. We would walk through the park, by the playground, by all the mothers. Their children laughing, smiling. Each little boy a part of his father. And Charlotte and I, walking past, nothing but pretty lawn ornaments.

She showed up at my door at 2 a.m., with hot pads and a steaming pan of fresh ravioli. I wasn’t sleeping, otherwise I would've missed the soft knock on the door, so soft as if she was hoping I might not hear it.

"Hey, Em." Her voice was hoarse, and her eyes were fresh red and swollen. Her fingernails were ragged, she must have ripped off the shiny new acrylic nails she’d spent so much on for John's return. One of her fingers had dried blood around the cuticle bed, which I assumed she'd ripped at too. She was in her pajamas and slippers, with a Christmas apron hanging around her neck. Her hair had been tied up at one point, but now half of it billowed around her shoulders and her little baby hairs clung to her forehead. She stared at me intently with glossy eyes, and I guessed that she had spent hours practicing what she would say to me.
She stepped closer and I gripped the door, drawing it between us. "Where's John?" I whispered. I pulled my robe tighter around me with my other hand as the night breeze pushed through the front door.

"Emily—"

"Charlotte, what are you doing here?" I asked, closing the door further as she stepped closer.

"Please, Emily!" She whispered, swallowing a sob in her throat. My chest stung and I wanted to reach for her, but I stopped myself. I couldn’t.

"You have John now, Charlotte."

She shook her head furiously. "You know that’s not true!"

"John?" I whispered, "He’s up! He’s walking! He can take a shit on his own, Charlotte!"

As soon as the words left my mouth nausea overtook me. I couldn’t blame David for anything. This was all my fault.

"I know, I know, I know," she said, "I know, Emily, but that’s not it. He’s like a ghost, he’s not—"

"It doesn’t matter if he’s a ghost, he’s your husband!" I hissed, stepping out onto the porch and closing the door behind me.

"You’re a coward!" She said, her voice breaking, "You know what happened, why don’t you man up and admit it! You try to pretend like it was an accident, like it wasn’t happening before!"

"Nothing was happening, Charlotte!" I took a step closer to her and she took one back.

"This was a mistake," she said, shaking her head.
She dropped the dish. Red sauce splattered against my white house and ravioli flew all over the porch, bouncing into the azaleas and under the deck chairs. The glass dish didn't break, it was the one I got her last Christmas. The one we spent months using to bake Christmas goods, roast vegetables, and bake a ham for Easter.

She broke into tears and tore away from the porch, cutting through the lawn in her house slippers. Mrs. Winters would be here in the morning, she would see. John would come out to get the morning paper, he would see. David’s new caretaker would be here at noon, and would see.

At some point I came back into myself and stared down at my toes, covered in red sauce. The house was so clean, the carpet was so white. Without looking I fumbled with the door handle and stepped back inside. Down the hall I could see David in the living room. I walked slowly, leaving red footprints, coming to where David stared out the back window. I swelled with numbness, prickling spreading over my skin like a million spiders. God stared at me. You can hide nothing from God.
Reprisal
On Sunday, Thomas Moore rose from the grave. Raindrops pitter-pattered at the slatted gazebo rooftop. My forearm pressed flat like a pancake on the railing, the spotted constellation of freckles stretched further from each other than usual. The gazebo paint, purchased at a sizable discount, had yellowed in the summer. The rain oozed over and through it as it started to bubble —water swelling into little plump pouches beneath it, a membrane fragile like a kitten’s skin. I watched the swollen lumps slip their way down the post before deflating silently, leaving gaping flaps of paint. I dug my stubby nails into the peeling patch on the rail. It rolled up in clumps, and dull pressure grew under my fingernails as more paint wedged beneath them. The daffodils along the house stuttered under the rain, bobbing like some invisible garden menace bludgeoned them with a stick.

The book was more of a prop than anything. I rolled my tongue back and forth over the roof of my mouth to try to soften the foul taste growing there. If I focused hard enough, I could feel a heartbeat in my toes. Not quite in my toes, but somewhere near them. Some external energy thrumming through the air around them. I had opened the book superficially. Every so often a page would turn in the wind or a raindrop would leave a darkened spot between the lines. As the time passed the pages slowly began to curl, rippling into wavy edges, trying to return to their original form.

“Mary!” I looked up from nowhere to my grandmother’s voice, preceding her crooked form waddling into the backyard, her church hat a saggy mound on her head. “Mary!”

I smeared the sticky paint clumps from my fingers against my thigh, sitting up and snapping my book shut. Her orthopedic shoes barely left the ground as she peddled towards me,
kicking a section of ankle-biting, plastic picket edging from the ground. A dull ache blossomed between my eyebrows.

“Mary!” Her sopping church clothes flapped and she swooped to the right each time she stepped into her bad knee. “Mary!” she wailed again. The rain only slightly tempered the shrill, screeching quality of her voice.

“Mother!” My own mother stomped through the garden gate, brandishing my grandmother’s mahogany cane above her head. Her bubblegum-pink patent bag whipped around her swollen midsection on its tarnished metal chain, unable to escape her orbit. I imagined it squee every time she would spin around too fast, screaming as it was forced to endure its place bouncing against her. Help me, help me— something like that.

My grandmother continued to yell, the noise growing louder as she drew closer. “Grandma. What’s going on?” Post-church outrage was typical, but my mother’s eyes were wild, and she moved across the yard faster than I ever thought her stumps could manage. Despite the rain, an angry, blotchy flush spread over her face and down her neck. I took hold of my grandmother’s arm to pull her out of the rain and my mother gave her a shove up the steps. My mother was creased around her eyes and beneath her jaw as her shoulders tightened closer and closer to her ears. Her lips puckered as if they had been looped around with thread and pulled too tight, turning white at the edges from the pressure. She would not look at me.

“It’s Thomas, Mary!” My grandmother clutched my face and shook me. The ache in my head sharpened.

“What?” My grandmother’s expression was euphoric, my mother looked angry. I looked behind me towards the house, no one else was there.
“Thomas is back!” My numb fingers grappled to pull her off. My stomach started to cramp. I watched my mother as she tried to dab the rain off her, she still wouldn’t look at me. My hands floated around me until I found something solid to hold on to. My body leaned heavy into the post, the corner digging under my shoulder blade. It felt like my eyes were opened too wide.

His name circulated so frequently now that it no longer made me flinch. His graduation photo, lined in little pixellated daisies, was posted on every cork board, every lamppost, every door, every boutique window for the one year memorial. Always at eye level so he could stare at you.

“What is she talking about?” I said. My mother shook her head and forced my grandmother to a seat.

“Thomas! Thomas, Mary!” Grandmother said, swishing her cane through the air and scattering needley raindrops across my face. “We were listening to Father Michael, but then little Billy Moore came in screaming! Said he saw his big brother outside!” She gestured with her hands, her wet hair flopping against her jowls. “Now, Mrs. Moore was mortified, and tried to take him outside— but then she starts screaming! And then the whole church stands and we all start screaming! It was Thomas! Walking down the aisle! A miracle!” I stared at my mother, but she would not look at me.

“Don’t you dare call this a miracle,” my mother said, snatching my grandmother’s cane back from her, the wood smacking against her palm with a sharp snap. “Thomas is dead! That boy is nothing but a vessel for the devil!”

“Come now, Shannon!” My grandmother said. “God has returned him to us!”
What a cruel joke, even for them. I should never have let anyone see us together. I retrieved my book and resolved to storm from the gazebo, but I froze, the sounds of voices began to swarm and echo around the backyard, coming from the front.

“You fool! It’s the devil back to take us all!” The cane whistled through the air, cracking against a post of the gazebo and tumbling over the rail to the crippled rose bushes.

“Mother!” I said, “It’s not funny! Knock it off already!”

She turned on me, wheezing through clenched, yellow teeth. “You!” She took hold of my arm with her gouging plastic nails, flinging me down the gazebo steps to the swampy lawn.

“Shannon!”

My ribs slammed into my chest and mud pressed into the crevices of my face. The rain sucked against my skin as if I was naked. I dug my fingers into the spotty grass to push myself out of the dirt.

“You slept with him! Didn’t you!” she yelled as she stomped towards me.

“Mother—” She took me by my hair.

“You brought this on us!”

My grandmother screeched at my mother, and I landed on my back as they started at each other. I scrambled backwards through the dirt, smearing the mud away from my eyes. It stung, turning the world cloudy and my mouth gritty.

“She brought this on us!”

“Nonsense! You’ve always been such a prude, Shannon!”

“Maybe if Mary here was such a prude, then she wouldn’t be such a disgrace! Imagine what her father would say!”
The voices from the front grew, the sounds of sobbing and shouted amens. The back gate swung open and people tumbled through. My skin prickled and my tongue felt big enough to choke me. Weeping church women in limp satin dresses, some with no shoes, with snagged nylons, hair clinging to faces running dirty with mascara. Men without suit jackets, children tugged along by a hand, bewildered. At the head of the crowd was Thomas, Thomas Moore. Standing upright, walking. He wore a wet tuxedo and polished black loafers. His golden hair clung to his forehead in soft ringlets.

My mother was yelling, but I couldn’t hear her. I watched the mouths of the crowd open, close, open, close, open wider. Hands shaking, clutching to wet, swinging hair, to wrinkled shirts. Lips dripping spit and rain and tears and prayers.

I saw my name form on his lips, flush red with blood. Blood.

Blood dripping, drip, drip, drip. Dribbling and curving down the temple, slipping into the well of the eye, creeping into the creasing of paper-thin skin. Blood— at the split in the lip, swelling and pooling, sliding down and around the chin. Blood in the green moss, in the white cotton. In my mouth, the blood was in my mouth.

The body of Thomas Moore stepped closer to me and the mud ran in my eye and the ground started to move towards me and edges of my vision were leaking black ink.

Hands and probing fingers on my shoulders. My mother ringing in my ears and my grandmother thudding at the back of my skull. Plastic nails chomping at my collarbones. Leathery thumbs digging at my sides. Church women leapt to me, their gloves wet and chilled, the men’s rings cold and stinging. Thomas Moore’s hand. It reached toward me. Emerging from the jacket sleeve. Warm against my cheek. Drumming with a heartbeat.
It’s nearly twilight, gold coats the tree trunks and the leaves, sucking out all of the green. It’s golden like thick syrup, a pool of syrup, ten feet under. Slipping past my lips and into my throat, coating the walls of my esophagus, filling the lungs. Thomas Moore stands before me, naked. I hear beeping. His face is smiling at me and he reaches out his hand. His fingers are invisible like they are hiding in my peripherals. I reach my hand to take his. It’s wet and slimy. I lift my hand to my face and it’s red. His smile widens and he moves towards me. I leave a bloody handprint on his chest, he wraps a single hand around my jaw and it smells like pennies. I hear beeping. He whispers my name. “Mary…” I hear beeping. He takes his other hand and raises an index finger to my lips. “Shhhh.” Beeping. Both of my hands are bloody. I push against him and his ivory skin is redder and redder. “Mary.” Something gurgles in the back of his throat. Beep. His tongue hangs out of his mouth and a drop of blood slips down the middle. Beep. “Thomas!” His blonde hair darkens at the hairline. Beep. “Mary!” Blood splatters my face as he starts to cough. Still smiling. Beep. “Thomas!” Beep. “Mary!” Beep.

“Mary?” Everything is white. I blink. A beep. A woman dressed like a nurse loomed over me. I blinked again and she was still there. There were white curtains. More beeping. A fluorescent light above me. “Mary?” I snapped my head towards her. “How are you feeling?”

My lips opened and there was no sound but the stickiness of saliva separating from my tongue and the roof of my mouth. The nurse tried to smile but her nostrils just flared and her thin lips disappeared in the tautness.

“We’re all a little shaken up, Mary, it’s alright if you’re not feeling your best. Are you feeling any pain in your head?”
Why was I here? Thomas Moore. The beeping was coming from the other side of the curtain. “What happened?”

The nurse balled her hand into a fist and brought it up to her mouth to catch her cough as she cleared her throat. “Your, uh,” she looked down at her clipboard, “your mother brought you in, you’d fainted and hit your head. You’ve been out for a few hours. You may have a concussion.”

“What?”

“Do you have any sort of headache or nausea, Mary?”

“No, of course not.” Had I been dreaming? It couldn’t be real.

I lunged from the bed and threw back the white curtain, spotting the door. The world spun and my brain knocked against the inside of my head. “Mary! Please! You must stay put!” The door slammed into a metal cart as I blew through it. The sky was starting to darken with the evening, the light slowly beginning its shift to gold, bits of blue pushing through the heavy clouds. A round woman at a nurse station looked at me with bulging eyes, her ponytail too tight at the top of her head. A television was mounted above her behind the desk, the banner of the nightly new running along the bottom.

“Mary, you have to sit down until the doctor can take a look at you!” I realized I was missing my shoes as my bare feet slapped loudly down the hallway. The dashing news reporter was bundled up in a scarf, less dashing in the harsh lighting.

“The volume,” I said, placing both hands on the round nurse’s desk.

“What?”
“The TV! You moron! Turn the volume on!” Along the little banner white letters spelled out THE SECOND COMING: LOCAL BOY FOUND ALIVE. I spotted the remote as she reached for it and snatched it off the desk.

*We’re here now at Reddington’s town hall, where locals and visitors are awaiting the arrival of Thomas Moore, the young man who just this morning dug his way out of his own grave!*

“Mary, you really must come back to your room.”

The news feed pointed at an empty podium, the flag waving softly in the background. It was impossible. He was dead. After they found him at the bottom of the cliff they stored his body in the town morgue. The press never received photos, out of respect for the family.

“He…”

“Your mother said you fainted when you saw him. You knew him? Didn’t you?”

I was acutely aware of the nurse out of the corner of my eye. The hair on my arms rose, twitching as the draft of the hallway played them against each other. I watched my knuckles turn white as my fingers wrapped tighter around the TV remote.

*Neither Thomas nor his family have given statements, and, as we can see here, people are looking for answers.*

“No, I didn’t know him.” I set the remote back on the desk. “We only went to school together.”

“He was here earlier, such a kind boy.”

“Here? At the hospital?”
“Yes, after—” she paused and looked at me, throat bobbing as she swallowed. “The sheriff insisted he be looked over.”

“Did they find anything?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t do the examination. If they found anything they’re keeping it to themselves.” The reporter was talking to an old woman in a yellow raincoat who said Thomas Moore was a miracle.

They couldn’t legally hold me at the hospital, so they gave me a dry set of clothes and an umbrella to walk home with. The local taxi company wasn’t answering their phone. The path home from the hospital took me through the center of town, past the town hall. If I went a few blocks north I could miss it entirely. In the summer evenings candlelight would normally flicker from every porch, kitchen windows would glow, and outdoor lanterns would cast shadows from lively backyards. Every house was dark. A cat, color indistinguishable, darted across the street.

Each time I replayed the events I found more to worry about. But he had seen the sheriff, and I had been incapacitated in the hospital all day. If he was going to say something, why wouldn’t he have done so already? I readjusted my grip on the umbrella, my palm sweating. As I came closer to the center of town the big oak trees lining the streets turned into spiky saplings with limp yellow leaves. I meant to turn and avoid the town hall, but I didn’t. There were more and more cars parked along the sidewalk, plates from different states. News trucks covered in flashy vinyl, most with satellite dishes perched on top. I could see the crowd, filling the street in front of the town hall. Bright TV lights lit up various reporters along the edge.

I shouldn’t be here.
People were yelling, crying. A woman held a crucifix in one hand and a child in the other. A pastor was weaving in and out with an open bible. The body of Thomas Moore was absent. My new hospital sneakers, damp from the rain, squished as I curled my toes against the soles.

The doors of the town hall opened and every person came to life at once, flailing and shouting. Above outraged hands I saw the sheriff emerge in his wide-brimmed hat. He was coming, I knew he was coming. I wanted to move but my legs were stiff and shaking. I had to, if I didn’t he would walk onto that stage. Any second now.

I made the decision and scurried away as quickly as I could without running. Behind me the crowd grew louder and I could feel a sting at the nape of my neck, as if he could instantly spot me, hundreds of feet away, scurrying through the patch of wilted clover. I made it one more block at a walking pace, then collapsed the umbrella, running to the other side of town, to my mother’s house.

The house was one of the few still glowing from within. Through the front windows I could see them sitting in the dining room, waving fingers at each other. The front door had been painted red years ago and was now bleached to an industrial pink from the sun, punctuated with an old brass knocker. I ran my fingers over it, smooth and dull with use, cold in the evening air. Should I run? I set the knocker back against its metal plate gently, scratching at my elbow. It’s possible he didn’t remember anything.

They all turned to look when I closed the front door behind me. My mother was out of view from the doorway, but I knew where she’d be. I entered the silent dining room, they were waiting, expecting me to do something. My uncle cleared his throat, his smile pulled the corners of his mouth back into his face, where they disappeared along with his lips as they rolled into
each other. He and my grandmother made spare noises of greeting, but she said nothing. There was no place set for me, so I took a plate and vinyl placemat from the kitchen at sat down across from her.

“We, uh, didn’t expect you back so soon,” My uncle said. His eyelids were pulled back a little further than usual, the white of his eye now visible below and above his iris. “You know, hitting your head. And all. In the yard.”

I responded with something between a hum and a grunt.

“What a scene!” My grandmother said.

I dropped into my shoulders in the dining room chair, spooning some mounds of food onto my plate. I had no appetite. The hole my gut was more like the absence of my stomach altogether rather than its emptiness. My mother grimaced and splatted another scoop of mashed potatoes on top of her greasy chicken. She watched me through the slits of her narrowed eyes and said nothing. A puckered pea had escaped its serving bowl, nestled into a hole in the crochet table runner. My mother was the head of the house, and there was strictly no TV during dinner. No press conference.

“Your mother,” my uncle continued, “Gives far too much credit to the devil.”

“Gah!” Grandmother wheezed with potatoes in her mouth. “Not this again.”

“In fact,” my uncle continued, “there is a perfectly logical explanation. He was simply not dead when they buried him.”

“Hogwash!” Grandmother said, reaching her spindly fingers for the neck of the wine bottle. “This is the lord at work!”
“Well, mother, perhaps it is the lord who allowed for Tommy to stay alive through it all,” my uncle said. “Perhaps the lord allowed the logical explanation!” Grandmother dismissed him with a wave of her hand and watched the wine glug glug glug into her glass.

The windows in the dining room reflected my face back to me. Unmoving, tired. Dead? I imagined a loud knock at the front door, the sheriff waiting on the porch under his big hat. I pushed my peas around, suffocating them in mashed potatoes.

“Don’t be ridiculous, that boy’s been six feet under for months now.”

“May I be excused?” My fork clattered against my plate. Under the table I dug my fingernails into the unravelling threads of my napkin. Their conversation hushed, as if I’d intruded on a private moment.

“You haven’t even eaten,” My uncle said.

“I’m not hungry.”

My mother stared my down from across the table. “What, you’re too good for us now?”

“Shannon—”

“The only reason I’m letting you stay in this house is because the lord tells me I should be forgiving, and because your father would’ve wanted me to be generous with you and your misgivings. The fool—”

“Don’t talk about dad like that,” I said.

“He was a fool.” She pressed on. “He should’ve thrown you out of this house years ago. The only reason you’re still here is because of my generosity, and because I respect his wishes. Mary, if I met you on the street I would never give you the time of day, so don’t you push me, and don’t you tell me what I can and can’t do—”
There was a knock at the door. I couldn’t breathe, my throat felt like it was swelling. “Get the door, Mary.” A sharp breath hissed through my nose, my thumb ripped a hole in my napkin.

“Now.”

I swallowed though my mouth had gone dry. The dining room chair scraped as I stood. In the window my face looked maniacal, tense. Guilty. I turned from the dining room and tried to breathe, the air shuddering as I struggled to move it into my lungs.

I had to pull it together. I was a liar, I could do this. I’d lied more times than I could count. I lied for no reason, I pretended, I put on a show. All the time. Of all times, I couldn’t let a guilty conscience turn me honest now.

The hall was dark, the front door white on the inside with its original factory paint. Brighter than the trim around it, yellowing. I stared at it, trying to calm my breath when the knock came again and I jumped. With one more deep breath I unlocked the deadbolt and opened the door.

“Billy?”

“Hi, Mary.” Billy Moore stood before me on the front porch, and least a head and a half shorter than I was expecting, holding a stack of flyers printed on bright pink paper. “My mom is having a party for my brother,” he took the top flyer and held it out to me, “She said to make sure I invite everyone.”

“Oh,” I took the flyer from him, trying to ignore my shaking fingers, “Thank you, Billy.”

“Yep,” he said, giving me a nod and a smile before turning back to the sidewalk and going on to the neighbor’s house.
I shut the door behind me, leaning against it. In Celebration of New Life and God’s Grace for Thomas Charlie Moore!

“Mary!” I floated my way back into the dining room and placed the flyer on the table, picking up my plate.

I scraped my food into the bin in the kitchen, staring out the window as I ran the water. I only turned the nob with the chipping cherry-red topper, and the hot water started to sting against my hands, steam rising to cloud the edges of the kitchen window.

“Marvelous!” My grandmother said. I could hear the pink paper flapping through the air. “We must give our thanks!”

“Ah, yes!”

“You’re both a disgrace.”

The day was fading, stripes of orange broke between gaps in the clouds. In the dark the blueberry bushes that bore no fruit were nothing but fuzziness along the bottom of the back fence, as if they were wavering on the edge of existing at all.

My hands were bright red, trembling, starting to swell under the heat. White speckles of paint still clung to the undersides of my nails and in the dry cracks on the back of my hand. The skin grew redder and redder as I scratched.

They hardly seemed concerned about what was going on. If it wasn’t for the continued conversation seeping in from the dining room, the pink flyer, the crowd at the town hall— I might have believed that I’d hallucinated the whole thing. I turned to look back through the doorway, they were all there, just as usual. I dug at my nails until the hot water heater kicked in full-force, and the burning woke me from a trance I hadn’t realized I’d fallen into.
The conversation from the dining room followed me up the stairs, nipping at my ankles. I heard his name, over and over. It stabbed through the air and I hurried my feet up the last few steps. The hallway was dark, lined in photographs. I passed large ones of my face—blurry, blown up too large. It was my face, but not anymore, it was more like relic, a souvenir. In the darkened hallway only the eyes stood out, wrinkled with a smile, white teeth under unmarred lips. Smiling at what, exactly? Across from it was the photo next to my door, of my parents holding a baby, me. I closed my door softly and crossed to my bed without turning on the light. Sitting, staring out the window at nothing.

I couldn’t swallow the lump in my throat. A prickling anxiety thrummed, rushing in my ears. Thoughts swimming through me, raking over my insides with tiny razors and tightening the tendons at the back of my neck. I couldn’t do nothing. I looked around my room as if something would give me a clue, as if something would tell me to go, to stay.

For all I knew, they were on their way to arrest me at any moment. If it came to that, I guess it didn’t matter what I did. I pulled on a jacket from the back of my closet and pushed my creaking window open, and a breath of cold air stinging at the back of my throat. I swung one leg out, and then the other, crouching on the mossy roof and pulling the window back into place, my sweaty palms sticking against the glass.

He’d been here this morning.

I inched my way to the gutter and dropped down onto the back porch, making my way around to the front, and then turning off onto the back road, stopping myself from turning to look over my shoulder every twenty seconds, though the impulse was there.
Soon I found myself halfway up Spit Mountain road. Sweat slithered down my chest and stuck my hospital issued t-shirt to my skin. The moisture seemed to help release the sterile, popsicle stick smell it carried, which now mingled with the musk of my sweat. As I neared the top I saw the fist snippet of yellow tape peeping though the trees. No doubt they were already reexamining the crime scene, originally taped off from the edge of the hiking trail to the edge of the cliff a mile away. As the sunlight continued to fade darkness crept in, anyone could be hiding not ten feet away from me in the trees and I wouldn’t see them. I continued up the road, my feet slipping around inside my sweaty sneakers.

It was a half-hour walk, but it felt longer. I shouldn’t have been there, someone could have seen me. The police could have seen me. But I kept walking. Ahead, I saw the marker for mile 26. My breakfast had worked it’s way out of my stomach by now, and couldn’t come back up.

“This is stupid,” I whispered, coming to a stop. The mile marker stood in front of me, swaying in the breeze. I was compromising everything by coming back here.

“One.” I took a deep breath, staring into the trees in front of me. Another deep breath. A shaky breath. “Two.” And I was off. 130 steps from mile marker 26.

I saw the maple tree long before I’d reached 130. Its trunk was big and barreled, marked with initials of lovers long past. Not my initials. The branches reached outwards more than upwards, like the ones my dad had in his backyard. The soil around it was dark and heavy, swaddling all the summer rains inside it.

“130.”
Something was wrong. I circled around the tree and my vision spotted. “No, nono no,”
My throat made a funny noise. My chest seized, my head floating away as I dropped to my
knees. Breathing. Not breathing. Digging my hands into the fresh dirt. It was gone. An animal? A
curious hiker? No. You fucking moron. I dug until I started to cry, slamming my fist into the
ground, my knuckles bleeding “Fuck!”

It was gone. It was gone. Covered in blood, in his blood, in my blood. It had to be
Tommy. He had to know. No one knew but Tommy. Why would I bury it here? Stupid!

Go. Go, Mary. You have to go. “Dammit!” I whispered, pushing the dirt back into place. I
tried to hold my breath to stop my sobbing, I was being too loud. I tried to compact it back down,
but it didn’t matter.

I brushed the dirt off and walked as fast as I could back to the road, back into town.
Scurrying away from a crime scene with dirt under my nails.

A rumbling sound grew behind me. I turned to see light flicker through the trees, then
headlights appeared from around the corner. Shit. I turned my head forward and kept walking,
putting my dirty hands into my pockets. What would I say when they pulled over? I’m just out
for a walk? After someone just came back from the dead?

I watched my long shadow grow shorter as the car came closer. The hairs loosened
around my face lit up in the light. It was an old truck, I thought I recognized it. It stopped a few
feet in front of me and the passenger side window groaned its way open. Sprinting off into the
woods crossed my mind, but I forced myself to breathe and took a step towards it.

Wait. What if it was him? What if the press conference was over? Was this his car? I
don’t think so. What if he borrowed it? I revisited my idea of running and glanced off into the
woods as if to verify that they were still there to run into. It was probably a better idea to hold my breath instead of letting myself hyperventilate.

“You need a ride?” I let out a sigh, it wasn’t him. I came up to the window and saw one of the older townsfolk, someone I knew from church, Mr. Wells, in the driver’s seat. “Heya Mary, thought that was you.”

He’d recognized me, he knew I was here, not twenty minutes from the crime scene. “Uh, yeah, sure.” I climbed in and buckled my seatbelt, holding my hands between my thighs.

“Your house is on Fisher Street, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you doing all the way out here so late?”

“I just needed a distraction. With everything going on, I just couldn’t bear to be at the big press conference. It’s just really scary, this whole coming back to life thing.” I said, chewing on my lip, staring wistfully out the window, hoping he would believe me.

“Ah, well I can understand that.”

“Why aren’t you at the press conference, Mr. Wells?”

“I was just dropping off my granddaughter back at home. I didn’t really want her in town, with everything that’s been going on.”

Everything that’s been going on. Me. I was the everything that’s been going on. I was the thing making this town unsafe for people like little girls, for grandparents. I just nodded and stared back out the window.

Mr. Wells dropped me off outside of the house. The dining room was empty now, and the sheers over the front window flickered with the shifting light of the TV. Once his truck had
turned the corner I snuck around to the back gate. The latch was rusted, mostly ornamental at this point. I laid my hand against the wood for a moment. This is where he’d come into the yard.

I continued through, the lawn turning to mud where people had trampled through it this morning. It was mushy, and gave under my feet. A long, brown strip was puddled with water in front of the gazebo. My chest tightened and my fingers pressed into my forearms. He’d stood here only hours ago.

I climbed up to the window and slipped quietly into my room, looking back over the yard one more time before drawing the curtains. I stepped into the bathroom, avoiding the creaky floorboards that would echo into the living room below.

The face in the mirror, it was nothing like the girl’s face in the hallway. Tired, worn out. My hands looked dirtier than I’d imagined them in the harsh lights. I scrubbed until the dirt was gone, but they were still dark, grey. Like a corpse.

*

Last month was the one year anniversary of his death, and flyers for the memorial still hung on all the lampposts. Each one squawked at me as I passed, some were sagging and peeling away after the rain, but most stood their ground. When I didn’t look at them—at him—directly I had to look at him in my mind, blood and all. Screaming and all.

The bakery at the west corner of the town plaza opened at 6am sharp. We still had a memorial poster in our front window. An old photo from his high school graduation. In Loving Memory. He was smiling, beaming. His old missing posters, from before they found his body, used a recent photo from university. His eyes colder, the upticks at the corners of his lips
unforgiving. This one was warm. The morning sun coated him in a layer of gold, turning the border daisies orange. It was the old body of Thomas Moore.

Aside from the silent, brightly branded news vans, the town square was empty. The sun cast long, fingery shadows across the cobblestones as it peeked over the spires of the old church, and shorter, blockier ones from the roof of the new boutique bought by some people from California. Nothing but empty café tables and the shadows. The doves in the church tower aviary were silent, the pigeons in the square were nowhere to be seen. My throat tightened as I fumbled in my bag for the bakery keys, Thomas Moore peering at me from the other side of the glass.

There was no one there. The keys jangled as I tried to fit the key in the lock. There was no one there. I got the door unlocked on the third try, quickly slipping inside. Sunlight splayed a rainbow of colors over the tile floor through the crystal hangings in the windows. I ripped the flyer of Thomas Moore’s face from the window, crumpling it into a ball to hide his eyes. The saltiness of blood danced against the left side of my tongue as I bit the inside of my cheek too hard. The poster went straight into the trash (since I had a real excuse to get rid of it now) and I made my way behind the counter, turning on our pre-selected music—all in French that I didn’t understand. It was probably better that way.

I was alone until the clock hit a quarter to 6, then I watched an old man shuffle his way across the square. So slow, methodical. I was relieved to see him finally disappear from view. There would be questions. Even before yesterday, women would huddle in the corners of the bakery and whisper, sneaking glances at me over their latte foam. Mothers would tell their children to wait outside as they picked out decorated cookies, watching me closely as I placed
each one into the powder-pink boxes. No one had believed it was an accident until they’d announced that he’d fallen from the cliff.

Five minutes before opening I set up the outdoor tables and chairs under the candy-striped awning, tied up in a matching candy-striped apron. The morning sun was already hot, roasting the surface of my morning-fresh demeanor with bubbling irritability. Thomas Moore’s face smiled at me from the window of the cobbler next door. I grimaced, blocking the light from my eyes as it reflected at me from the windows.

Perhaps I was full of myself to think that anyone would care. I didn’t came back from the dead, after all. If he was going to turn me in, he could have done it already. The urge to look over my shoulder inched its way up my spine and I huffed out a loud, sloppy breath, spinning around. No one there, of course. I set up each chair perpendicular to its table, stopping more than necessary to nudge one corner to the right, and then to the left, and then back to the right again.

What on earth was he? Did he remember nothing? He remembered enough to lead the entire church into my backyard. To reach out his hand to me. If he didn’t remember anything, then I guess it’s God, fate, who brought him to me. If he did, they he was playing games with me, and he wanted me to get hurt.

It was early, and no one sat down inside the shop to eat besides a young couple from out of town. After an hour the French music playlist started over again, its opening song recognizable by its nasaly singer and whining accordion sounds.

The woman who lived across the square came in with her hair piled on top of her head and her arms oozing out of a pink dress. She’d shoved her feet into some pointed heels, and
could barely waddle up to the counter. “Good morning, Mary. The usual, please.” Her thin lips were overdrawn and smiling at me politely.

“Have any plans today, Mrs. Frederick?”

She gave me a funny look, cocking her head back into her neck like a chicken. “Well, of course, Mary.” I started the espresso and pulled a blueberry scone from the case for her. “The press conference!”

“The what?”

“Goodness, sweetheart—*The press conference.* They announced it at the town hall last night. Oh, and I suppose of course the banquet at the church this evening as well. Mrs. Moore’s.”

“Oh.”

“Not that I’ve seen you much in church lately. I suppose those non-traditional folks do go on about how you can worship God no matter where you are, but you really ought to be back with the rest of us!” She took the pastry bag from my hand and circled around the bar to wait for her latte. “I mean, think of your poor mother!”

“You’re right, Mrs. Frederick.”

“Of course I am! Oh, you know I’m just teasing. But now that Tommy has been granted to us by God, you really must come back and show him your gratitude.” I watched an ant crawl across the tiled floor, disappearing for a moment each time it crossed over a line of blackened grout. My breath was shallow as if I’d eaten something I was allergic to, something my body couldn’t handle, blowing itself up with inflammation to protect itself. I could see the new body of Thomas Moore raise his arms at the altar in sweeping black robes, where Thomas used to be an altar boy. I watched myself, as if from above, walk down the aisle towards him, ready to pay
my gratitude. The sun shone through the stained glass and my skin shifted from blue, to purple, to red.

“You’re right, Mrs. Frederick.” I poured the espresso and foamed milk into her cup, spilling onto my apron and struggling to get the lid on, handing it to her, telling her to have a nice day. Surely, if he had made accusations, I would know by now. Surely.

The square was filling. Just like Mrs. Frederick, many of them wore their Sunday best. A group with matching jackets walked by the bakery, their tops embroidered with a news station logo. They would be going to see him, to talk to him about his vacation in hell.

About an hour later my coworkers arrived, an hour later than they should have.

“He’s so dreamy.”

“Ugh, yes he is! So brave, it’s so sad he had to go through all that.”

Work was of little importance compared to the body of Thomas Moore. Especially considering how brilliantly his hair sparkled in the sun. How he was just so, so sweet. Maybe he didn’t remember. Maybe he really was in a coma the whole time. Maybe I didn’t kill him.

Even if I didn’t, that didn’t mean I hadn’t tried.

We used Red Delicious for the afternoon apple tarts. Deep, dark, red-skinned with watery, tasteless flesh. Cheaper, and easy to masquerade with cinnamon and sugar. I ran them under the water in a bucket, watching the light flicker over the freezer door.

I took groups of them out of the water at a time, lining them up along the stainless steel counter, death row. With our sharpest knife I began slicing, softly thudding steel against the cutting board and tossing the slices into a bowl with lemon juice.
“Mary!” I slipped and the knife sliced into the flesh of my finger, fat drops of blood splatting onto the cutting board.

“What?” The lemon juice stung as it wormed into me. The blood spots bloomed on the cutting board, fanning out across the wandering streaks of lemon juice like snowflakes.

“Come quick!” I held my hand under the faucet, blood swirling around the drain. Around and around and around. My name came to me again from somewhere far off and chattering voices grew louder. Giggling and squealing and my name again.

I tore off a paper towel and wrapped my finger as fast as I could, warm blood quickly seeping through. “Mary! Mary come quick!” The bakery was never this busy. I threw a towel over the sliced apples and I grabbed my bag, hauling it onto my shoulder as I fumbled with the back door to the alley. “Mary!”

An ocean of trash bins filled the alley between the bakery and the pub next-door. I closed the door softly, blinking to adjust to the dark. The sky, starting to grey above me, was narrowed between the buildings, creating an artificial night. The air was wet and acidic with the smell of concrete and rot. Either wall of the alley was lined with trash cans, their bright yellow plastic cutting through the dark. Each one waited to become a jack-in-the-box, each containing the body of Thomas Moore in his funeral suit, each with an inevitable explosion. The body of Thomas Moore as I imagined him in his grave, in pieces, bent and mangled with water-logged skin rippling across his face, with milky eyes and a bloated purple tongue. I listened to myself swallow and pushed past them.

In the late afternoon sun, the peaks and eaves of the bakery roof stretched across the square in jagged shadows. A crowd stood in the entrance, figures silhouetted against the light
from the windows. They jumped and fidgeted and peered inside on their tiptoes. I couldn’t see him, but he was there, he has to be.

The eastern horizon was creeping closer, clouds so grey they were almost blue, purple. The air was growing heavier, crawling down my throat with wet hands. It was still crowded with his name, with things about him, all pressing in. So heavy that breathing was slow, taking so much work for one breath. I tried to swallow the slime in my throat, the spit pooling under my tongue, it was as if nothing could go down.

Mrs. Moore’s party was at the church, the one everybody used, not the historic one in town that was falling apart. I stopped up the road from it, next to an empty lot. Strung up in the churchyard trees, strings of colorful flags and paper streamers tossed in the air, the wind starting to dig its fingers into the world’s creases and crevices. It cut through the fabric of my shirt and I wrapped my arms around my chest, tucking my fingers under my ribs. I could feel myself trembling. If I went, I would see him. My fingers started to scratch.

No, not him. Thomas was dead. If he wasn’t, then he knew, if he was, then my mother must be right— he, it, must be here for me. And who would dare call him a liar? If he turned on me, that would be the end of it.

The tall weeds in the empty lot bent sideways in the wind, tiny birds zipping out of them for the cover of the trees. The cold air pressed into my back, pushing me forward, throwing my hair into my face. The leaves on the trees were lighter on one side than the other, so as they shook in the wind the whole street seemed to shimmer.

Where else could I go? I tried to swallow again, winding my arms tighter around me, pressing them hard into each other, they started to shake, my shoulders straining under the
torque. Where could I run? If he wanted to find me, he would find me. I took a step forward, staring down at the crack in the road, following it as it split off into smaller fractures, splintering itself until it puttered out. I unwound my arms and gripped the strap of my bag with white knuckles. My finger still pulsed beneath the paper towel, growing redder as I continued to bleed. I took one step forward, and then another.

The crepe streamers were pink, orange, red— I watched them roll and snap through the air. One suddenly wound upwards like a bolt of lightning, then slowly drifted back down to float between the trees. I could hear my breath as I crossed over the curb onto the grass, the white steeple rising above me.

It was an old church, but not old enough to be anything but mundane. All utility, economy— no care for those who would use it in the future. There was a plastic cross gilded in fake gold on the wall by the door. I suspected it was much larger than life, far above my head. I held my breath and imagined a giant golden head hung against a giant chest, his head, his chest. He would lift his head and look at me, eyes the size of apples. Each giant extremity held in place by iron nails. First the giant muscles of his legs would strain, then, slowly, with a wet, squelching sound he would pull one foot away from the cross, the head of the nail going deeper and deeper till it ripped through his flesh on the other side, leaving a bloody, gaping hole. Then the other foot. He would be smiling, and then he would pull his hands from the nails, tearing the rusting iron through the meat of his palm, bright blood running down his arms, down to the earth, flooding into the lawn. He would say my name, and then he would take a step towards me, a giant step.
Voices and laughter carried through the doors of the church. I stared at the cross a moment longer, but circled around to the back, reaching out my shaking hands to brush my fingertips through the crepe streamers. They felt like nothing more than whispers.

The party tables had rocks on their corners, holding down the plastic tablecloths flapping around their legs. A concrete reproduction statue of the Virgin Mary stood in the lawn at the back of the church, set back inside a barren flower bed. The concrete was old, dark. A chunk of her cheek the size of a quarter had broken off. I turned to look back at the church, at the stained glass windows lit up from the inside in every color.

“How’s your head?” He said. His voice was so even, unfazed. It was all wrong, he looked just the same. There was no blood, no soggy flesh, no purpling extremities. His blonde hair glowed like a halo in the last rays of sun peeking through the trees.

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“What?” I didn’t want to see him like this.

“You hit your head pretty hard, Mary.”

He wasn’t supposed to say my name ever again. My face grimaced as my guts heaved and I could taste bile coming up my throat. He wasn’t supposed to. There was red, I blinked, it wouldn’t go away. My hands, I could see them in front of me, they were clean, pale— but they weren’t, they were red, they were shining. I clasped them together over my chest, my shoulders
climbing into my ears. I took a step back from him, biting my lips between my teeth. He smiled at me. I only saw it for a moment, blinking to clear my vision as my eyes stung. His body started to step towards me and I stepped away. He had stopped, watching me.

“Am I dead, Thomas?” As I said his name it felt like it had been stapled to my tongue. I could hardly feel them, but my breaths came quickly. I could hear them, it sounded like I was hyperventilating.

“No.” He took a step towards me. “That would be too easy.”

I caught myself on my own foot and fell backwards. The world was moving, I was shaking my head, I couldn’t see. “Are—are you dead?”

“What do you think?” He was expressionless, his voice steady and even.

“Are you even—how could you be?”

His lips smiled at me. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten me, Mary?”

I pushed myself to my feet, it was too fast. I braced myself on my knees and held my breath, trying to keep everything down, trying to swallow the bitterness.

“Tommy! Tommy where’d you go?” Thomas’ little brother came running through the streamers, yelling.

“Go wait inside, Billy, I’ll be right there.” We stood in silence for a long moment, my chest collapsing, my stomach quivering. “So what’ll it be, Mary? What are you going to do?”

“What? What am I going to do?”

He smiled again, shaking his head. “Goodnight, Mary.” He looked up at the statue, crossed himself, and followed his brother around the corner of the church.
It had been a week since Thomas Moore rose from the grave. The air was still cold in the early morning, I left my window open, sitting on the floor, staring into the mirror. It was like I’d never looked at my own face before, but the more I did, the less I seemed to recognize it.

I listened to the rest of the household bustle around, yelling at each other as they got ready for church. Then with a final door slam all was quiet again. I hadn’t been to church in months, he would be there now. I finally rose from the floor and found my church dress, my church shoes, and tied my hair back so it wouldn’t look so messy. I’d just quietly slip in the back, no one even needed to know I was there.

My dress shifted around my body as I walked, grazing my skin and rustling the tiny hairs there. Most of the decorations had been cleaned up now, only a few still hung from the trees, limp and wet. I hadn’t been in a month, but it seemed remarkably quiet as I approached, the doors shut. I took hold of the big brass handles and pushed, stepping inside. It was empty, the sea of yellowed wood pews lined up like fresh pencils in a box. A few people sat near the altar, my mother one of them. I carefully dipped my fingers in the holy water and crossed myself, making my way to her.

“Mother?” I whispered. She was kneeling, her rosary clutched in her hands, fingers moving from bead to bead. She muttered her hail Mary’s under her breath. “Mother?”

“Go. Away. Mary.”

“Where is everyone?”
She turned her head towards me and opened her eyes slowly. They were more vicious than I’d ever seen them, turning my stomach cold. How could she look at me like that? “Where is everyone?” She hissed, unblinking, “Or where is it?”

“Mother—”

“They are down at the river. They want it to baptize them again.”

“Okay,” I whispered. She turned away from me and went back to her payers, her forehead tight with anger. The few others there were deep in prayer as well, they eyes closed, their lips moving soundlessly. A pit opened in my chest, something was wrong. I turned and ran down the aisle, gasping as I reentered the cold morning air from the warmth of the church. The river was only a little ways down. I came around the back, passing the Virgin Mary stature and entering one of the multipurpose trails.

What was he doing? Tommy wasn’t religious, not really. Maybe dying changed that. My breathing strained as I ran, as I came closer and closer to the river. Even the trees were too quiet, too still. The singing of early morning birds was absent. It was just my breath, haggard and rasping, until the sounds of chanting grew louder and louder, and soon I could see the river, and the congregation clustered around the bank. A few yards out, Tommy stood up to his waist in the dark water, in his white dress shirt. Around him were a few others—his brother, my grandmother, some kids from the local school.

“And, on this beautiful morning we have been given, let us cleanse these poor souls, let God see into them, and let his will guide their way. Amen!”

“Amen!” The voices around me echoed. I pushed through them, stepping down the bank to the shore, coming closer to the water.
“Billy! My fair brother! You have confessed your sins to me, now let God cleanse you, let God’s will help you on your way!”

His little brother, chest deep in the water, stepped towards him. Thomas suddenly looked up and met my eyes, smiling. His face almost seemed to be glowing, his chest pale beneath the wet, gossamer cotton of his shirt. He looked alive, he looked too alive. Thomas put both hands on his brother’s shoulders and pushed him under the water.

“Call upon God! Call upon him to help this boy on his journey!” The whispers rose around me as I watched Billy. His small hands reached up to his brother’s, pulling on them. How long had he been under? The praying grew louder and Billy started to kick. Tommy’s face was unchanged, staring at me, smiling, holding his brother under the water.

“Thomas!” I yelled, shoving my way to shore. “Thomas, you’re killing him!” His grin pulled back to reveal his shiny white teeth, his body seemed to crouch into an athletic stance, like an animal.

“Mary, Mary,” He sang as I leapt into the water, “quite contrary!”

“Thomas, stop it!” I finally reached them, but he pulled his brother away as I tried to grab him, still under the water, no longer kicking. “Thomas!” I screamed, crying.

He suddenly stood up and took his arms above his head. “Amen! God has spoken!”

“Amen!”

I grabbed his bother and pulled him up, he wasn’t breathing. “No, no, no.” I pulled him to the shore. “Billy!” I started compressions on his chest but Thomas took my arms and pulled me away from him. “Hey! Stop—”

“Come on, Mary, you know how this works.”
“No, Thomas, no! Stop it! That’s your brother! He’s going to die!”

“Half-brother, actually. My mother’s a slut.” His mouth was right next to my ear and I squirmed to get away from him as he held me against him and pulled me back into the water.

“Thomas!” I screamed, coughing as I sobbed. “What are you doing!”

“You’re so dramatic.”

The rest of the congregation wasn’t doing anything, they were looking at him, waiting.

“Somebody help him! He needs CPR! Someone!” No one moved.

“Mark,” Thomas said to one of the other boys in the water, “God has called on you to help, it is Jane’s turn to see God.”

“No! Grandmother, no!” She smiled up at Thomas and nodded.

“It’s okay, Mary, I have confessed.”

“What are you doing!” I thrashed against him, his arms clamped around me. “Thomas you’ve made your point! Stop it!”

He laughed, his cheek against my head. “No, I don’t think I have.”

Mark took my grandmother’s shoulders and guided her under the water. She smiled at me before her face disappeared. I kept yelling his name, but he didn’t stop, he wouldn’t stop them.

“What’s wrong with you! You’re killing them!”

“Is it wrong to kill people, Mary?” I asked him to let me go, I told him I was sorry, for what I did, for what I did to him. “You can’t just do what you want, Mary,” he drew me closer, I tossed as my grandmother stopped moving. “People like you, Mary, you bring destruction on all of us.”
All I could see was red. His face, my face. My hands, his hands. Holding it in my hands, red, all red. I could hear him yelling, the opening of a symphony finale, ending with the sound his body made when it hit the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. Thomas was the easiest part.

Mary! Mary what have you done!

I said I didn’t want to. But that was a lie. I kicked my feet in the water, and it splashed up around us. He was laughing. He pulled me under.

Mary how could you! You’ll burn for this! You’ll burn!

That was the simplest part. The river was murky around me, sediment stirred up from all the commotion. He held me down by the back of my arms.

I trusted you, Mary! You promised!

I could hear them singing underwater, muffled, soft. My grandmother floated in front of me, bubbles collecting in the caves of her eye sockets.
Culmination
The stalks moaned and crackled under the wind. Dancing back and forth between gently swaying and violently snapping off altogether. The tall ones, the strong ones, trembled under the weight of their old corn ears, decay devouring them from the inside. All the leaves were dry and rustled obscenely.

Humming buzzed between my lips. It was as if I could induce my own temporary numbness. Nothing went numb in the height of summer, everything stuck to your skin, to the grease, to the sweat. The air was hot, but the faster I sucked it in my nose the cooler it felt. If only there was some way to hurtle myself through the air for the same relief. I held a breath in my throat till it burned, waited at least a second longer, and let it out in a huff. I probably didn’t have the will to suffocate myself, so I didn’t bother. I just waited until I could feel the faintest of flames licking around my lungs, just a hint of the beginnings of suffocation, just a hint of something beyond approaching. It — something beyond — had to exist somewhere for my body to burn so hot in its approach.

The sunlight prickled against me like I was butter simmering in a frying pan, with bubbles that snapped and popped, throwing bits of hot grease. My skin would blister soon, then peel — the top in crispy flakes, the bottom in slimy layers. It would be the slow, clear sort of bleeding. It couldn’t just be water, it oozed, thick and heavy. If I burned bad enough I would swell up from the inside, maybe even turn purple, green, or a curdling, creamy yellow.

I opened my eyes to look into the sun, then closed them to watch the shadow sun — the green alter ego — move around beneath my eyelids. It was definitely past noon now, past when I was supposed to be home. I looked at the sun again, directly, counting at least five seconds
longer than I was supposed to. The groan in my throat sounded far off, as if my head was lost somewhere in the ears of corn rather than between my own ears.

Home as in the old home. With the furniture-cluttered lawn. Rather ghastly and unattractive, if you ask me. The old chairs and half-broken tables clustered together as if they had grown up from the ground themselves as great big bushes. My sister called it an “estate sale,” like that was higher class than a “garage sale.” It didn’t make anything less unsightly. Estates had antiques made of wood, paintings in gold-leaf frames, war memorabilia, family portraits— things no one dreamt of giving up unless they were dead. I couldn’t wait for the lawn to be as empty as the house.

My hands were clammy, palms to the sky. One by one I tugged at each of my fingers, some part of me hoping to find one that had stopped working. The tendons in my wrist slacked and tightened, all lined up like guitar strings. My fingertips slid across my palms, slick and wet. I groaned again, moving the pitch up and down the back of my throat, feeling it rise and fall like some foreign object. I turned my hands to the earth and I pushed myself up. When I’d first come here, I’d tried to imagine I could hear words in the whispers of the field’s underbelly, in the rustling, in the whistling breeze— but nothing was calling to me. As I stood my eyes leveled above the corn, all swirling together as one big tangle of black and grey, bleached by the sun and blackened by decay.

The bare post of an old scarecrow stood a few hundred feet away, forgotten fabric scraps flapping limply. I let my eyes rest on it as I pulled my pants back up and started buttoning my shirt from bottom to top, the drops of sweat collecting on my skin eagerly bled through. They ran down my forehead and into the crevice of the eye, stinging. I didn’t stop my body from blinking
to clear it, but made no conscious contribution to ease the discomfort. The post wavered, becoming three, then four, then a big fan of blocky lines against the blue sky. Isn’t nature supposed to be grounding? Man’s home away from home? A bead of sweat tickled down my forehead and settled in my eyebrow.

I was closer to the post than usual, though I wasn’t particularly fond of it. I’d been wearing a path, a berth growing wider each time I barreled through the corn. It ruined my nature illusion, so I forked off to a fresh patch periodically.

After the crop died they just let it sit, apparently not worth the trouble to tear down. No one really knew who owned it, only that a local sold it to someone out of town to supplement his retirement. For his quarterly Bahamas cruises, of course. Every once in a while a man in a suit was spotted weaving through the corn, always the same grey suit and aluminum clipboard, always a different man. The neighbors said it belonged to some big corporation testing the soil, and no one had seen them spray anything. I might have been soaking in pesticides all summer, and it didn’t really bother me. So long as it killed me before it made my balls shrivel up.

Each day I came and left the field from the east, on a dirt road that took me by Priscilla’s house. I lied to myself at first, pretending not to realize why I’d chosen the path. There were plenty of other houses on that road, belonging to plenty of other people. Who could claim I took that path to happen upon Priscilla? I just as easily could have wanted to run into her single, eighty year-old neighbor with tits hanging around her waist. Easily.

But I couldn’t continue my personal charade after I finally did happen upon her. Funny how that works, walking directly in front of her house every day. My ego was bruised by the fact
that I wasn’t above manufacturing happenstance— that I would continue on in the same rut as if I hadn’t already tried to bait fate the day previous.

It was at sunrise, of course, the earth awash in gold. And so was she, bathrobe and all. It was an especially orange morning. I saw her from a distance—moving the sprinkler in the front lawn— it was as if she was a marble statue come to life. As quickly as she appeared she vanished like a lit candle in a gust of wind. The droplets from the sprinkler flew through the air, golden rays catching each one, each a tiny flame in her wake.

So each morning, and each afternoon, I held my breath as I came into the winding corner where her house sat. I could keep my head straight on—most of the time—only barely glancing up into the windows of the big yellow house. The more I passed by the more foolish I felt, but now that I’d established a pattern, I’d have to admit the pattern was there in order for me to go out of my way to break it.

It was simpler just to continue. The anticipation of the anticipation grew, it was now some sort of game whether or not I could catch a glimpse of her.

There was a funny maple tree at the foot of their driveway. Its leaves looked artificial and out of place in the bright sunlight, as if the entire thing had been dunked in wax. It ought to be enjoying cooler summers somewhere far from here.

Priscilla was tending to the strawberries. She had dyed her hair a bright red, now slicked back in a bun glistening like a baseball-sized maraschino cherry. Around her face wisps of brown hair were starting to grow in. Part of me wondered if she’d noticed my comings and going. I wasn’t sure if I wanted her to have. Probably not. I tried to wait till I got closer to actually look at her, nonchalant, as if I hadn't noticed her from all the way up the road.
“Hey, Daniel,” she said, a flat remark. She was hardly smiling.

“Hey Priscilla!” I crossed the road to her, the strawberries between us. Her jean shorts were frayed and tattered at the crown of her thighs. I’m sure they were like that on purpose.

I smiled at her and she smiled back, her lips pressed tightly together. Eyes blazing. “Want one?” She held out a shining berry from the wicker basket at her elbow.

“Yeah, thank you.” She watched me as my teeth ripped into the strawberry, the skin ruptured and juice dribbled down my chin, stinging my lips where they’d dried and cracked in the sun. “It’s delicious.” I rolled my lips together and tasted the tangy metal of blood where a split had reopened. “You must be tired of them by now, with so many.” Against the sweetness of the berry it was rather umami.

She shrugged, one corner of her mouth higher than the other. She handed me her basket and bent over to pick some more. Her shirt floated away from her bare chest as she inverted. I tried not to look.

“They’re not really something you can get tired of, they’re all a little different.”

My face was already flushed from the heat. “Yeah, that’s true.”

Priscilla held out some more to me. They were all a deep red, some flirting with purple, so ripe they were already coming to pieces in her hands. She watched each one move from her hand to my mouth as I gripped them by the leaves and bit into the flesh. She seemed strangely unblinking.

“Do you want to go on a date, Daniel?” She had her head crooked to the side.

“A what?” Had I been sitting in the sun too long?

“A date. Do you want to go on a date with me?”
I swallowed the spongy strawberry in my mouth whole and I nodded as I tried to wipe the juice from my chin. “Yes—yes, I would love to Priscilla.”

She said nothing for a moment and in a flash of anxiety I worried that I’d somehow misheard her. “I’m free tonight,” she said, “Wanna meet me by the pier at eight?”

My cheeks lifted as I smiled. “Can I meet you here? We’ll walk there together?”

Her left cheek shrunk as she sucked it between her teeth and chewed. If her eyebrows weren’t always so close together, I’d have thought she was frowning. She huffed, and her cheeks blew outwards, but she nodded.

“Okay, deal. But don’t come up to the door. Wait down by the mailbox.”

“Okay.” I felt the urge to put my hands in my pockets.

She took a berry for herself and let it linger, rolling it across her bottom lip before she took a bite, pursed around it. I swallowed a hard lump in my throat.

“I’ve got to go help my sister with the estate sale,” I said when she remained silent, her eyes watching. “But I’ll see you tonight.”

She smiled and held out her hand for her basket, nestling it into her side at her waist. “See you tonight.” Pricilla’s eyes were a shade of green like the maple leaves, they didn’t seem to belong where they’d ended up.

I nodded and smiled sheepishly, acutely aware of my posture as I walked away—in case she might be watching. I could tell my grin was wide by how warm it felt in my face.

Maybe all the trips in front of her house had paid off. We used to be friends in high school, but now that she went to college she was only back home in the summer. She used to tell me how much she didn’t want to go to college, that she’d always be able to get the things she needed, that
she didn’t need *that* much to be happy. But her grandmother was a woman with a hyphenated last name, and a lot of money, so Priscilla had no choice.

I’d reached the outskirts of my neighborhood when the street lamps changed from antique reproduction lampposts to big steel poles with antennae-looking light boxes on top. I imagine at one point they were supposed to have been painted, but you could still see the manufacturer’s label stamped across them, running diagonally. The antique reproductions covered the ground in soft, sepia gold at night, while the steel poles sterilized everything with their refrigerator-white light. Bluish white, as if regular white wasn’t sharp enough.

I’m pretty sure the neighbors still remembered my name. I didn’t know many of theirs, only their titles: Bill’s Dad, Jessica’s Mom. They would give me an obligatory wave when I passed, but they hadn’t really spoken to me since their own kids left town. It was routine now. I left the house for the field about the same time Mr. Wilkins (who I did remember) left for work, and Christina’s Dad read the newspaper on his front porch. Sometimes Sadie’s Mom was shooing her previous night’s escapade out the front door in only a pink satin robe, the tie nestled safely under one of her fat rolls.

I had to walk by all of them to get to or to leave the end of the street, to the house. Might have been nice if it backed up to a forest, or a meadow, but the yard only went a few dozen feet back before it hit the cinderblock wall separating the backyard from the train tracks.

The house was set in a brown, crispy patch of dead grass. The yellowest patches like broken chunks of ramen noodles. The terracotta planters by the front door were crumbling, the designs on their faces falling away into dust, settling into the crevices of the concrete. My mother had been waiting to find some new ones on Craigslist, the glazed kind that would last in the rain.
Nice and shiny. She would have liked a red color. I pictured the red of Priscilla’s hair bun as little round ceramic pots around the house. It didn’t help the image much.

When I’d left this morning the pine dresser from my father’s room sat square in the driveway, but it was gone now, replaced with the big box of old DVDs nobody watched anymore. On the side, the box read: “Hellman’s REAL Mayonnaise.”

My sister, Margaret, in her floppy, rose-printed dress and my grandmother, in a pink top and lime green shorts, argued with the neighbor, Mr. Kans, who patted the top of the old television set between them all periodically. Various neighbors and strangers browsed through the stacks of books, through boxes of trinkets and souvenirs, through big bins of old t-shirts. A stout man was wiggling a shelf on a tall bookcase.

“Daniel!” My sister turned from her confrontation and stomped towards me. “You were supposed to be back an hour ago!” Somewhere between the age of sixteen and twenty-six, my sister’s voice had developed a terrible nasal quality, like something had been lodged in an orifice somewhere, blocking the airflow.

“Sorry—”

“We need all of this sold. Now!” She shook her head at me as she set her sights on the bookcase man, and cornered him by the rhododendrons.

I helped them till late afternoon. Selling a majority of my father’s books and some of my mother’s plastic candelabras molded to look like crystal.

“These are great, they’re like the real thing, but no consequences if I drop them!”

“Mrs. Miller, they aren’t really that much like the real thing.”
She brought the shiny plastic close to her face as if she would find some detail there to validate herself. They made a flat rapping sound when she tapped them together. I imagined men in traditional Chinese dress pouring plastic into candelabra molds like blacksmiths.

“Nonsense! They’re just like the real thing!” She paid me ten dollars from a purple plastic wallet printed in leopard spots and hobbled away with one under each arm.

Priscilla was the real thing, living under golden streetlamps in a yellow house surrounded by a lush lawn. Everything about Priscilla was as it should be.

“Daniel, what are you doing?” Margaret wheezed through her nose. It flared out at the nostrils, the tips turning white, pointing at me as she appeared from nowhere. Her voice seemed to materialize before she did.

“What?”

“There are two more candlesticks in that set.” She continued to bend forward at the hip, leering at me. “You’re supposed to sell all of them together.” In her tomato red face her eyes, apparently under pressure, looked like they might pop out of her head.

“Mrs. Miller only wanted two.”

“I don’t care what she wanted, Daniel!” Margaret snatched one of the remaining candlesticks, wagging it in front of my face like a magic wand. “She’s a stupid old lady, and she’s supposed to buy all four!”

“Okay.”

“You are useless, Daniel, absolutely useless!”

“I’m leaving soon, I have something to do later this evening.”
A snarl flashed across her face before it set back into her standard frown. Margaret never had any plans in the evenings. “Leave? You want to leave?”

“I am going to leave.” The sun reflected harshly in the neighbor’s front windows across the street, I squinted as the afternoon angle sent the light straight into my eyes.

“Oh, yeah?” Margaret waved her ham arms at me. “And who is going to make dinner for Jackie and Margot? Huh?”

I scowled at her, as if she had anything important in her life left at all, let alone this one evening. As if she couldn’t bother to feed her own siblings. “Fine,” I grunted, crossing my arms over my chest, “But I’m not doing anything else for you after seven.”

“Fuck you,” she snapped, her automatic response. “Just make sure grandpa eats something. Watch him to make sure he doesn’t choke.” She stared at me as if I might let him choke on purpose, just for the fun of it.

“Yeah, I know, Margaret.”

She sneered and rolled her eyes, muttering under her breath, curling her upper lip back from jagged teeth, marching over to grandmother with arms crossed.

The new house was only a little ways down the street, further from the train tracks but with even less yard. Grandpa Jerry was asleep on the front porch, and inside Jackie and Margot were watching television with the curtains drawn. The shifting colors from their cartoons cast bright shadows over the ragged landscape of the living room, where all the couch cushions were strewn about. They both had toys in each hand, floating them through the air aimlessly as their eyes fixated on the screen. “What sounds good for dinner?” I asked. A few seconds passed before Margot turned to me.
“Fish sticks.”

“Fish sticks, please?”

“Fish sticks please.”

Jackie took a moment to process. “No! I hate fish sticks! I want dinosaur chicken!”

“No! No, NO! No dinosaur chicken!”

“Dinosaur CHICKEN!”

“Hey! Hey, we can have fish sticks and dinosaur chicken.” They both stared at me, then at each other, then nodded (Margot mostly rocked) and went back to the television.

The whole house exuded ancient cigarette smoke, but the kitchen smelled extra sour and reminded me of old broccoli. The apricot preserves sat open on the counter, grandpa Jerry must’ve made himself some toast. It was sticky on the outside of the jar and all down the front of the cabinet. And breadcrumbs had gathered in communion in the grout lines. And someone’s leftover scrambled eggs were sitting in the pan on the stove. And an open bag of hotdogs sat on the table.

The chicken nuggets and fish sticks were in the back of the freezer, behind the chocolate ice cream and my sister’s diet fruit pops. 5:30. I took a breath and gave myself a smile. Soon, soon none of this would matter. Soon, I would be with Priscilla. For real this time. My face reflected back to me in the microwave, misshapen in the uneven plastic.

“Jackie! Margot! Please set the table!”

“Margaret never makes us set the table!”
“Well, I do. Come on now it will only take a minute.” They discussed how stupid I was as they pulled the spaghetti-stained placemats from the new kitchen cabinets, and laid them out with paper plates.

“Danny, how many spots?”

“Just three, Jackie. For you, Margot, and grandpa.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I put Grandpa Jerry’s ready meal in the microwave and watched it spin. 5:45. At home, he always sat in a big chair at the end of the table, mostly so he could get up out of it on his own. This kitchen was smaller, and with no room to spare he sat against the wall in a regular dining chair. His face only ever looked one of two ways, like his skin had been stretched thin and then scrunched up all on his forehead, or like it was far looser than it ought to be, and hung around his chin. Both the fish sticks and the dinosaur chicken left grease halos on the paper plates. I watched them grow as I waited for Grandpa Jerry to finish eating.

The new bathroom was covered in yellow tile, and the bathtub was its own unique shade—less buttery and distinctly reminiscent of bile. I watched myself in the mirror, it was clearer than the image in the microwave, but not quite right. I pressed my hand into my chest and left a fading white handprint in the red skin. Great, real endearing. My skin burned when I stepped under the water, all the way up to the tips of my ears. Dirt swirled against the yellow tub as I washed the field off of me. It’s not like I wasn’t clean, but I hadn’t exactly needed to be quite so clean so often until now.

All of my real clothes were still in boxes. All of my real things were still in boxes. I quickly dug through them until I found a nicer pair of jeans, and a shirt. The jeans were from
high school, and tight around the thighs. It was 7:30 by the time I had left the house, and the summer sun was inching closer and closer to the horizon. Maybe we’d get to see the sunset, she’d probably like that.

Without a watch I didn’t know what time I reached the maple tree, but Priscilla wasn’t there yet. Now that the light was softer, the leaves seemed more demure. I put my hands in my pockets, but then made myself take them out again. I pulled a maple leaf from a low-hanging branch and cut through it with the edge of my fingernail, slicing it in long strips that fluttered on their way to the ground.

I knew Priscilla. Not only that, but she had been the one to ask me on a date. Priscilla with shiny, coffee-brown hair and green eyes. She was as fair as I was, but her skin was never burnt, never red and blotchy. At the thought I shifted around inside my shirt, the stinging flaring wherever the fabric brushed against me. The collar of my shirt was especially grating, it was as if I had a ring of fire around my neck.

Over my shoulder, I could see lights through the trees. The porch light, the solar powered lamps along the path to the front door, the warm light from the windows. A light would flicker, a shape would move, and whether it was just leaves moving in the breeze or someone passing by a window in the house my chest tightened just the same. I started to pace, and then I stopped. I didn’t want her thinking I was impatient. Or eager. Or anxious. My footsteps crunched too loud in the gravel.

Why would she make me wait down by the mailbox? I ripped the last pieces of the maple leaf in half and reached up for another. This one was bigger and papery from the sun, the edges crumbling away as I pinched my fingers along it. It’s not like her parents didn’t already know
me, it’s not like I was a stranger. I moved my eyes from the lights of the house to the front lawn, cast in shadow as the sun continued to sink. I could remember afternoons spent there, I could see her, slumped next to me on the lawn, glowing under the sun, the peach fuzz on her skin catching the light. I couldn’t remember every detail, every tiny hair, but I could remember looking over them, along her shoulders, watching them light up like her skin itself was glowing.

Maybe I was just earlier than I’d thought. Through the trees I watched a light on the south side of the house, the light that should have been her bedroom. Or she just needed extra time. Before, she’d never been like that, she didn’t spend hours getting ready. Although I guess she’d never actually been on a date with me before. It was different, but was it that different?

She was different, I guess. She had to be. She’d even changed her hair. I hadn’t really thought about her being different. She never even called after the first month. The first week, she told me about her dorm room, about her roommate with a drinking problem, about her intro communications class. Why didn’t she come see me when she got home?

What would dad have done? He would never have been stood up, he wouldn’t ever have to wait at the curb. Though he would never have told me what to do anyways. Maybe it was still early. Something moved in the light from her window, blocking it out for a moment. I choked down the lump in my throat and took a breath through my nose.

“Priscilla,” I whispered as the light returned, to no one but the empty road.

We had at least been friends, before. Walking down to the pier, walking to the high school, walking to the movie theater. Sitting in her lawn, swimming in the lake, swinging on the playground. All I’d ever wanted was a date.

Why did I have to wait at the mailbox?
I heard the front door open, and then close. I crouched to peer through the trees, feeling horribly conspicuous. It was Priscilla’s mother in a purple nightgown, with a bag of trash in each hand. I released a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

“Dammit.” Why did I feel guilty? Why did I feel bad for being here? She asked me to be here. I straightened up and watched Priscilla’s mother dump the trash bags into the can and walk quietly back inside. I had no reason to be ashamed, just as I had no reason to wait out on the street.

I started forward and then stopped, just out of the driveway. I pressed my hand against the tree. What if she really did have a good reason to ask me to stay out here? I grimaced, shaking my head and turning back to the road. The sun was mostly set now, the sherbet sky slowly fading to grey. She wouldn’t get to see it.

Unless she could see it, unless she was off somewhere else, at a different street, a different tree, with a different person. A different man. We had seen so many together, over the years, was she finally sick of them? Of me?

It was the height of summer, sunset would be after 8:30. Across the way a herd of cows was moving towards a barn, nothing but ambiguous, floating shapes in the dark. I took a long breath, closing my eyes. The air was cool, clear. I waited, watching the last cow disappear. The sky was grey now, fading into blue for just a moment before turning to black. Priscilla’s house sat in a bend in the road, the light from the streetlamps just out of view, the road cast in shadow.

I turned to look at it, at the light from her window. Surely, there had been some kind of mistake. I took one step forward, then another, then another. I felt the gravel crunch beneath me and then the flat driveway pavers, and then I was up the brick steps to the front door. It was big,
heavy, made of some kind of wood. It seemed impolite to ring the doorbell. I raised my hand, my entire arm starting to tingle with numbness, and knocked three times.

A dull throb grew in my head as I waited, like something was pushing against my skull from the inside. I clasped my hands in front of me, then behind my back. Soft footsteps approached from the other side of the door and the deadbolt clicked.

“Daniel?” Priscilla’s mother opened the door just a crack. “What are you doing here?”

“Is Priscilla here?”

“Uh,” her mother glanced down at the floor, then ducked her head behind the door for a moment, “Sorry,” she said, turning back to me, “She’s not here.”

“Oh.”

“Goodnight, Daniel.” She shut the door and the lock clicked back into place.

“Goodnight,” I whispered.

My head grew heavy as the blood seemed to drain from it. I blinked a few times, but the heaviness settled into the rest of by body, my legs sluggish as I made my way back to the road. I felt like my body was swaying, but I couldn't be sure. The sky was black now, only one star faintly visible off to my right.

The shape of her name started to take form on my lips, but no sound came out. I ran my tongue along the back sides of my teeth, suddenly aware of the taste at the back of my throat. I swallowed an itch there, then another— continuing to do so until it was raw and irritated.

Everything I’d known had peeled itself away from me and grown into something else. Some chill, of the evening or otherwise, quickly set in, making it’s home in the spaces between my bones. I turned down the road, curving at the bend, passing under the golden streetlamp for a
moment. My shadow stretched out behind me, shortened beneath the light, then grew long again in front of me, fading as I reentered the darkness.