

Kissing, naked, in bed

“How do you spell ‘sex’?” An 8-year-old Meredith craned her neck and looked at Georgia over her shoulder from where she lay belly-down on her bed. Clutching a wooden pencil with the rubber learner’s grip pushed up to the eraser, she was bearing down hard on a blank sheet of notebook paper, using her second-grade homework folder for support. Since Meredith had been held back in school, Georgia wondered if it was the folder she’d used the year before or the folder from that same year, the year they were in the same class and the year they became friends. On this piece of paper she was writing a message that would then be sealed and delivered to an imaginary teenaged boy who lived in the tree house at the far corner of her backyard, which the girls would travel to in Meredith’s battery-powered Barbie Jeep that they both had outgrown years ago. This was Georgia’s first time at Meredith’s house, so she had little say in what games they’d play, which was something she realized early into the play date, a little nervous to be at Meredith’s mercy, since they’d only become friends a couple of weeks ago.

Georgia sat at Meredith’s desk working on a letter of her own. There was only one way she knew to reply to Meredith’s question: “What’s ‘sex’?” The word stumbled out of her mouth, like it knew it was forbidden. Heavy in her chair, Georgia felt a veil of guilt drape over her shoulders as Meredith rose from her spot on the bed, leaving behind a faint shallow imprint in the quilt, and came to Georgia’s side. A whisper tickled Georgia’s face and hot breath wafted into her ear as the small weight of learning something new crept into her body. *This must be what makes her so cool*, Georgia thought, *she knows things most second graders don’t know yet*. Like flies on a tongue of sticky paper, the words clung to Georgia’s hungry brain, where their whispers would echo for months. Echoing until they were corrected: “It’s kissing naked in bed.”

Slowly, Meredith pulled back, her eyes shining and serious.

“How do you know about that?” Georgia asked.

“Molly told me last weekend when I slept over at her house,” said Meredith. “We were watching TV and it happened on the show. Her mom lets her watch all the channels.”

Georgia had spent the first month of second grade fawning over Meredith and her other friend, Molly, from afar. They were the popular girls: the ones who sat at their own end of the table during lunch, the ones the boys chased during recess, the ones whose parents let them watch MTV. Georgia knew she was nothing like them, but she couldn't help wanting to be one of them. It wasn't until Molly got moved to another second-grade class that Meredith took interest in Georgia – playing with her at recess, whispering to her between reading group and social studies, and eventually, after a couple of weeks, inviting her over to play.

Georgia shivered as she imagined the two girls huddled around a TV in a dark room at Molly's house with the volume down, giggling and whispering to one another, then thought of her own family's TV in their living room, loaded up with time limits and channel blocks for Georgia and her little brother, but mostly used by her father to watch SportsCenter. She turned back to her letter for the tree house boy, picking up her crayon and frowning at the drawing, which suddenly looked so *babyish*. “Well,” she said shakily, “I don't know how to spell that.”

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Even at 7 years old, Georgia could sense her mom hesitate whenever she asked if she could go to her new friend Meredith's house to play. At the time, she thought it was because Meredith lived far away from her own home in the suburbs. “All the way out there to the Evanses'?” her mother would ask, sounding like she couldn't believe Georgia even bothered to ask, making her feel guilty about the length of the drive rather than sharing the real reasons she

didn't want to take her daughter *all the way out there*. Mrs. Evans wasn't a member of the garden club or the Junior League, they'd just moved here to Edenton from the Midwest, and they'd just built some new house "way out" instead of moving into one of the old ones in the historic district like Georgia's family's. These were the same sorts of things her mother talked about on the phone with Georgia's aunts: *have you heard who's become a member of the country club, they're just letting anyone who can write a check into the school now, I've never laid eyes on that child's mother*. At first, her mom's lack of approval made Georgia feel wrong for even wanting to go to Meredith's in the first place, but eventually it made her house all the more appealing – like a forbidden land of knowledge waiting to be uncovered, revealed with each idea Meredith had for how they'd spend their play dates.

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The starting end of what would one day become a long grosgrain ribbon of memories from Georgia's childhood became tied with little knots of moments she spent with Meredith, marking the very beginning of Georgia realizing the ways she'd been sheltered. Meredith's Barbie jeep, a toy car built for toddlers but powered by a battery motor, made the girls feel grown up and free – it let them cross the sprawling fields in the Evanses' backyard, but their knees smashed up against the miniature dashboard and their bottoms balanced on the pink plastic headrests reminded them that they were playing with something they'd already outgrown.

One afternoon in the middle of a sun baked and dusty fall afternoon, Meredith and Georgia were clunking across the strawy expanse of the field behind Meredith's house in the Barbie jeep. Cold air and wind licked at their flushed cheeks while Meredith drove, as usual. "Ugh, I need a smoke," she said in the teenager voice that the two of them had developed over

the course of their play dates, a mishmash of tones and phrases they had overheard from older kids or studied on TV.

“What?” A smoke? Georgia was horrified.

“Duh,” she drawled. “A cigarette. Will you unzip my pocket?”

Inside the pocket of Meredith’s polar fleece jacket was a plastic bag filled with toothpicks. Georgia unearthed it and opened the seal.

“Could you give me one?” Meredith asked, still driving the Barbie jeep with one hand. Georgia pulled out a toothpick and tried to hand it to her, but she pointed up to her mouth. Georgia’s fingers trembled as the two girls bounced along in the plastic car and she placed the thin wooden needle carefully between her lips.

“Try it!” she said, slowing down the Barbie jeep to a halt. Showing her how to properly hold the makeshift cigarette, Meredith arranged her pointer and middle finger like a peace sign around it, clamped them shut, pulled it from her mouth, and closed her eyes as she blew a cloud of invisible smoke into the sky.

The field in her backyard was big, and they continued driving around like this for quite some time. With each pull of the toothpick back and forth from her lips, Georgia felt her stomach turning and her eyes stinging, like the cigarette was real and she was breathing black smoke into her lungs, two baby muscles, gasping and unready.

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On one of the last weekends of second grade, Meredith invited Molly and Georgia to come over at the same time. The three girls were in Meredith’s bedroom, packing up drawstring backpacks with survival materials – Molly’s idea for the game they were playing had turned into

a secret plot for the three of them, now sisters, to run away from their imaginary evil parents.

Molly sat on the bed telling Meredith and Georgia which things to pack.

She twirled her fine blond hair around a finger. “And we’ll *definitely* need sleeping bags.”

Meredith looked up from a Barbie doll she was redressing that Molly had undressed earlier in the play date. “Sleeping bags?”

“Duh!” she said. “Can’t we sleep in your tree house?”

Georgia’s eyes darted between the two girls.

Meredith stuttered, “Oh, I...didn’t know you were sleeping over. I can ask my mom.”

Georgia interrupted, “I’ll have to ask my mom, too. I don’t know if she’ll want me to be home tonight...”

“You guys, we’re *running away*. We *have to*,” said Molly, raising her eyebrows.

“OK,” said Meredith. “I’ll go ask.”

After a few minutes Meredith returned, breathless from crawling up the carpeted stairs on all fours and smiling. “She said yeah. Georgia, call your mom and ask!” She picked up the phone from her bedside table, a clear plastic one so you could see the gears and machines inside, and thrust it towards Georgia, then sat on the bed next to Molly.

“OK...” said Georgia, slowly dialing the cell phone number of her mother, who had told her she’d pick her up after her garden club meeting that evening, and pulled the phone up to her ear.

Her mother’s phone-voice picked up on the other end, a polite “Hello?”

“Hi Mom, it’s Georgia.”

“Georgia? Is everything okay?”

Georgia looked over to the bed, where Molly was whispering something in Meredith's ear. Her stomach turned. "Yeah, everything's fine," she lied. "Can I spend the night?"

Her mother sighed into the receiver. "Again? You spent the night out there last weekend," she said.

Georgia opened her mouth to speak, to take it all back, to apologize, but was interrupted by another one of her mother's sighs into the phone.

"Sure. That's fine."

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After dinner, the girls arranged their sleeping bags on the tree house floor like petals on a wimpy flower, with a Tupperware container of lightning bugs in the center that they had collected from the field behind Meredith's house. After whispering too loudly for an hour or so, Molly squirmed out of her sleeping bag and clutched the living nightlight from the middle of the circle, crawling over to a cabinet in the corner of the tree house. From it she pulled a souvenir bottle from the World of Coke in Atlanta, which she placed sideways in the middle. "Let's play spin the bottle," she whispered. Meredith and Georgia struggled for each other's looks of panic in the darkness to no avail. Molly giggled. "Meredith, you go first."

Georgia's eyes widened in the filtered moonlight as she searched deeper in the dark for Meredith's gaze. She saw the bottle catch a shine of silver as Molly fingered it on the floor of the tree house, showing it off in some sort of catty power play. Georgia noticed she felt a deeper bond to Meredith, and suddenly at odds with Molly, like whether Meredith decided to play would show who was her real best friend. Georgia realized that she'd known the answer to that question all along, her stomach sinking as Meredith stretched her arm and reached for the bottle with a cool, "Fine," then spun it with girlish force.

The bottle danced a heavy, clumsy spin on the plywood floor; so loudly over the hushed giggles of the other two girls Georgia could've sworn Meredith's mother heard it all the way up in the house, so slowly Georgia wondered if time might stop for long enough for her to escape from this horror. Molly and Meredith hushed each other as the bottle slowed, licking the edges of their sleeping bags until it slowed to a hollow stop. The rusty-capped mouth of the bottle halted at Georgia's crossed legs, mocking the sudden wave of nausea she felt coat her stomach and pull a clammy coat over each inch of her skin, exposed and goosebumped. She looked up at the two cackling girls, collapsing into one another in fits on their sleeping bags, and felt she might throw up. For a flash she wondered whether her own parents had gone to sleep, or if her mom would answer the phone and come pick her up.

"*Well*, what are y'all waiting for?" nudged Molly, twisting a strand of thin brown hair around her blue-polished finger.

"I'm not the one who spun it," spat Georgia, surprised by how mean she could make her voice sound.

"Ugh, gah-lee. Just *do* it," Molly said. She reached out and lightly pushed Meredith's shoulder, then giggled. "Come on. Y'all are so *boring*."

Meredith shrugged away from her reach. "I'm going, I'm going," she said, inching towards Georgia.

"OK. I'll count to three," whispered Molly. "One..."

Meredith's palm reached for Georgia's thigh pressing hard into it for stability. Georgia winced and Meredith whispered, "sorry," sliding her knees on the cool wood floor.

"Two..." Molly whispered, a little less hushed, now.

Georgia shut her eyes tight and wished for the future, just ten or so seconds from now. She heard the lightning bugs rustle in the Tupperware container, pushed up against a wall of the tree house to make room for their game, and felt a pang of guilt for trapping them in there like that, just for the girls' own amusement. On the first breath of Molly's "three," Meredith's lips opened up over Georgia's like two little clams, the wet muscly point of her young tongue making its way to gummy hole where Georgia's two front teeth would grow back eventually, swirling around like a confused slug, curling into itself under a shake of salt. Georgia's eyes stayed clenched tight as they could be, Molly's *eeeeewwwwwww* echoed in the background, the soundtrack to Georgia's rushing confusion, guilt, and awareness of her body, her muscles tingling in places she didn't know could tingle, the burning of her face when she watched Meredith pull away through one cracked-open eye, leaning back and falling into an endless fit of forced giggles into Molly's cheek, flopping over onto her sleeping bag. Georgia had already crawled into her own sleeping bag when Molly announced moments later that she was too tired to keep playing, cutting the night short for them all, Georgia a trembling lonely mess, wetting her pillow under the quietest, most stifled tears she'd ever cried.

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Just before dawn the next morning, Georgia woke up first. She opened her eyes to find the bugs scattered on the bottom of the Tupperware container, soft and dead. She picked it up and walked to the small square tree house window, their little bodies rattling against the plastic the container as she stood up. With Meredith and Molly still asleep, she carefully opened the lid and revealed a chemical stench of their drained phosphorescence, then dumped them out the window and watched their weightless carcasses float past the trees and into the pine straw below.

Suddenly struck by a morning urge to pee, Georgia pulled on her sneakers and tiptoed over Molly's and Meredith's still sleeping bagged bodies to the trap door, which she opened slowly to control the sound of its squeaky hinge, then climbed carefully down the ladder and began her walk to the house through a thick veil of fog draped over the field. The mesh of her sneakers collected wet blades of grass and became soaked with the morning dew as she walked, straining to see the house through the fog and fighting flashes of the night before, vivid in her mind like a forbidden TV show late at night. *Why did they do that to me?* She wondered. *Will I ever be like them?* She considered, ashamed of herself for still wanting, somehow, for the answer to be yes.

Eventually she found her way to the door to the basement, which she opened quietly and left ajar as she scurried to the bathroom to pee, choosing not to flush in fear of waking up Meredith's parents, and closed without sound before walking back to the tree house. During her walk back, she imagined the girls' pulsing bodies still asleep on the plywood floor and fought back tears at the mere idea of having to speak to them after they woke up. She considered whether she'd be able to collect her things from the tree house, return to the main house, and call her mom on Meredith's bedroom phone and ask her to come pick her up all without anyone knowing, and decided she would try.

She quieted her steps as she approached the trunk of the tree, then walked around and reached out where the ladder had been when she'd first come down. Squinting in the fog and not finding it, she circled the tree, her arms outstretched. Still finding nothing, she looked to the ground, then crouched and buried beneath the first layer of pine straw, thinking maybe it had fallen, but the ladder was gone. She made a visor over her eyes with her hand and looked around

the area encircling the tree house as if she might find a culprit in the distance, frantically searching the fog and muttering aloud to herself, “Where is it?”

Above her, she heard two hushed giggles.

“Guys?” Georgia looked up and called to them, a lump forming in her throat.

More quiet giggles. A *shhh!*

“Guys, that’s not funny,” she choked, wiping tears from her cheeks. “Let me back up.”

The girls were silent. One of them let out an unconvincing snoring sound.

“Please,” Georgia said, shivering in her nightgown and wet sneakers.

After a few more moments of silence passed.

“Why are y’all doing this to me?”

Another urgent *shh*.

Georgia leaned her back against the trunk of the tree and let her heavy lids fall over her eyes, the wet warmth of her tears trickling down her flushed cheeks. She felt her small, thin legs buckle underneath the shifting weight of her body as she began to nod off, but her pilled nightgown caught on the bark of the tree and pulled up behind her as she sunk to the ground, exposing her underwear. She was jerked awake by a big, cold, wet circle imprint into the seat of her underwear pressed into the damp pine straw. She stood up and felt her bottom, dirty and wet, then looked back up to the now-silent tree house, then back over her shoulder to the house in the distance, which now had a light on in the kitchen window that told her Meredith’s mom must be awake. Unsure of what else to do, but too cold and hurt to stay outside all morning without a jacket, Georgia started across the field for the basement.

She’d been to Meredith’s house enough times to know there was a route up to her bedroom that wouldn’t pass the kitchen, so Meredith’s mom wouldn’t see her and she could

avoid explaining what happened or making up some other story so she wouldn't be called a tattletale. She snuck back in through the basement and closed the door carefully, tiptoed through the basement and up the stairs where she paused, looked down both ends of the hallway to find empty darkness, and hurried around the corner to the set of carpeted stairs that led to the second floor where Meredith's room was. Once she made it there safely, she closed the door behind her and exhaled, alone in Meredith's room for the first time ever. She felt the urge to lie down and go to sleep, but her wet underwear reminded her of why she was here, in Meredith's room, while the other two girls were still in the tree house sleeping, and felt herself be overcome with not guilt, sadness, or confusion, but anger. Georgia reached under her nightgown and peeled her underwear off her shivering body, balled it up, and threw it at Meredith's bed, where it left a faint brown spot on the quilt. She stormed over to Meredith's dresser and jerked open the top drawer to find what she wanted – a clean stack of underwear. She picked a pair from the top and slid them up her legs, appreciating the dry warmth as it hugged onto her bottom. *These are mine now*, she decided, then turned back to the balled-up wet pair on the bed and reached for them.

As she unfurled the wet, dirty underwear in her hands, she imagined her mom doing laundry later that day. Georgia could hear her voice, calling for her to throw her dirty clothes from the night before down the laundry chute and imagined the small pile of clothes tumble down together, holding foreign pair of underwear – a different brand than those Georgia's mom bought her – within, wondering if her mom would notice. Turning back to the open drawer of Meredith's dresser, Georgia placed her old, damp, muddy underwear on top of the clean stack, pressing down slightly, wondering if Meredith would notice.

Oo Ma

Pia was a few hours early to her symphony rehearsal at Carnegie Hall and a choir had just begun practicing. With few friends in the city and little to do beyond rehearsal and practice, she found herself as the only audience member in the Hall quite often. She placed her violin in the aisle of the empty concert hall and settled into a seat, placing her feet on the back of the chair in front of her. The choir began vocal exercises, filling the cacophonous room with long, extended, and pure tones. Pia was young – just twenty-two – but her rigorous rehearsal schedule kept her tired, so she let her heavy lids fall over her eyes.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo. They held each tone for as long as they could.

Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Breath.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa. The last note got louder as they sang it, urging Pia to cover her ears. As the warm-up continued, Pia let herself be engulfed by the comforting warmth of the hall, curled into herself in the red velour seat, watching herself from above – alone in the concert hall with nowhere else to be, and not just alone, but lonely. Sad, and empty. She drifted away into a fragile sleep before it all hit her, her sleep saving her from tears once again.

Most days, if not every day, Uma would do this: wake, rise, pee, sometimes remember to eat, sometimes forget, sometimes remember to change from her nightgown, sometimes forget, sometimes remember and decide against it. Her motions were slowed – methodical, steady - when she moved through her house. The tiny cage of Uma's body was draped with loose pearlescent skin: wrinkly, translucent, and bunching up in folds where her joints were when she contorted her limbs for deep stretches, which was another thing she would sometimes do. Each morning stopped being the Morning and started being Today when she would decide to go for a walk. Although Uma had this compulsion every day, it did not occur out of habit, or of memory

of yesterday; rather, it came from the same fire sparking in the same place at the same time over and over again. By happenstance, or luck – good or bad, it didn't matter.

Every day Uma met an entirely new cast of characters along her walk, but each of them remembered her from the days, weeks, and months before. On the elevator riding down she would introduce herself to a neighbor of forty or so years, once brilliant friends who would cross one another's thresholds with two steaming cups of tea at any hour, let their music seep through their walls, throw their arms around her arriving at an impromptu dinner party. "Hello," Uma would say in the elevator. "I'm Uma. Do you live here?"

At first, these longtime neighbors tried to correct her:

"Uma, It's me. Ethel. I've lived across the hall for thirty years..."

"Of course I do, old gal! Not for much longer though, hear they're gonna be pushing us out soon..."

But eventually, like all ghosts, they grew tired and worthless against the steady degradation of their old friend's brain:

"Hi, Uma. I'm Brian. Yes, I do. I just moved here with my wife and kids."

"Nice to meet you. No, I'm just visiting a friend."

"Yes. I live here, too."

Uma would smile over and over, step off the elevator, walk through the lobby, and down the street.

The ending of every walk began with Uma finding herself somewhere she didn't recognize. On good days, she would find money or a credit card in her pocket and hail a cab. She'd step in, sit in the passenger's seat, and the driver would look over to her:

"Where do you need to go?" they'd ask.

“I need to go home.”

“And where’s that?” by this time, they would start driving.

“Home. To my apartment.”

“But where do you live?”

“I live in the concert hall with the glass apartments on top.”

The last home to hold Uma was a cluster of high-ceilinged, black and white-tiled rooms on the top floor of Carnegie Hall. This home held her - not confined like a hostage nor gently like a baby but openly and freely but contained, like sea water in a bathtub - under stacks of old linens and fading quilts, among boxes spilling over with unpolished silver cups and towers of photographs, diaries, and sewing patterns. Curtains forever parted hung along the windows’ sides, beckoning in the sun’s rise and fall, pulling Uma closer to the Earth’s movement around the sun. Nobody would have seen the space if she weren’t so often found and taken back.

Most of Uma’s walks did not end with a ride from an understanding cab driver; rather, with kind strangers with open schedules who wander parks and find a sweet, trembling old woman on a bench. These strangers would sit down and talk to Uma, and while often they would say have a nice day and continue their stroll, sometimes they would stay to comfort her, maybe even rub her back, and ask if she wanted to go home. Often, they would help her figure out which subway route to take back or money for a cab or walk with her if she wasn’t far; and sometimes – although rarely – they would accompany her up to her apartment.

The rare visitor, usually amazed to learn of apartments atop Carnegie Hall, would always pause in the doorway and ask the same question: “Were you a ballerina?” They would then point to the ballet barre installed along the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Uma's choice of tense in her response tended to vary. "I was a dancer," she would say on days she was tired, perhaps when her feet had taken her too far on her walk.

Other times: "I have always been a dancer."

Most frequently: "I wish to be a dancer."

And once, on a cold day at the end of February: "I am a dancer." That afternoon, Uma was found by Pia, who noticed her sitting on a bench outside Carnegie Hall with her head tucked in to her breast. The speakers outside the building were playing a symphony, with which Uma was humming along. She hummed loudly in to the fabric of her overcoat and rocked back and forth, her brittle bones growing colder under a thin silk robe. Pia emerged from the tall glass door, the entrance to the apartments, holding a violin in one hand. She noticed the beautifully yet scarcely dressed woman on the bench and approached her.

"Do you need a coat?" Pia asked, concerned.

"I need to go home," Uma shivered.

Pia placed her violin on the sidewalk and crouched down to meet Uma's line of sight. She reached out for her hand, desperate to help, which Uma took, and realized this was the first time she'd touched another person's hand since moving to the city two months ago. "And where is that?"

Uma peeled her fingers from Pia's and pointed toward the door.

"You live in Carnegie Hall?"

"I live there." Uma pointed again.

"Well, why are you out here in the cold?"

"I haven't got a key."

“Ah. Well, I have a friend who lives up there whose cat I’m feeding while she’s away. I was just on my way out, but I can let you in,” Pia grabbed Uma’s hand again and helped her stand up, then the two of them walked into the lobby.

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Uma was forgotten about; buoyed by an inheritance from a long line of jewelers, rent control, and contentment in solitude, which was more like a deep love for the company offered by the multiplicity of her self.

In the elevator, Pia admired Uma’s ornamentation. Her wrists were stacked with bangles of every precious metal and from her ears hung long costume earrings like chandeliers. Her hair was pulled back erratically with shining tortoiseshell combs and on her feet were feathered house slippers. Uma sunk back in to the corner of the elevator and sighed. She closed her eyes and spoke: “It is difficult and frightening to be inside of this.”

Startled, Pia turned to her. “The elevator?”

Uma shook her head no.

“Inside of what?”

Uma unfolded her arms from in front of her and reached her hands to her head, where she held them for a few moments before opening her eyes to meet Pia’s gaze. She moved her hands down her body slowly: from her shoulders, to her heart - where she paused - down to her legs. Uma extended them, folding them in to a ballet third position as the elevator doors opened. She started towards the door to her apartment. Pausing with her hand on the unlocked doorknob, she leaned in to Pia and whimpered, “Inside of this body that no longer wants me.”

Uma pushed open the door and turned around once inside, then outstretched her arms and did a small plié to the woman in the doorway. She closed her eyes and walked to the barre,

which intersected the windows spilling forth an orange sunset. From the barre, she motioned to her new friend to come over.

Pia smiled. “How did you end up living in this apartment?” She asked, comforted by her own interest in someone else’s life, an opportunity to talk with someone that wasn’t just pleasantries.

Uma always felt the need to explain herself, which she did not have the capacity to do. She turned and looked up at Pia, who was not very tall herself. “This is a womb, dear.”

“Pardon?”

Uma turned and motioned toward the ground, drawing attention to the dozens upon dozens of piles cluttering the entire room. “A womb.”

“What do you mean?”

Uma laughed. “You know what a womb is, don’t you?”

Pia was embarrassed. She nodded.

“Here. Let me show you.” Each pulled back a drawn curtain and stood before the cool glass, letting their mouths fog the panes. Uma turned to her and spoke: “I don’t like to be down there. I never have.” The two of them watched the tops of heads of people passing on the sidewalk below. “But I get lonely up here. It’s too warm. Are you warm?”

Pia shook her head no.

“I get too warm. So I have to go down there. Every day. But then I end up all mixed up, and only want to come back here. And I have to smile at strangers. As payment to crawl on back here.”

“But why do you call it a womb?” Pia asked.

“My mother told me my womb would shrink with each person I passed on the sidewalk and failed to smile at,” Uma laughed.

“Are you a dancer?” Pia asked, delightedly watching Uma begin creaky exercises with one hand on the barre.

“I am a dancer,” Uma said, maintaining focus. “Will you stay and watch me?” she asked.

At this point, Pia remembered the cat upstairs. She reached out to Uma’s shoulder.

“Uma, I have to go feed my friend’s cat upstairs. Would you like to come with me?”

“Oh. No, no. Will you not come over tomorrow?” Uma asked. It had been weeks since she had had company, if not years, but she felt some glimmer of attachment to this stranger. Perhaps she was not a stranger, but a friend. Uma felt safe with her. Less alone. “We have so much to catch up on!”

Pia was confused, but intrigued. She racked her brain for prior engagements and considered her limited options of daytime activities given she’d only be in the city for a couple of months. “Sure. What time?”

“Well, I usually wake with the sun.”

“Oh,” Pia said. She usually woke closer to eleven o’clock or noon. “How does 9 o’clock sound?”

“That’ll be just fine,” Uma said, dipping in to another shallow pli e.

“Okay, I will see you tomorrow,” said Pia. Uma did not respond, so she backed out of the door and in to the hallway, closing the door behind her. On her walk to upstairs apartment that housed the cat, she wondered about Uma. *Was she okay? If not, what was wrong with her? Where does she come from?* Her apartment had been massively cluttered, as if filled with endless exquisite collections, only displayed in thoughtless piles. Pia had felt a deep connection

to – if not profound interest in - Uma, and wondered if she felt the same. She wanted to watch Uma dance, to listen to her speak, to learn her stories, then wondered if she could still tell them.

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Uma never turned to glass, no. Not like the other old ladies she once knew, or saw tiptoeing down the sidewalk, or read about in books. Never a brittle glass vase or a gingerly etched porcelain teacup; rather, something solid but empty. A scratched and spherical Mongolian brass bell hollow and heavy and nestled among other things in a trunk packed tight with old dish towels and quilt scraps, forgotten about during a move across town and left on a shelf. If there was one thing Uma was it was forgotten about, even by her own mind. At ninety-one, the fabric of her inner being was fading like it had been left the sun too long, and she had little control over her own mind, which lost its ability and focus required to take care of itself. Through the past few years leading up to ninety-one, Uma's daily life had become a series of whims – an intricate network of happenstance only connected by their origin somewhere deep in Uma's basic consciousness.

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Uma did not know, but each of her three ex husbands died within six months of one another. Her daughters only lived a couple dozen blocks uptown but did not bother to tell her about the funerals. They had become untouching in their adult lives, forever postponing the question of their mother's dissolving by declaring themselves too busy over the phone to one another.

“I visited her last weekend,” lied Melanie over the phone, the daughter from Uma's first marriage. She was walking in to Duane Reade to pick up a prescription for Uma that had been filled a month ago.

“No, Mel, I *actually* visited her last weekend,” retorted Petunia, from the third. “She said you haven’t been there in months. You said you were going to be in charge of her medication, but when I was there she didn’t have any.” Petunia cradled the cordless phone between her ear and shoulder as she picked up two lunch plates from the coffee table and rose from the couch in her family’s Upper East Side home. She walked to the kitchen where Sage, from Uma’s second marriage, stood listening on the phone hanging on the wall in her kitchen. “And she said she hasn’t seen you either, Sage.”

Sage covered the receiver with her hand and mouthed, “*What the hell?*” to her step-sister, who raised her eyebrows and continued with the plates to the sink.

Melanie stopped in her tracks in the drugstore, which placed her in front of a display of Christmas lights, now on sale in mid-January. “Sage is there? Sage, are you back in the city?”

And conversation would stray in to other realms.

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That night, Pia dreamt of Uma. The two of them were alone, standing on a vast plane of black-and-white marble tile like the floor in Uma’s apartment, suspended in the sky. Uma looked the same, but radiant – her skin was sparkling, glowing, celestial – and Pia now looked Uma’s age, her skin transparent and in folds, but her hands looked as young as a child’s and radiant like Uma’s skin. In her hands, Pia held her violin, which she picked up and began to play. In the dream, Pia could not hear the music, but she could feel her fingers gliding over the strings with ease, each note singing perfection into infinite air. Uma, a short distance away from where Pia sat, began to dance. She glided across the floor, levitating, the fabrics draped over her limbs flirting with the air behind her, her body swooping through space like a vine that grows into the air. She spread her legs to either side and wrapped her arms over the top of her head,

then bent at her waist, rotating her torso around in a circle, her hips as the axis. From this, she straightened into a pin – her arms pointed above her and into the sky, her legs tightly together – and collapsed in a ball. Pia stopped playing, got up from where she sat in the dream, and ran over to see if Uma was okay, but it took hours for her to get to her, even though she was just a few yards away. When she tried to run, her body contorted itself into fluid, expressive motions – she was emulating the movements of Uma, but interpreting them as her own, empowered by the agility of her body. When her dancing finally brought her to Uma’s side, she was sitting on a bench like the one outside Carnegie Hall where Pia first saw her, shivering and grounded in nothing but her own failing body that carries her through this dream world.

*

When Pia woke up the next day, she did not recall the dream. She knew she was supposed to visit Uma, but she had a strange sense of doubt about it that she couldn’t place. Had she imagined her? Was she something from a dream? She shook her head to convince herself she wasn’t delusional, and got ready to travel to Carnegie Hall.

When Pia arrived, Uma’s door was open. She approached the threshold and called her name, “Uma?” When she received no response, she entered the apartment and looked around to no avail. She called the woman’s name again. “Uma?” Something pushed her towards the window. Grabbing the barre, she peered at the sidewalk below to find Uma folded over and shivering in her silk robe, rocking back and forth, just as Pia found her yesterday. Pia was confused – she’d just been outside when she arrived, but she hadn’t seen her. Perhaps she had taken the stairs, or perhaps Pia had passed her without noticing somehow. A woman walking down the sidewalk holding a briefcase and a dog on a leash noticed Uma sitting there, and as Pia watched the woman approach her, kneel down, place a hand on her knee, ask if she needed a

coat, she felt suddenly territorial. It dawned on Pia that Uma did not only belong to her, but she belonged to nobody – not even herself. Like antique china left in a box on the street.

Pia rushed across Uma's apartment, out the door, and down the hallway to the elevator. She pressed the down arrow frantically, overcome with the fear of Uma disappearing. Just as she started for the stairwell, the elevator bell chimed, the doors parted, and she jumped inside, punching the button for the lobby and holding it down.

When the elevator doors opened to the lobby, Uma was waiting to get on. "Uma!" Pia shouted.

Uma, taken aback, jumped. "Who are you?"

Pia felt a pang of hurt, of helplessness. "I came to see you," she improvised, allowing herself to decide what Uma needed, decide what would be best for this old woman who was shriveling up and bursting at the seams at the same time, this stranger whose life she loved but did not know. "We have an appointment. To clean. Your apartment." She straddled the threshold into the elevator, holding the doors open with her back.

"But I was getting ready to leave for my walk," Uma said, visibly confused.

"You were going to show me your collections," Pia half-told her, half-asked. "And--- and...we were going to practice. Dancing."

"Ahh. Dancing. I was once a dancer," Uma smiled and began to walk into the elevator again. "Let's go on up, then," she said, leaning against the wall of the elevator. She motioned to Pia's violin case. "Do you play?"

"I do," said Pia. "But I am also a dancer."

Each other

The summer after I graduated high school, back when I had enough time to commit to an eating disorder, I'd scroll through pages of posts on fitness blogs in between morning and afternoon workouts. Recipes for making low-fat nut milks, the benefits of high-intensity interval training, and tips for overcoming weight loss "plateaus" were often interspersed with inspirational quotes. One of them was really popular - *Before anyone else can love you, you have to learn to love yourself* – but I always questioned it. Is self-love really a *requirement* for being loved by others? Can boys who might be interested in loving me sense whether I love myself? If not, how will they know once I've achieved self-love? And, most important: why would I love myself if no one else loves me – if I'm unlovable? Thirteen years at the same private school without any of the thirty boys in my grade ever trying to touch me was enough proof that I was undesirable, and fixing that before I went to college – by becoming skinny, becoming beautiful - was my top priority.

Deep down, I know I'm not *ugly*, but everything I believe to be true about my appearance, I've learned from other people. I've known I was tall "for a girl" since eighth grade when I kept up with all the growing boys, but if it weren't for strangers in public places – grocery store cashiers, children on the bus, old people at church – asking *exactly how tall?* I would've never known that it was such a big deal. I know my waist is small and my hips wide because my cousin told me once, on a family beach trip when we were thirteen. *Fern, you definitely have your mom's body* she smiled, scanning me up and down. People even tell me I'm pretty; always people who I haven't seen in a long time - my grandparents' friends at the country club or old babysitters – but never boys my own age, the only people whose compliments I value.

Not a single boy tried to kiss me until I was a legal adult; I voted for Obama to be reelected without ever having kissed anyone. When it happened, I was in my first semester of college and the guy was a stranger, but I was eighteen years old, and *fucking finally*, so I kissed him back. It was gross - we were grinding in the sludgy-floored living room-turned-dance-club of a fraternity house, empty save a DJ booth and a dozen or so black tarps covering the walls painted with vague scribbles of neon paint to match the “rave” theme of the party – but it was also validating. This kiss was my first piece of evidence that I might be good-looking, desirable - at least to one other person.

Not a single boy tried to love me until just five months ago - this past January, the second semester of my sophomore year. His name was Ian and he was in my large friend group. I knew him okay – like a comfortable acquaintance, a close friend of a close friend, and only knew him a little more intimately than everyone else did who was outside of our friend group - as one of those human punch lines, the drunkest guy at every party, always making a fool of himself for attention, to become the subject of another crazy story from last weekend – and maybe that’s why I wasn’t interested. Everyone knew who he was and everybody liked him, but I became one of the few people who really knew him.

When we kissed for the first time, it was on his nineteenth birthday at someone else’s party. He was sitting on the pile of coats that had collected on a couch, watching the coats’ now-sweaty owners dancing a few feet away in the crowded kitchen. I sat down with him because I didn’t feel like dancing and everybody else was outside smoking in the cold.

“Is it weird to be at someone else’s party on your birthday?” I asked him.

He squinted his eyes at me and smiled. “Who said this was someone else’s party?” he slurred, already drunk.

I squinted back, amused but refusing to indulge the character he was putting on. “Kristin,” I pressed, pointing to the birthday girl, who was sitting on the kitchen counter making out with her ex-boyfriend. “It’s her birthday party.” Too soon, I’d realize that talking to him this way - treating him like a normal person and ignoring the caricature that he hid behind – was the very thing that was making him crazy about me.

“Well that’s fucked up,” he joked, leaning into his cup for another sip of keg beer, finding it empty. “And so is that,” Ian laughed, raising his eyebrows and turning to me.

“I don’t know, you seem pretty drunk,” I teased. “Maybe it’s a sign.”

“A *sign*?” he repeated, pretending to be offended. “Harsh, Fern.” My name sparked from his mouth like a safety flare, an announcement. *He’s flirting with you*, it said.

Jarred with unease, I took a swig from my cup and relented, “Sorry! I just call it like I see it.”

“Hell yeah you do,” he shouted, pointing at me and inching closer. “That’s what I love about you, Fern. You don’t give a *shit* what *anyone* thinks.” He was pointing at me and yelling, excited, but I was the only one who could hear him over the music.

I raised my eyebrows and burst out laughing. “Oh really? You love me? Good to know,” I joked, my head swirling with five cups of beer and this load of new self-knowledge – Ian’s impressions of me.

He got defensive, serious but sarcastic, “Yeah, that’s totally what I meant,” he said, my first glimpse of what later became his favorite way to try to regain control of me.

“And that’s kind of fucked up to say I don’t care about anything!” I persisted. “You barely know me! For all you know, I -”

“Fern,” he interrupted me. “Obviously that was a compliment. And don’t act like I don’t know you,” he added, a trace of hurt in his voice.

“We barely know each other!”

Ian waved his hands between us, as if trying to erase the past few minutes. “Okay, Fern. Can I tell you something?” He asked, quickly adding, “can I tell you something and you’ll be cool about it?” His words were desperate but he spoke confidently; he was in control now.

I looked around the room to see if anyone had entered. We were still alone, but it unsettled me now. Our privacy wasn’t just a break from the party anymore; now it felt significant, intentional, dangerous. “Sure,” I said, trying to cover my nervousness.

“I like you,” he said, pausing for one long second to see if I’d respond immediately or even confess I felt the same way – which I knew, in that long second, I didn’t. And I never would.

“What?” I asked.

“I like you, Fern. I think you’re cool as fuck,” Ian said, as if trying to convince me of myself. “Any person in this entire room could say anything to you,” he started, motioning to the swarm of kitchen dancers, “and you wouldn’t give a *shit*,” he said, emphasizing the cuss words. “You’re the coolest girl here.”

I was genuinely perplexed. “You like me because I don’t give a shit?”

“Fuck you, dude! No!” he defended, “Come on! You’re also nice, and funny, and smart. You’re just fuckin’ cool.”

He continued like this for a minute or so and I smiled, weighed down by each haphazard confession. *What if I hadn’t sat down on this couch next to him?* I wondered. *Is this just some elaborate pick up line? Is that how these things work?* I scrambled for an explanation,

collapsing under his avalanche of compliments. Weak, I caved. “That’s so nice,” I said, interrupting him. “Thanks.”

“Thanks?” he asked. “I say all that shit and all you say is thanks?”

He was so forward, always focused on the thing in front of him, forcing all his energy on it at once. I couldn’t decide whether this drew me in or scared me or both, so I reached for his neck and pulled him in for a kiss, my first flirtation with boldness. Later that night, everyone watched and egged him on as he slid on his stomach down the stairs, over and over. I took pictures, hoping this charade meant he was drunk enough to forget everything, hoping nobody saw us kissing; hoping that none of what he said was true. I wanted someone; I’d yearned for this my whole life. But not like this, not him, not the nineteen-year-old boy bleeding from a carpet burn down his torso, chugging a beer, desperate and reaching for approval, for someone to latch onto.

For the rest of the semester I was unraveling – with no direction in school, I went days without motivation to go to class, only punctuated by waves of guilt and self-loathing for my laziness. I turned to my old, familiar obsession with my body, a buoy in a storm I brewed myself. When I wasn’t skipping meals or on hour-long runs, I found comfort in a war I waged with an unknowing Ian, a competition to see who could care less about the other that I always won. We both knew the truth: Ian had feelings for me and I didn’t have feelings for him – I had to remind him all the time to keep him in my control. I was always honest with him – *I don’t want to date you, I just want to kiss you sometimes, but not always* – and I never asked him to give me anything; I could take whatever I needed without him noticing. We both knew he was impulsive enough to slip and say he loved me, immediately deny it, then use it later as a bargaining chip for feelings, to make me feel guilty for using him. Ian had an alarming ability to

commit to conquering whatever held his attention in a given moment, but was damned by his refusal to ever truly admit defeat. Like a shriveled sponge, he'd scrape for a drop of affection from the bottom of me, a chipped and clouded glass, bone-dry and desperate for him to keep pouring himself into me. Now I see him as a pathetic clumsy stream and me an old well, thirsty but unwilling to dig deeper for a trickle to drink.

During the last week of classes that semester, I made an appointment with the "nutritionist and registered dietician" at the student health center because I "couldn't stop thinking about food." An email I received to confirm my appointment time said the dietician's name was Laurel, another plant name, which filled me with dread as I imagined one of us forcing a joke during our introduction, a sad attempt at comfort, but when we met, both of us refrained.

"Okay, Fern. I'm going to ask you some questions and you can just reply yes or no, okay? And you can be totally honest. No judgment here." Laurel motioned around the space of her small, windowless office warmly lit by single lamp and smiled at me.

"Sure," I shrugged. I had never been in the habit of not telling the truth.

"So you wrote here on your check-in sheet that you think about food too much. Would you say you spend most of your time thinking about food?"

I considered the question; trying to imagine the different ways I spend time as categories.

Sure. "Yes."

"And when you are thinking about food, are the feelings negative or hostile?"

"Yes."

"Do you ever regret or feel guilty about something you ate for longer than an hour?"

"Yes."

She had been looking at a piece of paper on a clipboard in her lap, but took this moment to look up at me and nod. “Can a single meal ruin your entire day?”

I felt the weight of this reality, this truth about myself, sink in, and my eyes began to burn, feel heavy and tired. They welled up a bit and I uttered, “Yes.”

“Is this obsession with food interfering with your daily life?” She asked, looking up at me.

I sniffled and looked at my lap, then nodded.

Laurel reached for a box of tissues on a bookshelf, which she handed to me, as well as a circular plastic plate that had another smaller circle attached to it. The plate had three labeled sections: one half of it said “fruits and vegetables,” a fourth of it said “starch,” and another fourth said “protein,” and the circle attached to the upper right part of the plate said “milk.” I imagined a dairy milk lobbyist strong-arming some member of whichever committee of the USDA is responsible for designing these plates, distributed to dieticians as props, useful for explaining to emaciated nineteen-year-old women the exact meal model they had deliberately abandoned ages ago, also useful as an advertising.

“So this is an ideal plate,” Laurel said enthusiastically. “And it’s a lot easier than it looks,” she encouraged me, then proceeded to give examples of meals that would achieve this nutritional ratio. “Have any questions?” She placed the plate back on her desk in front of a framed photo of her running across the finish line of some race, maybe a half marathon.

I took a moment to create a narrative of Laurel’s own recovery story, placing her running hobby - a regained strength to exercise in moderation – at the end. “Do people really still drink milk?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just...I didn’t know people still drank milk. Like, people whose parents aren’t making them drink a glass with their dinner. Kind of gross. That’s also another serving of protein,” I added.

“Oh,” she picked up the plate and frowned at it. “Yeah. I guess so. It’s a really great source of nutrition. But, like I said, everything on here is optiona--”

“Right,” I said. Obviously I knew all this. Knowing how to properly feed myself wasn’t the problem; being able to do it without feeling guilty for the rest of the day about eating two pieces of bread was. Instead of telling her this, I nodded at the right times and watched her pretty eyes and smiling mouth and muscular legs, wondering if sometimes after her runs, she slips and calculates the number of calories she burned, just out of habit.

On the night of the last day of classes, Ian and I walked two and a half miles to a party together, heavy and clumsy after a daylong flow of beer. Everything he did embarrassed me. Stumbling together down the town’s main street, he’d stop every so often in the middle of a stretch of sidewalk to grab my shoulders and pull me in for a hard, sloppy kiss, me worrying that the people passing by might think we were in love, or that we shared the same feelings for each other at all. He tended to pause for a second and smile at me whenever he pulled away, which tended to make me feel guilty, as he tended to do fairly often without trying. He’d say my name to me with exasperation - “Ferrrrrrnnnnnn” - as if I was forcing him into this, holding him against his will. And maybe I was.

Along the way we came upon a garden and plant store that kept beautiful flowerbeds along its stretch of sidewalk. He stopped and made me stop too, then pointed at a plant a couple of feet tall and said, “Look at that fucking plant.”

The plant was young and its branches were skinny, a grayish purple color with a few small yellow leaves eking out the ends. It looked strong but leaned a bit to one side, recently planted. “What about it?” I asked. He did things like this where he’d choose to talk at length about anything, commanding the attention of everyone around him.

“Fuckin’ look at it. The colors.”

“Yeah, those are pretty good colors,” I said, continuing to walk towards the party, still a mile away.

“I fuckin’ want it,” he said, stepping closer to it and touching its center stalk.

“Well the store probably sells them,” I said. “Come on, let’s keep going.”

“I want *this* one,” he said, then grabbed the stalk at the base and began to pull.

“What the hell are you doing?” I shouted, half-amused, fully worried someone would see.

He grasped the plant with his other hand now and pulled, “I’m gonna get you this fuckin’ plant.”

“I don’t want it!”

“I don’t care!” he said, shooting upwards as the fresh roots came loose from the ground and clumps of soil fell off on to the sidewalk. He held the uprooted plant in front of him like a prize and smiled widely.

“I’m not carrying that,” I said, feeling a pang of sadness for the life of the plant.

“You don’t have to carry it. I’ll fuckin’ carry it,” he joked, feigning hurt.

We continued our walk; smoking cigarettes from the pack I placed in my purse on nights when I knew I’d be drinking. Along the way, Ian asked if we could hold hands, his need for

permission reminding both of us that I didn't like him as much as he did me, that I should feel guilty and say yes, so I did.

Half a mile later, we approached a house with a trampoline in the front yard, which inspired Ian to thrust the plant into my hands, sprint across the grass, and bounce in solitude for a few long minutes. I tossed the plant on the ground next to where I stood alone on the sidewalk, looking on from a distance. Watching the orange glow of his cigarette rise and fall with his motion, listening to the springs of the trampoline squeak under his weight, tasting the wet suck of a stale drunk cigarette, I felt the negative space surrounding my body – the patch of grass between Ian and me, the bugs floating through the late April air, the dozens of busy lives being escaped from in sleepy warm beds – hug the contours of my curves, pressing into my skin and brushing against my ear as if to whisper: *you are alone, and so is everybody else.*

I woke up beside him for the first time the next morning, the day we had to move out of our dorms for the summer. I tried to slip away from his twin-sized dorm bed unnoticed, but he woke up and stopped me. He told me he wouldn't be back at school next year – his parents were making him take a year off because his behavior during his first year had put him at risk of losing his scholarship. They were sending him on one of those months-long wilderness leadership trips that cost tens of thousands of dollars. I felt overtaken by relief, but there were dumb little tears in his eyes so I pretended to be sad, cringed kissing him sober for the first and last time, and ran away to pack up my room.

Now it's a month into summer and I've already dissociated myself enough from our little fling to endure hours long phone calls he gives me late at night after drinking alone at his parents' house. I came to terms with the fact that I was using him from the very beginning – it's convincing myself that *he* was using *me* that's still a struggle, but these hours of listening to his

existential crises help me feel better – like maybe I’m not the bad one after all. And may that’s why I suffer through these conversations.

Sometimes he cries about how he’s failed, how everyone hates him, how his parents don’t even know him, how he’s lost all sense of himself. I cradle my phone between my ear and shoulder, letting out the occasional “hmm” as I fold clothes or clean my room in my new, off-campus house. Tonight, after forty-five minutes or so of him speaking and after half a year of us knowing each other, he paused for a moment. “Damn, Fern. Sorry for talking about myself so much. I feel like I don’t even know anything about you. Do you have problems with your family, too?”

I stood up at my dresser where I’d been bent over sorting through my lingerie drawer, dropping the limp pair of underwear in my hand. “What?” I asked, watching my perplexed expression unfold in the mirror.

“Like, tell me about your life, dude. I feel like I’ve never asked.”

I was silent.

“Like, is there anything you, like, struggle with?”

I noticed my mouth was hanging open. “Yeah. Definitely.”

“Like what?”

I paused to decide what to say, then thought why the hell not. “Uhh, I have an eating disorder,” I said, looking to my reflection with a shrug.

“Are you serious?”

I didn’t respond. Was I supposed to? “What?”

“Like, I don’t know, that’s so surprising. You really shouldn’t worry about that stuff.”

Worry. “Yeah,” I said, “well, you’d be surprised.”

“I mean, you don’t have like a perfect model body or anything, but you definitely shouldn’t worry about that. Like you’re definitely not fat.”

My mouth fell open again. *Did he just endorse me hating myself?* I choked out a reply, dumbfounded. “Yeah.”

“Damn, like I forget girls still have such bad body images being forced on them all the time...”

I pulled my phone a few inches from my face and looked back to the mirror for support, where I found my reflection with mouth agape and eyes wide. “Y-yeah...” I stammered.

“...Like, people say women and men have equal rights but I always forget it’s still actually so much harder for girls.”

“Yep.”

“Damn, I miss you. Like, I just miss talking to you. You’re the only one I can talk to about, like, real stuff.”

“Really?” I asked, genuinely surprised and a little sad to hear that such basic revelations fall under his category of “real stuff.”

“Yes, dude. For real.”

“Wow.”

Some how the conversation flowed into his reflections on smoking weed at his parents’ house, how it was harder than at college, how he had to go out on the balcony adjacent to his bedroom after they were asleep to do it. He went on talking about his parents’ house, his job at home, how strict his parents were. With each new anecdote, he devolved into less and less of a complete, functional person in my mind. I continued to hold the phone pressed against my ear, moving throughout my room completing my chores as I imagined him hundreds of miles across

the state, whining into the June darkness from one of the many balconies on his parents' gigantic house. Eventually, somewhere around the beginning of him discussing his travel plans, I needed to use my whole upper body to put clean sheets on my bed, so I took the phone from my ear and held it in front of me, staring at the screen and hearing his distant, tinny voice eek out of the speaker. I hung up on him when he was mid-sentence, then placed my phone on the bedside table, and picked up the clean fitted sheet. I shook out the wrinkles and savored its just-dried warmth against my skin before securing it down, walking around my bed to tuck in each corner at a time.

All the women and children

Coward was the second word Eleanor taught me, in between “dwindle” (on the playground in fourth grade, talking about her interest in ballet class) and “fellatio” (New Year’s Eve during sixth grade, recounting something she read in a magazine in her mom’s bathroom) only I think she thought I already knew what coward meant, because she yelled it at me from the edge of the pool – not even tilting her head up to the high dive to look me in the eye – where she sat checking all her tan lines (it was the summer she finally started puberty). Eventually she craned her neck up and squinted into the sun to find me perched at the edge of the board; trying to force myself to do a gainer – you know, when you run off frontwards but then flip backwards - for the first time. That must have been the summer I was thirteen or fourteen – not old enough to drive a car but not young enough to let that keep me inside – one of the summers of no men, of President Johnson on the TV, of newspapers piling up at the ends of the driveways because folks in the suburbs don’t need to know everything.

*

When Mama left Jackie and me at home alone we’d sneak into her bedroom to snoop. That summer Jackie was only eight, so she was still small enough and I was strong enough so I could pick her up and make her reach stuff on the top shelves. I put her down and she let the old Capezio box thud on the carpeted floor of Mama’s walk-in closet. We uncovered it and sifted through its contents carefully – pearl necklaces (probably costume) missing a few beads, a tarnished baby spoon, a few Girl Scout patches, and a fat manila envelope. I reached for it and carefully peeled away the opening flap – inside were about a dozen letters, a few photographs. As I shook them out onto the closet floor, Jackie stood up, bored. “I don’t want to look at this stuff,” she said as she stood up and walked over toward Mama’s scarves.

When I saw the letters had been sent from Vietnam I knew who had sent them. I grabbed one of the snapshots. A man holding a tiny baby. Was that me? I flipped it over to read the back: *Paul holding Frances*. Then my birthday was written. I heard the screen door creak, “Jackie! Mama’s home! Go distract her,” then Mama’s voice, “Giiiiirls?” Jackie scrambled away, tip-toeing out the bedroom door as quickly as she could. I shuffled all the letters together and shoved them back into the envelope, then placed the now-half-empty shoe box back on the shelf (I had to jump to reach it). I ran to my room and stashed it under my bed. “Coming!”

*

I had known Eleanor my whole life. We didn’t go to school together but we met on the swim team when we were in the six and unders. Each summer we were inseparable, spending each day at the pool playing sharks and minnows or escape from Alcatraz, eating ice cream from the snack bar and letting the chlorine sink into our hair, turning it green and strawy. Every June we’d reconvene and share secrets from the school year, only Eleanor’s would be a lot juicier. While I’d talk about flunking math or cutting class or the slew of boyfriends Mama went through, she’d tell me about kissing the boys she chased on the playground, which soon turned into sneaking away with friends to the locker room during gym class, which turned into skipping class and stealing beer from the corner store. I’d watch her back talking as she stood in front of her dresser plucking her eyebrows in her mirror with beveled edges, seemingly listing off a different boy she’d taken to the darkroom in her school’s photography classroom with each innocent hair she tweezed. She’d turn to me:

“And I know some boys from high school who are gonna be lifeguards this summer,” I’d watch as she’d part her hair in the back and start braiding a pigtail on one side, “they’re pretty

cute!” Then she’d turn around, raise her eyebrows, and smile like she knew how ahead of me she was and like she was bathing in it - in my fear, in my intoxication.

Through all the time I knew Eleanor, Mama never let me go over to her house and all the chances I got to sneak out (whenever Mama was gone) I’d be stuck watching Jackie. My life in the summers was defined by our life at the pool together – the way she jumped in to the deep end right before the lifeguards blew their whistles to say break was over, the way she always propped one leg up and rested her head on her knee to fix her goggles, the way her wet brown curls clung to her shoulder blades. I had friends at school, normal ones, but she made me feel differently than anyone else. I found myself watching her from across the pool talking to the lifeguards in their hut, or during swim practice as she swam breaststroke back and forth. Every summer it was sweaty heat, the pool, and Eleanor, and the next thing I knew we were in the thirteen-fourteens, standing in the shallow end one morning at our first practice helping each other put on our swim caps. Eleanor offered half of the sheet of it to me and bent over at her waist. I stretched the latex and began to help her put it on. “I’m so hungover,” she said.

I slung the cap onto her head, which encased her skull with bright orange rubber. “Huh?”

“I went to this high school party last night with Ava.” Ava was her friend from school who had older brothers and was always doing stuff she probably shouldn’t’ve been. “And drank a lot of beer, so I feel pretty lousy. He was there,” a smile spread across her face as she nodded in the direction of an older lifeguard checking the chlorine levels in the deep end, then looked back at me. “Cute, right? His name’s Jeff.” He looked up from his work in our direction, almost like he could hear us. He waved.

“I guess so, yeah,” I said, then put my goggles on and dove in, gulped in by the thick blue water, and heat, and Eleanor, and breaststroke.

*

That summer and too many summers before we lived in a town with no men. Or at least that's what Mama would say in between drags of Marlboro Golds: "All the young ones have gone off to the war thinking they'll find their their brave hearts." She'd bring the cigarette down to the ashtray, tap it gingerly against the ceramic lip. "Paul's just going to get all beat up over there. Dead even."

At night Jackie and me would listen to Mama talk about this man she hasn't known for ten years, this man who half threw us into this world and down into this swamp in Florida but who we've never known past the pictures he took of Mama in the hospital the day I was born. We'd stand at the stove shoveling globs of honey into a saucepan and watch it warm up like molten amber, bubble up like liquid gold, then pour in splashes of milk one by one and eat it from tiny chipped tea cups with cereal spoons, burning our tongues. Our living room TV played the news every night, but Mama would watch from the screened in porch like she thought it might hurt her if she got too close. Which it probably would.

*

Eleanor cupped her hands around her mouth. "Jesus, Frances, just jump! Don't be such a coward!" I opened my eyes for the first time in what felt like ages and found that the distance between the pool and me had grown tenfold. I looked down at her and felt my legs wobble. "You're making it worse!" I barely uttered.

"Just turn around. Walk to the back of the board. Run. Just do it. It's not that hard. I did a gainer for the first time like two years ago." Eleanor said as she rolled her eyes. In, like, a complete rotation. Eye roll integrity. She pinched her index finger and thumb together and put them to her mouth, from which she extracted a long string of lime green bubble gum. She

twisted it around her finger the way she always does, so it cuts off the circulation and makes the top knuckle a weird bulbous marble of taut white skin. “GO, Frances. One...two....”

“Okay! Okay!” I yelled, and then whispered, “Gah-lee!” I walked to the end of the diving board, took a deep breath, and ran to the edge. Past the edge, even. I think I ran halfway down the length of the pool, in thin air, above it. Walking in the sky ten feet above the surface of the water.

I felt my neck bend as far as it had ever gone and my back curve into a perfect arch as my knees bent and then whipped all the way around. My body made a perfect circle, spinning above the pool, like in slow motion. Suspended above the pool, an ocean, my blonde hair creating rays to a suntan gold skin sun all wrapped up into itself. I was the center of the earth’s axis, I was light of day, I was food for plants, I was the slapping hand of sunburn whose wrath Eleanor would face blanketing her mole hill breasts in her parents’ mirror after supertime. Macaroni and cheese and whole milk so she’ll gain weight, help those curves along.

I plunged into the water feet first and straight as a board, or a stick, or fellatio. Engulfed by blue, the blue that pool water looks like but the blue that dwindles when I pick it up in my hands or watch it bead down my freckled arms and then it turns clear, like a ghost of a reflection of the sky that I take from the water’s surface when my skin absorbs it. I became engulfed in it, the sky made touchable, me made touchable. I felt myself sink and my organs compromise their density to the water’s pull, the wawum, wawum, only the lowest frequencies of Marco Polo shouts traveling from the shallow end and squeezing their way this far beneath the surface. I felt my hair swirling around my face, the chlorine stinging my squinted eyes. I flutter kicked up to the surface and over to the ladder. Eleanor had gotten up from her spot on the edge and was chatting with a lifeguard up on his stand, holding one hand up to shield her eyes, still spinning

the string of bubble gum from her mouth around her fingertip with the other. I pulled myself out of the pool and jumped up and down to get the water out of my ears. “Hey Eleanor! Did you see? I think I just did one.” I tilted my head to the other side, jumped up and down again. I think I did a pretty good one.” I walked over to the lifeguard stand. “Hey, Jeff.”

She jerked her left hand forward, broke the string of her now-hardened gum. “Oh, I guess I missed it. Sorry, France.” She looked up to Jeff and smiled.

I examined the space between them, the gaze strung all criss-crossed and saccharine between their four eyeballs like a cat’s cradle. I felt Eleanor’s shortness of breath echo in my skull, Jeff’s sweaty clavicle emanating away from his body, down from his perch. I stuttered, “Well maybe I’ll try again tomorrow. I think my mom wants me home. Bye, y’all.”

I turned to get my things as Eleanor reached a hand over her shoulder to wave goodbye. This was one of those times when I cried and felt dumb about it the whole time, the whole bike ride home. Mom wasn’t even home so I sat on the patio in my towel and lit one of her cigarettes, the wet seat of my bathing suit seeping through to the vinyl cushion, my lungs filling up with smoke like a sponge. I closed my eyes and listened to the cicadas roar and hush, ebb and flow of sound, as I exhaled.

*

That summer my mom and Jackie and me were still living in the blue house with the blue door where we had grown up. It was small and surrounded by bushes of forsythia that acted like a bright yellow fence flush up against those walls, bloomed flowers like flames licking the bright blue paint for two weeks of the year, either in early spring or late winter (it depended on lion or lamb, that sort of thing). When we were little Jackie and I would hide inside of the bushes and build fairy houses with dirty pieces of pine straw and Mama would clip off sprigs of the flowers

and place them in old Seven Up bottles on all our windowsills. They'd stay there through summer fall and winter and the insides of the curved green glass walls getting gunky and spotty and then dry up as the yellow petals shriveled and fell to the floor. Those bushes contained the whole house, like the walls of a big tank of water. Looking at that yellow and blue from the street sometimes I felt like the whole thing was a drawing from a cartoon, or a playhouse, or an aquarium where one day I'd walk home from the bus stop and follow a tiny stream of water up to the doorstep, turn the knob, and be knocked over by a huge tidal wave. Sometimes I'd wake up in the middle of the night from nightmares of the house flooding, couch cushions and alarm clocks and lost keys suspended in the water thick as tears, bobbing along with Mama's chipped china and dull knives, old toys, and my pet goldfish who would be the only comfortable one in the whole situation. Not able to fall back asleep, I would pour myself a glass of milk and sit on the kitchen counter watching the home shopping network, cast in a veil of blue light, mesmerized by the food processors, the cashmere sweaters, the diamond tennis bracelets sparkling in the studio lights, spinning on a motorized velvet pedestal, til I'd hear the birds start chirping. Everything was sort of fluid like that in the blue house; Jackie and me would come and go. Sometimes Mama would be there, sometimes she'd be at work, and sometimes she'd be who knew where. We ate ketchup sandwiches in her bedroom where we tried on her clothes. Wobbling around in too-big high heels, smearing gooey red fingers on her bedsheets, accident after accident.

After Eleanor went off with Jeff and swim team ended I just stayed at home that summer, ignoring the envelope underneath my bed, trying to find the right moment to put it back. Jackie and I would wake up in the late morning and watch TV while we ate cereal I fixed for us both. We watched the Today Show a lot, and one day they were interviewing the cast of *Rosemary's*

Baby about the premiere. We watched Mia Farrow smile and touch her hair, the whole house silent other than her eloquent answers and laughs and the occasional slurp of milk or clink of spoon against cereal bowl. We sat there for a few moments after finishing breakfast and kept watching. Jackie finally broke the silence. “Can we go see that?”

“Rosemary’s Baby?”

“Yeah,” she pointed to the TV, “It looks good.”

“Don’t you think it looks scary? You’re only ten. I sort of want to see it too, though.”

“Can’t we sneak in?”

“Jackie.”

“What?”

“Okay.” I reached across the table for the newspaper and looked at show times.

*

Jackie and I had to sneak in ten minutes after the movie started. We walked into a packed theater - dozens of bulging eyeballs – and couldn’t find two seats together, so we had to split up. “I’ll come find you when it’s over,” I told her. Jackie nodded.

I sat towards the back row of the theater where I could see Jackie. The movie was so scary I found myself just staring at the backs of people’s heads in the audience. About ten minutes in I heard people laughing a couple rows down to my right. Amazed anyone could find any humor in the movie, I searched the crowd. I heard another giggle and identified the couple – a girl and a boy – and saw them turn closer to each other until their faces were touching, they were kissing, his hand appeared behind her head, his hand on her hair, her brown curls, Eleanor’s wet curls stuck to her shoulder blades, dry here in this movie theater with the blue light of the screen showing the frizzy hairs, the baby hairs, Eleanor’s baby hairs, the ones I would watch her

braid in two pigtails in front of her dresser, or swirl around her underwater when she'd practice floating on her back, carrying on a conversation with me the whole time. I jerked my gaze back to the screen and tried to watch as my eyes filled up with tears, like water into a glass, like water into a swimming pool in late May. I looked back over to find them still kissing. I held my hands up to my eyes and applied pressure for a few moments, trying to force the water back down my tear ducts. *How do they breathe? Don't they get tired?* I looked up and saw Jackie getting up from her seat out of the corner of my eye. She ran up the aisle and squatted next to me.

"Frances," she whispered. She sniffled and choked back a sob. "I'm scared."

I touched my eyes and put my hand on her back. "Shh, let's go home."

*

That summer ended with a bunch of boys from our neighborhood getting letters in the mail. I always imagined them standing in their front entrances, faces behind the screen door feeling August air on their cheeks and waiting for the mailman. Some of them would go out to retrieve the mail, see their own name on some official envelope from the military, and just fall to the ground in their front lawns, their knees buckling right there, in front of the whole cul de sac. When Jeff found out he didn't tell anyone, just left one day and didn't show up to his last shift at the pool.

Mama made us go to the pool on the last day it was open, the last day of the summer, the day before school started, because she "needed some rest." We ate bowls of Cap'n Crunch and got our stuff together. Jackie and I walked to the pool that day because my bike had a flat. It took us about twenty minutes and Jackie kept tripping over her flip-flops, her yellow beach towel falling from where it was slung over her shoulder, complaining about how it was cloudy. I reached for the handle on the gate and Jackie kept talking. "Frances, look, there's no one here! I

think it's going to rain. One thing's for sure, I am NOT wearing sunscreen today. Why can't we just—“

“Shh.” I reached my hand over to quiet her and nodded toward the high dive, where a single figure stood at the end. She was straight as a board, or a stick, or -- . She bent her knees, steadied herself as it wobbled, then continued to bounce on it, up and down, up and down. The blue churned below.

“What? Come on, Frances.”

We walked in and Jackie laid out her towel on her usual lounge chair as I walked over to a nearby table. I held my gaze on Eleanor, who was still bouncing on the high dive. No one was waiting for her at the bottom of the ladder, I guess because not many people were there since it was cloudy. I sat down in the chair and kept watching for a few moments. All at once, I felt something wet underneath me.

“Frances, are you gonna swim?” Jackie asked, putting on her goggles.

I kept my eye on the diving board. I called over toward her, “I'm not sure. Maybe in a little while.” I wondered if I had sat in something. A spilled drink, maybe. No, it felt too warm for that. Eleanor was still bouncing, and I noticed her hair was still dry. She hadn't gotten in the pool yet! I felt the seat of my shorts, then looked down and saw a streak of red on the palm of my hand. A splash in the water. I looked up to see the empty board jiggling from released tension, looked down to find a whirlpool, the end of a splash veiled with exhaled attempts at breath that form bubbles. Rise up to the surface, then pop.

Less-famous men

The sun was just peeking over the horizon when Leslie walked into her office, always the first one to work as the founder of her own small, independent publishing house. She and her six employees were just on their third month of “full operation,” but their first three publications’ wild success sparked an influx of calls, meetings, proposals, press requests on top of the work that remained for laying the foundation of the company. Leslie was sleeping very little these days, but this morning she felt particularly weak, switching on her desk lamp to check her agenda for the day. On top of it was a bright yellow sticky note that read: MEETING WITH HARVARD KANT PHD GUY, 8:30. BRINGING MANUSCRIPT. SHOULD BE SHORT. SORRY – BLAME KATHRYN. “God damn it,” she said aloud, snatching up the note and crumpling it in her fist. Kathryn was her favorite Harvard philosophy professor from undergrad – they still kept in touch, and when Leslie had told Kathryn that she’d started her own publishing house, Kathryn asked her to give one of her doctoral students a quick meeting. “His name’s Ben,” she’d written her in an email. “Kantian ethics guy. Not particularly compelling, but won’t stop hounding me about ‘connections.’ I know you’re busy, but could you meet with him for ten minutes? He can bring a manuscript.” Kathryn was right - Leslie was busy – but she’d done her much bigger, career-defining favors, so she agreed to meet with Ben, instantly forgetting she’d done so after replying to Kathryn’s email. She sighed and headed towards the break room to put on a pot of coffee.

Before the sun rose that morning in Boston, the subway custodians got off work, emerging from the depths of the stations into a cold sky cracking dawn. On his way out of the station at the end of his shift at 5:00 a.m., Alessandro tossed a lost manuscript – heavy and clean, but orphaned – into a trashcan outside the Downtown Crossing T stop and heard a faint but

satisfying thud as he reached for the pack of cigarettes in his jacket pocket, hoping to sneak in a smoke before his girlfriend picked him up. Alessandro decided to throw it away after seeing it was written in English and reading the title: *Kantian Ethics Today: Final Working Draft* – he knew Kant was a philosopher, and he could certainly make sense of the English with some effort, but no way in hell did he have time for that. As he climbed the turned-off escalator, he noticed that the author's name was smudged.

On his way out of the subway car he'd been cleaning that morning, he'd grabbed the thick stack of paper from where he'd found it at the end of his shift. Before the end of his shift rolled around, Alessandro had sat down across from the manuscript to rest and rub his eyes, slouched over with his other hand resting on the top of his broomstick. Like most of these early-morning shifts at his new job, he'd spent this one struggling to keep his eyes open as he swept up piles of detritus from the previous night – Halloween - from the floor of the train, imagining clusters of costumed strangers pressed together, dropping stray feathers, sequins, chipped pieces of plastic wounds, droplets of congealed fake blood to the floor of the train, making a synthetic grimy stew.

When he had woken up that morning at 4, he found himself wondering whether his friends were still out for the night, Halloween partying until the wee hours, cursing himself for caring.

Just before Alessandro woke up, Bess, an ancient woman with loose, transparent skin, the final passenger on the train, stepped on to the dim Downtown Crossing platform through the open doors and began to hunch her way up the stairs. She had just finished arranging the stack of papers back where she'd watched them be abandoned originally: she'd picked up each last piece of paper that she'd seen tossed through the hollow tunnel of the train by a group of

teenagers, scattered across the floor to collect tears, footprints, dirt, and folds. Since her 90th birthday a few months ago, she'd spent most days riding the subway and watching people come and go, sometimes talking to them for a laugh. It began as a game, a way to pass the time. But impulses like the one that made her reassemble the thesis she'd watched the young man across from her leave behind an hour or so earlier made her wonder if she'd developed some sort of elevated empathy for strangers. She even thought of the person who would have to eventually clean up all the mess. People and things she wouldn't have usually minded much had begun to pull on her in her 90th year, something she never would have anticipated. Since early that evening, Bess had been watching the young people file in and out of the train, admiring their costumes, their energy, their simultaneous obsessions and lack of familiarity with their own bodies. Many of them stumbled through the train as it lurched into motion, slipping on the pieces of paper beneath their feet.

Before the train cleared out enough for Bess to collect the papers, a man named Carl, wedged in a back corner seat, squeezed his shoulders between the bodies in front of him to reach for one of the pieces of paper at his feet – it looked like a page from an essay – and tore off a corner to spit his flavorless gum into, then threw it back on the floor and straightened up, resting his head against the wall beside him. At 32, he still tended to feel a twinge of guilt when he passed people older than him weakly clutching the handrails on crowded trains to keep their broken bodies from falling to the floor while he squeezed through the crowds to get to an open, and preferably secluded, seat. But he was tired too, he told himself as he reached for the stubborn tag of the Dri-fit polo shirt from his work uniform that scratched his neck after zipping up his jacket to conceal the embroidered “ParkPlaza” logo. Eight hours of monitoring a parking lot and calling trucks to tow away the vehicles of drivers without permits, the next one always

angrier than the last, in the middle of Boston can wear on a man. He'd wanted to be as far away as possible from the vicious cackling group of costumed teenagers taking up space in front of the doors through which he'd entered.

"Excuse me," Carl had said tiredly as he stepped on to the train from the platform, unzipping his jacket in anticipation of the stuffy train.

One of them dressed as Santa Claus pulled away from kissing a girl dressed as Wonder Woman and muttered over his shoulder, "Yeah, excuse you."

Unable to move farther into the train as it lurched forward, he turned to him. "What did you say?"

Santa turned around and looked Carl in the eye. "I said excuse you, man." Wonder Woman giggled.

Carl raised his eyebrows and almost continued to argue, but instead pushed his way through the crowd, thinking of the dozen drunken costumed strangers who'd cussed him out after finding their cars missing that night, cursing himself for losing his edge, for becoming weak, thanks to the training he'd gotten at work to avoid sticking up for himself – "customer service" – which had apparently carried itself into all of his encounters with strangers.

Just moments before the confrontation between Carl and Santa, dozens of other passengers on the train had just finished yelling at eighteen-year-old Santa, still drunk off freshman year freedom, Wonder Woman's attention, and Four Loko. He had ripped the staple out of a manuscript he saw sitting in an empty seat across from a decaying old woman, then threw it above the heads of all the passengers through the belly of the train – papers cascading through the thick heated air, threatening paper cuts and disarray. "Ho, ho, ho! Happy Halloween!" He'd screamed belligerently, pulling in Wonder Woman for a firm kiss.

She pulled away and laughed loudly, then screamed “Merry Christmas!”

“Fuck homework!” he added, certainly yelling as loudly as he could and eyeing Wonder Woman to his side. This was their first hookup, one he’d been banking on since their first day of Econ 101 together, and he wanted to strike the right balance of entertaining and cool.

Before the teenagers caused such a commotion and as they waited to step on to the train, Wonder Woman helped a woman with her baby get her stroller off the train, who thanked them. In one arm she clutched a diaper bag; in another, her baby, who was dressed as a bumblebee. The baby loved to ride the train, and the mother often held her securely on her own seat to watch her smile with wide eyes. When she picked her back up after their short ride – just one stop – to put her back in her stroller, the fleece fabric of the baby’s bumblebee costume pulled at the edge of the cover page of some left-behind manuscript, on top of which the baby had been sitting. Before placing the baby atop the papers, the mother had read the title – something about Kant – and smiled thinking of the baby’s dirty diaper warming the abandoned manuscript, which had been left behind by the rude man.

Moments before the baby’s diaper touched the abandoned manuscript’s cover page, the man who’d left the manuscript behind brushed hurriedly past the mother who was struggling to get her stroller on the train, baby in one arm. Normally, someone might have stopped the man, but the people who saw him leave all briefly left their seats to help the woman with her stroller.

About half an hour before the mother and baby boarded the train, Ben, a Harvard philosophy PhD candidate, squeezed through the closing doors just in time, shuffling through the crowd to the only available seat on the packed train. He’d missed the timing for his regular train route home and was already on edge - anxious about his first-ever, long-awaited meeting with a publisher the next morning - and being surrounded by hordes of loud strangers always gave him

a tension headache. He slid his hand into his briefcase to check on his manuscript, then pulled it out and placed it in his lap, thumbing through the pages calmly. After six years of living alone in his cramped studio apartment in Somerville and slaving over this dissertation without any sign of the recognition he'd expected upon his acceptance to Harvard, he felt uneasy about the meeting his advisor had set up for him with a new, small publishing house in his neighborhood. After the train pulled into its first stop and the man sitting next to Ben got off the train, Ben hurriedly piled his thick manuscript, briefcase, and jacket onto the now-vacant seat, making it appear occupied to give him a little extra breathing room. He was still huffing and puffing after his sprint to the train station from his office in the philosophy building, where he'd spent his afternoon making final edits to the manuscript he'd take to the publisher the next day.

Ben stood before the modest bookshelf in his office as he heard the printer begin spitting out the pages of his manuscript, admiring the framed certificates and awards from his days in undergrad at UMass Amherst. All throughout undergrad he'd been the star of the UMass philosophy department – he was asked as a sophomore to TA his favorite professor's Kant class, was asked to speak at undergraduate philosophy conventions every semester, and won both of the senior awards in ethics – and had come to Harvard expecting the same kind of praise. Studying ethics was interesting enough, but the pride he felt when he was referred to as an authority on philosophy, and the glory of being a famous academic were what brought him to Harvard, and also what kept him going. He thought about his meeting the next morning, his long-awaited chance to make his name known, but shook himself from his daydreaming as he felt his nerves begin to rise. He walked over to peer out his window and survey the lamp-lit quad. It was swelling with dozens of costumed undergraduates, and he let his eyes fall on a group of scantily clad women whose costumes were unidentifiable, but all lacking shirts. He

bent his knees a bit to get a better view of them, all standing in a circle staring at their cell phones and talking, the bluish light from their screens reflecting off their chins and on to the shelf of their breasts, which jiggled when they laughed.

He looked to the printer and saw his manuscript was halfway printed, checked his watch and considered the train schedule, and fixed his eyes back on the women. He unzipped his pants and wrapped his hand around himself loosely, crouching further below the windowsill to hide himself, and began to move his hand back and forth, first slowly, then gradually faster – he hadn't done this in a while and felt a bit awkward. He didn't hear the printer beep to say it had run out of paper until after he finished about thirty seconds later, which sent him lurching forward to the floor of his office, stopping himself with his palm on the rough carpet and panting. He held the cum in one hand and crawled over to the storage cabinet with the other, his pants still around his knees, and fumbled for a stack of paper that he then shoved into the printer, taking a blank piece from the top to clean off his hand.

When the manuscript finished printing, he pulled his pants back up and carefully pulled the warm stack of papers from the printer tray, feeling calmed by the thought that he'd been prepping for the meeting for days. He pictured himself walking into the publishing house offices, pulling the thick stack of paper from his briefcase and sliding it gently across the table and into the eager hands of the publishing representative, the maker of his future.

Daughters' daughters

Everything I've learned and believed, I've learned from my grandma or my mom - my only family. How can you trust what people say unless something huge – like love – is at stake? And how can you trust that people love you unless they're family? And how can you call someone family unless you came into the world by way of her body?

I'm fifteen now, and I've spent every day of those fifteen years on Cumberland Island, a long stretch of beach just a mile off the coast of Georgia. Here, my grandma and mom have raised me in an old beachfront cottage, the northernmost one on the island, with ten miles of untouched beaches and a thin dirt road stretching between us and town, where the grocery store, gas station, and dozen other houses on the island sit clumped together. A month ago in June when this summer started, they gave me the responsibility to do the errands – to go into town alone. With this new privilege, I've made friends with five people my own age – three of them work at the deli meat counter in the grocery store and two of them are lifeguards at the public access beach – and I like talking to them. One of the ones who I like the most works at the deli counter. His name is Frank; he's a boy. Since I don't get to see him much, I don't know him too well, and figured I never really would. I didn't think I'd ever be telling Mom and Grandma about him, let alone have him enter our house, the first man in sixty years.

*

Grandma was pregnant with mom when she found her husband having an affair in their own bed. She couldn't bear the thought of living her life as the wife of a cheater, but making her own life as a single mother in their upper middle class community just outside of Atlanta – especially in the 1950s – simply wasn't an option. She left him – she took his car and the keys to their beach house, here on Cumberland Island – and she never went back. When she arrived on

Cumberland, she wrote him a letter with a few scrawled lines, a copy of which is now framed and hanging in the living room at the cottage. *I am at the cottage on Cumberland. It is mine now. I will raise our daughter here. I will not bring her to you, and you will not come here to see her. She is mine now. You don't protect us anymore. You never protected us.*

*

Since my Grandma first got here, all men have been forbidden from entering the cottage. She and mom have always told me that everyone has a mother but not everyone has a father. “The daddies are optional,” Grandma would say, sitting in a rocker on the porch with her hands on the back of my wet salty head, wedged between her knees as she pulled a wide-tooth comb through the knots in my hair. “They can leave whenever they want to leave,” she’d sigh, “because they aren’t necessary.” She’d pause and I’d turn around to find her looking out over the ocean.

“Are you talking about grandpa or my dad?” I asked once. I knew that my mom had gotten pregnant with me in college at Emory, moving back to Cumberland once I was born, but whenever I asked something specific about my dad, I was answered with a vague statement about men in general.

She peered down at me. “You don’t have a grandpa, Zoe. Or a dad,” she spat. “And I’m talking about all men,” she reached to turn my head back around. “They’re bastards,” she said, now scratching my scalp with her fingernails, “and they can’t be trusted.”

*

Grandma raised Mom not only as protection against her ex-husband, but as protection against all men. Mom was only nine years old when Grandma had her driving their old pickup truck down the island to buy groceries or to pick up prescriptions. She made her answer the door

for deliveries. Just like my mom homeschools me, my grandma homeschooled my mom, and the two of them learned basic plumbing and electrical, they learned how to catch enough fish and crabs for dinner, they started making home remedies from oils, herbs, and spices to minimize their need for outside help. They'd go into town if they needed, sure – if one of them had the flu or something dire happened, if they needed groceries, anything – but they made a life for themselves that let them stay on their end of the island as long as they wanted. They made a life for themselves that depended on each other – two women, mother and daughter - and no one else.

Because of this shared history, this past of them starting it all, they had their own sort of language of affection, one I can't quite talk in. This, along with the fact that they're both much older than I am – grandma 85, mom 60 – means they spend a lot of time together and give me a lot of responsibility. They go on long walks along the beach for hours each day, leaving me with a list of responsibilities – “goals” for the day – and my schoolwork, then retreat to the porch to read, or to sleep in their rooms, or back to sit on the beach and stare at the ocean. I enjoy the time that the three of us all spend together, but my solitude gives me freedom – albeit, freedom to experience things that I have to keep secret from them.

When I was younger and still hopeful, I'd ask them when I'd be allowed to make friends with boys.

“Excuse me, Zoe?” my mom would ask, begging me to relent.

Grandma was always sad. “Zoe, honey,” she'd coo, “why would you want that?”

I'd shrug or offer a limp defense. “I just want to be normal.”

My mom would raise her eyebrows and laugh loudly. “Ha! Oh, do you think you're so special, then?”

“Zoe, baby. You are normal.”

“I don’t feel normal,” I’d say, which was always true. It’s still true.

“Just trust us, Zoe,” mom would say, waving her hand in the air.

Grandma would always nod. “We’re protecting you, love.”

*

Frank lives across the bridge and often asks me to come visit him there. I want to, but I’m scared: to me, the bridge has always represented a harrowing boundary – a mile-long gateway to the unknown, the dangerous, the forbidden.

“What’s that?” I remember asking when I was five years old, pointing from my car seat in the back of our Jeep Wrangler on my first trip into town with Mom to buy groceries.

Mom eyed me in the rearview mirror, signaling to turn into the grocery store parking lot. “That’s the bridge off the island,” she said, “We don’t go there.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because nobody knows us over there,” she replied. “Because this is where our family is. All three of us. And we all love each other.”

Her answer - so simple, so matter-of-fact – still makes sense to me: we’re all here, so why go elsewhere? She and grandma have been elsewhere, but each decided to come back here and stay. So I tell Frank no, sorry, I can’t, always a little bit relieved to postpone my first encounter with the unknown.

Last week, however, Frank questioned me. “Why not?” he asked as he sliced turkey behind the counter.

I peered over the edge of the glass display case, admiring the thin pieces of meat as they collected into a pile. “I just can’t,” I said. “I’m only fifteen; if I can’t even drive legally *on* the island, I definitely shouldn’t cross the bridge.”

“I can drive you,” he said, pressing me. He switched the machine off and turned to face me. “I have a car. And I’m seventeen.”

With that, I realized I’d never asked his age before, or told him my own. “I really can’t,” I stammered.

He raised his eyebrows; he didn’t believe me.

“I just really need to be home a lot,” I begged, “my mom and grandma need me.”

Frank wiped his hands with a towel and held them up, surrendering, “Okay, okay. Sounds like they’re important to you,” he said. “Where do you live, anyway?”

I pointed over my shoulder, motioning north. “I live in the one at the end,” I said, a bit embarrassed. It was the largest house on Cumberland by a long shot, and most everyone else who lived on the island knew of my mom and Grandma as the weirdo rich hermits.

“Oh really?” he asked. “Sometimes I kayak down there.”

“You do?” I’d never seen anyone in the ocean in front of our house, which extended as far as I could see.

“Sure!” he said. “Well, I only have a couple times,” he admitted, blushing, “and with other people. It’s a pretty tough workout, and I just started kayaking this summer.”

I smiled and wondered if he was trying to impress me. “Well, I’ll be on the lookout,” I said.

*

The next day at dusk I sat on the porch looking out at the ocean, still in my bathing suit from a day of swimming. I crossed one arm over my chest and making a fist on which to rest my other elbow, then tipped a can of coke to my lips to take a gulp. Over the red blur of the can's edge I watched a storm brewing in the distance, then focused my eyes on the railing in front of me. On top sat a crusty starfish found early this morning and placed on the rail to dry, but it was now being devoured by ants under the rusting sun. Behind me through the cracked open sliding door into the house I could hear my mom and grandma in the kitchen discussing dinner plans, their conversation punctuated by the familiar and satisfying click of a stirring spoon against a bowl, which meant Grandma was adding more horseradish to the cocktail sauce.

All afternoon, I'd been thinking about my conversation with Frank the day prior, trying to decode his words and his smiles. *Was he flirting with me?* I wondered, wishing I could just ask him. My daydreams made me want to avoid mom and Grandma all day – I felt so much guilt for keeping my life from them, but even more frustration and resentment with how they control my life. When I heard them approaching the door, I picked up a copy of *The Wall Street Journal* that Grandma must have been reading earlier and pretended to read it.

“Well good afternoon, Zoe girl,” offered Grandma. “Care to join us on an evening walk on the beach?”

“No thanks,” I said, not taking my eyes from the paper, which might as well have been in a different language.

Mom frowned. “Are you sure? You never go on walks, Zoe. Don't you think you'd like some exercise?”

“Oh, I don't go on walks?” I snapped. “Really? So what do you think I do when y'all ignore me all day?” I shot at her, immediately regretting it.

Mom squinted. “Well *excuse* me,” she mocked me. “Maybe while we’re gone you can sort out that attitude, hmm?” she asked, opening the screen door and on to the walkway. She yelled behind her without stopping, “And we need your help with dinner!”

Grandma, who still stood on the porch next to me, smiled and nodded, “There is a bowl of boiled shrimp on the counter, if you wouldn’t mind peeling it,” she said, looking at me with sad eyes. “Be back soon, sweet pea. And take care.” She placed her hand on my shoulder, then followed my mom out to the beach.

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An hour or so after they left, I grabbed the bowl of shrimp and carried it out to the beach, dragging a low-slung chair across the sand to where the tide came up. I watched the brewing storm over the horizon as I peeled off the shrimp’s plasticky pink tails, tossing them to disappointed seagulls. The clouds were getting closer and closer; the storm would probably hit land in under an hour, and I hoped Mom and Grandma were keeping track of it on their walk.

I was lulled into a seaborne meditation as I peeled the shrimp, enjoying the gray spray of cool salt air on my skin, and gratified by the repetitive work of releasing the meat from its shell. Right as I peeled the tail of the last piece of shrimp in the bowl, heavy raindrops started to fall, so I grabbed my chair and ran inside.

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Worried about Mom and Grandma, I watched the storm from the porch, the beach battered under the hard rain. The ocean was rough, with countless whitecaps as far as I could see, and intermittent lightning flashes were followed by rolls of thunder that shook the house. The tide had crept up higher on the shore, and the rain made it difficult to see down the beach from the safety of the porch. I grabbed a pair of binoculars from inside and decided to run out to

the end of the boardwalk to look for Mom and Grandma. Wind disturbed my balance and rain spotted the binoculars, but about a mile away, I made out two hunched figures walking in my direction, relieved to see them, but wishing they weren't so far away. I panned the binoculars to the violent ocean, waves slamming into one another like masculine brushstrokes, deep blues collecting lightning flashes. As I panned the surface of the water, I saw a long plastic hull bobbing on the surface about 30 yards out, blurred by the rain. I strained my eyes and rubbed the binocular lenses to get a better look, and then I heard him.

“Help!!!” rung across the beach. A clap of thunder. “Help!”

I pulled the binoculars from my face, shielding my eyes with a hand. “WHERE ARE YOU???” I shouted, straining my voice.

“HELP!!!”

I couldn't locate them in the water, so I ran on to the beach, my ankles in the water, drenched in the unrelenting rain. “Wave your arms in the air!” I shouted.

“Zoe.” He said, losing breath. A whisper.

My name, from the mouth of a boy. It could only be Frank. “FRANK?”

“I'm over here,” he said weakly. I saw an arm flail, then fall to the surface of the water. His body began to bob, floating a few yards from his overturned yellow kayak.

I stumbled over myself as I sprinted into the water and swam to Frank who, while only a about twenty yards from the shore, was in fairly deep water. “Frank!” I called to him. “Frank!”

His head bobbed back and his arms flailed weakly. He looked barely conscious. I paddled over to him, the water slapping against my face and trying to pull me under. Below the surface the currents brewed, vibrating in my brain and pushing against me. I thanked my life growing up in the ocean – my arms and legs are strong, I can keep myself afloat in anything.

When I finally got a hold of him, my body sunk a bit under his weight, but I finally struggled to get him to the shore.

Once I had him on his back on the beach, I searched his face for signs of consciousness. When I didn't find any, I slapped him. "Frank!" I yelled at him, and he coughed up a bit of water. I swung my leg over his body, straddling him, and folded my hands in to each other, then pressed down hard on his torso just below his chest. After just a few presses, his mouth exploded with salt water as he came to, and I quickly dismounted, standing up over him. He squinted up towards me and immediately gasped, "Oh, Zoe. No. I'm sorry."

I reached out a hand to help him up, but he shook his head.

"Not yet."

I watched him for a few seconds, squinting in the rain. "What were you doing out there?" I asked, still panicked, tears forming in my eyes.

"I..." he started, still out of breath. "I thought..." his head fell to the side, his chest heaved.

"Frank? Are you there? Frank?"

He shook his head weakly.

"OK, let's get you inside," I said, reaching for his shoulders. "Come on," I strained to hold his weight as I pulled him up the shore, dragging him slowly up the steps to the house, stopping when we got to the sliding glass doors. Frank could stand up now, but barely; I was still supporting most of his weight under my shoulder. I looked through the glass at the empty house, warmly lit by a lamp. No men allowed.

Frank coughed. "I need to lie down," he rasped.

I considered the porch's accommodations – worn wooden benches, a few rocking chairs, a glass table. I looked down the beach; the storm was letting up, but Mom and Grandma were probably still half a mile away. I turned to Frank, noticing his skin looked a bit blue. “Ok,” I whispered.

I took him inside, surprised to find that the room did not transform, nor did the house burst in to flames, nor the foundation explode from under us. I positioned him on a Lazyboy chair and wrapped him in towels, tilting his chin down to his chest so he wouldn't choke.

“I'm tired,” said Frank.

“You should rest,” I said. I was suddenly hit with fatigue as well, but the adrenaline from saving him, my worry about Mom and Grandma in the storm, and my fear for what would happen when the two parties met paralyzed me, binding me to the couch across from Frank, alternating between watching him intently and peering out the window over my shoulder. I became mesmerized by Frank sleeping, by watching his chest rise and fall in perfect rhythm. The spell was broken when I heard my name called from outside. I whipped my head around and saw Mom and Grandma outside, just past the boardwalk and beckoning me from the beach. The storm had passed and they were home. I looked back to Frank and my stomach dropped, but I ran out to meet them on the beach.

They were both drenched and panting.

“Are y'all okay?” I asked.

They nodded. Mom pointed to Frank's yellow kayak, now on the beach. “That washed up during the storm,” she exhaled. “Could you pull it up to the house?”

I nodded, still unsure whether I should say something about Frank, but muted with fear and out of time to decide. They started toward the house, I toward the kayak down the beach.

As I pulled the plastic boat into the dunes, I half expected to hear Mom and Grandma scream my name at the sight of Frank's still body, resting in a house forbidden to him. I expected them to curse, to run back down the boardwalk and throw me into the ocean, to drown me for saving him. But I only heard silence.

I leapt up the stairs and jogged across the boardwalk to the house, pushing the screen door open softly. Mom and Grandma stood in front of the glass sliding doors, peering in at Frank, who still slept peacefully.

I panicked, grasping for explanation as tears teetered at the edges of my eyes. "I'm sorry, there was the storm and he was kayaking and he just wanted to see me—" I cried, saying just too much.

Mom held her hand in front of me. "You know him?" she whispered, not taking her eyes from him. "*You know him? This...man?*"

The three of us were silent, all watching him through the door. His sleep was steady except for a small cough, up came a bit of water, a choke on his own breath, and a return to his slumber. Mom opened her mouth to speak again, making a sound, but Grandma held up a finger to stop her. "Is he okay?" Grandma asked.

I shook my head no. "He was going to drown, but I—"

Grandma reached for the handle of the door, slid it open, and touched my shoulder as she crossed the threshold. Mom and I watched from the porch as she padded barefoot across the hardwood floor, circled the recliner where Frank sat, crouched to his level to look at him square in his dropping face, then stepped in front of the chair next to his, leaned back into it, and closed her eyes.

Thread count

Every time I change my sheets, I find traces of us at the foot of my bed where I shove the bottom edge of the top sheet under the mattress. Jerking the sheet out reveals constellations of our body-dust that I sift through with my fingers before clomping down the stairs to shove the piles of fabric into the wash.

Stains: imprints on the pillow cases from ink stamped on the backs of our hands at concerts; a glaring year-old blot from a pen left open while I leaned over from my reading to kiss you; green drops from spoonfuls of mint ice cream we pass back and forth watching episodes of Spongebob on my laptop; light brown smudges from my too early periods; invisible patches of our hardened drool, marks of deep sleep that you fall into before me and stay in for longer.

Skin: pieces I pick from my thumbs when you're not there or when you are, we're reading side by side and I think you're not looking, only to have you reach for my hand without taking your eyes from your book, holding it in a soft grip between our bodies.

So many hairs: plucked from your mustache while you're thinking, making bald patches you'll frown at later in the mirror. Others you let me extract from red bumps along your jawline, the precise tip of my tweezers gripping the ingrown follicle, pulling it out into a bead of pinkish pus like the string of a honeysuckle revealing its golden nectar orb. The longer, kinkier hairs I can't trace; they're either pubic or from our armpits, just as likely yours as mine. They grow into crooked wiry forms, surprised to be kept intact instead of shaved off and down a drain somewhere.

The fine, dark ones are from your head: once caught between my fingers scratching deep into your porous scalp, pulled out with an elastic you let me wrap around a funny ponytail at your crown, quietly taken by the pillow when we sleep. The few long blond ones are mine:

yanked hard by your clumsily placed arm and my sudden movement; fallen from behind your hand that strokes my head as you listen to me cry, but never as you kiss me.

Breathless and leaning into your shoulder during a nervous breakdown, the thought crosses my mind that you never touch my face. When I mention it later, you say it's because someone once warned you of the oils from your hands, how they make a face dirty, give a face pimples; now it's a habit of yours to keep them away. I insist that I don't mind the oils from your hands, you say okay and reach for my cheek; I melt under the feeling of your thumb on my face once, twice, then not again – you forget to remember until I bring it up again and you say sorry, remind me it's a habit. It's a habit I wish you'd break, but not enough to ask you to touch my face. Instead I settle for your other oils and dirt, embedded in the crook of my neck and between my fingers as I clutch the corners of the sheet and shake us on to my rug, scattered across new fabric, tiptoed around by our bare feet, and sucked up by my vacuum weeks later.