A Woodpecker’s Visit and Other Stories from When Grandma Tracy Came to Stay

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Acknowledgements

As a brief introduction, while each of these stories is intended to be different from the others, all of these stories are related as a series following the same characters, who are all preoccupied with time and their personal memories. These characters almost always recall memories when inspired by nature, as well as Grandma Tracy’s visit.

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**Summer: June and Grandma Tracy**

The morning glories had crept in overnight. Their vines had scuttled over the kitchen windowsill and pushed tight-rolled leaves and buds through the gaps in the window casement, so by the time June crept downstairs in the early morning, the window frame was full of blue and purple buds that stretched into the still-dark kitchen.

The window overlooked June’s garden, a fringe of color beside the square, stone house. She planted climbers along the kitchen wall, on the stretch of dirt that ran below the window, and two beds of herbs and lettuce a few steps farther from the wall. Only the morning glories had ever grown into the house.

June stood barefoot in the dark, cool kitchen and watched the morning glories open and unwind.

She had never been a good sleeper. She liked the quiet of the early morning and the freedom to do whatever she wanted, without scrutiny. She tucked her fingers under her arms and waited.

“What are you doing?”

June startled, and her heart beat fast. “God! You scared me,” she breathed. Still facing the window, she gestured for Charlotte to come and stand beside her.

Charlotte didn’t sleep much either. She was June’s first child, and even after eleven years, June was sometimes still surprised at how similar they were in their little ways. She liked to keep a running list in her mind. They both had cold hands in the morning. They both sighed right after they laughed.

Charlotte leaned against June, and they watched the flowers slowly rise as the sun came up. The buds lifted their heads and stretched their petals wide. The twirling and stretching made
pink and purple light that blew across the floorboards where they watched. June’s arm felt warm where Charlotte rested her head. She thought Charlotte would probably reach the height of her shoulder by the end of the year.

Once the sun was up and shining, June went to get the trowels, and she and Charlotte went to weed the garden. The morning was June’s favorite time of day to be outside. She liked to smell the dew, and it was never too warm. She kneeled in the dirt beneath the kitchen window and pulled out a pair of slender green shoots that had started to grow among the morning glories. She had never seen the weed before, but when she looked closer, little green shoots like that one were sprouting everywhere along the wall. Each one snapped in her fingers before she could find their roots, ensuring they would grow back again.

“What are all these little green things?” Charlotte poked at one with a shovel.

“I don’t know,” June said. “They’re everywhere.” She sighed. “Just in time for Grandma Tracy.” Her mother would be flying in from California the next day, and June was sure she would have a list of things to say about the garden. She started hacking at another pair of shoots. “What if they damage the foundation?”

The house was old and held together entirely by stone and mortar. If the shoots grew inwards, they could easily slip into the cracks in the foundation and push the stone further apart. Charlotte stared at her with wide eyes. “I’m sure it’ll be fine,” June said. “Just help me get them out.”

June turned toward the open window on the second story. “Maisey! Come help us weed! We’re all chipping in!”

The window shade twitched. “No thank you!” Maisey called. “It’s seven a.m.!”
“If you’re going to eat out of the garden, you’re going to help with the garden,” her mother called. “And tell your father!”

Her children had never appreciated how little she asked of them. She mumbled to Charlotte as she dug up another weed. “When I was little, I had a lot more to do in the morning,” Then, she rolled her eyes. “Oh my God. I sound like my mother.”

Jim came outside with Maisey giggling on his back. “The morning glories look great,” he said, and swung Maisey into the garden.

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The next day, Charlotte and Maisey rode in the car to meet Grandma Tracy at the airport. The family hadn’t seen June’s mother since she had moved to California six years before, when Charlotte was five and Maisey was two.

Grandma Tracy towered over the people in the terminal, wearing a tank top that showed off her strong arms and her sunburn. Charlotte ran to her, calling “Grandma Tracy!” June could see that Maisey didn’t recognize her grandmother in the crowd, but she ran after Charlotte anyway and shouted “Grandma Tracy! Grandma Tracy!” June felt their excitement too as she followed close behind.

“Hey!” Grandma Tracy squatted to hug them in the middle of the crowd. People looked around at her as she dug through her duffel bag, unaware that she was blocking their way. “I have presents all the way from California.” She dug out a pen for Charlotte, wrapped in purple paper, and Maisey reached for a lollipop with Mickey Mouse ears. June smiled and helped Maisey to
peel back the wrapper, waiting to kiss her mother hello. When Grandma Tracy stood, she pecked June on the cheek, and handed her a bottle of wine.

“California grapes,” she said.

“I don't drink.” There was an awkward silence, and Grandma Tracy looked unsure. “I'll give it to Jim,” June said and waved the silence away.

Grandma Tracy smiled. “Great! Sorry.” She hoisted her bags and turned to compliment Maisey on her rain boots. “I like the pink.”

When they pulled up to the house, Jim was taking a chicken out of the oven. Everything smelled like rosemary, but the most pungent smell came from the hot dish burning the wood of the kitchen table. Grandma Tracy hugged Jim and told him she’d missed him while June whisked away the dish and tried to cool the table.

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June couldn’t sleep all night. Through the open window, she could hear the garden rustling. The plants creaked upward, and she thought she could hear the mortar crumbling between the stones. She pictured the little green shoots pushing them apart.

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When June was young, her mother had tended a window box of petunias so carefully that when the dust blew up from the dirt road, she used to brush it off the petals with a damp dish rag. People had always stopped to admire them on June’s childhood street.

June had been Charlotte’s age when she’d come downstairs on her birthday to find her mother leaning out the window to water the flowers. June had been dreaming of birthday cake for
the entire week. Emily Jameson’s parents had baked chocolate cupcakes with rainbow sprinkles for her birthday, and they’d been so delicious that even her teacher had eaten one at school.

When June’s mother had turned around to see her waiting in the hallway, she’d smiled widely and said, “Morning, Cricket,” like she did every morning. And, like she did every morning, she’d told June to go get the eggs while she cooked the oatmeal, so June had pulled her socks up and marched out to the chicken coop through the wet morning grass. The hens had nuzzled her hand while she collected the eggs, and she’d blown them both kisses before marching to the house.

June’s brother Robert always pretended to be asleep so June would have to get the eggs herself every morning. Still, her mother always reminded her of the rules. “Carry one egg in each hand,” she’d say as June ran out the door. Ever since the hens had started aging and the price of eggs had risen, her mother had started treating the eggs as precious.

That morning, sick of the rules, June had made a point to carry both eggs in just one hand. She’d thought about squeezing them together, just once, and breaking the yolk over the bright green grass. But, June had decided not to crack the eggs. Instead, she’d laid them on the counter and lingered a little longer to see if she would hear a “happy birthday,” before running to the bus stop so she wouldn’t be late for school.

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As soon as the sun rose, June kicked off the covers and ran to inspect the garden.

The little green shoots seemed to have duplicated. They had popped up against every stone at the base of the kitchen wall, so it looked like the house might be swallowed up at any moment. June cut at them wildly with little scissors and dribbled vinegar over the soil.

“Are the weeds back?” Charlotte asked her mother through the kitchen window.
“I’m getting rid of them!” June said. The fumes from the vinegar burned her nose.

“Are you putting that on our vegetables?”

“You won’t be able to taste it. I don’t want these shoots to kill the morning glories.”

Inside, a pan clanged onto the stove, and Maisey yelled “I want to crack the eggs!” June got up to stop them from waking Grandma Tracy.

“Let’s do it together,” she whispered. Charlotte and Maisey lined up beside her, and they each took turns adding an ingredient to the pancake batter.

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When June was younger, every Sunday, she and Robert had baked an angel cake with their mother. Always at 11:00, her mother had drunk a tall mug of coffee and had told June and her brother to stand in a line beside her. Then, she could pass along the flour and the egg for June to measure and Robert to plop into the mixing bowl. Sundays were the only days they were allowed to crack the eggs, under careful supervision. When they were done baking, they had dusted the cakes with cinnamon sugar and a dot of chocolate syrup. June had always loved Sundays, except when Robert wasn’t home. There had always been too much silence between June and her mother. It had made the kitchen awkward, though June had liked to flick on the oven light and watch the cake rise. The oven had always smelled a little dusty when it had begun to heat the batter.

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June drew a chair up to the counter so Maisey could reach and helped her crack the egg very carefully, so it wouldn’t leave shells in the batter.
The wood in the kitchen looked like the wood in June’s childhood home. It was dark, like all wood in the ‘70s seemed to be, and the stove had the same plastic handle made to look like grainy wood, the suggestion of something natural made stain proof and crack-resistant.

Maisey flipped a pancake, and everybody cheered. The morning glories tossed in the window while they all took turns licking chocolate syrup from their fingers, and June smiled.

When Charlotte went to wash her hands, she paused to look behind the morning glories, into the garden.

“What’s wrong, Charlotte?” June asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m just a little worried about those green plants.”

“They’ll be fine,” June said. “I don’t think they can really do any damage.”

Grandma Tracy came into the kitchen just then and distracted Charlotte from the garden. She sat at the kitchen table, still wearing her kitten pajama set, and took a mug from her purse.

“June-bug, I brought your mug for you from home,” she said.

She held out a mug completely covered in gray bunnies that were wearing striped sweaters and thrusting their hips to indicate dancing.

Charlotte snorted, and June tried not to laugh. “Thanks, mom.” She couldn’t keep from smiling. “But I think that’s Robert’s cup.”

“What?” Grandma Tracy looked down at the pattern. “I could have sworn this was yours. Wasn’t this the one you took that time you tried to run away?”

June tried to imagine the mug in their old wood-trimmed kitchen. “Oh, yeah,” she said. “You’re right.” But, it really was Robert’s mug. June had tried to take it because she hated that she was allowed to wash it but never to borrow it.

“Mom, you tried to run away?” Maisey was sitting on Grandma Tracy’s lap.
“Your mother was quite a handful. Once, she cut all the hair off your uncle’s head.”

“Okay! That’s a story for another day,” June said. “We don’t need any ideas here.” She looked sternly at Maisey. “Who wants pancakes?”

Once everyone had filed outside to eat in the sun, June went to leave a few pancakes in the oven for Jim, where they could keep warm. When she opened the door, she froze. At the back of the oven, a pair of thin green shoots was growing in the heating vent. Their vines clung to the grease-flecked walls like fingers spreading from the oven’s center. June checked over her shoulder to be sure Charlotte hadn't seen and ripped the vines out of the vent. She banged the oven door shut and stuffed the shoots into the garbage disposal in the kitchen sink.

The kids stayed outside to play in the heat, while Grandma Tracy came inside to sit at the kitchen table. June wasn’t used to seeing her mother so tired from the heat. People used to tease her mother that she was so stubborn she didn’t feel the weather. She used to wear sweaters in the sunshine, and she never wore a coat in winter, but now, she breathed heavily in the kitchen chair, sweat beaded on her forehead and the little hairs above her lip. June flicked on the fan in the corner.

“Maisey told me last night she’s so excited that you’re here,” she said. She dumped the dishes in the sink and sat at the table to try to talk with her mother. “The kids would love to see you more.”

“I’d love to see them more, too,” Grandma Tracy said. “They’re getting so old.”

June looked down at her hands. Seeing her mother made her feel guilty for the distance that had always been between them. They talked on the phone every week, but she could never bridge all that space. Their conversations were light, or else there was an argument.
“I know it’s partly my fault we haven’t been closer,” Grandma Tracy said. She turned to watch the kids out the window. “Seeing all these petunia sprouts and watching the kids, it reminds me of when you were little. It’s weird how that works. I hear the birds every morning, and everything’s business as usual, but then, sometimes I hear a robin singing by itself, or I smell a car kicking up some dust, and it brings me right back.” June nodded. “I think we should try to know each other better,” her mother said.

June was shocked. She felt warm inside, like she’d felt when she was little and her mother had said that she was proud of her. She had never heard her mother talk so much in her life. “Is everything okay, mom?” She couldn’t quite trust that her mother when she wasn’t joking.

In the corner of the kitchen, where the low ceiling ran into the wall, June spotted a small green shoot begin to push through a crack in the plaster. Her eyes flicked back and forth between her mother and the skinny green leaves. How had she never noticed it growing? She wondered if they were really petunia sprouts or if that was just her mother’s strange fascination.

“They said I have cancer.” June stopped thinking of the shoot and listened to her mother talking. “I don’t think it’s serious. They can do so much now. But, I want to stay and see some of the doctors I know here.” Grandma Tracy had lived in Massachusetts for most of her life, before she’d left for California.

June’s chest felt tight. Sickness had always been one of June’s greatest fears. Before she knew what she was saying, she hurried, “You should stay here. See the doctors, and we can take care of you a little bit.” Her mother raised her eyebrows.

“I’d like that,” she said. “I was actually planning to stay here. I didn’t think you’d kick me out.” June smiled, and her mother took on a kinder tone. “Honey, we shouldn’t start worrying now. I really think it’ll be fine.”
June whispered, “Okay,” worried she would cry if she spoke any louder.

Then, her mother stood and stretched her back. She paused before leaving the room.

“And, honey? If you have to tell Jim, please tell him not to be too nice to me.” June felt comforted by the eyeroll. Her mother had always hated Jim’s fussing.

Grandma Tracy left, and June stayed still for a while to think. She watched the kids still playing near the garden, but her head was mostly empty. Her eyes wandered while she avoided thought, and a thin strand of hair caught her eye where it was growing from the knuckle of her thumb. She took hold of it and pulled. She could feel its root stinging and pulling at her skin, like a plant being pulled from the ground. Her skin raised in a mound, and then she ripped the hair away.

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When she was a kid, June’s house was at the top of the hill, farthest from school, and the dirt road was always covered in a thick tan dust. It had packed into the creases of her too-tight running shoes and her best friend Stacy’s Mary Janes. It was probably still under her fingernails.

On the day her mother forgot her birthday, her best friend, Stacy, had remembered, and she’d brought June a birthday card she had cut into the shape of a red balloon. “Don’t worry,” she’d said, once she’d heard that everyone had forgotten. “We’ll celebrate anyway.” That’s when they’d devised the plan. They had threatened to run away a few times before, but this time was serious.

After school, Stacy and June had traipsed up the hill and snuck into June’s house while her mother was still at work. They’d slipped three dresses into a petunia-patterned duffle bag, along with a plastic cup and a spoon. The dancing bunny mug had caught June’s eye just as they
were walking out the door, and she’d snatched it quickly, so she could finally use it without
Robert complaining. The bag had been heavy against June’s hip, and she’d started feeling guilty
for taking Robert’s mug, but she’d told herself that one day, she would return and bring him back
a new one.

Usually, when June was young, she’d walked down the dusty very slowly, so she could
weave around and look at beautiful things – a beetle with a shiny green top burrowing through
the dust, a bird swooping over the tops of the trees. Sometimes, she’d stopped to talk with Mrs.
Hannaford, who was always outside in the yard. But, when June and Stacy had run away,
everything had looked different. She’d noticed the pincers on the beetles’ heads and the cars had
kicked up dust like monsters on the roadway. She’d walked by Mrs. Hannaford very fast, with
her head down, and she hadn’t stopped to say hello.

When they’d reached Morrie’s Meadow, they’d felt more sure of themselves. They’d
plodded down to their favorite slope by the swingset, where the ground was jagged, like someone
had bitten it. June had laid out the picnic blanket, and she was just starting to fill Robert’s mug
with the mud for a birthday mud pie, when Stacy took two plump brown eggs from a pocket in
her duffel bag. June still remembered how the eggs had rolled, back and forth dangerously, over
the checkered blanket. Something about them made everything seem more real. As much as she
hated the rules, June knew the value of an egg, and if one was broken, no one could eat it, and
there would be consequences.

“Where did you get that?” she’d asked.

“I took it out of the fridge.” While June watched, Stacy had cracked the egg into the
bunny mug, and nothing had changed, but June had felt sick to her stomach.
Stacy had been whisking the egg with a long twig, lifting the yolk and watching it stretch, when all of a sudden, thunder crashed, and rain started pouring.

“Thanks for cooking, Tracy,” Jim said. June could see the steam rising from his mouthful of eggs. “You know you don’t have to.”

“You’re welcome,” Grandma Tracy said. “You and June work so hard, you deserve a little break.”

June smiled, trying not to show how much she appreciated the praise. Everyone stayed at the table while June did the dishes.

Grandma Tracy was humming while June spoke, so she was sure her mother couldn’t hear a word of what she was saying. “Mom, did you see the picture Maisey made for you?”

Grandma Tracy was still humming and flipping through a magazine on the table. June was asking, “Are you listening?” when suddenly, she smacked her hand against the sink’s linoleum. Grandma Tracy’s head snapped up.

“What are you doing?”

When June pulled her hand away, a limp weed clung to the sink. “It was coming up the drain,” she said.

“Jesus. Isn’t that a little dramatic?” Grandma Tracy said.

“Do you know how to stop them from growing through the house?” June said. She was almost frantic, imagining the weeds tangled in the plumbing. “You said they’re petunias.”

“I never had this problem,” Grandma Tracy said. “You must have planted them wrong.”

June rolled her eyes. Of course it would be her fault that the magic petunias were growing up the drain. “I didn’t even plant any petunias,” she hissed. “I hate them.”
“Well, I don’t know,” Grandma Tracy said.

June reached her arm into the drain to feel around for other sprouts while Grandma Tracy wandered off. She stretched up onto her toes so she could feed her arm down the drain and moved carefully. Her hand slid on the drain’s slimy edges and sank into bits of food. Her fingers brushed over a leaf that felt like a living plant, and she felt a smooth tendril hook around her arm. She felt the shoots spreading upwards, pinching into the skin above her elbows, and her arm started tingling like it was asleep. She screamed, and Grandma Tracy bolted back into the room, Jim, Charlotte, and Maisey close behind her.

“What’s going on?” Jim said.

“It’s pulling me in!”

“What the hell kind of plants are these?” said Grandma Tracy. She grabbed June’s free arm and pulled, Maisey and Jim pulling Grandma Tracy to give her more strength. Charlotte got the vinegar and poured it down the drain, but the vines would not let go. They all pulled harder, until there was a sound of screeching metal. “Jim! Hold the counter so we don’t fall!” Grandma Tracy kept shouting instructions. And, then, the weed exploded from the drain. Long, thin roots hung from the sink and draped over the kitchen floor. June stared at it, dumbfounded, while Maisey, Charlotte, and her mother snapped the tiny shoots away from her skin. As the tension broke, the blood came tingling back. Grandma Tracy winced at the thin bruises left behind by the shoots and helped June to run her arm under cool tap water. “I’m sorry,” she said. June patted her hand.

“What are we going to do?” Charlotte whispered. Maisey looked like she would cry.

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Once the storm had started, June had wanted to go home, but she’d said nothing. “We better get going to Ashley’s house,” Stacy had said. They’d huddled under the hoods of their raincoats before running onto the sidewalk that stretched along the road. June had laughed at the way her voice sounded while her teeth chattered. They had only been planning to stay at a friend’s house three streets away from home. Ashley’s house was only three rights and a left from June’s house, but they had never walked there from the park, and they’d realized that the didn’t know which way to turn. In the rain, the streets had been quiet except for the occasional hissing car, and they’d kept running in a straight line down the sidewalk, waiting to recognize a street sign.

As they’d run farther down the street, June had become more nervous. “Stacy, I don’t recognize these streets.”

Stacy had nodded. “I didn’t know there were streets in this town we hadn’t seen before.” But, they had never really ventured far without their parents to guide the way.

“I think we should go back,” June had said, but when she’d turned her head, she’d realized that they could hardly see through the fog.

Stacy had sighed. “I knew this was gonna happen. Every time you say you want to run away, you quit.” With this new challenge ringing in her ears, June had continued down the sidewalk, to search for Ashley’s house.

She had been just about to suggest giving up again when a big brick wall had stopped them in their tracks.

“What is this?” Stacy’s voice had been shaking, and her teeth had kept chattering as they’d realized that the nearest street was about a mile back up the road. Before they could turn back, a pair of headlights had come streaking towards them through the fog. The car had kept
driving fast, and it was headed straight toward them, trapping them against the wall. The car had failed to turn at the only side street, and Stacy had tensed. June had prepared to knock her out of the way of the moving car. “Please turn around, please turn around,” she’d whispered.

And then, she’d recognized the dark green paint of the station wagon. The car had screeched to a halt near their knees, and her mother had opened the door.

June had never been so relieved to see her mother. She’d run into her mother’s arms, which smelled like warm wood and her mother’s shampoo, like breathing in the steam from a hot chocolate. Even Stacy had been happy to get out of the cold.

“I’m sorry,” June had cried.

She’d expected her mother to yell loud enough for the whole town to hear, but the whole night, she never spoke louder than a murmur. She had not spoken on the drive, and she’d dropped Stacy off quietly. Then, when they’d arrived home, she’d turned to June in the passenger seat, and she’d said, “Don’t run away again. You can talk to me instead.” Then, she’d swung her legs out of the car.

When June had woken up the day after running away, she’d collected the eggs as usual and combed her hair before school. Then, just as she was about to leave, she’d noticed a small yellow cake in the dust outside her bedroom window. A film of plastic wrap had glittered on the top of the cake, which was decorated with sugared pearls and yellow icing flipped into waves. June had been so happy to see the cake that she had kept it on her shelf for three days before eating it and hadn’t minded that it was stale. Secretly, she’d hoped that it had been left by birthday fairies. Now, she knew it was her mother.

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“Jim,” June hissed. “I think I can fix the garden problem.”
He opened one eye wide. “We’ll do it in the morning,” he said.

She crept downstairs to find a package of morning glory seeds and inspect the green shoots outside the house. The gray stone around the bottom of the house was almost entirely covered by a line of green sprouts that waved in the wind.

While she inspected the foundation, Grandma Tracy and Charlotte walked out into the garden in their pajamas. “Couldn’t sleep either?” June asked.

“I’m a little sore from yesterday,” said Grandma Tracy. She stretched her neck and yawned at the top of her lungs. Maisey came out from the kitchen laughing at the sound.

“Brought you some aloe for your arm,” said Grandma Tracy. She handed June the bottle.

“Thanks, mom.”

“Did you think of something for these suckers?” Grandma Tracy nudged the wave of shoots with her toe, setting them rustling.

“I had an idea last night,” she said. She pointed to the clump of morning glories that had grown up the wall beneath the kitchen window. Grandma Tracy looked at Charlotte from the corner of her eye and raised an eyebrow. Charlotte giggled.

June held a morning glory vine between her fingers. Many of the morning glory sprouts had twined around the green petunia shoots, like tight-coiled springs, pulling them in close while keeping them from harming the mortar. June traced them with her finger.

“The morning glories grow up the side of the house, so I think if we can plant them behind the shoots, the shoots might grow into the morning glories instead of the stones,” June said.

“Ohhhh.” Charlotte started scattering the seeds right away.
Grandma Tracy shrugged and started helping with the seeds. She couldn’t help but smile at the way the flowers bounced in the breeze. “So we’re all just going to put our trust in the morning glories to protect us,” she said.

“A few will still get through,” June said. “I’m not even sure if they’ll grow in time, but I think it’ll help. A couple of the shoots might even look kind of nice as long as they don’t crumble down the house.” She pulled one from a gap between the stones.

“They do look nice together,” Grandma Tracy said, pointing toward the plants.

June nodded. She still moved around the house cautiously, worried that the vines might draw her in again.
Fall: A Woodpecker’s Visit

Grandma Tray lay in the thin, pink bed beneath the window, with her toes pointing toward the sun. She was borrowing Maisey’s bed during her visit, and everything in the room was pink. A gust of wind blew hard against the window, turning her swollen feet cold against the glass, so she buried them deep under the blankets and watched a small spider in the corner of the ceiling tiptoe with high knees over its web.

The spider usually ate around five ‘o clock. When Grandma Tracy had trouble sleeping, she watched the spider unwrap the fruit flies from its web. She was starting to feel queasy in the mornings, but the doctors were still monitoring the site of the cancer, waiting to see if she needed the chemo after they’d removed the sun spot from her arm. She didn’t want to know yet if the queasiness was the cancer spreading.

She jerked upright in bed. The ceiling rattled, and the sound of something hammering the roof echoed over the bed. The sound paused. Then, it began again. This time, the rapping was lighter and sounded against the wooden window frame. Grandma Tracy got up and looked down at the house through the window panes. A long, thin bird clung to the left edge of the windowsill. It stared shrewdly at Grandma Tracy, with beady eyes, chirped, and then, with its beak, it pounded again at the window frame. The bird had found the only wood on the stone house, in the roof’s shingles and the windows. Scattered over the busy road, the other blue and yellow houses appeared to be made of wood siding, but the woodpecker had chosen June’s house, squat and stone and tucked away behind a pine tree.

“Shoo!” she yelled. She could smell her own breath on the window panes.
“Shoo!” Grandma Tracy jiggled the window, and the bird flitted away to the pine, where it perched and waited, its beak pointed sharply at the house.

June burst through the bedroom door. “It’s freezing in here,” she breathed. “Why are you yelling?” June had never been a patient child.

“There was a woodpecker trying to eat your house,” Grandma Tracy said. June peeked through the window at the small hole the bird had left in the wood.

“Well, I think you’ve certainly scared it away.” She shrugged and went downstairs to make some coffee, while Grandma Tracy sat at Maisey’s mirror to draw on her raspberry lipstick. She stared at the lipstick, wondering if she had overreacted to the bird, and when she looked away, a set of watery eyes stared back at her in the mirror, small and black like peppercorns.

The woodpecker stood on the windowsill again. When the bird cocked its head to the side, Grandma Tracy thought she saw a slender cheekbone standing out under its feathers, and something red and round grew under its beak. Like a drop of blood, the mound grew larger, until Grandma Tracy was certain it was a human lip, covered in cranberry lipstick. She closed her eyes and drew in a breath. When she opened them, the bird was gone.

Grandma Tracy had seen that shade of lipstick before, when she was young and still Mrs. Wood’s neighbor across the way. She allowed her mind to wander back.

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Tracy pushed the window open over the street, scattering paint chips into the road’s long gutter. The morning wind stirred off the River Clyde and whistled down the street, knocking at windows and pushing between the people surging toward the city centre.
Across the street and high above Tracy’s view, Mrs. Wood drew on a line of cranberry lipstick in the window. Tracy admired the way she applied the lipstick, carefully, with a cigarette clamped between her teeth.

Tracy grinned and then, from her window on the street, smashed the sides of her father’s old accordion together, waiting to see who would jump. Most people glared directly at her, knowing where the accordion came from, and Mrs. Wood startled and smudged her lipstick. She snapped her curtains shut.

“Tracy!” her mother threw her hands over her face in bed. “You’re waking everybody up again,” she groaned.

“It’s six o’clock,” said Tracy. “Everyone should be up.” Her mother kicked away the bedcovers and rushed to get Esme changed for school. The Subway would arrive in an hour.

While her mother braided Esme’s hair, Tracy placed the accordion under its dust sheet and back on its shelf, where it stayed perched, like a ghost, in the corner.

An otherwise quiet man when he was alive, Tracy’s father was once known for how he played the old accordion. Despite their large size, his fingers had moved quickly, careful to skip all the antique’s missing keys. He had found the instrument, banged up and missing pieces, in the thrift shop on the corner, and he’d taught himself to play by ear. Tracy played only to taunt the neighbors when she was bored. She wouldn’t try to replace her father’s playing with her own clumsy hands.

The last time she’d played for her father, his hands had been too tired to hold the accordion up. After fighting the sickness for three months, he had dozed off during Tracy’s playing, and he had never woken up. That was the only day Tracy had ever seen her mother cry.
She hadn’t liked for people to see her in that state. At the funeral a few days later, they had all tried their best to stand quietly and nod when people paid their respects.

Tracy stopped staring at the accordion and went to join her brother at the kitchen table, where she practiced drawing on lipstick with a faded crayon and balanced a pencil carefully between her teeth.

Then, she got up to hand her brother his lunch for school.

“Did you cut the crusts off?” Doug looked suspiciously at the bag Tracy had packed for him.

“Yes, Doug. You can check for yourself if you don’t believe me.”

On their way out the door, Tracy handed Esme and her mother their own paper bags, and they all joined hands for the walk over. Their mother was very strict about holding hands. The first day Tracy had walked with her siblings alone, her mother had told her never to let go of them until they’d arrived.

They all walked together until they reached the Subway, a stately building made of soot-smudged bricks and decorated with a clock. Then, their mother hurried off to her platform, and Tracy led the way to school.

“Let’s play ‘I Spy,’” Tracy said, and Esme cheered. They spotted a pigeon, a black motorcar.

“I spy something green!” Esme said. She made her voice sound spooky, like she was telling a ghost story. As they approached the school gates, Mrs. Wood swept over the sidewalk wearing her velvet green cloak that billowed all around. She wore it when she went to the city centre, and her pet crow was always perched on her left shoulder.
Mrs. Wood lived alone except for the crow. Her only daughter, Lily, had died ten years before, at the age of ten. Mrs. Wood had always liked to keep to herself, but she would stop to talk to anyone about Lily.

“Tommy Lind said Mrs. Wood hexed him on Rose Street,” Esme whispered. “He said she killed his cat.” Tracy looked at her disapprovingly.

“I heard she’s actually a ghost,” Doug said.

“Don’t talk about people like that,” Tracy said. “How can she be a ghost when she’s standing right there.”

Doug shrugged. “I’ve heard her whispering spells.”

“She’s just talking to the crow,” Tracy said.

When they reached the school, Tracy’s heart skipped a moment. She glimpsed a head that looked exactly like her father’s, round and covered in shaggy brown hair. Their father had never walked with them to school. He had left on the fishing boats too early. But, every once in a while, he had come to walk them home, when he’d had a slow day or the boat wasn’t running. He had always brought a pot of orange jelly, and he’d let them all scoop the jelly with their hands and lick it off their fingers so it would be gone by the time they’d reached home. Their mother had never allowed them to eat sweets before dinner.

Staring at the man’s shaggy hair, Tracy thought about what Doug had said, about ghosts. But, when the man turned around it was only Mr. Turner from the third year’s maths class.

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“A little to the left,” Grandma Tracy called. The sun was setting, and June was arranging plastic crows across the sill outside the living room. Maisey zigzagged under the weight of a
large, round pumpkin carved to have a jagged grin. With a thud, she dropped the pumpkin into place on the doorstep, and pieces of stone crumbled away.

“I told you it was too big,” June said.

“I think it’s fantastic,” said Grandma Tracy. She slung her own pumpkin down beside Maisey’s with one arm. Maisey giggled at Grandma Tracy’s strength.

Then, they all gathered to see the tealights in the pumpkins. A cold wind blew leaves around their ankles, stirring up the smell of mold and rotting wood. On the top doorstep, Maisey’s pumpkin grinned orange like her father’s. Charlotte had carved her pumpkin hearts for eyes, and on the step below, June and Grandma Tracy had crafted gaping mouths that spilled out light like honey. Grandma Tracy felt warm inside while the candles burned, and the hot cider filled their bellies.

“Grandma Tracy, did you carve pumpkins with your grandma?” Charlotte asked.

“No.” Grandma Tracy said. “But, one year, Uncle Doug and Aunt Esme and I carved faces in our apples.” Grandma Tracy laughed. “We put them in our window to try and scare Mrs. Wood because she was living across the way.”

“I remember Mrs. Wood,” said June. “Wasn’t she the one with the crow?” She’d always loved Grandma Tracy’s stories about the mysterious Mrs. Wood, the ghostly woman on the cobblestone street.

“Yeah.” Grandma Tracy smiled. She had forgotten that June might recognize her name. Mrs. Wood had died of cancer too.

“Can we get a pet bird?” called Maisey, distracting grandma Tracy from her thoughts.

June and Grandma Tracy laughed.
Suddenly, Charlotte leapt up and ran to the window sill, taking the largest crow and running upstairs to Maisey’s room. “I have an idea!” she called.

She positioned the bird on Maisey’s windowsill, so it was looming over the yard below. “Maybe this will scare the woodpecker away.”

“I don’t think Mrs. Wood would be bothered by a crow,” Grandma Tracy said. She leaned against the doorframe beside June.

“Well, it’s not for Mrs. Wood, Mom. It’s for the woodpecker.”

“Right!” Grandma Tracy pretended to laugh while June acted out hitting her forehead to jog her memory.

Grandma Tracy helped Charlotte to make the crow look ominous and tried not to think too much about Mrs. Wood. When Mrs. Wood had died, Tracy had already moved away to America, and since Mrs. Wood’s letters had stopped coming, she had never really stopped to think about Mrs. Wood being really gone. She certainly didn’t want to start grieving then. She was trying not to think about lives gone missing.

XXXXXX

Back when Tracy had walked Doug and Esme home from school, the streets had always been busiest on Fridays. Usually, Tracy’s best friend, Tommy, walked with them too. She remembered because they had all teased him for the smell of his mother’s market.

On the same day Tracy was thinking about her father’s ghost, they had all rounded the corner of Alder Street and immediately flinched away from the smell. “Ewww,” Tracy groaned. Once the smells of Friday salmon were in your nose, they were in your nose forever.

“I don’t know if I’m going to make it,” she panted. Doug pretended to cry at the smell, while Esme just laughed with both hands against her mouth.
“It reeks,” she mumbled through her fingers.

Tommy lived in a room above his parents’ market, where people gathered for his mother’s Friday Salmon, known throughout Glasgow as a fine recipe for preserving fish. On every Thursday night, Mrs. Lind counted up the leftover salmon from her weekly supply. She rolled the remaining cold, pink filets in salt and peppercorns, and when she sold the filets on Friday, the stinging smell of fish in pepper clung to the city’s stone and the hairs inside their noses.

Tommy had pushed through the crowd around the market, and as Tracy plodded toward the Subway, a stocky man with long brown hair crossed their path by the Subway, and Tracy felt sure that she had seen her father. This man had seemed shorter than her father, but she had felt sure that it was him, from the way he rolled up on his toes when he was walking. “Dad!” she’d shouted. She had ignored the people who had looked up to see her running past. “Da! Wait!” Tracy had felt a sense of panic rise into her throat. Unsure where he was going or why he was moving so quickly, she had pulled Esme and Doug along behind her.

“Tracy!” Doug and Esme had screamed at the top of their lungs to stop her from running in front of a produce truck that had rolled slowly on the cobblestone. When the traffic had cleared, Tracy had seen her father at the other side of the road, boarding a small, red bus, but when the bus had driven past, the man with shaggy brown hair had looked down at her from his window, and she had seen that he was not her father. When she had turned to comfort Esme, she had seen that she had spilled her schoolbooks on the street. “I’m sorry,” she said. Tracy had waited for the traffic to thin and then had darted into the road to collect both squares of color from the cobblestones.
“I’m sorry,” she’d whispered again, holding Esme and Doug in a hug. “I thought I saw dad.”

“That’s impossible,” Esme had said.

They had all been quiet for the rest of the walk home. Tracy had put her arm over Esme’s shoulders, and she’d asked Doug three times if he was sure he was alright. Across from the bus stop, a crow had come to land over a spot of roadkill on the street. With its beak, it had caught at the animal’s soft, gray fur and snapped the pink and stringy tendons from the bone. Tracy had been just able to make out a pointed ear in the muddle of the road kill, the color of the Linds’ lost cat, and she’d looked away, hoping her mind was playing tricks.

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Grandma Tracy jolted awake. The woodpecker was knocking quickly against the bedroom wall. While she looked out the window, the woodpecker hopped onto the windowsill and stood beside the plastic crow.

“I knew that wouldn’t scare you,” Grandma Tracy said.

The bird cocked her head to one side to stare at Grandma Tracy. She tapped the window pane three times quickly. Tap, tap, tap. When Grandma Tracy didn’t move, the woodpecker reared her head and pecked harder, as though to break the glass. “Shoo!” Grandma Tracy screamed from the bed. But the woodpecker just kept winding back and banging harder into the glass.

June came running in from the hall, yelling “Shoo!” She turned to face the bed. “Mom, are you just letting that thing break the glass?” She forced the window open and flailed her arms to make herself look bigger. The bird’s glassy eyes seemed to droop in disappointment, and she
glided back toward the pine. In the sun, the black feathers along her wings shone green, like an oil slick in summer, giving the bird a deep green cloak.

“I don’t know why she keeps coming back,” Grandma Tracy said.

“Well, we have to do something to keep it away,” June said. “Or it’ll ruin the house.”

Tracy’s mother had always worked late on Saturdays, so when they were safely inside, Tracy had cleaned off Esme’s books and served a dinner of salted ham and mountains of mushy peas. Doug had stood up on a chair to switch on the little red radio, and they’d all tapped their forks to the tune of “The Twist.” The sun had fallen while they ate, and fewer feet had shuffled on the street.

“Tracy, you play something,” said Doug, when they had finished eating.

“Listen to the radio,” she’d said.

“Please?” Esme had whined, and Tracy had already been feeling guilty for dragging them onto the street, so she had tried to remember the song their father had used to send Esme off to sleep. It was one he’d heard as a child, but Tracy didn’t know what the words meant.

She’d leaned back in the creaky chair to balance the accordion on her lap and had leaned its weight onto her chest before beginning to play.

After a silence, Doug and Esme sang along.

‘Twas there that we parted, in yon shady glen
On the steep, steep side o’ Ben Lomond
Where in soft purple hue, the highland hills we view
And the moon coming out in the gloaming.
Doug had kept time softly, drumming the table’s tan wood. Their voices had been so high and airy that they’d sometimes get lost in the accordion’s whining.

Esme had swayed, calm and quiet, keeping time with the music and sliding lower and lower in her chair. Tracy had always liked to imagine her father on Loch Lomond, living in the long grass and the soft purple flowers that could bend in the wind. Her father had taken her there to see the tough flowers once every Sunday. As Esme had nodded to sleep, Tracy had eased the accordion back to her lap to catch her breath. Doug had laughed at the way her muscles shook from holding up its weight, so she’d challenged him to a bout of arm wrestling that had scattered bits of ham and peas over the kitchen. When Tracy had won, she’d flexed her muscles and jumped up on the table, just as her mother had come in through the door.

“What on earth are you doing?” she’d asked. Doug had laughed so hard he’d nearly wet his pants.

Their mother had eaten first, before they’d all lined up to wash dishes, except Esme, who’d slept early. Their mother had always liked to turn the dishes into a game that she could play after a long day of stitching. While Doug and Tracy had dried and put away, their mother had occasionally called, “Freeze!” and then had circled them, nudging their arms and trying to make them move while they fought to stay still. Doug had always been the quickest loser because he’d been unable to keep himself from laughing.

After the dishes, Tracy had gone to bed the latest, as she always did. The flat had felt empty, and the light and the people had all grown louder outside than the sounds of the house inside. She’d always tried to imagine what the people said to each other with their goodnight words. She had shared a cot with Esme, beside Doug’s cot and her mother’s bed, and without her
father, the bed had always looked empty late at night. He had left an indentation in the mattress, which her mother sometimes covered with a pillow. When Tracy had finally lain down, she’d looked through the window and listened to the tenement shift and breathe, the footsteps falling overhead, the pigeon’s feet clacking on the windowsill. Across the way, Mrs. Wood had spoken with her hands and dangled a smoking cigarette from her fingers. Her window had always looked orange-gold in her lamplight, but Tracy had never seen anyone else in the room, except for Mrs. Wood’s pet crow.

Tracy’s father had always slept early, but sometimes, she had woken up in the early mornings to spend time with him before he went to work. She had followed him around the flat while he’d gathered his things and pulled on his shoes, and she’d listed off everything that had happened at school. He’d told her stories about the fish he’d hauled from the water. He had never believed much in monsters or the afterlife or the other superstitions that people talked about. He had wanted to talk about ordinary things, like the sun coming up on the water and giving them a little warmth, or the little stone house he dreamed of in the highlands. Even after her father had died, Tracy had found herself keeping a list in her mind of the things she would tell him about school, the couples ending and beginning and Mrs. Crowley’s harsh grading of everybody’s work. When Tracy thought of her father for too long, she grew homesick, and she felt a heavy feeling, like she’d eaten too much cream.

That night, while she’d stared out the window, Tracy had heard her mother ease out of bed and stick her feet to the floor. Tracy’s mother always slept at the edge of the mattress, so she could easily stand and hurry to the door, when shoes came too close or there was a rustling of rats somewhere near the stove. No one had ever replied, but whenever she’d heard something stir, she had always whispered,
“John?” seeming to believe that she would catch her husband haunting them.

Once, Tracy had scattered flour over the kitchen floor to see if she would find ghost’s footsteps in the morning. She had been excited to see toeprints left in her trap, until she’d seen the flour on the bottom of her mother's feet.

That night, instead of moving toward the kitchen, her mother’s footsteps had passed around the bed until she was standing above Tracy, her white nightgown lit by the window and casting shadows over her eyes and mouth.

“I ran into Mrs. Wood earlier,” she’d hissed. “She heard you play today, and she wants you to have her daughter’s old piano.” Tracy had wondered wondered why Mrs. Wood would offer the instrument to her, but her mother had said, “I’ve thought about it, and I think you should take it.”

“Okay,” Tracy’d whispered.

“I want you to have something of your own,” her mother had said.

XXXXXX

Grandma Tracy was humming “Loch Lomond” when she came into the kitchen and nearly stepped on Maisey’s hand. Kneeling on the ground, Maisey used a pair of scissors to cut the kitchen tinfoil into strips. Everywhere in the house, someone was working to keep the woodpecker away.

“Mom said we can scare the woodpecker away if we hang up shiny stuff,” Charlotte said, glancing up from watching Maisey’s work.

“Let’s hope so,” Grandma Tracy said.

Outside, Jim was balancing on a ladder too tall for the house, hammering blocks of wood over the holes the woodpecker had left behind. He moved gingerly. No one had wanted him near
the ladder since last Christmas, when he’d fallen and broken two ribs and his leg. However, he was the only one who volunteered for the ladder, just to prove himself. Much to Grandma Tracy’s irritation, June had been afraid of heights since the day she was born.

Grandma Tracy went outside and stood at the base of the ladder in her work boots. “Can I give you a hand, Jim?” she called. Jim refused to look down.

“No worries!” he said. “Everything’s under control!” But his voice was shaking.

Grandma Tracy liked Jim. She liked the way he played Scrabble with the dictionary handy and hummed around the house. But, she often found Jim’s niceness irritating, like when he stopped people from helping with the cooking, even when they were bored.

“How about if I just hold the ladder?” she asked.

“Totally unnecessary,” Jim said. “You just go sit down.” Jim tried to give her a meaningful look.

Grandma Tracy just glared back. She stomped back into the house to help Maisey. Charlotte watched her glare outside for a while, then asked her to play them the song she had been humming.

The cellphone’s speakers made the piano sound fuzzy as “Loch Lomond” played. Charlotte and Maisey swayed dramatically to the song, while Grandma Tracy rolled her eyes and searched for a map of Glasgow on her phone, looking for an image of her old street. She scrolled quickly, but the street appeared to be missing from the grey criss-crossed lines on the map. She traced every line for a familiar setting. Nothing she remembered was there, until, finally, she found the street, a little ways below the city’s largest graveyard, and she sighed in relief.

Charlotte imagined Grandma Tracy as a young girl with laced-up shoes and blondish hair, roving through grey and blue routes and past the fuzzy animations of the trees and rivers.
“I probably wouldn’t recognize it now,” said Grandma Tracy. She helped Maisey and Charlotte gather up the tinfoil strips and deliver them to Jim outside on the ladder. Grandma Tracy squinted up at the house to watch Jim’s craftsmanship. Already, some of the strips were flowing in the breeze.

“Don’t sneeze, Jim,” she said.

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Mrs. Wood had sent her piano to Tracy the day after she’d offered it. Accompanied by Mrs. Wood, two men had wheeled it through the door and stuck it in the hallway leading in to their ground-level room.

The hall had grown narrower as it went, so the small piano could only be pushed through its beginning before it stuck between the walls, but Tracy’s mother had insisted they keep it. Because it was positioned sideways, when they’d moved it closer to the door, Tracy could just fit the bench behind it and sit with her back against the wall. To move through the hall, everyone would have to crawl beneath the piano, or else slide across its rickety bench. Her mother had just patted the dark, lacquered wood, and thanked the men for moving it. “Now, everyone can admire it,” she’d said.

Mrs. Wood’s own hands had swollen prematurely, from her many nights as a concert pianist, so she was coming to find playing slow and painful.

“I’m just glad you’ll play,” she told Tracy. “And I’ll come back and teach you.”

The next day, Mrs. Wood had brought a shiny new National Geographic that smelled like glue and squeaked under Tracy’s fingers. “Thought you might like the pictures,” she’d said. On the front cover, the sun had been shining on the sea. Tracy had asked Mrs. Wood to sit with her on the bench, instead of standing by the keys.
Her time spent teaching her daughter had left behind the faint outlines of chalk and shallow dips in the keys the size of a smaller finger. Tracy’s fingers fit softly into the dips, and Mrs. Wood marked the keys with yellow chalk again so Tracy could learn her scales.

After about an hour of little conversation, Tracy had asked Mrs. Wood about her crow.

Mrs. Wood had just laughed. “Most people don’t ask about the crow. I didn’t think your mother would take kindly to him.”

“Right.” Tracy laughed. “Does he make your flat a mess?”

“He’s careful,” she’d said. “We just keep each other company, really.”

Tracy had tried to play a faster scale. “I wouldn’t want to live alone, either,” she’d said. “I’d feel homesick all the time for my dad.”

Mrs. Wood had just nodded.

When Mrs. Wood had returned the next day, she had brought a jar of Cola Cubes to share with Doug and Esme. Tracy balanced a cube on her tongue and ran through the scales she’d practiced.

“How about we start with ‘Hot Cross Buns’?” asked Mrs. Wood. “That was the first one my Lily learned.”

“My dad learned that one too,” Tracy had said.

Mrs. Wood had hummed the very first note. “Which note does this sound like?” Tracy had hummed along too, the taste of Cola tickling her nose, and by the end of the day, she could play the first verse.

Three hours after victory, Tracy had been surprised to find that Mrs. Wood had returned, wearing her green going-out cloak. The sun had been setting low against the river, so she’d held a torch, while balancing the crow on her shoulder.
“Mrs. Wood has a surprise for you,” her mother had said.

Esme had pulled at Tracy’s sleeve. “Can I go please?”

“Let your sister have some fun if she wants to,” their mother had said. Tracy had lingered in the doorway, unsure, but she’d liked talking to Mrs. Wood, so she’d decided to join her and had planned to slip away if the surprise was terrible.

Mrs. Wood had led the way up the street, and Tracy’s palms had pricked as they’d approached the cemetery on the hill. She hadn’t been to visit her father’s plot since his funeral, though her mother went every day with a flower or a candle to leave behind.

In the dark blue and purple dusk, Tracy had seen a group of children, her age and younger, weaving their way around the headstones at the top of the hill. Mrs. Wood had seemed to be expecting them and had continued through the gate without pause. “What’s going on?” Tracy had asked. The children’s stomping feet had fallen dully on the frozen ground.

“Some kids end up doing this every year,” she’d said. “They hunt for ghosts near Hallow’s Eve, and then they go home before it gets too late. My Lily was in one of the first groups. She claimed to have seen a ghost downtown.”

Tracy had grown more nervous as they’d gone deeper into the cemetery, but she’d set her upper lip so she didn’t look afraid. “You let Lily come here alone?” she’d asked.

“Sometimes you have to face your ghosts,” Mrs. Wood had said.

The crowd had parted to allow Mrs. Wood to pass, Tracy jogging along behind her, and Mrs. Wood had walked directly to a gray, oblong grave marker, cut from polished stone. There, the crow had nuzzled closer to her cheek. The stone had read “For Lily,” and its base had been covered by grass and wildflowers.
Tracy had been too embarrassed to look at Mrs. Wood, but Mrs. Wood had grabbed hold of her hand while she stood there. Tracy had tried to grant her privacy by looking off in the direction of her father’s grave. She’d watched from a distance as a tree branch blew slowly back and forth above her father’s grave, making the shadows flit over the grass so the ground appeared to be moving. She’d wondered why no one had told her about the ghosting night.

Then, Mrs. Wood had opened her mouth and screamed.

Everybody had stopped moving. The scream was loud, high-pitched, and long. It had rung out over the hill.

“Sometimes, it helps to let it out,” Mrs. Wood had chuckled. “I like to leave a good example for all the ghosthunters.” Tracy had laughed.

“I’m not saying you have to scream,” Mrs. Wood had said. “I’m just saying that sooner or later, you have to stop bottling things up.”

As the moon had grown brighter over the cemetery, the children had begun weaving down the hill towards the road.

“Go if you want,” Mrs. Wood had said. “I’ll see you back at home.” Tracy had followed the parade to see what she could.

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Grandma Tracy lay on the thin, pink bed and watched the shadows on the ceiling. She sank tiredly into the mattress. As she drifted off, she could hear the tin foil outside the window rustling in the breeze, like the sound of someone’s hair blowing.

Grandma Tracy could hear the crowd of children chatter and shuffle through the streets. She felt the cold mist that settled at night and smelled the damp in her own rustling hair. Ghostly figures wandered the street outside her tenement, made of filmy clouds. A pair of cloud-women
strolled together arm and arm and continued to walk through the brick of the corner store. A man in Wellies hauled a net of blue, shining fish, leaving a trail of slime that glowed silver behind him. Grandma Tracy stood at her own tenement, looking through the darkened window. She stared at her reflection in the windowpanes. She could not see her current face, but, instead, the face of her youth, round and wind-chapped, the glass making her eyes look hollow. Through the window, behind her own face, she could see her father sitting in the kitchen, shimmering blue, as if he were made of glass. He peeled onions and quietly smoked a cigar.

Tiny claws scurried over her feet, and Grandma Tracy stumbled back into a cloud of mist. She recognized Tommy Lind’s lost cat streaking away. It hissed at a passing crow, breathing silver clouds.

When Grandma Tracy woke, she was crying.

On the night of the ghost parade, Tracy really had believed that she had seen her father’s ghost waiting on the street. She could still remember the fear and the sadness when she realized the ghost was only mist. Still, when Mrs. Wood had returned a week later, Tracy had no longer hesitated to speak about her father.

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On Tracy’s thirteenth birthday, Mrs. Wood had helped her ride the train to Loch Lomond. They’d taken Doug and Esme too. Esme had still been too young to remember the place when their father had first taken them there.

Esme had sat beside Doug and Tracy on the train and kicked her legs under the seat. They’d followed a long line of hikers and tourists off the train and up the hill, while Mrs. Wood had mocked their giant backpacks and the way they gawked at her pet crow. “Like they’ve never
seen nature before,” she’d said. “With those giant things.” And they’d climbed up to the hillside to a waterfall, one long curve that sparkled in the sun. From the top of the hill, Tracy had thought she was hearing the wind whistle the first few chords of “Loch Lomond,” long and thin, like her father’s whistling around the house. She’d been disappointed by the waterfall. She had remembered it being larger, and the foxglove hadn’t yet grown up past their ankles, but the wind had made Tracy homesick for her father. She’d said that if she could, she would live like a grouse and build a nest in the tall grass that always felt the wind. “But then, you’d miss me in Glasgow,” Esme had said. Mrs. Wood had laughed.

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A flash caught Grandma Tracy’s eye from somewhere on the ceiling, where she was lying in the tiny bed. Her ears were full of the sound of sheets snapping on a clothesline. When she looked up, the woodpecker flapped her wings in Grandma Tracy’s eyes. She shrieked as the woodpecker flew into walls and beat against the ceiling. Grandma Tracy spluttered on fallen feathers, and she charged the bird, forcing it back toward the open window. The woodpecker landed on the window ledge outside and looked back through the glass with beady eyes and a cranberry smile. Grandma Tracy yelled “Shoo!” a final time, and the woodpecker looked at her fiercely before turning to leave.

Charlotte reached the bedroom first, where Grandma Tracy sat on the ground with her back against the wall. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“The bird was in the room,” Grandma Tracy wheezed. Everyone joined in inspecting the feathers and laughing at the bird’s audacity while Grandma Tracy tried to catch her breath.

By the time Jim had left for work, a sheen of mist covered the leaves and roads outside and was making the grass squeak where people walked. Grandma Tracy sat still on the
bubblegum bed, staring at the window. She imagined the smell of the wind and the mist blowing through the little hole the woodpecker had left in the window frame and hovering just above the floor and the tops of the dresser drawers. She dried her face where her nose started dripping, shoved on her work boots, and went downstairs to find Charlotte and Maisey.

“I think it’s a perfect day for a picnic,” Grandma Tracy said in the kitchen. Maisey laughed and went to find Charlotte, while Grandma Tracy wrapped three peanut butter sandwiches in tinfoil.

June looked at her mother in utter confusion. “But, it’s raining.”

Maisey returned wearing a pink and purple raincoat and holding Charlotte’s arm in one hand and a wicker basket in the other.

“Won’t it stop raining soon?” Charlotte asked.

Grandma Tracy swept sandwiches and orange slices into the basket and grabbed June’s keys from the hook by the door. “I want to go before it stops,” she said. “Coming, June?”

“No thanks,” she said flatly, watching Grandma Tracy from the corner of her eye. Charlotte and Maisey ran to the car with their faces turned up to the mist. “Be careful, please!” June called.

Grandma Tracy drove until they reached the base of some hiking trails, then eased her way out of the driver’s seat. “I tell you, girls. This car is so small you couldn’t swing a mouse in it!” she said. They started up the hiking trail. The sandy path opened on an orchard at the top of a hill, where long, flat rows of apple trees stretched along the bright gray sky. Long grass waved between the trees and hid the fallen fruit, and Grandma Tracy pulled herself up to stand on a long, flat rock at the top of the orchard. She looked down the hill covered in trees and a river.
“Doesn’t that wind smell good?” she called. The wind blew her voice backwards and made it hard to hear. Maisey sneezed in the mist.

Grandma Tracy took another deep breath and then screamed, so loudly that her voice carried over the trees and down the river, sounding full until it died out by the water. Charlotte and Maisey stared at Grandma Tracy.

“Are you okay?” Charlotte looked panicked.

Maisey looked confused.

“That’s better,” said Grandma Tracy. She moved to the end of the rock so they could stand beside her. “I know it looks silly, but the yelling really helps when you’re missing someone.”

“Are you missing someone?” Charlotte asked. Grandma Tracy felt Charlotte watching very closely.

“It’s just something that my friend taught me,” Grandma Tracy said. “I was thinking of her today.” Maisey raised her head and tried yelling too, but her voice was too weak and didn’t carry over the hill.

“Good try,” Grandma Tracy said, laying the blanket over the rock. One day, years away, Charlotte and Maisey could come back to scream for her.

A robin raised its orange beak from between two blades of grass, and Grandma Tracy thought of a grouse, peeking out from its nest to feel the wind. A woodpecker chattered in the distance, and Grandma Tracy told Charlotte and Maisey about Mrs. Wood.
Winter: Ladybugs

Charlotte could see the short set of stairs from the kitchen to the bedrooms through a crack in her bedroom door. She lay on her side with her knees tucked in and watched the stairs grow dark, while her bedroom hummed with the buzzing sounds of ladybugs and the yellow overhead light.

The ladybugs always came in fall, when the wind picked up and the sky turned cold and Charlotte could smell sticky crabapples on the bus ride home from school. The beetles stuck to the ceiling in Charlotte’s bedroom and stayed for the winter. They gathered in a reddish-orange clump on the ledge of her window, and as the nights grew colder, they spiraled inward, from the window to the ceiling, until all the paint was covered by their dusty, dotted red. Sometimes, when Charlotte woke up at night, it scared her to see them seeping through her window. It looked like the great, big sky was bleeding into her tiny room.

But, Charlotte also loved the ladybugs. That night, as the house grew quieter, Charlotte felt lonelier and more bored. She rolled onto her back and watched the ladybugs huddle their shells and move around on L-shaped feet. Her mother poked her head through the door, a pair of reading glasses stuck to the end of her nose.

“Are you sleeping with the light on?” she whispered, squinting at the light.

Charlotte pointed toward the ladybugs to answer.

“Oh brother.” Her mother motioned for Charlotte to make room and slid onto the covers to watch the ceiling. “You’re like your father,” she said. “They’re just ladybugs.” She wriggled to find a comfortable place on the bed.
“I know,” Charlotte said. “It’s just fun to see them together.” The ladybugs’ wings crackled where they bumped into the walls. “They must feel so tiny when they go back to flying outside,” Charlotte said.

“You’re pretty small yourself, and you’re doing just fine.” Charlotte elbowed her mother’s arm. She did feel small inside her bed, when she imagined all the places the ladybugs had flown.

“Did you know they eat their own eggs?” her mother asked.

“Ew!” Charlotte squealed. “Why would you tell me that?” Her mother giggled. Charlotte could tell from the dark circles under her eyes that her mother had been awake Googling. She always stayed up late Googling whatever she wanted to know. She peppered all her facts into conversation the next day, phrasing them like things you should know. “Didn’t you know your heart beats 1.5 gallons per minute?” That one made Charlotte think of her heart as a pot of soup boiling over.

“It’s true!” her mother said. “But they won’t lay eggs until the spring.”

The door creaked, and Charlotte’s father poked his head through the crack.

“What’s going on?” he asked, one eye shut against the light.

Her father was the lightest sleeper in the house, and he was often woken up by Charlotte’s mother prowling about the house.

“We were just talking about the ladybugs,” her mother said.

“They are amazing, aren’t they?” He came to lay on Charlotte’s other side and wriggled his head up onto a pillow. “They really take me back to my first apartment. It was full of these things.” He looked over at Charlotte. “Don’t let any fall in your mouth,” he said. “They taste like dirt.”
Charlotte imagined her father laying on the couch in a small Boston apartment and spitting out ladybugs that fell from overhead.

“Isn’t that when you met mom?” Charlotte asked.

“Yep,” said her mother. “We watched a special on ladybugs for our third date.” Charlotte imagined them balled up on a short, brown couch, their faces lit by the TV’s black-and-white light. Then, she thought the TV might have been in color by then, so she changed it to multi-colored light in her mind. She frowned when she couldn’t picture what they must have worn in the ’90s.

Charlotte loved hearing stories about her parents’ pasts. They usually talked about the days after Charlotte and Maisey were born. She couldn’t remember many details about her parents before that. She only knew that they had lived together in Boston, just before they were married, and they’d both lived in New York before that. Charlotte couldn’t help but feel a little jealous that she wasn’t there to see her parents when they were younger. They’d known each other longer than she’d known them.

Her father began the story. “I met your mother on the worst day of the year.” Charlotte kicked him under the covers.

“It wasn’t that bad,” her mother said. On the ceiling, two ladybugs stood at once and bumped their rounded shells together, buzzing worriedly and failing to take off.

“It was horrible. There were slush puddles everywhere on the street, and it was snowing, but it was also raining.” His eyes sparked, and he talked in his loud story-telling voice, to make sure Charlotte was listening. She was.

Her father had met her mother on a day that was horrible and slushy but wasn’t really that bad. Her father was trudging down the street toward the 7/11, just a few blocks down from his
apartment. He always walked after a long day spent teaching multiplication tables. He usually chatted with Bill at the counter before heading home with a crinkly plastic bag full of noodles and peanut butter snacks. That’s what Charlotte imagined he ate, as those were his favorite snacks.

Charlotte pictured the 7/11 she liked best, the one at the end of a very long street lined with gray buildings and Boston brick and one row of spindly pine trees. She knew her parents had gone there a lot before she was born, when her mother was craving grape slushies. Charlotte had been there once too, when they had visited Boston, and her mother had taken her to the 7/11 to drink slushies until their tongues turned blue.

The street was long and wide, with lumpy sidewalks and street lamps that beamed white light in the nighttime.

Her father was walking along this street when he spotted a snowman leering at him from under the trees. He could barely see it through the snow stuck to his eyes, but the snowman was looming under the line of trees. “I stopped dead in my tracks,” her father said.

“Why’d you stop?” Charlotte couldn’t keep herself from breaking in.

“Because just as I was passing the last few trees, I saw the snowman move.” He paused for effect and watched to see shock on Charlotte’s face. She watched him with her eyebrows raised to show that she didn’t believe him.

At first, the snowman’s arm, a bendy twig from the pine trees, waggled “hello.” Then, as Charlotte’s father looked into the snowman’s face, flecked with mud and pebbles, he could’ve sworn he saw the snowman’s head tilt.
Her father’s first reaction was to back away. He kept his eyes on the snowman, as he
inched backward toward the road. Someone had shoved pine cones into the snowman’s face to
serve as his eyes, and they watched her father, unblinking.

“That snowman was not that scary,” Charlotte’s mother broke in. “It barely came up to
your waist.”

Two ladybugs roving the ceiling collided and buzzed their wings, until they settled them
again and continued in different directions.

For just a moment, Charlotte wondered if it was true. She had heard people say that love
was like magic, and her parents weren’t the only ones who had seen a magic snowman. Maisey
claimed that she and Charlotte had seen one too – three winters ago, before Maisey had grown to
Charlotte’s height. They had built a snowwoman under Maisey’s window, using their mother’s
favorite baseball cap. They still didn’t know how it had happened, but Maisey said she had heard
a strange crunching sound that night, outside her window, and when she looked out, the
snowperson had disappeared, though the rest of the snow on the ground hadn’t melted. They had
found the hat cast up into a tree, and Maisey insisted that the snowwoman had rolled away in the
night and tossed the hat behind her so they wouldn’t lose it.

“So, it was like magic when you met,” Charlotte asked her father. “Shouldn’t true love
magic be a little less scary?”

“It wasn’t magic,” her mother said. “It was me.” She smiled at Charlotte’s confusion.

“Your father is exaggerating his story.”

When Charlotte’s father stumbled upon the snowman, Charlotte’s mother was crouching
behind it, hidden by the snow and fog and nudging the snow to make it move. She had just built
it to brighten up the landscape. She had learned to always take matters into her own hands. She
fashioned the snowman’s smile from a shoelace and meant to give the passersby a friendly wave, so she was surprised by Charlotte’s father, who took the snowman seriously, rather than a prank. When she could see that he was afraid, she emerged from behind the snowbank. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I just thought it would be funny to see a snowman wave hello.”

In her bright green jacket and matching leg warmers, in Charlotte’s mind, her mother looked like some sort of goblin. Her father had struggled to think of something to say when she spoke to him.

“That’s okay,” he said. “You’re a very convincing snowman.”

Charlotte’s parents had stood at the center of the sidewalk while everything moved around them. The cars hissed through puddles. The snowflakes swirled and stuck to their cheeks and hair. And the streetlamps glowed brighter as the sky grew dark, creating a spotlight. They were aware of the wind and the growing cold, but they couldn’t feel it. Her father looked down a lot when he was talking nervously. Her mother stood with her arms crossed when her hands were cold.

Charlotte watched the ladybugs nestle together. Then, after a while, her mother broke the silence. “So, it wasn’t actually magic.”

Charlotte glared at the side of her father’s face. “I knew the snowman wasn’t moving.” He always told his stories in a way that made them more exciting.

“I think he really was confused in the moment,” her mother said. “Probably a little bit because he was delirious.”

“That’s right!” her father sat up. “I completely forgot I had the flu!”

Charlotte didn’t know if it was romantic or offensive that her parents couldn’t remember the details.
A cluster of ladybugs, with shells orange like Boston brick, gathered on a briefly empty stretch of ceiling. The smallest, a beetle with only one spot, wobbled behind the other two, until they halted, and all three collided at once. The smallest, thrown from the ceiling, landed – thwap – on the bed. Stuck on its back, the bug’s waxy underbelly and thin legs looked so small in the sea of bed covers that Charlotte wasn’t sure it had enough strength in its wings, and then, the ladybug stood and flew back to the ceiling, where it wandered, probably looking for the other two. Charlotte tried to concentrate on her parents’ words. She was losing track of the story in her mind.

When her father met her mother, he had the flu and needed Aspirin. On his walk to the 7/11, everything looked blurry in the snow. He was moving toward the red and blue light from the 7/11 sign, when he noticed the snowman, looming toward the sidewalk.

“Your mother walked with me so she could be sure I was okay,” her father said. Charlotte thought maybe they stood at a distance under the streetlights.

“I still loved that he even noticed the snowman,” her mother said. “I mostly walked with him because I wanted to talk more.”

Charlotte’s father had never talked so easily with someone before. It turned out they worked in the same school district, the one with the infuriating school board. As they told their story, their voices were so sappy Charlotte squirmed like a beetle. They talked inside the 7/11 until her father’s fever had improved with Aspirin, and Charlotte’s mother walked back to her apartment, looking over her shoulder at the snowman all the way.

“We met again two weeks later,” her father said.
Charlotte imagined them meeting on the same street. They spotted each other from different sides of the road and kept waving, until her father was able to run toward her through the first break in traffic.

“Is that why winter’s your favorite season?” she asked her mother.

“Well, it wasn’t winter. It was April,” her mother said.

“That’s why the snow was so nasty,” said her father.

The image in Charlotte’s head was all wrong. Now, she imagined her father’s scarf thinner and her mother in a bright green raincoat. It never snowed in April, so the meeting must have been related to a rainy, muddy magic.

Another ladybug dropped from the ceiling, and something buzzed on Charlotte’s tongue. She shrieked. When the ladybug flew away to the ceiling, her tongue was still buzzing.

Her father laughed. “I told you,” he said. Charlotte’s head kept buzzing.

“Everything tastes like ladybug.” She still smelled the earthy scent on her breath.

“Maybe these are the same ladybugs from the old apartment,” he joked. “Staying with us.”

June smiled, even as she said “You’re ridiculous.”

Charlotte imagined the ladybugs flying for all those years, through the wind and over the plants and animals and people on the ground. Ladybugs didn’t fly very high, so they probably thought the people were all very large, especially when they came up close to see their polka-dots. Charlotte felt small thinking of all the time she wasn’t alive. At least she could picture the ladybugs in her father’s apartment. She heard her father’s voice drone off into the buzzing of ladybugs and felt herself begin to fall asleep.
When she woke in the morning, it was snowing, and perfect circles of frost were frozen on the window. Maisey was shouting from outside her bedroom door.

“Charlotte! Get up! It’s snowing outside!”

Outside, the sky was bright and solid blue, and they had to blink hard to see through the sun bouncing on the snow. The trees rustled as their boots creaked further into the yard, and, suddenly, Grandma Tracy leapt out from behind a tree. “Look out!” she called and pegged Charlotte with her snowball. Charlotte and Maisey ducked behind the bushes.

Maisey kept watch while Charlotte prepared her own snowball. She wound up and was about to throw.

“Charlotte!” Her father called out from the front door. “You better not be throwing snowballs at your grandmother.” Charlotte paused. Before she could answer, Grandma Tracy hit her with more snow.

“Stay out of this, Jim!” Grandma Tracy cackled and dodged Charlotte’s failed snowball. Charlotte’s mother laughed from the kitchen window.

By the time the snowflakes turned to rain, the snow had risen over Charlotte’s boots. Grandma Tracy seemed more winded than usual, so Charlotte and Maisey walked slowly with her to get inside and sit back on the couch. “Whoo!” Grandma Tracy coughed a little. “That was some real exercise”

Charlotte and Maisey draped their socks on the radiator and made Grandma Tracy a cup of coffee. While they worked, Charlotte told the story she’d heard the night before.

“Mom and dad told me they met while it was snowing,” she said. Maisey listened and nodded along. She always listened to Charlotte’s stories.
“Mom built a snowman and made it wave at him from behind the trees, and then, they met in the same place three days later.”

“Like magic!” Maisey said. Charlotte could see her staring out the window and imagining the scene. She wondered how the snowman looked in Maisey’s mind.

“It wasn’t magic,” Grandma Tracy said as they handed her the tea. “They met at a friend’s house the second time, though I’m sure it was meant to be.” Charlotte frowned and tried to remember why she’d thought that her parents had reunited on the street. Had her parents ever really said that?

“That’s when your mother was living in Michigan.”

“Michigan?” Charlotte’s head snapped up.

Grandma Tracy nodded. “They were in Michigan for a year.”

Charlotte had never been to Michigan. She couldn’t picture a snowman on a Michigan street. She couldn’t imagine all the things the ladybugs had seen, flying from Michigan on triangle wings. It was probably scary to be a little ladybug surrounded by the sky.

Charlotte ran upstairs for a new pair of socks. In her bedroom, the ladybugs crawled quickly and a little dizzily through the sunlight and buzzed around the walls. Charlotte looked for the tiny ladybug she’d seen yesterday, the one with just a single spot, but the ladybugs wove around each other so quickly they were difficult to follow. They disappeared behind each other, then reappeared in different corners. They formed a sea so large it gave Charlotte the creepy-crawlies.
Spring: Muscle Memory

Maisey sighed loud enough for everyone to hear and stretched out across the carpet to show her irritation. She hated when Grandma Tracy controlled the TV. Maisey’s mother always complained that Grandma Tracy had trouble making decisions, but everyone still let her control the remote, even though she played each show for just a few minutes before flipping to the next channel to see what else was on. From her seat on the couch, Grandma Tracy cut off a woman’s voice in the middle of a song and then played the beginning of a cartoon, about a rabbit who had lost his bicycle. Just when it seemed like he would find the bike, she flipped away to the news. Maisey was too annoyed to sit still. She rolled her head back against the carpet and sighed again with her toes curled up in her socks. She tried to catch Charlotte’s eye, but Charlotte liked to stay quiet at night because complaining got you sent to bed.

“Maisey, stop if you’re going to be in here,” her mother said, but she was scrolling on her phone instead of watching the TV.

Finally, Grandma Tracy flipped to a show about a cartoon mouse who danced ballet. Maisey leapt up from the carpet and yelled, “Stop!” She stood in front of the television to take in every movement.

“Maisey, you make a better door than a window,” said Grandma Tracy. She craned her neck to see around her.

“I used to watch this all the time!” Maisey said. In kindergarten, Maisey had been in Ms. Norris’s after school ballet class. She’d watched every show about ballet, and she’d worn ballet shoes every day to school, each shoe with two ribbons that wrapped around her legs, all the way to her knees. But, Maisey hadn’t danced since Kindergarten ended, when Ms. Norris had stopped teaching.
“In this show, all the ballerinas are good at leaping!” said Maisey, already part way in the air. She leapt across the living room with her feet pointed in different directions, closing her eyes to imagine she was flying even higher. The smallest mouse was performing a solo on the screen, standing upright in fourth position, then twirling into an arabesque. Maisey mimicked her stance, then twirled. She twirled two times more and almost knocked the lamp into Grandma Tracy’s lap. “Maisey!” her mother snapped. She could feel the soft shag carpet pushing up between her toes, and blocking the TV, she turned to face her family, standing in first position.

Her feet moved before she could think about what they were doing, as if they were moving all on their own. They turned out to fourth position, and she felt one arm raise and gracefully curl. Her ankles pushed together and her knees bowed out in a plie, before her sweeping bow for applause.

Everybody clapped as Maisey curled up on the floor near the television. “I didn’t know you could dance,” Grandma Tracy said, and Maisey stared at her in shock. She hadn’t thought about dancing in a while, but she had always considered herself a ballerina.

“Of course I danced!” she said. “I can’t believe I remembered all of that, though!”

“Well, You used to practice every day,” her mother said. “Once you learn something that well, you can remember it again. It’s just muscle memory.”

Maisey beamed down at her toes, stretched out on the carpet. She remembered Ms. Norris telling them to practice morning and night so they could remember their steps. Maisey had practiced in her bathroom mirror every morning and before she went to bed, and she decided she would practice again, to see what else she remembered. Then, Grandma Tracy would know she was a serious dancer, and Maisey wouldn’t forget about knowing all those steps.
That night, she practiced all the dance steps she could remember in the bathroom mirror. She couldn’t remember what her spin was called, or where to put her feet for fifth position, but she felt her muscles move like they remembered other steps. When she climbed into bed, she stared at the ceiling and started to worry. What else was inside her muscles that she had forgotten to think about? Would she stop thinking about ballet again? She imagined memories like marbles rolling around in her joints, and she worried that one day, she’d forget to look for them, like marbles lost under the couch.

In the morning, when Maisey stretched her arms above her head, she felt them curve like a ballerina’s, into a perfect oval. Standing at the bathroom sink to brush her teeth, she felt her ankles touch and her feet jut out for second position as her muscles remembered more and more. She spat a mouthful of bubblegum toothpaste into the sink and turned to face the full-length mirror on the bathroom door. She could feel her feet and arms lifting and bouncing, like she was in dance class in the school gymnasium, where the walls always smelled like sweat.

At the end of the school day, Ms. Norris would ask all the kindergarten ballerinas to stand in a line behind the first-grade ballerinas. Then, she’d ask about their days and she’d say “Okay! Let’s get started!” and begin to model all the steps at the front of the room. She was so strong she could float, all the way up to the tips of her toes, and fall again without a sound. Back in the bathroom, Maisey’s stomach grumbled and broke the silence, so she turned her feet toward the door and went downstairs, where Charlotte and Grandma Tracy ate at the kitchen table.

Grandma Tracy chatted with Maisey’s mother and paid no attention to her fingers worrying at a grapefruit skin. Her hands sprayed a cloud of citrus to mix with the heavy smell of butter from the stove. While Maisey’s father looked around for an empty plate, the muscles in his hand flipped the perfect egg, not too fast, like he did every morning.
Maisey pictured their muscles like smooth, pink shells, clamped over memories, like clams around pearls.

“Charlotte, help your sister with the orange juice, please.” Their mother leaned against the brown tiled countertop. Maisey ignored her, leaning the carton onto the lip of the glass, and juice spilled everywhere, soaking the table.

“Every morning.” Her mother sighed, and she tossed Maisey the paper towels. The years had left many stains and indentations pressed into the table’s wood.

Grandma Tracy sat back in her chair while Maisey soaked up the spill. “What are we doing today?” she asked.

“I think we should all help in the garden,” their mother said.

It was March, and their mother wanted to get seeds in the ground before the green shoots started sprouting for the summer. The breezes were already starting to smell like lilac and warm grass. Maisey hated the way the spring made her nose itch, and she tried to think of an excuse to avoid the garden while she returned the juice to the fridge.

Her eyes stuck to her photograph taped on the refrigerator door. Near the pictures of Maisey’s first field trip and Charlotte’s old soccer team, Maisey stood in a line of tiny ballerinas dressed in stiff, bright tutus and holding plastic trophies toward the camera. Maisey held hers high above her head and beamed. She had felt so proud at her first recital, when Charlotte and her parents had stood to cheer from the back of the school gymnasium. She could feel the excitement again somewhere in her stomach. She had felt so happy when she’d finished every step, and the whole family had gone for ice cream afterwards.

Maisey popped back to the table with an idea in her head. If she could find the trophy in the attic, Grandma Tracy would have more proof that Maisey was a serious ballerina, and,
maybe, Maisey would remember more steps she hadn’t thought of in a while. “I know what we should do!” she said. “We should go explore the attic.” She was already tugging on Charlotte’s arm.

“Why would we do that on such a nice day?” said Grandma Tracy.

“We’ll go up to the attic and bring down all the stuff you should see,” Maisey said. “So you can get to know us better.”

“I feel like I know you pretty well.” Grandma Tracy said.

“Um yeah. And we don’t take things out of the attic,” said their mother, standing by the kitchen sink.

Grandma Tracy raised her eyebrows. “Just let them show me what they think I should see,” Grandma Tracy said. “They can choose what they think is important, and we’ll put it all back.”

Maisey smiled. She loved exploring the boxes and remembering different things. When she pulled on an old sweater or suddenly stepped on an abandoned Lego, she could feel past things again, like forgotten memories rolled out into her mind. Her father smirked into his coffee mug. “Maybe they’ll lose something and make some space up there,” he said.

Their mother glared. “You can show Grandma Tracy,” she said. “But, I’ll know if you don’t put every last thing back where you found it. And if you lose any memories, we might not be able to get them back.” She was always careful to keep their memories in attic piles, where she knew that she could find them again.

Charlotte and Maisey were already running up the stairs. Their mother would notice if things were missing, but she could never know if they put things back where they found them. The piles of memories were all just messes.
Charlotte pulled open the attic door, and Maisey shivered. The air in the attic was still cold from winter. Maisey darted to stand under the only window, the only square of light, where she could warm her toes in the sun.

The room was long and rectangular, just tall enough for their father to stand in. The sun warmed the one edge by the window, while cold radiated from the broad stone chimney crumbling at the center of the room.

Maisey stood under the window in a cloud of dust motes that twirled softly in the draft. Through the glitter, she could see her stiff pink tutu, swaying on a clothing rack, beside her parents’ brightly colored jackets from high school. She reached for the tutu, and she felt one leg point in the air behind her, so she stood like a ballerina on a music box. She pulled the tutu down and tied it on over her jeans.

It was too small to cover her middle — according to her mother, she was growing like a weed — but she tied its ribbon around her waist and allowed the skirt to stay open at the back.

Her father had tried so many times to throw the frayed tulle away, but Maisey had insisted on keeping it. He always said he didn’t see why she needed it, but Maisey’s mother understood, so kept it on the clothing rack.

Charlotte gasped from the other side of the room. She tore open a box and hugged a tattered blanket. Maisey recognized the red-and-white quilt her mother had made for Charlotte when she was having nightmares and couldn’t sleep. Back then, Charlotte wore her hair in pigtails that Maisey always tried to copy. “Oh my God,” Charlotte said, looking up at Maisey. “Do you remember how much you used to wear that?”

Maisey laughed. She had worn the tutu almost every day in Kindergarten with her ballet shoes with the long pink ribbons. Charlotte had called her silly, but Maisey had always liked to
be the first one ready when the school day ended and Ms. Norris asked all the ballerinas to line up in the gym. She remembered the joy she’d felt watching her pink feet move in the mirror.

“Maisey!” Charlotte’s voice broke through her daydream. She pulled a checkered tablecloth out of the box, and Maisey shrieked as a shower of mouse dropping scattered over her feet. Long and thin, she expected the droppings to fall lightly, like rolls of lint, but instead, they fell hard over her feet and scuttled on the floor. A few pointy droppings had slipped through the tops of her socks, and they scratched against her legs.

“Are they eating everything?” Maisey shrieked. She peeked into the box. “What if we forget what was in here!”

Charlotte claimed she didn’t notice the mice anymore, but they sometimes kept Maisey awake at night, when they scratched and nibbled at the walls and rolled around unseen.

From the bottom of the box, Charlotte picked up a small stuffed toy in the shape of a dog. Its face was worn, and its fur had been torn so that stuffing spilled out from the holes in his ears and his body. A hard plastic nose dangled from his face by a thread. “Whose is that?” Maisey cringed away from the dog.

Charlotte studied it for a moment. Then she said, “I don’t know. It looks old enough to be Grandma Tracy’s.” They stood back to look at the side of the box, where someone had scribbled their names. “I think everything in here is ours,” Charlotte said. She leaned back to study the dog. “But, I can’t recognize this anymore.”

Maisey suddenly felt sad for the dog. She snatched it from Charlotte and hugged it to her chest.

“Maisey!” Charlotte batted the toy away from Maisey’s face, knocking it into the droppings on the floor. “Don’t put that near your face. That’s disgusting.”
Charlotte was usually right, so Maisey held the dog away from her face, but she still picked him up and brushed the droppings from his fur, before setting the puppy down on the cleanest floorboard she could find. “We can’t just throw it away,” she said.

“Just keep it away from me,” said Charlotte. She poked through the box with one finger, keeping her face at a safe distance. Then, she froze and met Maisey’s eyes. Maisey started to back away, worried that Charlotte might fling a mouse out of the box between them. Instead, she pulled out a toy microphone, made from hollow, neon plastic. She raised the microphone dramatically from the box and began the goodnight song their parents had written years before. Before Maisey knew that she was moving, she was dancing to the song, making the same poses they used to every night.

It had all started with their mother singing “It’s time for bed” to the basic tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” When she’d wanted to drown out the whining and complaining, their mother would sing over their voices. “The day is over. Go to sleep/ I need some rest, so go to sleep.” Soon, the song was accompanied by a dance routine. Their father had moved his arms like a chicken, while their mother had worked the microphone like a popstar on a stage, and Charlotte and Maisey had stomped their feet and struck their funny poses all the way up the stairs, trying to make each other laugh. They had usually felt more awake by the end of the song, but their mother had told them to stay in bed. She’d taught them to talk to each other through the wall between their bedrooms. Charlotte had told stories she thought Maisey would like, about ballerinas and talking cats, and they’d talked until their voices faded and they’d nodded off to sleep.

Charlotte laughed as Maisey copied their father’s old poses and started her own flapping chicken wings. Then, she stopped to poke at a piece of silky pink fabric peeking out of the box.
She pulled her old ballet shoes out of the box, and a waterfall of birdseed, mouse droppings, and what looked like chewed-up bits of acorn rained down over the floorboards and onto the ends of her toes. Maisey didn’t care. She held them up to her feet to see if they’d still fit. There was a rustling sound inside the box. Maisey grabbed both shoes and sprinted away, screaming, as a mouse darted away from the box. It shot out of the cardboard and slid through a hole at the base of the wall. Charlotte staggered after Maisey, doubled over laughing and wheezing her words.

“What are you doing?” Maisey was pulling on the shoes. “That’s disgusting,” she gasped to catch her breath. Maisey felt her fingers begin to tie the ribbons all the way up around her knees, like they remembered on their own.

“I just want to remember what they feel like,” she said. Inside, the cool fabric felt smooth and familiar. She ran her fingers over the ribbons’ tattered ends.

Charlotte went back to looking through boxes, still laughing and shaking her head, and Maisey sat in the sunlight under the window to warm her legs. She had to curl her toes a little to keep them stuck inside the shoes, and her muscles were already cramping. She remembered a forgotten feeling: the sharp sting of blisters at the bottom of her toes and the wetness of something leaking from them where they burst. Still, she liked the way the shoes looked on her feet. She leaned against the wall beneath the window and swayed the slippers back and forth through the dust motes.

The dust settled around the sides of the shoes, making them glitter, and she tried to remember other feelings she’d forgotten, like the wind in the middle of a leap or a spin. She remembered that she sometimes got to dance with the first graders because she wasn’t afraid to spin really fast. Everyone wore stiff tutus in different colors, and the gym floor stuck to the bottom of her shoes. Ms. Norris always began from first position.
Maisey was never nervous when she danced for her family at home, so she used to gather everyone on the couch to watch her practice.

She couldn’t remember fifth position now, even with all the practice, except that it was something beautiful, and it sometimes made her feet hurt. Where Maisey sat on the floor, she felt her feet slide closer to one another. Her heels touched, and her legs bowed outwards, and before she knew what was happening, she felt herself pulled upwards to a standing position. Like a rag doll’s, her arms swung by her side, until they snapped into position in front of her, making a circular shape. She heard her elbows crack, but she couldn’t straighten out her feet or lower her arms.

When the music came louder through the gym speakers, it sounded fuzzy, and all of the ballerinas were supposed to run with fluttering feet in one big circle. On the creaky floorboards, Maisey’s legs started moving in little steps to make a big circle. Her arms fluttered behind her. Another memory surfaced, the flutter of a butterfly wing somewhere in her stomach, someone saying “It’s just nerves in your tummy!” The fear she had felt on recital day washed over her. It had surprised her then, after so many nights spent practicing at home. Because of the running or the fear, Maisey’s spit thickened, and she thought she might be sick.

She stared at Charlotte in disbelief as her feet came to a halt. Then, she felt her arms extend, and her feet were running, in a circle flowing in the opposite direction. She felt the wind rush past her ears as she flew. They ran in a circle five times.

Her vision turned blurry from all the spinning. She remembered the feeling of sickness and losing her bearings, forgetting where she was in the room after too much spinning. Suddenly, her feet stuck to one place on the floor, and she halted. Maisey breathed out sharply through her mouth and bent to rest her hands on her knees. She stretched her arms and rolled her shoulders to
be sure she could control them, and she thought, maybe this was just the process of muscle memory bringing everything up inside her, causing her to move before she knew how. Charlotte was staring at her from the other corner of the room. “What are you doing?” she asked.

Maisey wiggled her toes. “I guess it was just all coming back to me,” she said.

“Your feet are getting red.” Charlotte pointed. Maisey could see deep red lines forming where the elastic in her shoes pressed sharply into the sides of her feet. As her toes jammed further into the front of the shoes, her feet were beginning to arch farther outwards. It looked like they would pop out from the top at any moment.

“I just have to get used to them again.” She pushed her toes into the floorboards and stood up on her tippy-toes. She tried to feel as graceful as she used to, when Ms. Norris said she was good at spinning. Instead, her muscles felt heavy, and her toes hurt. When she tried to lay her feet flat, the muscles in her legs and ankles locked, and she couldn’t move away from the tips of her toes.

“Charlotte?” Maisey called. “I can’t move.” Her muscles were cramping, and she was afraid her joints would break.

“What?” Maisey saw Charlotte’s face through a film of dust motes, each one spinning like a miniature ballerina. As Maisey watched them spin, she felt her own body turn, faster and faster until she felt light as a fleck of dust. Her arms shot out in front of her, into first position, curved into their circular shape. She had forgotten how sore dancing made her. After Ms. Norris’s class, she used to come home and stretch out on the couch with ice on her feet. Her locked joints throbbed.

“Maisey?” Charlotte said. “Stop it! You’re freaking me out!”
“I can’t!” Maisey was swirling around as she spoke. *They spun around seven times in Ms. Norris’s dance routine.* Maisey was so dizzy she could see the room only in a blur of wood and stone. Charlotte was a streak of pink. Once she’d counted seven spins, Maisey felt her back arch backwards and a crack from somewhere in her spine. Her joints snapped to attention. A searing pain tingled up from her feet as her legs leapt across the room, her toes pointed and suspended in midair. The leaping carried her across the room from wall to wall, shaking the floorboards at every landing.

“Maisey! You’re going to break the floorboards! Try to grab onto the wall!” Leaping had always been Maisey’s favorite part of a performance. *She loved jumping high in the air and moving quickly, so the audience streaked by and almost disappeared.* Now, her shoes squeezed her feet too tightly. “Your feet are bleeding!” Charlotte screamed. “Take the shoes off!”

She could feel a few drops of something wet smearing around her toes, but she could do nothing to bend her waist or arms. Her toes stuck to the fabric on the bottom of the shoes. She tried to grab the beams that jutted from the walls, reaching out for them as she passed, but she was moving too quickly. “I’m trying!” she called. Finally, the dancing slowed again. She stood in third position, her feet jutting out in different directions. She was crying, and she could feel the blood growing sticky on her toes, causing them to fuse to the sides of her shoes. *Third position always made her ankles sore, but she had felt so happy when Charlotte and her parents had stood up from their fold-up chairs and clapped from the back row. Ms. Norris had taught them to wave to the crowd and bow with big, sweeping motions.* “Thank you!” Maisey heard herself yell. Her arms swung under her as she bowed to Charlotte, and she felt her arms wave toward the staircase, but rather than ending the dance, she could feel her feet sliding into first position again, as if Ms. Norris had told them, “From the top!” Her muscles tensed to perform.
“I want to take them off,” Maisey sobbed. She panicked as she felt her feet move apart again.

“I’m going to get mom and dad,” Charlotte said, and she started running toward the stairs.

“No! Don’t leave,” Maisey cried. Her feet were throbbing as they pushed her back up onto her toes.

“I’ll be right back,” Charlotte called over her shoulder.

Maisey had cried before recital day. Everything she loved about that day had come after the performance: the trophy, the hugging, and the celebration. Maybe she hadn’t loved dancing as much as she’d thought. She felt warmer inside, and her joints began to relax as she remembered the songs her family sang together on the car ride to the ice cream store. They'd all shared a banana split because Maisey had always wanted to try one. Once her muscles stopped recreating the recital, she could feel the relief that had warmed her when the dancing had ended.

Maisey collapsed in the shaded area of the attic, feeling sweat trickle down her back. She tore off the shoes and pulled at the ribbon around her waist to drop the tutu. On the ground, she pulled her knees to her chest. Most of the blood had dried in thin smears on her feet. And she stared at the shoes for a while before testing control of her own feet and legs.

Finally, she stood and went to the wall to shove a ballet slipper through the hole where the mouse had disappeared. She didn't want to see the shoe again, but part of her didn’t want to know it was gone. The mouse had seemed to love the shoe’s new purpose, as a place to store his nuts and seeds.

She breathed heavily as she made her way downstairs, carrying the toy microphone, and the second ballet shoe, to be thrown in the trash. She met Charlotte and her mother in the kitchen rushing towards the attic. Charlotte let Maisey lean on her shoulder and eased her onto a seat at
the kitchen table. Her mother was shocked that Maisey had finally agreed to get rid of the shoes. Quietly, Charlotte tossed the shoe into the bin before her mother encouraged her to keep it. Her mother helped Maisey to stick three bandaids over the broken blisters on her feet. No one knew what to believe about the attic, except that the shoes had been too small, and Maisey had been unable to take them off.

“Let’s go outside,” their mother said. “We’re going to talk about something as a family.” She walked out the door with her arms around them, and Charlotte looked nervously at Maisey from the corner of her eye. Maisey couldn’t understand why no one was asking her more about what had happened in the attic.

“What do we have to talk about?” Charlotte asked. They joined their father and Grandma Tracy in the garden. Maisey went to sit on the garden rock beside Grandma Tracy. When she stretched her arms, she could feel them begin to form an oval over her head, but their muscles felt warm, and she found that she could straighten them again when she wanted.

“Did you bring me anything to look at?” Grandma Tracy asked.

“No,” Maisey said. “I’ll tell you about my ballet recital another time.” Maisey no longer worried that Grandma Tracy didn’t see her as a ballerina. She was a little different now that she was older, and even if others didn’t remember to call her a ballerina, her muscles were storing ballet steps somewhere.

Grandma Tracy nodded. They wiggled to avoid the bugs on the rock and watched Maisey’s parents plant cucumbers and tomatoes, waiting for someone to speak.

“Girls, we were talking about something important while you were upstairs.” Their mother looked up from the tomato plants, and her hands were trembling until she pushed them
into her pockets. Maisey pulled her knees to her chest and listened closely, seeing that her mother was upset.

Her breath was shaky. “Grandma Tracy hasn’t been feeling well,” her mother said. “She didn’t want to tell you.” Their mother glanced at Grandma Tracy, “But we think you should know so you can help her when she’s feeling sick. She’s going to stay here a little while longer because her doctors say she needs some treatments.”

“What kind of treatments?” Maisey asked.

“They’ll make me a little sick, but, then, I’ll eventually be fine,” Grandma Tracy said. “I’ll be out of here right after tomato season.”

Their mother looked like she didn’t believe what Grandma Tracy said. Maisey put her hand on Grandma Tracy’s. It rolled over the bone. It was much softer than it looked.

“I have cancer,” said Grandma Tracy, “But, the doctors are going to help me. You can make me soup and bring me things from the attic if my memory starts going.” Maisey imagined shaking Grandma Tracy’s arm until her memories rolled to where she could see them. Already, her fingers were tucking away the feel of Grandma Tracy’s skin with the smell of the flower beds.

Maisey’s mother stood and wiped her hands under her eyes. “Ah!” She sighed like she was thinking of something else. “Let’s make dinner, and we can talk about it more.” They walked inside as Maisey and Charlotte began to cry.

Everybody comforted them until they smiled at once, and they cooked pasta and ate it at a small metal table in the yard.

“So, you really didn’t bring me anything from the attic?” Grandma Tracy leaned back in her chair, with her hands crossed over her belly. The wind blew colder as the sun fell, reminding
Maisey of nights she’d felt the cold air blow through her window while Charlotte told a story through the wall. She got up suddenly, and Charlotte followed her inside. Maisey could sense everyone else’s fear that something was wrong, but they returned carrying the neon microphone and singing the “Goodnight Song.” “The day is over. Go to sleep/ I need some rest, so go to sleep.” Their parents started laughing at the table, and their mother stood to dance in the yard with tears still in her eyes. Grandma Tracy watched and clapped her hands, looking confused.

Their father joined in after their mother. “It’s time for bed.” By the second verse, Maisey could feel her feet shuffling from side to side, in a pattern she could hardly remember. Charlotte joined her, and Grandma Tracy followed along. Their mother and father followed Maisey and Charlotte around the garden, dancing like a chicken and belting into the microphone. The plants moved too. They wiggled somewhere under the soil, like the unseen memories that rolled around, and Maisey wondered if Grandma Tracy’s muscles would still remember the “Goodnight Dance” when she went back to California.

As they all filed back inside the house, dancing and holding dirty dishes, Maisey’s mother sighed and craned her neck to look up at the wall on the attic level. The windows cast a dull, warm light over the house, so they could vaguely see a small green shoot growing out through the wall. The shoot seemed to grow from a gap in the house’s siding, which had collected dirt and rain. Somewhere inside, Maisey knew that a mouse was storing seeds in her ballet slipper. Attached to the shoot, a little bud had already begun to open purple petals, promising shelter for the mouse and petals to fill the hole in the house.