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Speculative Short Fiction

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Speculative Short Fiction
Sarah White

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Prerequisite for Honors in English
under the advisement of Professor Marilyn Sides

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Introduction

I initially conceived of my thesis as a collection of magical realism short stories. I defined the magical realism genre as one in which there are fantastical, uncanny, and—crucially—unexplained happenings. “Magical realism is a genre that I want to explore out of love for its possibilities,” I wrote in my application. It was a bold claim for someone who had read remarkably little magical realism, particularly as it is traditionally defined. I did not arrive at this topic by reviewing the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Haruki Murakami, nor did I have any strong sense of the historical or cultural context behind the genre I was claiming. Instead, I had written a work of speculative short fiction, enjoyed writing it immensely, decided I wanted to write more of it, and cast about for a genre to slot it into. Magical realism appeared to fit the bill, at least according to my somewhat scant knowledge, so I settled on it—effectively backing into my thesis topic.

On the surface, my writing does match the definition of magical realism. Each story is set in a reasonably realistic setting—with perhaps one or two exceptions, depending on your definition of “realistic”—with fantastical elements introduced. A detective attempts to solve a crime while navigating her boss’ ability to reshape reality; a town full of people go through their daily schedule while watching every word they’ve recently typed appear on their skin; a group of men at a bar swap stories about the sirens who live in the reservoir on the edge of town. Yet the tone and style is markedly different from traditional magical realism. A mid-year thesis reviewer gently pointed this out—the tone of my stories were more uncanny, eerie, and grotesque than classical magical realism. If my stories were members of the genre, they were not members in good standing.

So what *was* I writing? I was writing the sort of fiction that I liked to read, a kind of emerging genre that currently remains nameless but one that I can recognize on sight. These are the stories that I most love to read, and the genre that I've tried to write into. Some writers who I follow are quite well-known. Angela Carter is famous for her bloody, sexual, feminist reinterpretations of fairy tales. Carmen Maria Machado was recently nominated for the National Book Award for her collection of stories about women, bodies, sex, and anger. I've found other, less well-known authors through online communities and the thriving eco-system of digital speculative fiction magazines. Sunny Moraine's story about a young transgender boy trying to survive both bullying and a house that eats people kicked off my interest in speculative short fiction back in high school. Brooke Bolander's work blends talking animals and social commentary with ease. Daniel Mallory Ortberg's short stories are uncanny takes on fairy tales, gender fluidity, and modernity. I'm not sure what to call this nexus of authors and ideas, but I do know it when I see it. Dark, uncanny, odd, political, self-aware. Sometimes grotesque, sometimes funny, sometimes both. Conscious of myth and fabulism. Often angry. I hope you enjoy reading these first ten stories.

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The Words and the Consequences

The town woke up to the words on a Wednesday.

Dont forget to pick up the rotisere for tonite.

I saw the pumkins starting to rot when I left this morning. Time to throw them out?

Lololol that's so real. He is the KING of passive-aggressive, imo.

The first were harmless. They appeared indiscriminately on their writers' bodies. Tucked in the curve of an elbow. Scrawled from nose to ear. Curling down the length of a thigh. The words were squared-off and regimented, neat black type transposed from screen to flesh. They didn't come off but they didn't hurt either, so when people left for work and school they were puzzled but unalarmed.

Can't wait for the party at jesse's #turnup.

We really need the Burton report by COB Friday.

You up?

It began getting worse at the high school first because the words were already so close to the skin there. Inky black or pale and glowing, they shone against flesh like they were tattooed.

A high school student got off the bus with *when will you leave her* tracing the outline of her dollar-store lip-gloss.

Soon. When you graduate, answered the words lining her homeroom teacher's lips, and a secretary stared at the pair of them from the doorway in horror. She marched down to the principal's office to report it, but when she raised her hand she saw *they dont pay me shit, I can barely keep the fucking lights on* wrapping around her wrist. She hesitated, then squared her shoulders. She rolled up her sleeves before knocking.

The principal didn't answer. *Sometimes when they whine at me I imagine punching them* had appeared in the reflection of his forehead in the office coffeepot that morning. He had fled to his office and not emerged. He was becoming acutely aware that he would need to leave to use the bathroom soon and he wasn't happy about it. *I just wish I could do more to help them* twined between his toes, where he couldn't see it.

In the hallway outside his office, a girl rummaged for gloves in the bottom of her locker to hide the *I think I'm in love with her* spiraling from the center of her palm. Nobody at school knew she could love women, not even *her*. Beneath the knit gloves, the words glimmered silver-white on her dark skin. She saw *her* in the hallway and *her* was wearing gloves as well. When they walked towards each other, the girl smiled cautiously. The answering smile wasn't cautious at all. They pressed palms when they kissed.

The star of the spring musical wolf-whistled when he saw them. Nobody laughed. He could not see the sentences appearing in neat rows down the length of his back, dark and vivid. They were visible through the thin white cotton of his shirt.

Fuck you, bitch.

I was never actually going to fuck you

You LYING WHORE.

They appeared slowly, as though they were being typed. Girls backed away from him. They were horrified and they were gratified, and that did not feel like a contradiction. It was like they had found the source of the smell of decay in their kitchen and they could finally say, *you see? I told you something had rotted. I told you.*

Boys backed away too. The words looked new on skin.

You made me do that you bitch marched across the base of the star's spine and a watching girl went white.

i dont think ill ever be normal i think he ruined me i dont think ill ever be ok again I hate this I hate this I hate this zigzagged from the girl's knee to ankle. She didn't notice until her friend flung her arms around her and burst into tears. The girl read the words running down the back of her friend's neck.

I think she's been upset about something but she wont tell me. What if something happened to her??? *I'm so worried. I love her so much,* her neck said, and then they were both crying.

The chaos spiraled outwards, spilling across town. The unlit depths of the digital world were being brought to the surface and bared to the sun.

Everyone had written so very many words and now their skin was owning all of them.

A boy who was home sick from middle school refused to come out of the bathroom no matter how gently his mother coaxed him. She jimmed open the door to find him covering his arms and legs with a towel.

"I only used them because everyone else did, honestly!" he cried. She peeled back the towel.

Holy shitting fuck that quiz was hard.

The fish fingers taste like CRAP! Damn!

Geometry is ass.

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed his forehead, struggling heroically not to laugh as she promised him that she was only a little bit mad.

In a nursing home, an elderly man smiled as every email he had laboriously sent to his granddaughter methodically inscribed themselves on his left thigh. *The foreigners running this place couldn't even understand me, 1.5 stars* appeared on the right, and his nurse sighed a little as she adjusted his pillow.

An executive discovered every racial slurs that he had posted in YouTube comment sections, one appearing on each finger and toe. When he ran out of appendages the words began inching inwards, crawling along his hands and his feet, his arms and his legs, closer and closer to his heart.

A housewife discovered every text message she had sent with the word “love” appearing like hatch marks down her side.

I think I'm falling in love with you.

Wow, thanks, love ya babe!

He thinks I'm still in love with him.

The interviews going to go great, <3!! Love and kisses!

I love you more than I've ever loved him.

She tried covering the texts that lacked exclamation points with make-up, but the concealer peeled away in flakes. Miles away, her husband sat in his office and stared at the email written in his drafts folder and across the palm of his hand.

Hi Mike. I can't believe I'm writing this, but I think I need to hire you. It's just not working out between Marge and I. Your retainer is still \$2,000, right?

Another draft surfaced on his other palm.

I know about him, Marge. I've known for ages.

The words did not stop. They spiraled down legs, emblazoned themselves on foreheads, braided between toes, formed complex knots around knees. They shone stronger, becoming visible through clothing. People began vacating public spaces. They huddled in bathrooms and holed up in offices, locked themselves in closets and refused to come out.

Women tried to scribble out the words with Sharpies—

Because we're all kind of sick of your crap, okay? I wasn't going to say that but you you wouldn't stop asking.

I'm going to do it. I'm going to adopt. I don't care what Dad says.

Oh my GOD, did you see what she was wearing? To a baptism??? O.O Where is her self-respect smh.

What if I don't want to let her?

She makes the rest of us look bad. You know there going to say we're all like that. We don't need this shit.

—and it didn't help.

Mothers told their children to stay in their rooms—

Sometimes i feel like i havent been a real person since the day they were born. I would jump off a fucking cliff for them, though.

I miss them every day of this stupid conference.

Do you think they could manage without me?

I was scared when I was pregnant I wouldn't like it but I like it so so so much

—and that didn't help either.

Men grabbed paper towels, scarves, anything that was at hand to wrap around their limbs and hide the words—

Ever since the breakup I've been kind of afraid that Ill be alone. like, forever, lol.

Feminsim is DEAD, you already have equality you dumb bitch

Sometimes I see my boss in the parking lot and think about running him down.

He deserves this shit. I just so fucking happy for him.

—and the words just grew brighter.

Students hid themselves in empty classrooms, disused stairwells, storage closets and even lockers—

Okay, but the older gym teacher is kinda hot tbh?

im kinda thinking about hurting myself?

Can I borrow lunch \$ just one more time?

What if the girl I have a crush on is actually a dude please please please don't get weird about it??

—desperate to avoid the gazes of peers whose eyes were mostly fixed upon themselves.

By midday, the town was quiet and still. Nobody was kissing or fighting or crying.

Nobody was saying anything at all. People huddled in basements and behind trees. Words kept blossoming, vivid against their writers' skin, and people cowered from what they had created.

Time passed. Skin filled. People became hungry and tired. They remembered the small, everyday demands of their lives and how they became less small when they were ignored. They emerged, wary and blinking, into the noonday sun. Tentative and defiant, shamefaced and hopeful, they revealed themselves to each other.

Across the town, a homeroom teacher was arrested and a secretary was given a smaller raise than she needed. The principal scheduled a short leave of absence for his mental health. Two girls intertwined their fingers, skin-to-skin, while they kissed in full view of their AP

English class. The theater kids decided the star would be disinvited from the cast party that year. A girl whose agony crisscrossed her legs Googled “what is therapy actually like” and her friend rubbed her shoulder. A little boy solemnly promised to never use a bad word again, never ever, and his mother almost hid her smile when she pretended to believe him. An old man changed very little, as old men are wont to do. An executive was quietly placed on short-term, paid leave, deleted his YouTube account, and made a new one. A couple bickered over which of them got to hire Mike from college as their divorce attorney. Some women stopped being friends with each other and other women started. A mother told her husband that she was going on a vacation and he could take care of the kids by himself for the week and see how he liked it, and one of the kids heard and cried for three hours. Some men were ashamed of themselves and others were proud. Students cried, kissed, and fought in roughly equal measure.

Across the town, things that had been unsettled became settled again, or something close to it.

Across the town, the words began to fade and sink back beneath the skin. People picked up phones and laptops that had been set aside and began writing again. They were more careful now. Their words had briefly held weight; their words had briefly had consequences. The words did not reappear. People became less careful.

The town woke to the new words the next Wednesday.

How to Petition the Oracle of the Red Line

The first step is learning where she is. She doesn't deliver prophecy from a cave beneath a temple anymore. Of course she doesn't. When was the last time you saw a cave? We don't have them these days. Well, we do, but they're lined with signs and warnings, or else set up with stores selling gear and headlamps, and that's not at all suitable. The Oracle requires a quiet darkness. Danger. Sacrifice. Struggle. *Risk*. Most of all, you need a connection. Someone to tell you where she is. A *real* someone. Not one of your classmates bragging and boasting about nothing. Not someone just trying to freak people out on one of those internet forums. Not a liar. Someone who's actually seen her, or actually knows her. Someone like me.

Yes, good. You've tracked me down to this smelly little alley, and that's the important first step taken care of. So here's the secret: she's on the Red Line now. Between Charles MGH and Park Street. Yes, the hospital one and the Boston Commons one. I know there isn't a stop between them. Do you think that she lives in a subway stop, maybe disguised as a busker or a snoozing homeless person? Do you think getting the knowledge you seek will be that easy? That you'll find her behind a donut shop, or under bright fluorescent lights, or anywhere on the safe side of the yellow warning paint lining the tracks? No. Back before her temple was called "Delphi," do you know what the Greeks said she was the Oracle of? *Pythia*. From Pytho. *Rot*. Because her temple was founded on the back of a serpent Apollo slayed and left to decay under the hot Grecian sun, and the smell crept up through the temple floor. Or maybe that's just a story. Either way, the Oracle lives in the darkness of the tunnels. Not a *subway station*.

Check the subway schedule carefully, of course. Your best bet is to go in the middle of the night, when the trains run less frequently and fewer people will be around to get their feathers ruffled by you leaping down onto the track. Yes, of course you get there on foot. How else? Do

you want to be taken to the Oracle on the back of a trolley? Maybe a hand-drawn cart? Carried in a litter? I did see someone try that one once, actually. No. You walk. And don't even think about bringing a flashlight. You heard what I said about cave and gear and headlights, didn't you? Darkness is essential. You're paying attention, aren't you? This is *essential*, kid.

Oh, you're all kids to me. When you reach my age—not that you will, of course—you're *all* kids. That pride won't suit you well if you actually reach her, you know. She doesn't like pride. And if you're a kid to me, you're a baby to her. An infant. Keep that in mind.

Anyway. Start at the Mass General stop. It's a quicker walk that way. Jump down. Walk to the left if you're jumping on the inbound side, the right if you're on the outbound platform. Avoid the third rail. Also the rats, unless you want them as your sacrifice. We'll get to that in a moment. Walk through the darkness. Again, no flashlights, no flashlight apps, definitely no headlamps. Matches, sure. Perhaps a candle, but I wouldn't risk it. She gets—edgy.

Trains? What about them? You'll be fine if you check the schedule. But—fine, well, then you'd die, I guess, if you can't reach a maintenance tunnel in time. What other options do you think you'd have? Just be sure to check the schedule. It's not that complicated. This is definitely not the complicated part. How badly do you really want this? I only ask because you've got an awful lot of questions. I've met a lot of guys like you, a lot of seekers. It doesn't end well when you don't really want it. She doesn't like it when you don't give up your sacrifices willingly.

So tell me. What do you want to know? No, you don't have to, but I'd recommend telling me. It might save you a trip. I'll be able to tell if you really want it enough. Just from how you say it. I meant it when I said I've talked to many of you, *kid*. Ah, you're not turning red this time, not even a little. Improvement. So you're not going to tell me? Fair enough. It's your life, and your future, and your sacrifice. Child.

Have a proper offering prepared. She still likes animal sacrifices, especially when she's in a nostalgic mood. They're not too hard to find, even in the city. No need to gut a bear or pull the steaming entrails from the belly of a ram or anything like that. A pigeon will do. Kick it hard enough—it's not like they remember to run away anymore—and you'll snap its spine easily enough. Scrape a squirrel off the side of a freeway. (The freeway part is important. If the animal is already dead, there must be some element of risk in retrieving it. Always remember the word "sacrifice.") If you're in a rush, you can always trap a rat on your way to visit her and toss it onto the third rail. Plenty of them down there.

Be prepared for it to be rejected. Most people no longer feed off animals we kill ourselves, and some days she remembers this. The sacrifice is lessened. Something else will be asked for. "Demanded" is a better word. If she has spoken to you this long, don't expect that she'll let you leave with your bargain unfulfilled. Stepping into her presence is a commitment all on its own.

What sort of thing? Whatever she wants. Three more rats, throttled by your hands. A dance, invented and performed just for her. Your platinum Visa and all 2,000 frequent flyer miles you've earned on it. Your attention. A year of your life. Your cellphone. A lock of your hair, a fingernail, an eye freshly plucked from its socket.

Don't make that face. I told you these things called for sacrifice. Not value, *sacrifice*. She doesn't want specific amounts of things, she wants percentages of them. She wants enough from you that it hurts. Don't think that just because you're rich you can buy your prophecy with your pocket money. I once saw a man who owned 13 head of cattle offer her just one. She called the rest of the cattle to her cave and made him slit their throats one by one until the blood reached their ankles. Yes, I know *you're* not rich. I'm sorry. I was only frustrated. Like I said, I've

spoken to many people like you. Many people not like you, too. Do you want your future told or not?

Have your question ready. No telling yourself you'll ask one thing, only to swap out the question that actually haunts you in the darkest hours of the night. Examine what's inscribed in your heart and read it aloud. She doesn't like false pretenses. Do you want to know if you'll get away with murdering your father? Yes, she really has gotten that one before. Or if your marriage will be happy? If you'll love your children the way that you're supposed to? If you're as mediocre as your professors hint? Hmm, not any of those.

Because I can see it on your face, silly. I've learned to see these things.

Once you've asked, it's important to be patient. It may look like she isn't doing anything, but she's inhaling the fumes from the subway grate she sits on. The vapors of the city take time to fill her. It's not like huffing glue, or whatever it is that you young people do for kicks in the 21st century. She has to draw it through her lips. Taste it in the back of her throat like wine. It isn't like time passes for her the same way it does for us. She's thousands of years old. Have some respect.

How much time? Oh, that depends. Five minutes, ten. A few hours. A year. No. No, you won't die waiting. When I say that time passes differently for her, I mean that it passes differently around her. You won't starve, and you won't emerge from the tunnels having missed a year of your life, either. Did you read the Narnia books when you were a child? Yes, like that—you know, it's so nice that people are still reading those. She'll drop you right back into the moment you left. Anyway, your family: they won't even notice that you spent a year of life silently sitting in a darkened tunnel, unable to leave or even move, suspended in time like a fly trapped in amber as subway train after train flew past you, stirring the fabric of your shirt as it

went. Hm? Yes, I suppose it might drive you mad. A few minds *have* broken that way. I know one woman who snapped after a month. Reemerged gibbering about her missing fingers and how the stalactites wouldn't stop *drip-drip-dripping* on her head. But cheer up. Sometimes the Oracle answers people thirty seconds or so. Maybe you'll be one of those people. I think three and a half seconds is her record. It's impossible to say.

Accept the answer. That's the crucial bit. Don't tell her she's wrong, because she's not. Don't tell her that you deserve more. You don't. Don't tell her you don't believe her. She doesn't like that. She *really* doesn't like that.

If you don't understand, don't tell her that either. The fault always lies in the listener. Remember that. I know, I know. You'll have given her subway-fried rats and a year of your life and maybe a fingernail or two, and all you get in return is an answer that sounds like she's been huffing fumes. Well, she has been huffing fumes. That's her job. Don't complain. She can read your future, not write it. That part's your job. You realize that, right? I hope you realize that.

Before you go, she might want more. Yes, in addition to the sacrifice, even if she already summoned the rest of your cows or what have you. Perhaps she'll feel like the first sacrifice wasn't quite enough after all. I know that's not in the original legend. Knowledge is dearer now. Humans abandoned the slick, pink entrails, the signs swirling in the smoke, the tea leaves abandoned at the bottom of the cup. Fortune telling is a game now, and all parties know that they're only playing. She's the only real deal left in town. All magic is growing rarer now, growing sweeter and darker and more treacherous, like a ripening poison berry. Of course it costs more now. She's not in a cave anymore.

She might ask you to serve her. How long? Oh, it depends. A few hours of dancing—she does love dancing. She misses it. She didn't know when she agreed to be High Priestess all those

years ago that her holy task would turn into this. A weekly visit bearing squashed squirrel until she has enough to fill her belly and line a cloak. A millennia or two of service. Yes, millennia. No, don't panic now. You've listened so long, so much longer than most do. One girl spent three years trying to find me and ran shrieking into traffic as soon as I got to the bit about eyes being plucked out. The Oracle only brings the millennia of service penalty down on those whose sacrifices look truly lacking in the light of her prophecy. I should have brought her something more precious when I visited her cave.

But I ramble. That's all the guidance I have for you, the depth and breadth of it. It's all your choice now. There is a wall between you and your future and she will open a crack in it if you let her. You'll know more about your future than anyone in the world, which is to say that you will know more about the world's future than anyone in the world. It will make you extraordinary. Happy? Perhaps. Probably not, honestly, from what I've seen. But *extraordinary*. That's certain. Your mind might break. Your body might fail you. An off-timed train could foreclose your future before it can be read. I know you've worked hard to find me, spent much in time and money and energy following the traces of the trail. Do not let that cost demand further costs from you. Sacrifices can beget sacrifices; they're hungry losses. And yet—and yet—I have come to know the look of people who will choose knowledge anyway. Well. I have done my job. She can't say that I haven't. It really is your choice, though. All of it. Your pursuit of your future, and your future itself.

A final suggestion. Don't do this. Knowing your future will not change it. It will only make it come faster and slower at the same time. If your future is tragic, your life will become the taut, infinite moment between when you see the train coming and when it hits you. No, not a literal train—that's a metaphor. You're not going to get hit by a train. Well, you might, I

suppose, but I don't know about that. *I* don't know the future. I'm only guessing. Once, a man came back to complain to me that she had told him the precise date of his husband's death, and now he was left counting down the days one by one. As though I could do something about it! If your future is joyous, the joy will be sapped by the foreknowledge. When it arrives, it will feel like your due, not your reward. But you will have given something up, and it will hurt so much, and in the end, you will only get to know your future as it slowly sprints toward you. You'll still have free will, of course. She can describe the future, not prescribe it. But in the end, you'll do what she says you will. We always do.

Oh, and just one more suggestion? If you choose to sacrifice rats to the third rail as your offering, do remember to bring a thick pair of gloves. Retrieving the rats can get a bit—messy, otherwise.

Your Body, Your Blood

“Good news! You’re not bleeding,” he said. Dr. Crouse, my gynecologist, looked like an old family doctor from a quaint British film set in “Tappings-on-Tweed” or something. He had glasses and a round face and a very confident—but not overly confident—smile. He spoke so convincingly that I almost believed him for a moment. The dampness between my legs brought me back to reality.

“You mean—you can make it stop?” I asked him.

“No, I mean there’s nothing *to* stop,” he said. His smile didn’t twitch. “All your tests came back clean. You aren’t actually menstruating.”

“Okay,” I said, “then where’s the blood coming from?”

“There isn’t any blood.”

“But it’s *right there*.” I could feel it seeping into my pad. I could see a crescent of it under my thumbnail, missed during my last scrub at the sink. I could see it on the discarded swab poking out of the waste bin in the corner. I pointed at the swab. “See?”

He didn’t turn his head.

“I know how stressful it can be to think that you’re sick,” he said. “Sometimes you just worry and worry, and when the doctor tells you it’s okay, you think—*oh no, he doesn’t get it! He must be missing something!* You can get invested in the idea that something’s wrong.”

“Believe me,” I said, “I’m not at all invested in this. I just want it to stop. Really.” I huffed out a little laugh. “It’s been a month, and I’ve spent like 30 dollars on tampons, and I really want my stupid period to just stop.”

“But there’s nothing *to* stop,” he said again, “medically speaking. All the test results came back fine.”

“But I can see the blood,” I said, getting a little louder.

“Well, you’re biased,” he said. He leaned forward, elbows on knees. “It’s your body. Your blood.”

“What does that *mean*?” My voice pitched up at the end, tight and squeaky.

He didn’t respond, taking a moment to polish his glasses on the sleeve of his white coat. I blinked at him. Then he said:

“You sound stressed. Do you think that could be a factor?”

I hadn’t really been concerned until well into week two of my period. My menstrual cycle had never settled down in the way that everyone promised it would, post-adolescence. It was less of a monthly visitor and more of a periodic mugger, popping out of dark alleys on irregular intervals to ruin date nights, job interviews, and memorably, a bridal shower. Dr. Crouse had suggested birth control once, saying, “If you really feel like you can’t handle it—going on medication is really a last result—but if you just can’t cope?” I had thought about it but never got around to following through.

Then I had gotten a period that just ... hadn’t stopped. If anything, it just got heavier and less manageable. I bought new boxes of tampons and pads and went through them. I ruined two pairs of underwear. I did laundry three times a week. I bled through to a couch cushion that my roommate’s parents had bought us and had to explain matters to the roommate, Meredith, who was very tall, very skinny, and had an eyebrow that looked like it was perpetually disapproving of you. That was when I made the appointment with Dr. Crouse. I had hoped that the appointment would be to discuss the freakishly long period that I *had* had—past tense—but the blood was of course still coming by the time I met with him.

There was a fierce little satisfaction in that. Part of me always wanted my doctor to look a little horrified when I told them what's wrong with me. Not "oh fuck, she's got cancer in her everything" horrified, just "wow, she's really suffering" horrified. "I should take her problems very seriously, and also she is a hero for enduring them," horrified. I had gotten that look out of Dr. Crouse, but just for a moment. Then it had been lying back and stirrups and that annoying little freezing-cold wand and the swab that went in the trash can and he did whatever mysterious tests doctors were supposed to do in this situation. I waited for his judgement to be handed down, but I wasn't prepared for him to tell me I was fine.

Over the next few weeks, I somehow got worse, not better, at managing my period. I started layering maxi-pads and panty liners, but the blood always reached my clothing anyway. I quit washing my sheets unless the size of the stain was bigger than a quarter, then bigger than my fist. I started to feel lightheaded after climbing stairs and tired even after eight hours of sleep.

"You need more iron," said Meredith, when she observed me try to stand up too quickly from the couch and get knocked back by a wave of dizziness. "Wanna try one of my supplements?"

She knew about the eternal period, because you can't really hide that sort of thing in an apartment under 900 square feet. Meredith appeared to live off a diet entirely composed of smoothies, carefully timed baggies of nuts, and her impressive array of supplements. She had offered to share before, most frequently when she walked in on me eating a huge bowl of pasta, but I had never taken her up on it. Her half of the fridge looked alien and smelled foul.

"Sure," I said, carefully levering myself up off the couch and shuffling towards the kitchen. "Can't hurt."

It didn't hurt, but it didn't help either. My nails got so brittle they cracked and split. I nearly dozed off in a meeting at work. I searched "foods with iron" on Google and started eating entire pans of spinach, burgers twice a week, whole jars of dried fruit. It didn't help. I began to adjust to a life of bloodstains, fatigue, and absolutely endless laundry.

Then one morning I woke up and my arm was broken. Properly broken, not just fractured. I lifted my arm to flick the light on and observed that my arm had a new elbow. My forearm had been hinged in the middle and my wrist and hand dangled limply at a 90 degree angle. I screamed. My hand swayed a little. I could feel my bones grind together.

Meredith wasn't around, so I called an Uber. The emergency room nurse looked distinctly unimpressed with my horror show of an arm, which was fair, given that the woman in front of me appeared to be pinching closed an arterial spurt of blood from a gash in her arm. I was in the waiting room for almost an hour before I realized that I hadn't grabbed any tampons on my way out the door. I dug around my purse and came up empty. The restroom had a dispenser offering tampons for a quarter, which I didn't have, but it spat one out in exchange for a bus token. Swapping out a tampon onehanded required an intricate juggle of toilet paper, wrappers, and my dangling arm. When I reemerged, a nurse finally waved me into an exam room.

"The doctor will be right in," she said. I settled into a chair in the corner and waited. There was a light knock on the door. "Come on in—"

Dr. Crouse walked in, pulling on his white coat.

"Hello," he said.

“Doctor! You work here too?” I blurted out, automatically cradling my arm a little closer.

He finished shrugging into his coat.

“I’m your doctor,” he said, a little puzzled.

“But you’re a gynecologist?”

“You think there’s something wrong with your arm?” he asked.

I held it up. He looked at me. I jiggled the still functioning part of my arm, causing the limp part to swing.

“It’s broken,” I said.

“You think so?” he said.

I looked a little more closely at him to see if he were joking.

“Yeah,” I said, “and I just woke up like this. So. Do you need to set it or something?”

“First we need to do an X-ray. Just to see what we’re dealing with,” he said.

The X-ray technician was very polite as he gently lifted my arm and arranged it neatly on the special tray. I shivered under the heavy radiation-shielding apron and hoped that the tiny dispenser tampon was holding up. When it was done, Dr. Crouse held up the X-rays in front of a lightbox and examined the results. The break was outlined clearly in black and white, with a little gap between the two halves of my divided radius and ulna.

“It looks fine,” Dr. Crouse beamed his reliable, friendly smile at me.

“It looks fine?”

“Exactly. Even you can see it,” he said. “I’m glad you’re not getting yourself all worked up over nothing this time.”

“Would you at least look at it?” I asked, brandishing the limb at him.

He grabbed the floppy portion of my arm and hand and tugged on it gently. It came away in his hand. One moment I had a whole, if broken, arm, and then I only had part of an arm, and he had the other part. There was no blood. It had parted as neatly as a banana slit in half.

“Give it!” I tried to snatch the hand and wrist back. My foreshortened arm swung uselessly through the air. I grabbed it from him with my other hand and held it close to my chest.

“If you don’t let me take a look at your arm, I won’t be able to help you,” said Dr. Crouse.

“It came off. It *came off*.”

“I can’t tell what happened unless you show me.”

“My fucking arm, my arm just *came off*.”

“I can’t help you if you don’t want to be helped. This needs to be a collaborative process. There’s no need to panic.”

“I’m not panicking!”

“The worst thing you can do is stress. You’d be so much better off if you didn’t stress yourself out.”

“Oh God, how the fuck do you put in a tampon with one hand? I don’t know what’s happening.”

“That’s all right. That’s my job. You just take a few deep breaths. Just lie back,” he said, putting his hands on my shoulders and gently pushing, and I did. “That’s it. Now do you want to give me that?”

I handed him my forearm and hand.

“There we go. Don’t you feel better now? Now let me just take a look at this.”

I knew what he was going to say. I knew it.

“Your arm looks like it’s in perfect shape,” he said.

“It’s not attached to the rest of my arm,” I said meekly. He peered at me over his glasses.

“You can’t expect everything to work perfectly all the time, you know,” he said.

“Okay,” I said. I just wanted to go home.

“Everyone’s body is different. You can’t start worrying over every little change.”

“Okay. Sure. Okay.” I sat up, or my body did anyway. My head remained on the examination table. Panic shot through me, electric and clarifying, burning away my complacency.

“What the fuck,” I said. “What the fuck. What the fuck. What the fuck.”

“Is something wrong?” Dr. Crouse asked.

“My head. My fucking head.” I stared up at the upright torso. I tried to rub my forehead, but my forehead wasn’t where it was supposed to be and my hand passed through air. “What the *fuck*.” I tried to turn and look at him. My neck atop my torso rotated toward him, but my head didn’t move. I tentatively reached down and shifted my head lying on the examination table. It was hard to manage without being able to see what I was moving. Eventually, I just picked my head up and positioned it in my lap. “My head. My fucking head. It fell off.”

Dr. Crouse sat down. He didn’t meet my eyes. He looked at the space where my head used to be.

“We need to talk. This behavior isn’t sustainable,” he said. “I understand that you want us to take you seriously. But just making stuff up—”

“My fucking head is in my fucking lap!” I shook it at him to demonstrate.

“*Listen!*” said Dr. Crouse, his voice rising sharply. “This is not helpful for your treatment. You can’t get worked up over everything that doesn’t go smoothly. Okay? You need to take

some more deep breaths.” I did, reflexively. My mouth opened and my lungs inflated, though they were no longer connected. “And relax your shoulders. There. That’s right. Doesn’t this feel more manageable? Don’t you feel better when you don’t get carried away by stress? Can’t you just trust me?”

His eyes. His eyes were so warm, so confident.

His voice. His voice was so reassuring, so certain.

I wanted to just trust him. I wanted to do what he told me. I wanted him to be right. I was tired of the panic, of the Googling, of constantly explaining myself, of my unreliable body betraying me over and over. I wanted my body to return to wholeness, to intactness, to be inviolate. Immaculate. And the blood. Oh God, was I tired of the blood. I wanted the blood to stay in my body. I wanted my body to belong to me. I wanted to stop being so scared all the time. I wanted to trust myself. I wanted to trust him. I wanted everything to go back to the way it had been. I wanted it all to stop: my body, my blood.

He shook his head and sent me home. I couldn’t afford a taxi. I stuck my disembodied hand and wrist into my purse, tucked my head under my good arm, and called an Uber.

My stomach was the last part of my body to betray me. I woke up one morning, chewed and swallowed a bite of toast, and promptly puked it back up onto the plate. I don’t mean that I got nauseous, because I didn’t. I just stopped being able to digest things. I had only just worked out a system for eating too. I would chew the food myself, spooning the food into my mouth with my good arm and positioning the opening beneath my head over a bowl, then re-spoon the chewed food back down the rest of my throat. After all that, the food began shooting back up my shortened esophagus. It came back clean and whole, untouched by stomach acid—or teeth, for

that matter. I took an experimental forkful of dried fruit. I could feel it reverse course at the base of my throat and shoot back out my mouth.

“So you’re chewing and tasting it?” said Meredith, sipping on one of her smoothies. It was a disquieting shade of murky green this morning. “But not actually digesting it?”

“Yup,” I said grimly, staring down at my plate of cut up but otherwise untouched food.

“Christ, I’m jealous,” she muttered, taking a swig of murk. “I’d lose so much goddamn weight.”

Staring down at the untouched dried apricots, I decided that this was a little too weird for my general practitioner. Last year I had to visit a gastroenterologist when I got a stomach infection on a trip. I called their office and summarized the problem to the man who answered.

“You’re not running a fever? Or experiencing any aches?” the man said.

“No. No, it doesn’t feel like the flu or anything,” I said.

“What about going to bathroom. Any changes—”

“No,” I said quickly. “No, that’s the same too.”

“Sounds like it’s just nausea. It should go away on its own,” he said. “Just keep pushing fluids. Keep to mild foods.”

“Except I’m not nauseous?” I said.

“So why are you throwing up?”

“I don’t know. And I meant it when I said that the food is coming back up unchewed. I don’t understand that at all.”

“Hmm. If you’re not chewing enough, that might be upsetting your stomach,” he said.

“But I *am* chewing, that’s what I’m saying—I’m chewing the food like usual and it’s coming right back untouched,” I said, squeezing the phone tighter.

“Well, you’ll have to try to chew the food a little more then,” he said. “It sounds like that might help.”

“I—all right,” I said.

“Call back if you start developing any more serious symptoms,” he said. “But I think you’re going to be just fine.”

There was this incredible ring of confidence to his voice, this note of total authority. It was familiar. It occurred to me that I hadn’t actually gotten his name.

“Sorry, is this *Dr. Cro*—”

He hung up.

I made it a full two days before visiting the doctor. The biggest issue came when I discovered that drinks met a similar fate as the food. I tried everything: little sips of Gatorade, spoonfuls of buttery mashed potato, honeyed tea, mashed bananas, a fruit smoothie with protein powder for strength. The last one was Meredith’s contribution, whose envy was evaporating rapidly. I grew lightheaded. My throat ached for water.

I made an appointment with my gastroenterologist. I was not surprised when I walked into the examination room and found Dr. Crouse.

“I really think a lot of this is just stress,” he said.

“I don’t think it’s stress?”

He leaned forward, propped his elbows on his knees. He smiled. He still looked like some old, friendly family doctor. He still looked so very reasonable.

“Sometimes,” he said generously, “people who are stressed don’t even know that they’re stressed.”

I couldn't argue my way into the hospital. I was informed that I was possibly a hypochondriac, possibly a drug seeker, possibly suffering from Munchausen's Syndrome, definitely untrustworthy, and very definitely an insurance nightmare. It would have only prolonged the inevitable, in any case.

I lived for a few more weeks without a working stomach, but I wasted away in the end. My stomach rejected any food, chewed or not, sending it shooting out of the hole of my neck in a small spray of chopped green beans. I called my mom and she flew out to stay with me, but even the most carefully picked foods—applesauce, yogurts, watered down soup, carefully prepared by my mom like I was still a kid, and home from school with a stomach virus—met the same fate. Even the capfuls of Gatorade that my mom carefully poured for me over the sink created tiny, rainbow sprays. Meredith tried to help, pouring her macrobiotics-rich, superfood smoothies down the small red opening, but my body rejected all of them. I could only keep water down if it was dribbled down my neck hole a teaspoon at a time. My Mom did that mostly, and Meredith helped with it a little, until I worked out a system—propping my head on a table, facing my body so I could see my neck, and using a ladle to tip tiny dribbles of water down my throat.

I still had my period. I propped my head on the bathroom vanity so I could see myself well enough to swap out my pads and tampons. I tore open the wrappers with my teeth.

It wasn't enough, in the end. So I got weaker, and my Mom got frantic, and Meredith told me she was *sorry just so fucking sorry* and went to stay with her sister until it was over, and I woke up with my other arm in five pieces and didn't even care, and precisely half the hair on my head fell out, and my Mom kept trying to force food down my throat even as I sprayed the walls with food, and I lost the strength to get out of bed, and Mom had to change my pads and I didn't even care, and I got so skinny that I could pick out of the knobs of my elbows, and then I died.

Dr. Crouse came to my funeral.

He leaned over the urn of me.

“I don’t know,” my doctor said. “You look fine to me.”

A Short Selection of Encounters Between Travelers and a Troll

“You’re a troll,” the woman said.

“That’s not very polite,” the troll said.

“You are! You’re not a tollbooth operator!” She leaned out of her van’s window and jabbed her finger at the small tollbooth set on the edge of the stone bridge. “You’re a troll!”

The troll could hear the exclamations points reverberating in the air. The woman looked a bit gleeful at this turn of events.

“Are you ready to answer a question?”

She bobbed her head eagerly. “I ought to warn you,” the woman said, “I’m quite good at riddles. What walks on four legs and two legs and all of that? I know it. Or water, water everywhere, but not a drop to—”

“Why did your husband leave you?”

She stopped. “What?”

“My job’s to ask tough questions.” The troll’s voice wasn’t mean. Wasn’t kind, either.

“The specifics have changed over time. Why did your husband leave you?”

“We grew apart.”

“No. You get two more guesses.”

“Or what? You throw me off the bridge?”

“Don’t stereotype. I haven’t done that since the Middle Ages,” he said. “Why?”

“Because he met someone. He cheated.”

“Closer. One more try.”

“He didn’t like me that much. In the end.” The woman shrugged. She was matter of fact now that the truth was spilling out. “He did, I think, in the beginning. I don’t have any way of

knowing for sure. But he acted like it. Bought me 32 lilies—my favorite—for my 32nd birthday. Let my mom move in after her stroke, and helped take care of her, and never complained. Something changed. I don't know what, but it did. I wish there were something—I wish he had lost his job, or my hair had fallen out, or something—I wish something had happened. But nothing did, really. I just woke up one morning, and he liked me a little less than he had the day before, and the next day it was a little less than that. Then he cheated, and it was a relief, almost.”

The troll let her through.

The little girl visited for the first time when she was six. The troll heard her before he saw her.

“Hello?”

He had to lean out the window to spot her. The brim of her baseball cap wasn't quite level with the windowsill.

“I'm a troll,” he said, because he wasn't sure the little girl would get that on her own. The stories parents told children had gotten gentler over the years, and he wouldn't have been surprised to find himself edited out entirely.

“I know,” she said, her chin jutting a little. “You look exactly like the troll in my fairy tale book. I read it on my own. I didn't even need the pictures.”

He always looked like every troll in everyone's fairy tale book. The girl's book had featured a troll who had dark skin and an old, grooved face like petrified oak, so that's what he looked like to her today.

“The picture never had a tollbooth, though,” the girl concluded. She seemed very pleased by this. Perhaps she would be the one to finally laugh at the joke.

“You could say,” he said hopefully, “that I’m a *troll* booth operator.”

She wasn’t.

She looked at him a bit doubtfully. “Why are you next to the bridge? Aren’t you supposed to be lurking underneath it?”

“Lurking is just what they call standing when a troll does it,” the troll said briskly. “And that was all well and good when you were walking or trotting around on horses, but now you’ve got these automobiles. Far too fast to interrupt on foot, and dangerous to boot. No, the only way of stopping you now is with this.”

He gestured proudly at the little wooden box in which he sat and the gate he could raise and lower. “If you know so much about trolls, then you know that if you want to cross, you need to answer a question,” he said.

“That’s all right,” the girl said politely. She was always polite when talking to strangers. “I don’t want to cross.”

The troll, who had been preparing a particularly incisive question about the girl’s rivalry with her little brother, rocked back on his heels.

“Then why are you here, Claire?” he asked. He did not usually use travelers’ names—it always seemed to scare them more than the most intimate questions, for reasons that he would never understand—but then, Claire was not really a traveler.

“To say hi,” she said, and gestured at the small town in the distance behind her. It was a little speed trap of a village, the kind where almost nobody worked up the escape velocity to

move away. It relied almost entirely on the spending of the people who detoured through it to avoid the traffic of the freeway.

The troll relied upon these people as well. The townsfolk themselves rarely came this way. They had learned not to, over the years.

“I can see your little booth from my window,” Claire went on. Children in town were taught to stay away from the booth, but Claire was a very inquisitive child. “I thought you must be lonely out here. I didn’t realize that you were a troll!” She beamed at him.

“Well.” The troll was used to pinning people with impossible riddles and, once mass media’s ability to spread answers outstripped his ability to develop new riddles, impossible questions of all kinds. These tended to preclude conversations, and he wasn’t entirely sure how to proceed. “I don’t suppose you’d like to answer a question anyway?” he asked hopefully, arching a dark brow.

Her face brightened further. She swiped a curl out of her face.

“Sure! I’m brilliant with riddles. I’ve got a whole book of them. I’ve read that one too.”

“Why do you resent your little brother?”

Her face sort of crumpled. The troll had seen many people’s faces cave in on themselves like this. It was a side effect of his job. They wandered through the world smooth and frictionless, comfortable they knew their place in it. He challenged them.

But this girl had not assumed she could speed past without ever finding opposition. Claire was polite, and restless, and ferociously curious about everything. She had only wanted to have a conversation.

“I don’t resent him,” she said. She could not lie like an adult. Her faith in the world still lay plainly on her face.

“Yes you do.” The troll answered automatically and felt a little guilty for it. He wasn’t sure he needed to do his job with this girl who didn’t want to cross. He couldn’t tell if she needed it.

“That’s not a riddle,” she said. Her left leg trembled a little, like she wanted stamp her foot. “That’s a trick. You *tricked* me.”

“I am a troll,” said the troll. “Did your fairy tale make me seem like a good guy?”

Claire pointed at him. “You *should*,” she said fiercely, almost touching his nose with the quivering tip of her finger. “You should be the good guy.”

She left before he could tell her the difference between what you seem and what you are.

“Why did you do it?”

“Same reason anyone does anything. Because I wanted to. And I had an excuse.” The woman met his gaze steadily. Her eyes were flat and shiny. He let her through.

Claire didn’t visit again until she was almost twelve.

“I’m not here because I want to cross the bridge,” she said preemptively. “I just wanted to see if you were real or not.”

The troll spread his hands. Claire hadn’t read her book of fairy tales in years and misremembered it slightly, so the troll now looked a lighter shade of brown and a bit rounder around the edges to her.

“Here I am.”

“And I just have so many questions,” she said. “Like, why do you only stop some people? Why do some people whiz through like they don’t even see you?”

“Not all of them need to see me.”

“And why did you decide on a tollbooth? Why not, I dunno, a speed trap?” Of course, Claire knew a lot about speed traps. Speed traps were approximately half the town’s income.

“I’m a troll,” he said. “I’m mysterious and inscrutable.”

Claire clearly did not know what “inscrutable” meant and wasn’t happy about it.

“Also,” she said abruptly, “I wanted to apologize. For storming off. You couldn’t help asking me that question.”

“Actually,” the troll said, “I could.”

Claire wrinkled her nose. “Isn’t it in your nature? As a troll?” she said, a little hopefully. She still wanted him to be the good guy.

“It’s a choice that I make,” he said. Very few humans had ever asked him about this. Fewer had ever understood. Most were too upset over the threat his questions posed to either their travel time or their sense of self to pry deeper into the life of the little fairy tale creature squatting in his booth. She looked a bit less baffled than most, so he persevered. “It’s a service I provide.”

Claire’s face was darkening.

“How is it a service? It’s just mean, lying about someone like that,” she said. “It wasn’t a nice thing to say at all.”

“Are you ready to answer a question?” The troll raised a hand. “My one question for the day, Claire. Answer it and I won’t ask another.”

Claire bit her lip, then nodded.

“*Was* it a lie?” The troll leaned forward slightly.

“I don’t resent my brother.”

“More.”

“I don’t resent him now. That much.”

“And?”

“And when he was born, it felt like Mom and Dad’s love was cut in half and I got the smaller half.”

“Was it a lie?”

“No. I resented him.”

“You can cross,” said the troll reflexively, giving her a wave.

Claire giggled. “I said I don’t *want* to cross,” she said, then sobered. “I still don’t think that was nice.”

This time she stuck around, so he had a chance to tell her, “There’s a difference between nice and good.”

“Why did you have kids?” he asked.

“Because I always wanted to.” The middle-aged woman in the Camry shrugged, just a slight bob of her shoulders.

“More.”

“Part of me just assumed that I had to. Like, that was what everyone else was doing—like, all my bridesmaids—and what my mom did—uh, obviously, I guess—and so I should too.”

“More.”

“I was a bit lonely. I kept having nightmares of Jeff and I withering away in some nursing home, never any visitors.”

“More.”

She laughed and the troll liked her a little for it. "Because I feared death and wanted a sliver of immortality. I dare you to find a parent who honestly says differently," she said.

The troll smiled as he waved her through.

Claire began visiting him regularly when she was in high school. The questions became routine, even welcome. The troll had to prompt her less and less as self-awareness became a habit.

"Because we're so similar."

"Because I'm still a little jealous of him."

"Because I feel like my dad wants me to die in this old place."

"Because I think I'm smarter than she is."

"Because I want to know so much more about the world."

"Because I want to leave."

"More."

Claire leaned forward in her chair. The year before, she had dug an old Adirondack chair out of the back of the garage, dragged it down the road, and propped it up in the shade of the booth.

"I feel guilty applying to colleges because I honestly can't wait until I grow up and move to a town that has a more interesting industry than 'being near a freeway,'" she said. "And I know that's absolutely going to kill my Dad."

"And?"

"Jesus, you're hard to satisfy today. Ah. Part of me is a little glad that he's squirming about this. It means he's finally taking me seriously. After all those years of him showing me

how to run the gas station and totally ignoring me when I said I wasn't going to do it, it's finally sinking in for him," she said. Once confessed, the guilt lifted a little. It usually did.

"You can cross now," the troll said. He had gotten in the habit of saying that periodically. It was useful to remind himself, just once in a while, what his real purpose was. Claire laughed.

"Hey, if I bring my friend's boyfriend to visit you, can you get him to tell us what his problem is?" she said.

"What do you think his problem is?" asked the troll, propping his elbow against the windowsill so he could see her.

She straightened up. "What, a second question?"

He persisted in demanding the answer to a question every time she visited, though sometimes he found himself struggling to probe for something she had not already confessed. He had never struck up a relationship like this with a human before. People, once challenged, tended not to return, and he had never met someone with such a powerful curiosity about herself. He wasn't sure why he was so eager to satisfy that curiosity, even on the days when Claire wasn't so keen herself. But he had already gotten an answer from her today.

"Just a question," he said. "Not a *question*."

"I think Rick's problem is that doesn't know the difference between *girlfriend* and *property*," said Claire, relaxing back into her chair. She savored the faint breeze carrying the sounds of cars whizzing down the distant freeway and the smell of hot asphalt. "He thinks that Kay should pick him over everyone else—'just for once,' he says, but he really means *again* and *always*."

The troll considered the matter. Claire's memory of her fairy tale book had mellowed further, and he was now only faintly lined and the color of caramel.

“So he’s deluding himself?” he asked. Claire nodded. “Bring him here. I can straighten him out. But he’ll have to come alone.”

Claire was used to stepping away when he stopped travelers. She’d wander down the banks of the river, just out of earshot, and wonder what terrible truth her friend was extracting from the man in the blue SUV or the college girls sharing a Volkswagen.

It only took a dare to lure Rick out to the troll and his tollbooth. *Don’t visit the tollbooth on the edge of town* was a rule taught to all the town’s children, but it was a lesson delivered tacitly and without explanation. Every child grew up knowing it without quite remembering where they had learned it. Claire pretended to really enjoy taking long strolls along the river to account for her absences to her parents, who didn’t pry. Rick was at an age and temperament to start questioning precisely those sorts of rules.

Claire slipped away when Rick spotted the troll—“*Wait, Claire, whatthefuck is THAT*”—but lingered long enough to hear the troll’s question.

“Do you truly believe, deep in your heart, that women are people? People like you and me? Or like you, in any case.”

Rick broke up with Kay the next morning and, to Claire’s knowledge, never spoke about Claire’s dare again.

“Because I was worried about Kay,” she replied to the question the troll asked the next day, “and because I was jealous he wanted so much of her time, and because it made feel a little righteous.” She eyed the troll, framed by his little wooden booth. “Mostly the first one,” she said hopefully.

“You may pass,” he concurred, and she gave a little *ha!* of triumph.

“Weirdest place?”

“In the bushes behind my bank. A security guard caught us.”

The troll waved him on.

Once Claire left for college, she could only visit the troll on breaks.

“I don’t know why everyone’s so surprised I’m going to college,” she said sourly on her first Christmas break. “Isn’t that what you do? Even in the middle of bumfuck nowhere, isn’t that pretty much the plan after you graduate high school?”

“Why do you think you deserve to go to college more than your high school classmates?” the troll asked.

Claire stilled underneath the blanket she had wrapped around her shoulders. Through her adolescence, the questions that he had attached to her near-daily visits had excavated many dark and tender parts of her soul. There was little she hadn’t admitted to him, or to herself. Off at college, she had let herself believe her self-knowledge was complete. She couldn’t help resenting that there were still spiky truths to unearth.

“I worked harder,” she said flatly. Confessions had become a habit, but her long absence at school had dulled it.

“And?”

“And I’m smarter.” She held up a hand when the troll opened his mouth. “Don’t ‘more’ me. I’m a bit of a snob. I think I’m better than them. I think I’m smarter, I know I work harder, and I think that if your highest aspiration is to man a gas station counter until you die, that’s kind of pathetic. Happy?”

“Yes,” said the troll. He was. He liked doing his job. He especially liked doing it for Claire, and he wasn’t sure why.

“Sorry, I just—sorry.” Claire frowned. “It’s been harder answering your questions since I started college. It’s harder to talk about this stuff now. There’s just ... more of it. There are more people living in my dorm than this whole town, y’know? I’ve never met so many people at once, and I can barely keep up in classes, and I feel like I’m changing so quickly—”

She broke off and slumped back in her Adirondack. She rubbed her forehead. She looked older, to the troll, than she should have after just a few months apart. She looked tired.

“I thought I knew myself, and now I’m ...” She ran her thumbnail along the peeling painted edge of the chair’s arm. “The questions are just harder now.”

“What scares you the most?”

“Spiders.”

“Two more tries.”

The woman frowned.

“Being alone?”

“Almost.”

“Being alone,” she said clearly, “and liking it. Accepting it.”

He waved her through.

Claire left after college and did not come back, not properly, for a long time. She wanted to leave her small, dusty town behind, and the troll was cut loose in the bargain.

The first few times she visited home after college, she did not visit the troll. Her post-college life was built on the same fraught framework of insecurities, fears, delusions, and pockets of narcissism that many people start their adult lives clinging to. Getting through the day required telling herself that she wasn't afraid, that she didn't feel guilty, that she had nothing to feel guilty about, that her new boss was going to fire her if she didn't pick things up faster, that success was around the corner, that her college friends would stay close forever, that her parents weren't getting old, that her metabolism wasn't slowing down. She was not ready to return to the troll and let him shove her frame to the ground. She told herself that she would visit during the next visit, or maybe the next. She was lucky there was no troll to force her to admit otherwise. Then her father fell off his ladder while trimming the crabapple tree out front, spent three months in rehab in the city, and by the end of it, her parents had decided to remain there. That allowed her to put off her next visit to the little tollbooth on the edge of her old town—how she loved calling it her 'old town'—indefinitely.

Years passed. Decades. She missed her troll friend, but lived a happy life for the most part. The troll missed her more, and was not happy for the most part. She became old. The troll didn't.

Though she never visited the troll, Claire found herself hearing his voice in her ear often over the years.

Do you want that job or do you want to be the sort of person who would want it?

Do you like him? Yes, you love him. Do you like him?

Can you really pull that sweater off at this point? C'mon, Claire.

Will having him move in with you actually help him? Or will it just make you feel less guilty about not visiting more?

Why do you avoid visiting your father's grave?

She answered the questions, too. The merciless, precise self-examination that her old friend had demanded of her had been internalized. It was harder in adulthood than in the comparatively bounded world of her adolescence, but she kept at it. She could not seem to stop herself. It made life harder. Better, and harder.

How many years of driving do you have left?

The morning that last simple question occurred to her, Claire folded herself into her car and drove for four hours to the freeway exit she knew so well. She slowed as she approached the speed trap and rolled through town slowly and patiently.

The tollbooth looked exactly the same. Claire had recently dug up her collection of old fairy tales to give to her grand-niece, which refreshed her mental image of the troll. The troll's face looked once more like it was carved from petrified oak. She turned her car off and stepped outside.

"I'd like to cross," she said for the first time.

"Are you ready to answer a question?" the troll asked.

"Yes."

The troll thought carefully. Over time, Claire had built a life of excruciatingly clear self-awareness. She had reached old age without any secrets kept from herself. There was only one question left.

"Why do you think I ask people questions?"

"I think," said Claire, "that you're helping them. Making them ... pause, and step back from the world—from themselves. You challenge them, just a little. Get them see everything anew, and through clearer eyes." She leaned heavily on her cane and it sunk half an inch into the

soft dirt. “Even the riddles did that, I think. Made them stop. Think about something ... lofty. Something beyond themselves.”

The troll was suddenly tired. For the first time in his centuries of existence, he was absolutely exhausted.

The troll could not remember when he had been born, and then, without warning, he could. He knew, then, why he had felt so compelled to talk to Claire, to question her.

“Claire,” the troll said, “do you want to step inside my booth?”

In all her years of visiting, Claire had never been inside the booth. It had never occurred to her to ask.

“I would,” she said, and the side of the booth swung open. It was a door, seemingly without hinges. She dropped her cane and gripped the doorframe to haul herself inside.

The booth should have been too small to hold them both, but she found herself quite comfortable.

“Do you have a name?” the old woman asked the troll.

“Claire,” the troll said.

The old woman rubbed her eyes.

When she opened them, the troll was not there. It did not seem possible for him to have ever been there. The booth could not possibly have held more than her alone. The walls were tucked around her like a warm embrace. She fit here. She liked it here. She could not remember which wall the door was and she did not want to.

“You’re not a tollbooth operator!” The woman leaning out of the driver’s window of her olive-green Subaru looked simultaneously thrilled and aghast. “You’re a troll!”

Claire turned to face the woman. She knew things about this woman. She knew what this woman needed to be asked.

“Yes,” said the troll in the tollbooth. “Are you ready to answer a question?”

And It Was True

They called it the “Truth in Politics” law, and after it passed, politicians could only tell the truth. It did not change how politicians spoke at all.

“People can pull themselves out of poverty if they work hard,” they said, and because they had said it, it became true. Single mothers juggling three jobs found checks in their mailboxes marked “for tuition” or “for formula” or “for the debt” or “for whatever the hell you want, honestly.” The checks never listed a sender and never bounced. Businesses discovered that their payroll systems had given everyone 15% raises and when they tried to change it back, the error message just read “Nope! ;)”. A supervisor trying to demand that an employee come in on her sick day found the words caught in his throat and heard himself offering her his own job instead, and maybe she wanted his car as well? Everyone who had ever forced a laugh at a customer’s “working hard or hardly working?” joke found a neat stack of hundred-dollar bills under their pillow.

“Being gay is a choice,” they said, and people could choose to be gay. Many did.

“The refugees are dangerous,” they said, and the refugees were. When they marched in the streets, their voices boomed so loudly that even those who deliberately avoided seeing them could not avoid hearing them. When counter-protestors attacked, the refugees’ flimsy, hand-lettered pasteboard signs formed an impenetrable shield. The refugees woke to find that notices of voter registration, uncontested and freely granted, had appeared in the lining of their cereal boxes or rolled up in their shoes. They marched to the polls that November as a triumphing army.

“If women take the proper steps, they can protect themselves from sexual assault,” they said, and women could. When they yelled “stop” and “no,” men were frozen in place like leering

statues and were unable to move until they repeated the words “toxic masculinity” three times. Short skirts and halter tops gave sharp electric shocks to anyone touching them without consent. Cardigans and jeans did too. Rape whistles stopped making shrieking noises at attempted predators and started firing tiny poisonous darts at them instead. Forcefields formed around women too intoxicated to consent, and those who tried to touch them anyway found the words *no means no, jackass* branded on their palms. When women took the proper step of not wanting to be raped, they weren’t.

“Immigrants are taking our jobs,” politicians said, and immigrants did. They ran for office and took the jobs of the politicians who said it. The politicians wished they had used more precise pronouns.

“Money given to the rich will trickle down to the poor,” they said, and money did. When wealthy people swiped their credit cards, an extra zero’s worth of money drained from their accounts. If the purchase involved slave labor, the horn or hide of something endangered, or anything “bespoke,” they lost another zero. Poor people woke up to find those extra zeroes in their bank accounts. When the wealthy pulled cash from their billfolds, they found the bills slipping free between their fingers. Swarms of bills flitted away like colorful clouds of confetti. Blocks away, homeless people huddled around grates were surprised when invisible hands dropped hundred-dollar bills in their cups. If a rich person forgot about an expensive possession—their second-favorite diamond watch, their third-favorite set of pearl earrings—a member of their domestic staff found it in the lining of their pockets.

“College campuses are all about ‘safe spaces’ now,” they said, and campuses were. Staff members who harassed students saw their misdeeds appear in exquisitely detailed op-eds in their school newspapers beneath their employee headshots. A graduate student tried to swallow a

whole bottle of pills and found they had turned to M'Ms. Hungry students who couldn't afford meal plans found food materializing in their dorm fridges: fresh produce, an entire rotisserie chickens, the occasional pint of Ben and Jerry's. Survivors of sexual assault discovered they could keep their attackers at least ten feet away with a glare or frightened glance. A man walked onto a college campus with a knife in his pocket and dark intentions in his heart, and the knife shattered against the skin of the first student's chest.

"Free markets work best when they're deregulated," they said, and the markets thrived. Congress passed laws allowing people who worked in finance to do whatever they wanted: sell risky mortgages, default on people's homes at will, lie to the government, commit arson. Stock markets soared in response, and economists scratched their heads. A hedge fund manager launched a Ponzi scheme and everyone but him profited. A mortgage company lied about their loans and everyone who financed a home with one found their mortgages suddenly manageable, their future suddenly secure, and their shutters suddenly freshly painted. An investment banker double-parked on Broadway and the GDP improved 2.7%.

"Climate change is a myth," they said, and science became legend. *Once, humanity had such hubris that they thought they were more important than Mother Nature herself. They ripped resources from her belly, burned her blood to power their machines, released poisonous vapors that shredded the skin that protected her from the worst of the Sun's rays. Nature tried to heal herself, but she burned with such a fever that she shed tears that began to flood the land.* The myth became imprinted upon the world's consciousness alongside the stories of Eve and her apple, Pandora and her box, Icarus and his wings of feather and wax; a cautionary tale that was both only metaphor and deeply true. Children inscribed these stories' lessons on their bones.

“There’s a War on Christmas,” they said, and war was declared. Mobs stormed department stores, jabbing inflatable Santas with push-pins and shredding tinsel into clouds of shiny debris. They tore branches from Christmas trees to make torches. They tied together oversized candy cane decorations to form curved, pronged pitchforks. A band of Christmas warriors in New York City chopped down the Rockefeller Christmas tree at its base. They chanted their war cry as they carried their trophy through the streets: “Happy Holidays! Happy Holidays! HAPPY HOLIDAYS!”

“Guns don’t kill people,” they said, and guns didn’t. A would-be mass shooter was stunned when his assault rifles sprayed the middle schoolers with iridescent bubbles instead of bullets. Soldiers pulled triggers and watched balloons swell from the tips of their rifles, swaying and floating free like a flock of brightly colored birds. The gun of an abusive partner, rarely seen but frequently referenced, turned into finely-carved, lavender-scented soap in his nightstand drawer. A suicidal boy tucked his parent’s rifle under his jaw, pulled the trigger, and felt a stream of small white pills pelt his chin in the place of bullets.

The law was repealed in a month.

Porcelain

The tips of Sydney's fingers were the first part of her to turn to porcelain.

"That happens sometimes for women in our family," her mother said, setting her spatula aside and examining her daughter's hand. "Congratulations! It makes a lot of things easier." She flung her arms around Sydney, careful not to get pancake batter on her.

"Easier?" asked Sydney, rubbing the cool, hard nubs. They didn't have any nerve endings.

"Look how pale your skin is now, and how perfect your nails are," her mom said. "You'll never have to worry about that again."

"Less fussing around with all those bottles of nail polish," added her dad with a chuckle from the far side of the breakfast table. He found Sydney's bathroom shelf full of make-up and cosmetics highly amusing for reasons she never quite understood.

"No more hangnails," said Sydney, trying to find their perspective and crawl inside it, "or chipped nails."

"That's the idea," her mom said, and returned to stirring her pancake batter.

Three weeks later, Sydney woke to find her ring, pinky, and index fingers were porcelain, as well as her left thumb.

"Now things will be even simpler for you," her mother said. "Seven out of your ten fingers are flawless now, and they'll be like that forever. And who knows? You might get more."

She held her hand against Sydney's outstretched palm. Sydney noticed for the first time that her mother's hand had a liver spot forming beneath her pinky's knuckle. The porcelain fingers were smooth and flawless, painted a delicate cream. The knuckles were shaped to keep

the fingers bent in a graceful arc. They would never warp with arthritis like her father's. The nails would never be ridged like her mother's.

"I wish the rest of my fingers and my toes were this pretty," she said, because they suddenly seemed ugly by comparison. Her right thumb was crooked after being broken in a biking accident. She slid her feet out of her slippers. There was a cluster of dark hairs sprouting from each toe. How much prettier they would be if they were smooth and hard and free of hair or dimples or oddly bent nails.

A week later they were.

"So is that, like, a weird prosthetic?" asked a girl in homeroom. "Or like, really good make-up. Oh my God, did you get plastic surgery?" She craned her neck to get a better look.

Sydney hid the porcelain fingers under her desk.

"Leave it alone," she said. "They're real."

"They're not fingers," said the girl with the absolute confidence of adolescence.

Sydney slapped her with a hand that was suddenly all porcelain. The pinky finger cracked down the side, the girl screeched, and Sydney was sent home for the day and told to undo whatever she had done to her hands before coming back.

"Well, I hope you understand what a serious mistake that was," her mother told her, tight-lipped, as she carefully slid the hot glue gun along the crack.

"I'm sorry, Mom, but they just didn't believe me when—"

"Oh, not the school." Her mother waved her free hand carelessly. "But your finger. There'll be a line right down your finger forever. You're just lucky it didn't shatter. There's no gluing *that* back together. You would be asymmetrical." She shuddered and stepped back, eying her work. "You could have ended up perfect, you know."

“Sorry,” said Sydney. The next morning, her hands and feet were all slick, cream porcelain. She missed three days of school relearning how to walk—slowly, arms spread for balance, the new weight of the hands helping, watching where she positioned the newly perfect feet.

The porcelain didn’t spread again for months. In the interim, her parents called her school and used the words “ADA” and “reasonable accommodations” frequently enough to convince them to ignore the new porcelain appendages. Her mom helped her get dressed in the morning, and her dad gently wedged her cutlery between the rigid fingers so she could feed herself. She even got an aide to write things down for her. Her classmates gasped and cooed over her new hands and feet in mingled horror and admiration. She could not understand the horror. She was so much more beautiful now, and when she could not do something, someone else—a parent, her aide, a sympathetic passerby—did it for her. Everyone treated her like a princess now. What did they think she was losing?

“You’ve got to be careful,” her father warned her, gently tapping the back of the fingers. “You’re hollow now. Like bird bones.”

Then the porcelain took her legs up to the calf, and she couldn’t walk at all. The hollow porcelain was fragile, but it was just so, so pretty. The turn of the calf was a clean, delicate sweep of a line, the ankles narrow, freed from the odd bulge she had always hated. Sydney trapped a cloth carefully between the elegantly shaped hands and dusted the legs once a day.

“You can take some time off school,” her mother told her with a wink, because they both knew Sydney was done with that. She was too different from her classmates now, and she knew they wouldn’t understand her. Besides, her new, transforming body was far too precious and delicate to take to a bustling school. They bought a wheelchair, but Sydney couldn’t operate it

with the unmoving hands. Her parents took turns pushing her around when they were home. Her mom started dressing her every morning.

“You’re so lucky,” her father said, heaving her chair over a raised threshold with a grunt. “You never have to walk anywhere ever again.”

Sydney nodded. That night, her knees and arms turned to porcelain.

She couldn’t bend the legs, so they jutted out from her chair like pale branches. When her parents were at work, she spent most of her time admiring the new porcelain limbs. Sydney especially loved seeing them in sunlight. The sun caught their smooth edges and the graceful curves of the joints. They were always slick and cool to the touch. She only got bored sometimes. Her head and torso seemed so wrong now, lumpen and oversized, covered in odd folds of skin and too-dark wisps of hair and uneven coloring. Her doctor told her that her weight was normal, so why did her belly hang out over her waistline when she sat? There was a weird mole that had a single hair growing out of it just above her left hip and she hadn’t worn a bikini since another girl pointed it out and laughed at a fourth-grade pool party. A spilled pot of cooking pasta had left a smooth ripple of scar over her left shoulder. Four months before her eighteenth birthday, it became shiny from porcelain instead, and she cried a little with relief. A boy had poked it once and asked her why her skin looked like plastic. She had cried much longer over that.

The school kept calling, wanting to know why Sydney wasn’t coming. She could sometimes hear her parents’ voices drifting down the hall.

“But you only need those forms for medical leave,” her mother said. “And we’re not—I don’t—no—we’re not *asking* for medical accommodations anymore. She isn’t *sick*. She was never sick. Why are you so intent on making this sound like she’s diseased?”

Later that day, her mother used gentle soap and a washcloth to swab away some smudges on Sydney's new legs. Her parents were taking turns feeding her now, and sometimes food spilled into her lap. Sydney tried not to feel like a child.

"Some people don't get it," her mother said firmly. "And they never will. But you don't need to listen to them, darling." She rubbed a trace of oatmeal off the curve of her daughter's knee. "You don't need them anymore."

"I hope it takes my belly soon," Sydney said to prove that she agreed with her mom, and three weeks later she woke to find out it had. It didn't just take her belly, either, but her hips and waist and butt too. The mole was vanquished by a stretch of unblemished porcelain. It took away the pouchy belly that puberty had brought, the growth spurt stretch marks.

"Mom? Mom! I can't get out bed," she said. She had been able to push herself upright before, using her still mobile hips and shoulders, but now she lay inert and trapped beneath the covers. All she could do was stare across the room at the old cabinet where her mom kept her childhood dolls.

"Oh, sweetheart, has it spread further?" Her mother hurried into Sydney's room, her father on her heels. She pulled down the covers and pulled up Sydney's pajama top, revealing the shiny new stomach. "Oh, *congratulations!*"

"Don't pull it up too high!" said Sydney, trying and failing to shift away. "Dad's right here!"

"Oh, that's right—I just forget that you're ..."

 Her mom gestured vaguely.

"Do you think I'm still going to be able to eat? How will—you know—use the bathroom?" Sydney asked. She loved the new, shiny planes of the porcelain, but her new

immobility was making her stomach twinge with nerves, or would have if she still had a stomach.

Her mother sat on the edge of her bed. “Okay. I think it’s time to show you my secret,” she said, and her father smiled. Sydney’s mother lifted her own shirt to reveal the hard, clean lines of her own porcelain stomach. Sydney gasped, wishing she could reach out and touch it. Her mother laughed and clapped her hands.

“Oh, I’ve been waiting for this day. I told you it ran in the family. How did you think I kept off the baby weight? You kicked so hard I worried you would break me,” she said, running her hands down the length of her belly. “But everything worked out all right, and it will for you too. I’ve lived with this for most of my life. If I turned out okay, shouldn’t you? And you’ve finally gotten rid of that mole, too.” She stroked Sydney’s hair.

Sydney hadn’t realized her mother knew about the mole. It made her feel squirmy. She thought about all the other little things she hoped nobody noticed—the pimples scattered on her back and the silvery stretch marks on her hips and the way her thighs got twice as big when she sat down and dimpled in odd places when she stood up—and she was suddenly intensely glad that the mole was gone.

“Your mom and I just have to be careful at night,” said her father from the doorway. “I’d hate to put a knee through your mom’s stomach in my sleep!” Her mother laughed, and after a moment, Sydney laughed too.

Sydney didn’t get out of bed any more, but that was all right—she no longer felt the desire to eat, drink, or use the bathroom. No more awkward meals where she had to balance a fork between two unfeeling fingers. Everything about her was so clean and pretty and

untroublesome now. No more smelling or sweating, shaving or plucking. Everything unruly or unkempt about her had been pared away, leaving her shiny and smooth as a new teacup.

The porcelain crept up her upper torso rib by rib. Her mother and father came into her room every morning to admire its progress. It swallowed her stretch marks and flattened her belly. The odd dip beneath her ribs vanished. The constellation of birthmarks beneath her breasts was overtaken by cool porcelain. Her breasts subsided into even porcelain curves. Her mother dusted her once a day and washed her gently with a damp cloth once a week. Her father applied some paint to the yellowing crack on the pinkie. Sydney could no longer lift her head to see it, but her parents assured her it was unnoticeable.

“I’m sorry about what I said,” her mother said, leaning over her daughter’s bed so Sydney could see her beam. “You might be perfect after all.” She clapped her hands together with delight.

A week before her eighteenth birthday, the porcelain turned Sydney’s throat into a slender, perfectly proportioned column.

“Gorgeous,” her mother said. “Like a Greek statue. Like a fountain.”

Sydney blinked several times to indicate her agreement.

“You’re so close, honey,” her dad said.

Her mother nodded vigorously. “So close to perfect.”

On her eighteenth birthday, Sydney woke inside a body made of porcelain. The cheeks were perfectly round. The hair curled evenly and precisely to the shoulders. The last scattering of adolescent acne across her nose was replaced by the unbroken ivory of the porcelain.

“You did it, sweetheart.” Her mother slid her arms under Sydney’s unmoving shoulders and gave her a hug.

“Look at you!” her father said, like she had just appeared in her wedding dress.

Sydney’s mother emptied the old cabinet where she kept her childhood dolls and propped up her brand new one.

“You can’t play with a doll this perfect,” she told her daughter as she positioned the porcelain frame on the shelf, and Sydney believed her from deep in her porcelain heart.

Who I Did Not Become

The ghosts have been visiting me at dawn, which is kind of weird if you think about it. Like, not midnight? Not the witching hour? Not even sunset?

No, they show up right when the sun starts streaming in through my windows. I'm not waking up because of the light, because that never bothered me, but because—I don't know. I do. I open my eyes right as the sun peeks over the horizon and there's a ghost silhouetted in the window. They're there for a few minutes, maybe ten. Then they dissipate, just like that, and I'm able to go back to sleep, thank God.

For a while I thought they were just dreams because, Christ, wouldn't you? They're diaphanous, misty outlines. The light goes through them and makes them look colorful and glimmering, like the insides of oyster shells. After a week or so of this, though, I tried getting out of bed, looking at them from different angles, even passing my hand through their gauzy haze. They felt like nothing but their features shifted around my hands. I was awake. They were real.

I thought it was just one ghost at first, the same one every morning, but up close I realized they're different every day. And here's the scary part—they all look like me.

What are they, really? I mean, I'm calling them ghosts, but how can you be haunted by yourself?

It takes me a few weeks before I start talking to them. I know, that's kind of a long time, but since when do ghosts just straight up have conversations with the people they're haunting? But I say hello one morning, just to test it, to a ghost who looks like me plus a few laugh lines and maybe a few drinks, and the ghost says *hello* back like it was waiting for me.

“Oh *shit*,” I say, because *honestly*. The ghost doesn’t respond. “Uh. Hello? No, I said that. Okay. Who are you?”

The ghost tilts her head to the side.

“I’m you,” she says. It’s faint, but it’s my voice. I couldn’t really tell from the “hello,” but that is definitely me. Well, *shit*.

“What do you mean you’re me?” I ask.

“I’m you,” she says, “if you had sat in the front row of Psych 101.”

“What,” I say.

“If you had sat in the front row of Psych 101,” my ghost says, “you would have become a more trusting, easygoing person.”

“Why,” I say.

“You would have met Karen.”

“Who?”

“Exactly.” I start to interrupt but she cuts me off with a wave of her hand. “You would have become friends with the student sitting next to you. Karen Geller. She would have been a softening influence on you. And your final project tearing apart Freud’s theory of development would have killed.” She smiles, flexing those laugh lines.

Then she evaporates.

“But I’m not hard,” I say to the empty room. It’s true. I guess. I mean, I could theoretically be nicer, but honestly, who couldn’t? Unless—after Annie’s sublet ended and moved out, she never followed up on those plans to grab lunch. Maybe that was because she secretly found me too cold. I had to tell her once, post-break-up, that I couldn’t treat patients all day and come home and be her therapist too. Maybe that was too harsh. Maybe my actual

therapist work has made me too good at setting boundaries. I crawl back into bed. I had given up after the third time she cancelled and tried not to think about it. Maybe she would have liked me more if I had been more open, more sharing—maybe she found me too clinical—maybe she never actually liked me at all—maybe I really would have aced that Freud presentation—

No. Enough. I take three deep breaths and visualize cutting down this overgrown vine of *what-ifs* at the root. These are questions that I'll never answer.

So that's the thing I figure out about each of these alternative universe me's. They're better than me. I meet one who took a class in Computer Science and majored in the subject after finding it wasn't miserable and boring like the rest of the math classes we—me and ghost-me—had both taken until our paths split.

“I made six-figures,” she tells me, her voice fading as she did. “Right out of ...”

College, I assume. I'm literally never going to make that much. Marriage and family therapists just don't, unless they start a practice that gets crazy successful and/or get celebrities for clients or whatever. I definitely don't have the nerve to start my own practice. I knew that when I enrolled in the master's program. Stupid to get upset about that now. Really, really stupid.

Life is not an infinitely branching set of possibilities. Sometimes making one decision means closing yourself off to all the other decisions. Sometimes choices don't come with a redo. Everyone knows that. Kids who break their toys know that. I should know that.

One ghost-me had become an amateur chef after taking that Japanese cooking elective that I had almost been impulsive enough to sign up for. She liked to cook elaborate meals for her husband every Friday night—yeah, she had a husband too.

“I like to cook too,” I tell her. I do. Sometimes.

After a few more week of visits, I think, *Sue me*. Honestly. So I never became a coding super genius and I’m not married—I’m not even 30, lots of people aren’t married—and I didn’t ace my sophomore year presentation on the relationship between Freud and Jung. I eat frozen meals on busy nights. Jesus.

This is the stuff rolling around my head all day. I’m starting every day with a little injection of regret, and I can feel it lingering in my bloodstream. I obsess over paths not taken: gap years and different grad school programs and that girl I had a crush on in middle school, years before I knew what crushing on a girl meant.

Here’s the worst part: The other me’s are sticking around longer. Sometimes the sun has cleared the horizon by the time they move on. Their outlines are getting sharper, too. One of them has dyed their hair lime green, and it takes me a minute to realize, *shit, they have real colors now?* The more I talk to them, the longer they last. The more tired I am.

I think they’re getting stronger.

Here’s the thing about my life. It’s not a tragedy. I have a job that I love, or at least like most days, even if the pay’s a bit shit. I have a loving family that doesn’t really understand my life decisions, but don’t ask me too many questions over Thanksgiving. Mom’s mostly stopped forwarding me articles with titles like “Relaunch! Changing Your Career Post-Grad School.” Dad’s mostly stopped asking me if I’m really, truly, completely sure I’m bisexual. My dating life is typical for anyone who has a whole folder of half-used dating apps on their phone: quiet, and unmarked by either monsters or soulmates. I love my friends and I see them when my schedule lines up with their schedule and none of us are too tired to leave the house, which does happen occasionally. I have hobbies that I mostly enjoy when I remember to do them. No one in my

immediate family has died yet, unless you're counting my cat, Sadie, and she was eighteen at that point.

I have no right to be haunted by all these people who I have not become.

My life is—it's fine. *Okay* would be a kind word for it. *Mediocre* would be an accurate one.

It's a limbo sort of life, the sort that nobody writes about because it is not extraordinary in any direction. I don't know why the ghosts picked me. Unless I'm not the only one? Perhaps everyone opens their eyes each morning and faces a version of themselves that they can barely look at directly, and they slowly suck the energy and life out of us, and none of us know how to talk about it.

Or maybe it's just me. Maybe it's because I'm the worst version of myself. Wrong college, wrong boyfriend, wrong career. Maybe we really live in a multiverse of infinite realities and I have fucked mine up the worst. Maybe this is my punishment. Maybe at every tiny branch, I've managed to steer my life down the least impressive fork. Maybe anyone with the family and the friends and all the luck that I've had would achieve "okay," and my choices are the only reason I haven't transcended it. Wrong haircut. Wrong attitude. Wrong fucking chair.

"Taking the team to nationals gave me the confidence boost I needed to ask out the hot guy in the psychoanalysts seminar."

I rub my eyes. This ghost is smugger than most of them. "Kyle?" He had dark, warm eyes and the jawline of a superhero. An animated superhero. I had lusted after him for a whole semester of archetypes and complexes. I chatted with him about the final project a few times and considered myself very brave. Looking back, he had been too self-absorbed to even notice me.

“Yeah. Those thoughts you had during the libido lesson?” She smirks. I do remember. Jung’s idea of the libido had almost nothing to do with sex, which didn’t stop me from staring at the narrow nape of Kyle’s neck and imagining kissing it. And kissing other parts of him, too. “They were accurate.”

“Great. Glad to hear it. And then you got married?” I’m weary of this. I’m very, very weary of this.

“Obviously. You do remember the libido lesson fantasies, right?”

“Congratulations.” My tone is flat. Her smile is gloating.

“You don’t have to be jealous,” she says. She shifts her weight. I can actually hear her cargo shorts rustle. She looks solid. Filled in. Fed. My appetite has been dying by degrees for weeks.

“That’s very easy for you to say.” When I close my eyes these days, a parade of me’s marches across the inside of my eyelids. Me’s who made braver choices. Smarter choices. Kinder choices. “Who the hell would you be jealous of?”

I’m matching her hostility with my own. I always tell my patients not to do this.

She shrugs. “No one, I guess.”

“All right,” I say. “Fine. Then how come I’m the real me? Huh?” The anger is acid in my stomach. “If you’re all so good and so much better, then how come I’m the one that’s real? How come you only exist in *my* room? You’re not real. You don’t *count*. I count. I’m not perfect, but I’m real! I’m goddamn real.”

She melts away. Her smile goes last.

I start ignoring the ghosts. I wake up like I always do, but I don't even look at them anymore. I burrow under my covers, tug them up over my ears. The ghosts stand there and ignore me, just like they did in the beginning. They don't move, don't talk. They just wait for me to acknowledge them. They know I will. They know that I can't stop myself. I never could.

I still can't sleep after dawn. I still can't stop obsessing. I nearly fall asleep in one of my family sessions, mid-paternal rant about their daughter's weed habit. I cycle through stalking each of my exes on Facebook. I look up the cost of airline tickets to Brazil, MFA programs, cabins in the woods, fitness programs, cosmetic surgery. I feel like they're draining my energy, like I'm being emptied out. I meet my grad school friends for drinks and feel sloshy and too-warm after the first beer. They ask if I'm okay. I dye my hair lime green and hate it. I start learning Japanese cooking and quit when I fall asleep one night in my kitchen chair and one of the dumplings catches fire in the pan. I stop wanting to eat anything rich or substantial and subsist on small, sweet things: half a banana for breakfast, a cup of yogurt for lunch.

Then one day, I peel back the sheets and peek at the window. I don't know why. Honestly, I don't. I just do it. And I'm standing there, framed by the dawn light, clearer and sharper than I have ever been before. I am solid except for the way the sun's rays cast a slight glow through me. I can see the freckle on my left temple, the pock of an acne scar on the side of my nose. I am sharply, painfully present. I look more like me than I ever have before.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask.

"You call us," I-in-the-window say. She's still sort of shimmering around the edges. More halo-like than blurry, though. She looks sympathetic. I don't really recognize that look. I don't think I make it in the mirror a lot.

"I don't mean to," I say.

“You don’t have to,” she says. “We come anyway.”

“Why?” I ask, voice cracking.

“Because you want us to,” she says.

“I *don’t*.”

“Then why do you keep calling us?”

I don’t know. I just look at her until she fades away.

“Because,” I say to an empty room. “Because. I just can’t stop—I don’t know—I always wonder—I’m *always* wondering—I don’t know if—what if—I had only—*only*—”

I slump back into my bed. I feel drawn. Drained. It’s definitely not just the dawn awakenings that are making me tired. Every encounter with them leaves me with a little less energy. I look a little paler in the mirror every morning. I stopped wanting to eat breakfast weeks ago, stopped eating it this week. I think they’re taking something from me.

I think that’s why they’re getting stronger.

That night, I see on Facebook that Kyle from my master’s program has moved back from the Ukraine to our city and hit the Messenger button on instinct.

You may not remember me, but we had a very bad seminar together in grad school. Do you want to get coffee at Magic Beans again some time? Catch up? Talk about how we thought Jung was a misogynist before it was cool?

Kyle really was a bit pretentious, I think, then hit send anyway. I don’t know if I even want to see him. I do know that I really, really don’t want to greet a future version of myself some morning, cuddling a pregnant belly with a ring-bearing hand, telling me how gently Kyle kissed them under the streetlights.

The ghost the next morning is more present than ever before. She's so solid that no light goes through. Her shadow is dark and clear against the carpet. The light is a nimbus around her sharply defined form.

Pursuing the obsession didn't work. I don't say anything. I cry a little. I cancel the coffee date.

I go back to hiding under my sheet. Like a fucking toddler. I know they're still there at the beginning of every day. I can see the shadow through the weave of the cotton. They have all have shadows now. My energy keeps waning. During the day, I'm so tired that my friends keep asking if I'm sick every time I see them. I stop seeing them. I feel empty, and not just because I've almost stopped eating altogether. Except for the dark circles under my eyes, my skin is pale all the time now. Almost translucent. When the wind is strong my body sways. Sometimes I think it's blowing through me.

I can't stop thinking about them. Their lives feel more real than my own. I'm a changeling. I don't deserve this life, not when these other me's could obviously live it better. Sometimes I want to let them. They want to spindle my life away until they're more real than I am? Fine. Let them do it.

I don't sleep the next night, either. Then I fall asleep in the middle of therapy session. Christ. I don't even remember doing it. I'm in my session, and then my patient is tapping me on the shoulder and apologizing for interrupting me. *He's* apologizing to *me*, and the guilt is swallowing me down.

I do handle it well. I can do that at least. I apologize, but not so much that he feels obligated to comfort me. I refund his appointment, explain that I've been sick—hell, it's basically true—and offer to refer him to another therapist. He looks alarmed by the suggestion.

“But I'm really happy with you! You're the only person who's ever really listened to me,” he says. “Seriously. It's fine.”

I stare at him. I know I look blank. I'm afraid I look haggard. I wish I knew what he saw.

“You're, like—” He blinks at me. “You obviously care a lot? Like your office—you've got potted plants everywhere, and there's tissues in reach wherever I sit, and even the curtains match the chairs—I don't know. It's not like I really care about the curtains, obviously. It's just—you put a lot of thought into it—into everything. So. I'm sorry you've been sick.”

He lifts his hand and it sort of hovers around my elbow, like he wants to pat me on the arm. Then he just gives a small wave, says he'll see me next week, and smiles a little before he leaves.

The other me's wouldn't have fallen asleep, I think. My whole mouth tastes like that lingering, bitter echo of vomit that you can never quite rinse out. Then again:

The other me's wouldn't have been there—not right there—in the first place.

I don't know where that thought came from, but I kind of like it. It rolls around my head like a marble. I don't know what the other me's would have done. They're not really me.

I closed off the paths that would have made me them. They closed off some paths too. Maybe they picked a better path, but Christ, they had to *pick* too. So yeah. Their lives can't be totally perfect. Maybe Miss “I opened up emotionally” lost all her money to a scam artist. Maybe the “married Kyle” me won't be so happy when all that libido wears off. Maybe the Japanese

cook gets hit by an asteroid. Whatever. Fuck them too, is what I'm saying. I hope they're happy, I hope everyone's happy, but also, *fuck them too*.

That night, I delete the half-finished grad school applications off my computer and erase the budget travel folder off my bookmarks tab. I pick up two boxes of dye, one in my natural hair color and another in a natural-looking black, in case I ever feel like experimenting again. I eat a box of frozen enchiladas and they taste delicious. I unfriend all my exes on every social media platform. I throw away the newly purchased weights that I never actually used. I call my grad school friends and make plans. I return the Coding for Dummies book that I bought off Amazon and use the credit to buy a guidebook to starting your own practice. I keep the Japanese cookbook. I actually quite liked it. When I crawl into bed that night, I go straight to sleep.

The next morning, there's a ghost.

This ghost is cloudy-gray and misty again, but she otherwise looks like me. Exactly like me, except—there's something a little different in her face. It's my own face, but I can't quite figure it out from the outside. More confident? Less? More anxious? More calm?

“Okay.” I don't get out of bed. I honestly, truly, can't be bothered. “Who the hell are you?”

“I'm the you that chose to keep wondering,” she said.

Less happy, I decide. She definitely looks less happy. She's already fading into a haze. The light passes straight through, falling onto me. She's gone. She's gone, and I hope I won't see her again.

The Sirens

She only wears make-up tastefully. A dab here, a line there. It only highlights her natural beauty. She is always gorgeous, in any case.

She cooks just the way your mother did.

She never, ever, asks you to change.

The sirens live in a reservoir now.

You can only see them when the light is right. Rising or setting is best, angled across the water in a way that should make a reflection but doesn't. It's one of those big, blocky reservoirs that doesn't even pretend to be natural, with concrete walls and a big fence around it that men must crawl under when they visit. The sirens of the reservoir are dark and indistinct at first, curled against the flat squares of cement like question marks. Then one detaches itself from the others, glides to the surface, and then she isn't dark any more. Not unless you'd like her like that. The men in town tell stories about the siren-girls in the bar.

“She was so *sad*,” says one man, rapping his beer can against the surface of the bar for emphasis. This doesn't seem to have made him sad. “She was *sick*, too. Who knew sirens could get sick?”

What sickness she had, he doesn't seem to know exactly, but it made her very thin and very white, except for her cheeks, which were rosy. She had lost nothing but pounds, gained nothing but clear pale skin. She's delicate, needy but not too needy, sweet like candy. Her body was like—like a *fuckin' statue*, the man said, as he drained the last of his beer can, but *soft*. Or she looks soft, anyway. He wishes she would let him reach through the surface of the water and touch her.

The man on the next stool down shakes his head. When he goes to the reservoir, he sees a different siren. They all do.

His siren is sad, he explains, but not because of the illness. It was because of the men, the *other* men.

She was skinny, yes, and pale, but in a drawn, delicate, trembling way. She had been hurt, in ways tragic and attractive and pleasantly vague. Her voice, usually clear and undistorted by the water separating them, wobbled with bravely suppressed tears. The important thing was that the men who had hurt her were not like the man on the stool. He was nice and they were not nice. He was so good compared to them, so brave and heroic and capable. *I'm a feminist*, he told her on an impulse, and watched as her eyes widened in awe.

“She’s starting to trust me,” he explains. He has visited her many times, and every time she comes a little closer to the surface. None of them ever break through. “Like a—a stray cat.”

The man at the end of the bar leans in and tells them both that they are shallow. His siren wasn’t weak and dependent like theirs.

She was a tough, capable badass. She didn’t need a man, but she wanted him. She was both muscled and slender, and wore tight tank tops that showed off her biceps, which were well-defined but less so than his. She had a scar on her face, discreetly sized and attractively placed. Her hair was short, but not too short. She offered to put on a dress for him one day, and maybe even make-up, and smiled shyly when she said it. He heroically told her that she was beautiful just the way she was, and she looked bashful, because she wasn’t used to men appreciating her for who she was. He knew she would wear the dress and make-up someday anyway.

She was sweeter than that, another man interjects. And not so boring.

She was quirky, almost aggressively so. She said she likes to pull over if she saw a patch of wildflowers she wanted to smell. (How she accomplished this from within the reservoir, she did not explain, but he knew what she meant.) She wore overlapping gauzy scarves and oversized glasses and brightly colored sundresses and a pair of combat boots because she was actually slightly edgy. She smelled like soap and sunshine. Her name was a noun. The man can't remember which one. *Rain*, maybe. Summer. Star. Someday, she told him, she will stop a spinning globe with a fingertip and travel there. The sirens said *someday* a lot.

"She kind of looked like my mom," blurts out the drunkest man in the room. He coughs up his drink a little. "But younger, obviously—much younger. And not as naggy."

"She liked sports," says another. "She told me about her dream first date. She didn't want to sip, like, mocha-frappe-sugar-soyccinos in a little café, or take a walk on the beach—no girly shit like that. She wanted to watch sports."

She told him that she would like hearing the announcers from the kitchen as she prepares meticulously layered dips and carefully arranged trays of cocktail wieners. She wants to wear jerseys with his team's name on it, one size too small. As he lies on the edge of the reservoir, propping his elbows on the concrete lip, she tips her head up at him and asks him to explain the rules—just one more time? She never gets it the first time. She likes cheap beer. She can burp on command.

"What did you see?" the last man asks the bartender.

The bartender swipes his rag across the bar. He has not been to see the sirens and he does not know what he would see in them. He tells them this. He does have some ideas. He doesn't tell them that.

"You haven't gone to the reservoir? Dude. *Dude*."

“I can’t believe you haven’t at least taken a peek?” Even the man who saw his almost-mother is emboldened by the bartender’s obvious foolishness. “That’s like—like being in a room with a mirror and not looking at all.”

“We’ll take you.” The man who had been so proud of his tank-top wearing siren knocks his drink against the bar top. “Right now.”

The men are at precisely the right stage of drunkenness for this plan to make perfect sense. There is a surge of excitement, drinks raised and cries of agreement.

The bartender shakes his head. He has heard all about the sirens.

She is beautiful. She has curves in all the right places, which is to say, her breasts are large, and her butt, if you like that, and no other part of her.

She is very smart—just a fraction less smart than you.

She is strong, strong enough to slap a sleazy guy across the face when he creeps on her at a bar. She tells you the story and does not explain where or when it happens. “I said, ‘You’re lucky—next time I’ll knee you in the balls!’” she declares, shoulders back and jaw jutting, “and everyone laughed and clapped and cheered for me.”

In the end, he goes anyway. The town is not large. These men are not an insignificant portion of his tips. It’s closing time. And hell, he’s curious. He thinks he knows what the siren will look like to him, but he wants to be sure.

“Whaddya think she’ll look like?”

The drunk men are walking him across Main Street, directing his path like he doesn't know where the reservoir is. Like he hasn't lived here his whole life. Quite a few of them had ordered beers for the trip.

"Like your ex-girlfriend?" One of them nudges his shoulders a little too hard, knocking him into another man.

"Like the *opposite* of your ex-girlfriend?"

Someone snorts.

"They'll look like sirens, I suppose," says the bartender cautiously. All he can imagine is the image in his childhood Greek myths picture book—the sirens luring Odysseus with gaping mouths and grasping hands. They were drawn terrifying, leering, and naked, with just some elaborately placed hair covering them. The image had always struck him as faintly ridiculous.

"Yeah, but what type?" The man whose siren was a tank-top wearing badass seems to have taken charge. He stands at the front of the group, eggs them on.

"Don't they just sing?"

They laugh at this.

"Maybe in, like, the *Roman* times, or whatever," one man says. "They have to work a little harder now!"

"Yeah, I mean, we all have—" The young man who saw the siren like his mother looks around and lowers his voice by perhaps a decibel. "—porn."

"This way." They've reached the fence wrapping around the rectangle of the reservoir. The tomboy-loving man has to walk back and forth across the same stretch of fence three times before he spots the section that can be peeled up. There's a "No Trespassing" sign directly above the split.

“How illegal is this?” asks the bartender.

“It’s, like—” The man who loved the girl named Rain (or something) gestures expansively. “Low-key illegal.”

It takes ten minutes for each of the men to negotiate the risky combination of beer, fence, and concrete. Once they’re all inside, the bartender is ushered to the edge of the reservoir.

“Just kneel here,” someone says. “She’ll come.”

The men retreat to a discreet distance. The bartender is a little amused by this sudden display of courtesy, but he still wishes he had not come. It’s windy, and he’s tired, and he’s not sure he wants to know what his siren will look like. He still can’t picture her.

A gust of wind sends leaves tumbling across the pavement and goosebumps rippling over his exposed neck. He’s on the verge of giving up when his eyes pick up the dark shapes sliding fluidly across the reservoir’s floor. One of them slips free of the other. She looks like—

She looks like your mother, but not in a weird way. She is younger and thinner and never asks you to do anything you don’t want to do.

She is strong but still cannot open the salsa jar without your help. Perhaps she isn’t strong. Perhaps she is feisty, or plucky, or spunky.

She fights with you, but only sometimes. In the end, she always ends up agreeing with you. She apologizes for disagreeing with you. She tells you sorry, she didn’t mean it, sorry, she won’t do it again, sorry sorry sorry.

—like a siren.

“She has wings,” he says over his shoulder, “and claws.”

“*Wings!*” hoots one of the men. “I thought you meant, like, the buffalo kind for a sec. And claws?”

“Claws!” squawks one of the men who brought a beer for the road. “Buffalo!”

“Her feet are scaly,” says the bartender evenly. The siren smiles at him just beneath the surface of the water.

“*Scaly*—you weirdo—”

“Another one is coming.”

This silences the men. There’s always a shifting mass of sirens in the bottom of the concrete basin, but they never pay attention to any but the one that comes to greet them. And it is always just one. Who could ever need more than one siren? Why would one not be enough?

“She looks like a sparrow.” The bartender’s voice is neutral. Calm. “But with a woman’s face.”

“I—*shit*, dude.”

“Are you into that?”

“I’m just describing what I see,” the bartender says. “I’m not sure what type of bird she is, exactly. She’s about the size of a sparrow, anyway.”

“And that’s hot?” The man whose siren rhapsodized about feeding him layered dips isn’t happy.

“It’s what she is,” says the bartender, hitching his shoulders in a tiny shrug. “Ah. There’s a third coming.”

“A *third*.” The man who saw his mother kicks a pebble so hard it flies into the reservoir.

“You’re jealous? Of this guy and his bird fetish?” says another.

The bartender ignores this.

“She has the upper body of a bird,” he reports, “and the lower body of a woman.”

“*Ugh.*” Several of them say it, more or less in unison.

She drinks Bud Light, or single malt scotch, or whatever it is that you drink. She doesn't know as much about it as you do, though.

She thinks that rom-coms are totally dumb and boring and never asks to watch them with you. When you watch horror movies together, she clutches your arm and buries her face in your shoulder during the scary parts.

Her bra and underwear always match.

“There’s a fourth one,” the bartender says, shifting his knees on the cold concrete. The other men grumble from their respectful difference. Why does he, with his strange and scaly bird women, need so many?

“What’s this one?” demands one of the men.

“He’s winged and has scaly legs, like the first one,” the bartender says.

“*He?*” The man who liked the ailing siren girl crumples his beer can in his hand.

“Yes,” says the bartender. A fact from the Greek mythology book drifts up from his memory. “Sirens were men, sometimes.” He is tired of this, tired of them—the men and the sirens alike. He wants to be back in his bar. He wants to go home. He wants to stop committing a *lowkey* crime. He has realized, vaguely, why the other men see what they see and why he does not see it, and he doesn’t really want to think about it. It was nice when there was a bar, beer, and coin between them. He would like that division to return.

“Guys! His siren is a *man!*” shouts the man who liked the woman who was one of the boys, and this is all that it takes to tip the assembled crowd into drunken, uncontrollable laughter.

“Do you want to be here?” the bartender asks the sirens. Their mouths—three mouths and one beak, really—move and he hears their voices as clearly as if there were no water separating them.

“Yes,” they say, their voices looping around one another in a quavering unison. “And we want you to be here too.”

“Why would I want to join you in a reservoir?” asks the bartender. He imagines their job was easier on the wine-dark sea. He had taken a semester of Latin in college for his language requirement, and that phrase was among what little he remembered.

“Because we’ll be who you want us to be,” the sirens say.

“I don’t want you to be anything in particular, really,” the bartender says. He really doesn’t. He’s heard the stories of hundreds of people as they pour their hearts out into their cups. Being surprised by them is what he likes best about his job. He likes hearing what makes them different. He can’t imagine why someone would want them to be the same.

“Mmmmm.” Their voices hiss, somehow melodically. The bartender can imagine them singing someone into a sea. “You’re rare, then. We don’t get a lot like you. It isn’t common that we cannot do anything.” Those with arms gesture to their surroundings: the battered chain-link fence, dying stretch of grass between the fence and street, the sign saying “No Trespassing, Municipal Property” with a hole from a bb gun in the “o” of the “no.” “Even here. Even now.”

The men’s laughter is only now dying.

“You’ve been hogging them,” one of the men says abruptly. “Let us have a turn.”

None of them had visited the sirens with another before, but they couldn't stop themselves from rushing to the edge of the water and leaning over the sides.

"You don't care, then?" asks the sirens politely. "If we leave?"

"No," says the bartender, "I understand. You have a job to do."

"We appreciate that," the sirens say, and scatter. Their sisters and brothers rise from the deep, transforming as they do so. He watches them each slide up to a man perched on the side of the reservoir. They become—so many different things. Such very similar things.

She likes hooking up in the shower. Or in the car. Or on the beach, behind the dunes. As you lean so close your nose almost touches the water, she tells you about it—your fantasy, and how she'll fulfill it.

You always like to look at her. If she is ruffled or unpolished, it's only because she's natural and authentic, not fake and plastic.

She runs. She never gets sweaty, but her workout clothes always cling to her anyway. Her skin is always smooth and clear.

She eats chili and hot dogs and hot wings with you and never gains a single pound.

They can't hang out here forever, thinks the bartender, watching the men eagerly speaking to their sirens as though each pair sat alone in a cozy, quiet room. He's right. Life is not a myth and the sirens do not have the power they once did. There are no epic heroes for them to lure, no brave quests across the sea to seduce or harry, no gods' will to bide. Their power has waned accordingly. They live in a reservoir now.

The bartender leaves then, and eventually, the men do too. They all have some combination of jobs, families, pets, and other responsibilities pulling them back from the lip of concrete.

The sirens slip back to the bottom of the reservoir. Their unobserved bodies are dark and shifting. They coil around one another and wait for the men to return. The men almost always do.

The sirens can afford to wait.

They've been waiting a long time.

Your favorite colors are her favorite colors. Your music, her music. Your food, her food. She is like you in all the ways that make life easier for you. She aligns with you, fits against you, curls against you so closely you begin to merge. There is no friction, no conflict, no difference, no space between you. Her dream is supporting your dreams. There is only as much drama as excites you. You cannot touch her, but she fills every hollow space in you, every gap and pit. She props up every part of you that is weak and you never even have to acknowledge it. Never thank her. Never change for her. Never treat her better than you want to treat her. She is easy. She is good.

She draws you in and shapes herself around you like water. She cradles you like the ocean, rocks you like the sea. Warms you like a bath. Sustains you like a drink. She is always there, always around you. You could drown in her eyes. You could drown in her.

Oh. And she laughs at all your jokes, of course. Every single one.

Flesh from Bone

“Hello,” said the corpse.

Angela set aside her lunch and stared over the side of her skiff. The young woman bobbing in the water alongside the boat was clearly dead, her tissue peeling away in strips to expose bones stained green from murky floodwater. And clearly, she was also speaking.

“Don’t you recognize me?” she asked.

“No,” said Angela. “I’m really sorry. I’m terrible with faces.”

She regretted saying it immediately. The woman in the water didn’t really have a face.

“Fair enough, I suppose,” the corpse said, sounding a bit put out regardless. “It has been quite a while. It’s me, Mom. It’s May.”

The corpse raised her hand from the water. A pearl ring glinted on her finger, looking a bit precariously positioned with such little flesh to hold it in place. May had wrapped it in tissue paper when she packed for her cousin’s New Orleans’s Sweet Sixteen. When Angela heard about the floods on the news, had seen her daughter’s name on the list of flood victims, she told a friend in halting, tearful bursts: her gawky girl had been so careful—May had been so proud to travel alone for the first time and so pleased to see her cousin—how she couldn’t, she couldn’t, she *wouldn’t*—

Her friend had said, “You’ll always have that memory?” and Angela had pinched the pale skin of her inner wrist to keep from screaming.

Angela looked at the pearl, and at the little tag of seaweed clinging to it. She thought then that she should weep, or scream, or vomit, or do any of the things a mother ought to do when her daughter’s corpse bobs up from the empty stretch of ocean that had been Louisiana before it had

become just another flood zone. Instead, she said the first and stupidest thing that popped into her head.

“You died.” Three years, two months, and seven days ago.

“*Clearly, Angela,*” said her daughter. The remaining tatters of flesh on her face twitched back into a smile. Calling her mother by her first name when she was annoyed was a precocious habit May had adopted as a toddler, to the great amusement and encouragement of the adults around her.

“You’re talking.” Angela couldn’t help herself.

Her daughter hooked a finger through one empty eye socket and out the other.

“Still pretty dead,” she said. “Are you going to let me onboard?”

“I guess there’s room,” her mother said blankly, surveying the salvage that only half-filled her skiff. The jumble of refuse she had fished from the ruins that lay just fifteen feet below the surface of the water—cracked solar panels, canned food, knives, bits of machinery—had seemed very important just a few minutes ago. The rest of the resource recovery team would be thrilled if she ever got it back to the camp where she lived now. Making it back to camp suddenly seemed like an uncertain prospect. She was talking to the corpse of her daughter. Why should anything stay the same? The only thing that mattered hadn’t.

Her daughter reached her arms up out of the water. Angela took her hand tentatively. May’s skeletal hand, entirely stripped of fingernails and skin and mostly stripped of flesh, felt precisely how it looked. Like damp, mossy twigs. It would have been worse, Angela decided, if it had felt any differently—if it had felt anything like a hand. Angela waited for May to pull herself up. For a moment, they just bobbed together, hand in hand. Angela had knelt at the side

of a pool once and held her daughter just like this while May kicked and windmilled her arms, learning to swim. It hadn't helped, in the end.

"I don't really have any muscles," the corpse said a bit sheepishly. "Could you give me a lift?"

Angela pulled her daughter up and over the side of the low-slung boat. May weighed what she looked like she should weigh too. She was just bones, really, and tags of withered skin, and stringy bits of cartilage that made the bones hang loose. Lifting her into the boat was no harder than lifting her out of her booster seat once had been.

"Thank you," May said, setting aside Angela's scuba suit and settling on the old oil drum used to hold any undamaged cans. She crossed her knees, accidentally catching a streamer of peeling skin on some scrap metal and pulling it loose in the process.

Angela never cried in front of her only child, not unless May cried first, and May's tear ducts had wasted away long ago.

"I've looked for you," Angela volunteered. "It's why I sign up for every long-term salvage mission in the area." She gestured, pointlessly, at the heap of salvaged goods surrounding them. She had found a sunken Piggly-Wiggly and retrieved two full crates of canned food, arms aching from the strain of hauling them to the surface. It was a good day, she had been thinking when May had surfaced. This was what *good* looked these days. "We're based back on the Arkansas shore now. It's a three-hour trip."

May's skull bobbed in a nod. She patted her mother on the knee with a hand knotted with seaweed.

Angela looked at the manifestation of her dearest dream and finally had the vague urge to vomit. She had spent the last few years in the floodwater refugee camp fantasizing about this.

Angela didn't sleep, you see. Angela didn't even truly rest. She lay in bed and stared at her tent's canvas ceiling and did not imagine a world where the sea walls had not broken, because that seemed like too much to ask for.

She imagined, instead, a world in which she had gone to New Orleans instead of her daughter. In this world, she was the one to look up from her niece's birthday party to see the wave of filthy seawater crashing through the shoddily constructed barriers and over her, knocking her against her sister's home, perhaps even knocking her unconscious and letting her drift, drift, drift. Or maybe she got carried along and could windmill her arms like she had learned, fight, cling briefly to a passing rooftop or chimney. She would die in the end, either way, but she would die imagining May sitting at home, dry and safe and warm. She would imagine it so hard that sometimes in the darkest corners of the night, she would slip so deep into this shining fantasy world that she could believe for a moment that it was her daughter's death that was imaginary instead of her own, that her daughter had outlived her as daughters were meant to do. In those moments, it was May who evacuated their Virginia home, who settled into the refugee camp's endless sea of tents, who spent all day under the ever-hotter sun picking over a drowned world for scraps and waiting for the rising waters to come for her. It was a miserable life. It was better than being dead. Those brief moments where Angela could imagine May living it were the sweetest she knew.

And now May was here, and talking, and still somehow dead.

"Did it hurt?" she asked the corpse finally. There had been a tangle of questions pinging around her mind (did you see it coming did you meet dad why did you have to go to the goddamn birthday party can you come back with me can I take care of you do you think I can do this alone) and that hadn't been one of them.

“What? Drowning? Yes, Mom. Getting bashed about by a flood until you suffocate on water hurt,” she said. Her tone was wry, not unkind. She tipped her head back like she was rolling her eyes. She didn’t have eyes.

“I’m sorry,” said Angela, tears rushing to her eyes. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there. I was so stupid to let you go alone.”

May blew a raspberry. (Angela wasn’t sure how.) “I was plenty old enough to travel on my own, Mom. Not bringing their parents everywhere is kind of part of growing up.”

“I just wish ...”

“That you could have died instead. Right? You’re a mom. You feel like you should have been the one to die. I thought so. That’s why I came back,” May said, leaning forward with a crackle of spine joints. “I’ve come up here to do you a favor.”

It didn’t feel wrong or selfish for May to claim this. It felt like a gift. It felt like proof of how well May understand her, that May could imagine Angela’s sleepless nights and the alternate universe she dreamed herself into and her sweet, dark wish.

“Me dying instead of you—we can fix that, if you like,” May’s corpse said, propping the points of her elbows on her thigh bones.

The boat rocked gently and May rocked with it. Angela had rocked May’s cradle for hours like this when she was a baby. When May was fussy, she would wake up the moment that Angela stopped. Back and forth and back and forth.

“We can switch?” Angela asked. Switch places, switch bodies, switch universes to one that wasn’t unbearable. Angela would settle for any of these options. She could not face the end of the world without her child. She wasn’t sure she could face anything without her child.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Get in the water.”

The suggestion felt perfectly natural to Angela. *Yes*, she found herself thinking. *Yes. This is how it should have gone from the beginning.* The sun had dropped precisely halfway beneath the mirrored glass of the water on the horizon. The red glow of it washed away all other color in the twilight world.

She slid one leg over the edge of the skiff, careful not to rock it too much. Then she twisted around and flung herself at her daughter, embracing her bones with a fierce care.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I’m sorry, *I’m sorry—*”

May ran her hands up and down her mother’s back. It was like being stroked by a bundle of twigs.

“I know,” she said gently, like she was the mother. “Oh, honey. It’s okay. I know.” They stayed like that for a minute: May sitting on her oil drum, Angela awkwardly squatting next to her. “Mom, the sun’s setting.”

“I—” Angela raised her hands, helpless.

“We need to do this right at sunset,” May explained.

Angela nodded. “Yes. Sorry. Yes.”

Angela slid over the side of the skiff.

“Now what?”

May told her.

Angela obeyed.

She allowed herself to sink into the water, kicking gently to stay afloat and tipping her head back so that her face lay just beneath the surface of the water. She took a moment to

register and relish everything she felt. The water was cooling and goosebumps were rippling up her calves. The salt water prickled in a scrape that she had gotten hauling a broken chunk of solar panel into her skiff. The currents made her body sway according to the ocean's quiet will.

She would miss this, she realized, and realized also that she didn't really care.

She reached up and pressed her palms against the delicate membrane separating air and sea. Dimly, through the murky, sun-pinked waters, she saw her daughter's corpse do the same.

They touched, bone to skin. Angela felt the skin on the bottoms of her feet and her fingertips split and slide. It was slipping free of her, dividing and reforming where it needed in order to skim across their joined hands and cover the smooth, worn bones of her daughter. The fat went next, slick and yellow, gliding off her body and up under the loose glove of skin now hanging from her daughter's frame of bones. Her circulatory system disentangled itself from her tissue, the web of veins and arteries and blood vessels slithering along the length of her body and around their interlocked hands like glossy snakes. It reformed beneath May's new skin like pale blue lace.

Her tissue was the last to go. The muscles peeled from her bones like a thick orange rind from the flesh of the fruit. The fibers clinging to her bones popped free, one by one, and her muscles slid unevenly up her arms and across the bridge of their hands.

Then it was done, and May was rebuilt and reborn above her, and Angela was so grateful to her. Angela felt with a sudden certainty that she had willed May back into the world with her mind as surely as she had once willed her free from her body.

May squeezed her mother's now-skeletal hand with her new strong fingers.

Angela squeezed back and let her go.

What a privilege this was, thought Angela as the bones of her began to slip deeper into the water. What mother wouldn't scrape flesh from bone for their child?

What a privilege to be allowed.

Before Ski Season

I hadn't been involved in a missing children's case since Brian. That was the one case you might have heard about on the news, the one that ended so horribly that it got over a week of coverage. The one with the boy, the culvert half-filled with dark melting slush, the bicycle crumpled like a paper clip, the single smear of blood dried brown and crusted on a dark cheek. The one with the gym teacher we arrested three months later after he got drunk and started rambling to his bartender about mistakes and how they never washed off, and he was right too, because he hadn't gotten the blood off his right fender no matter how hard he scrubbed. I hadn't seen it coming, which was stupid given what I knew about him. I was the one who found that kid. One of the boy's friends had told me that Brian had forgotten his brand new laptop in study hall, and I thought maybe he had snuck back to school after his mom went to bed to retrieve the laptop? I suggested walking the route from his home to school to Chief Price, and he nodded in his thoughtful, weighty way, and said, "Well, it couldn't hurt," because he was busy trying to get Appleton's resident sex offender to confess—never mind Creepy Kevin had only been convicted of flashing, and flashing grown women at that. So while everyone else scoured the side of the mountain for a half-clothed body tucked into a snow drift, I started at Brian's house, and walked the winding side roads stretching between the boy and the middle school, where he had pissed off his art teacher by picking a Pokémon for his animal drawing project and once pushed a girl off a slide and cried from guilt. His mom told me all that when I interviewed her in the interview room for non-suspects. She sat in the squeaky interview room chair, twisting the strap of her enormous quilted bag, and started reeling off anecdotes. Her son (by then missing a full day, enough that she was in a true Schrodinger's child situation; maybe she still had a son and maybe she didn't) liked/had liked lemonade with a splash of Sprite. He went to church every Sunday.

He still slept with a stuffed animal. (I searched his bedroom, later. She was lying about that.) I think she thought it would make me care more, like a boy who doctors his lemonade is worth more than a boy who drinks it straight. My job was talking to all the people who called the station with some little tip or theory. People love being adjacent to this sort of thing—close enough to feel the heat, not close enough to burn. The friend’s call led me to the laptop, and the walk through the roads lined with budding elms, and the culvert with the snow just melting around the boy, the twisted bicycle, the smeared cheek, the backpack shaped like a Pikachu. I puked not quite clear of the crime scene—*newbies*, Sergeant Burns muttered—and then I called the mom and listened to her scream until she hyperventilated and her boyfriend grabbed the phone to tell me that they would call back, sorry. They never did and I let them be. I cried once afterwards when a trailer for a new Pokémon movie came on. *At least it happened at the end of ski season*, someone at the station said. I was younger then, and shinier, and when the judge sentenced my old gym teacher to rehab instead of jail—*I think you can turn this around*, he said—I was actually surprised and threw up again from the guilt of it.

Anyway. We didn’t have a missing children’s case for five years after that, just normal small town stuff—quarters stolen out of cars, packages snatched off stoops, a single burst of excitement when a bunch of high schoolers came back from a field trip with some newly purchased ecstasy tabs in their bookbags. The whole department was just Sergeant Burns and the Chief and I, and we spent most of our shifts ticketing tourists who didn’t put snow chains on their cars, at least during ski season. Then Casey and Max Gibson shuffled into the police station.

Casey was in her forties and tired around the eyes, with a voice that rose and fell dramatically as she spoke. She looked familiar in a way that meant I probably sometimes saw her

volunteering at the library on weekends or walking their dog in the square in the evenings, one of those tiny bits of inevitable overlap between people who live in a town with less than a thousand people year-round. Max was older, angry, and worn around the edges. They had a daughter, or had had a daughter. The second possibility was beginning to eat away at the edges of Casey's mind and the fear was rising off her like steam. Jacqueline had been missing for 17 hours, she told me from across the front desk. I didn't want to tell her that 17 hours wasn't alarming enough to warrant an interview with Chief Price, so I ducked away into his office.

"The mother's getting a bit hysterical," said the Chief quietly when I filled him in, eyeing the pair through his office door. "You're so good with people—can you take this one?"

I hadn't thought she looked hysterical, exactly, but I took another look. She was rocking in her plastic waiting room chair and I saw her eyes were wild and bright. She had seemed so tired and dulled when I spoke to her just moments before.

"Of course," I said, because that's what you say when the Chief asks you to do something. He wore authority like he had been born into it, which he had. His uncle was the police chief before him. Chief Price took his coffee black at the diner every morning and came to every high school football game. I used to watch him while I led cheerleading routines, swinging pom-poms in the air and admiring the way people moved out of the way when he walked, like he was a ship and they were water parting before his prow. My mom had a tiny crush on him that my dad thought was hilarious.

Our interview room, with its mint-green walls and sagging couches—not to be confused with our interrogation room, which had cinderblock walls and folding chairs—felt uncomfortably cheery for this conversation. The small window had bright pink curtains and the

radiator rattled cheerfully, combatting the November chill. They accepted my offer of tea and the cups cooled untouched in front of them as they told me their story.

“Jacks went out with friends last night,” Casey Gibson said, wiping at her eyes compulsively. They were dry. “It was late. But she’s fourteen. We thought she was old enough.” She looked furious with herself.

“She *said* she went out with friends,” said Max darkly. All of his contributions so far were venomous little insertions. Max was *not* furious with himself.

“She wouldn’t have *lied* to me, Max,” said Casey, twisting in the little plastic chair. It squeaked almost cutely. “I’d have *known* if she lied to me.”

“Like with the baggies of dope?” said Max with a triumphant edge to his voice.

“Dope?” I hadn’t spoken much since they had settled into the chairs and started telling me their story, but drugs could cover a lot of ground in an incident like this.

“*One* bag of marijuana,” said Casey, glaring at Max. “*One* bag, and Max was ready to kick her out—”

“I wasn’t—and she was experimenting with drugs—” Max started.

“One thing of pot is not *experimenting with drugs*—it is, at most, experimenting with a *single drug*—” Casey’s voice skated up an octave. Her eyes glittered. She was going to start crying in a minute.

“She said she was going out with friends,” I said, taking a sip from my own mug of green tea.

“Yes. Yes. Except none of her usual friends said they had plans,” said Casey. “And they *were* her real friends, too—” Here she shot another little look at Max, who huffed and didn’t look at her. “Because I *know* that mothers don’t always know about their daughter’s social lives,

especially with teenagers, but I checked her Facebook. She left her computer logged in.” She leaned back in her chair—*squeak, squeak*—pleased with her small sleuthing. “And I talked to the friends she was always posting stuff with. So.”

“And none of them knew why she might be going out that night?” They shook their heads. “Did you check her messages with them? There could be something the friends wouldn’t want to tell you—a boy she was secretly messaging, or—”

Casey shook her head definitely. “She took her phone.”

“Okay.” I took a deep breath. A mental image formed. This girl, who looked painfully like an older version of my little cousin in my imagination, curled, small and vulnerable like a snail without a shell, in the hollow of a ditch somewhere, life leaking out into the slush in small pink drips. “Why don’t I come to your house and look around? See if anything jumps out at me?” *See if maybe she had more than a dime bag or two stashed away in her pillowcase or the lining of her jewelry box?*

“*Thank you.*” Casey yanked her bag’s strap so hard I was worried that she would tear it free. “We’d really, really appreciate it.”

“And I’m sorry if this ends up being a waste of your time,” said Max. He was apologizing in the way people sometimes apologize for other’s misdoings; as a sharp little jab that isn’t an apology at all. “Chances are she’ll just turn up hungover or high or—”

“Can you just. Can you not. Max? Can you just *for a second* give your daughter the *benefit of the doubt*—”

“I’ll just check back in with the Chief,” I said, backing out of the mint-green walls.

They both looked relieved by this. Everyone knew Chief Price. Chief listened patiently as I relayed the Gibsons’ story.

“Well, the first thing to do,” he said, and took a sip of his steaming black coffee. “The first thing to do, is not to panic.”

“Of course,” I said. “I’m not talking about opening a missing persons case. Just poking around her room. See if there’s anything suggesting a secret boyfriend—or the father suggested that drugs might be a factor.”

“Drugs?” He straightened in his chair, then paused to take another slow sip. When he spoke again, his voice had leveled. “We haven’t had any problems with drugs in Appleton. Can you imagine what a big PR pain in the you-know-what that would be, with ski season coming up and all?”

“I know, nothing since those kids with the ecstasy,” I said, nodding.

“Who? I don’t remember an ecstasy case.” His voice has this incredible surety to it. I could feel the disapproval radiating off him like a thick, heavy fog.

“The high school kids. After their field trip to the city. They met up with an Appleton grad they knew who moved away—he slipped them some—some—” I stuttered to a stop. His frown had deepened until it looked carved into his face.

“Are you sure this happened here?” he asked, generously, like he was offering me an escape. I wanted to say no. The urge to say it squeezed at my chest.

“I—”

The boys had been named Frankie, Jim, and TJ. Jim had cried from the guilt after getting caught showing off the tabs, carefully preserved and unsampled, to a friend in wood shop. TJ had thrown up after being informed he might get kicked off the football team. (He wasn’t, in the end. Apparently he was their star kicker this season.) I had had to scrub his half-digested chicken nuggets from between the cinderblocks. My parents had laughed when I told them this story over

Friday dinner. There was a faint, dark shadow left over, which made the walls look blood-splattered. Not a bad look for an interrogation room, all said.

“Yes?” I said, the force of his gaze pushing my voice up at the end.

He shook his head. “Well,” he said, without elaboration. “I, personally, don’t think that Appleton is the sort of town that would have drugs. *Kids* with drugs.” He hit *kids* with a level of disgust that strangled my objection in my throat.

“Ha, yes. I wouldn’t want that either,” I said. There was a sweet, guilty rush of relief at capitulating.

“If you really want to smooth the mother’s nerves, go ahead. Check out the Gibsons’ house while they wait, be my guest. Call it your lunch hour.”

“Sure,” I said. On my way back to the interview room, on a whim that I couldn’t have articulated, I poked my head into the interrogation room. The cinderblocks were clean and white, all the way around, shadow-free. My skin itched. I shook the feeling off and returned to the Gibsons.

You see, I didn’t realize what it meant yet. Reality had cracked and shifted around me and I thought it was my memory that had broken. I still thought there was an explanation for things like this. I still thought there was an order to the world. I saw the body of a little boy half-buried in the filthy slush sprayed by passing cars and heard the judge sentence his killer to treatment and nothing more, and I knew the role that I had played, and I still thought there was a fundamental logic to things. Police officers have to think like that, at least to some degree, but I don’t know how I managed it.

The Gibsons, like half of Appleton, relied on ski season for the vast majority of their income. They ran the Polar Bear Pub at the bottom of the mountain, which explained why Casey looked familiar—she sometimes took over for the bartender while her husband worked in the back. Everyone in Appleton had at least a cobweb of a connection to one another, in my experience. The Polar Bear was a popular town hangout during the off-season, including among police officers looking for a beer after work, though the skiers owned it during the season.

Business must have been good. The Gibsons lived in a sweet little clapboard house that was right on the edge of the woods at the base of the mountain. I had lived just a few streets over growing up, in the rather smaller house where my parents still lived. I used to bike down this street on my way to the library. They parked their clean blue sedan in the driveway and there was room left over for me to park the cruiser next to it. Neatly tended flowerbeds lined the walkway. The windows all had matching curtains. It was a steadying sight. What could happen to a girl who lived in a house with succulents hanging in little pots in the windows? Succulents, in this climate.

“She took her bike,” said Max, gesturing at the space my cruiser now occupied, then rubbing his arms for warmth. It was late November and the mountain was already blocking most of the sun. Winter was settling in.

“Oh?” I should have asked about that at the station. I had been out of the academy for three years, which made me the youngest of the three members of Appleton Police Department. Sergeant Burns liked to remind me that he used to come to the football games with Chief Price sometimes while I was still doing flips and leaps on the sidelines. I think he still saw pom-poms when he looked at me. “Do you have the make, model, color?” Did bikes even have models?

“Silver. Big. A mountain bike, obviously.” Casey laughed a little, gesturing behind the house at the mountain looming over Appleton. Its slopes were already white. They would be opening any day now.

“Just hope she hasn’t wrecked it somewhere,” said Max under his breath.

“Okay.” I wrote it down. I hadn’t even thought about her transportation. It was funny to imagine a young girl sneaking off to meet her weed dealer or secret internet boyfriend on a bike, but it was also hard to imagine a fourteen year old getting around any other way. “Can you show me her room?”

They led me through the house, which was as charming on the inside as the outside, and up to Jackie’s bedroom. The succulents in the windows of the staircase were in bright, colorful pots. I made a mental note to buy some for my mom.

Casey gestured to a door labeled *Jackie’s Room* in looping, painted cursive. “This one’s hers,” she said, unnecessarily.

“All right,” I said, and when they showed no sign of moving, I added, “Sorry, if I could just—”

Max nodded.

“Let’s give her a minute,” he said, leading away Casey, who looked like she would have rather liked an excuse to watch someone else pick through her daughter’s things for her.

Jackie had kept her room cluttered and clean. Stuffed animals lined a shelf over the window, banished to an appropriate distance from a fourteen year old’s bed but not ready to be thrown out yet. Her walls were painted bright candy pink, no doubt at the insistence of a younger self. Her bookbag was propped against her desk chair, and contained several overstuffed folders—I leafed through a few and discovered that she got mostly A’s in chemistry and drama

and B's on essays—a crumpled scarf, and an apple core gone soft and brown with age. A bag of weed did turn up in the lining of her tampon box, which insured that one parent would never have found it, at a minimum. I tucked it into an evidence bag and pocketed it.

Teenagers experimented with drugs sometimes, even in Appleton, even when ski season approached, even when the police chief really didn't want them to. He must have scrubbed the reminder of it from the interrogation room walls, but why deny it ever happened? I ignored the voice in my head that said scrubbing alone couldn't have made the old wall so white and innocent again.

Jacqueline's window overlooked the woods leading to the smooth, white curve of the mountain rising above us. I finished searching the room, finding nothing of note except for the noticeable lack of a laptop.

“Casey? Max? When you looked through Jackie's computer, where did you leave it? I'd like to have a look.”

Casey retrieved it and set me up with it at the kitchen table. The Facebook tab was still open. A quick skim of Facebook revealed typical teenage girl stuff. She was totally over Taylor Swift. She liked taking nature photographs and wasn't terribly good at it. Maybe she liked drinking her lemonade with a twist as well. The Messenger button caught my eye.

“When you checked her Facebook, was there anything interesting in her messages?” I asked.

“You mean the posts she sent to friends?” asked Casey.

“No, in the Messenger feature,” I said, and clicked on it.

It's honestly fucking tragic how obvious some cases are. People think that the biggest danger is the charming sociopath or the serial killer lurking in the bushes or whatever, and that

those are the sorts of dangers that only haunt other towns, bigger towns, towns that don't have cutest snowman competitions and a pub that serves drinks called "Polar Bear Pina Coladas." No. At the Police Academy they taught us: 99 times out of 100, no. They made us read hundreds of case files, watch hours of interrogations and confessions. In real life, it's the drug addict who can never quite explain themselves, who stares at you dull-eyed and says things like *I don't know* and *I just kind of did it* and *I didn't mean it?* and *fuck, I'm sorry, fuck fuck fuck* and shrugs twitchily. It's the spouse or child or business partner who would make money if the victim died and always told you how much: *I wouldn't ever do anything like that, but, but—it was ten fucking grand!* or *—enough to pay off my mortgage!* or *—three hundred bucks!* It's the boyfriend who hit her because she spilled beer on his second-favorite T-shirt, or because she was home twelve minutes late, or because he wanted to, basically. It's the gym teacher who's had just one too many drinks, who's been warned about drinking and driving by the police but doesn't see the boy until it's a fraction of a second too late, who panics and leaves a child flung aside in a ditch. It's banal. It's everywhere. It's boring and sad and stupid and it's done by boring, sad, stupid people. It's so fucking obvious.

It's a secret internet boyfriend with a blowing-a-kiss emoji next to his name in the Facebook Messenger app and a long stream of sexy messages exchanged on a platform a teenage girl was confident her tech-clueless parents would never penetrate.

The man's name was Ray Damond, and his profile said that he was 23 years old and his hobbies include playing video games and ping-pong and, I guessed, sending high school girls messages like: *I don't know what I would do to you if you left.* And: *You'll only ever love me, babe.* And from last night: *Hey you whore. I know what you did. If you care about our relationship so much, come out and meet me at our spot tonight.*

He had been a sophomore when I was a senior in high school. I remembered that he had been on the football team, and he had spilled chocolate milk on his uniform once, and there was a rumor that he had been caught with a fake ID at the Polar Bear, and absolutely nothing else. He had just been a guy, then, and my gym teacher had just been my gym teacher, and it had felt like nothing was ever going to go wrong—not really wrong, not big-city, makes-the-news, what-the-fuck wrong—in our sweet and snowy little town. I became a cop because I honestly thought that I could make that stay true.

“Kathleen?” Casey asked, eyes hopeful.

“It looks like she was making plans through the Messenger app last night. I’m going to report this back to my boss,” I said, my voice even and level. I didn’t even look like I was going to vomit this time.

“Listen. The first thing is, there’s no need to start panicking,” Chief Price said for the second time that day. I hadn’t been panicking. Not before, not then.

“Of course, but I think Ray was supplying her with drugs,” I said, sliding my evidence back across the wide expanse of his desk. He picked it up and regarded it dispassionately.

“You think this is real? Sometimes kids pass around little baggies that are mostly oregano, or what have you.”

“I’m pretty confident it’s the real deal—I mean, I know what pot looks like,” I said, and he gave me a look like maybe I should be embarrassed by that. “It’s just this secret rendezvous—”

“—probably means,” he said, so patiently, “that she’s with him, safe and sound.” He leaned forward. “Listen.” He said that a lot. “I actually know Ray. He was running-back on the

team a few years. Good kid, good family. If she's with him, he'll keep an eye on her." He leaned back in his chair, enormously satisfied with this explanation.

Of course he knew Ray. I knew Ray. Everyone knew everyone in Appleton. If knowing someone meant that they couldn't be a criminal, then no one in Appleton would ever be a criminal. The magical shield of familiarity would spread, thin and shining, over the whole town. Sergeant Burns had promised me once that it would be better if I didn't arrest my old gym teacher this one time, that he would put the fear of God into the drunken old idiot, that I would never find him swerving across the icy streets again, and fuck me if I hadn't believed him. I pushed my laptop at the Chief more urgently. "Look at the messages between them. He's a lot older than her, controlling, aggressive ..."

He set aside the tuna fish sandwich he was tucking into and picked up my phone. "It can't be that bad," he said, and he spoke with that extraordinary, effortless confidence. "Yes, see—'I don't know what I would do if you left'?" he said. "Kathleen." He peered over his glasses at me. "It's typical high school stuff."

Ray had graduated high school a while ago, but I ignored that to say: "Sorry, I think you might have skipped a few words? It actually says 'I don't know what I would do *to you* if you left.'"

He smiled. His teeth were bright, even and straight. The incredible confidence resonated through his voice. "No," he said, very reasonably. "No, look at it." He swiveled the screen.

I don't know what I would do if you left. I read the words and felt a shiver, like someone stroking a cold finger down the ladder of my spine.

“Sorry, I—can kids edit their messages on this thing?” I asked. I had last used Messenger to stay in touch with a friend from high school who had studied abroad. It had changed. *The stain on the interrogation room wall.* “I don’t know these days.”

Chief Price gave a nice, round belly laugh.

“How the hell would I know?” he asked, shrugging a little. He took a hearty bite out of his sandwich. “Kathleen, do you think you might be getting a bit paranoid about this?”

Chief Price leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He looked solid. Reliable. I felt spindly and inconsequential across from him.

“I know the Brian Calder case was rough on you. It’s hard for anyone to see kids like that, but especially for ...” He gestured vaguely at me. “But these things, they mostly turn out well in the end. And look, even the guy who hit him is getting his life back.”

I believed him. In the depths of my uncertainty and my fear and my confusion, I believed him. I’ll never quite forgive myself for that. His gaze drilled through me.

“What about the *you whore* stuff?” I asked with effort.

He recoiled, looking alarmed by my language.

“Where—where do you see *that*?” he asked.

I grabbed the laptop back and scrolled back down to the bottom.

“*Here*,” I said, and held it out to him.

He squinted down at the screen.

“My God. That can’t be right. That’s not the Ray I know.” He shook his head, pulled off his glasses, and polished them on the sleeve of his uniform. He replaced the glasses and smiled.

“No, look here. That’s not what it says at all. ‘Hey you. I know what you did. You care some

much about our relationship! Come out and meet me at our spot tonight?’ Perfectly harmless.” His voice just rang with that self-assurance. He said something in that voice and it was true.

Ray must have edited it somehow. That’s what I told myself. Kids could do weird stuff with computers and social media stuff these days. I still couldn’t help thinking about the ecstasy case that wasn’t and the clean, white cinderblock walls. The incredible power of that voice, that sureness, like he could speak things into being.

“I—” His gaze was steady. Demanding. I shrugged. “I must have been wrong,” I said.

I wasn’t sure I was, though. Maybe things *were* changing. Maybe something was changing them. My tongue felt thick.

“Hey, we all make mistakes,” he said warmly, his gaze easing in intensity immediately, and turned back to his tuna fish. “Jacqueline and Ray will turn back up, looking sheepish and hungover and maybe with a little something cooking in the oven if Max is unlucky.” He snorted.

“Why don’t I just check in on Ray?” My voice tipped up at the end. “Just to be sure?”

He glanced up. “Sure,” he said. “If that will make you feel better. He’s working at Carl’s now. Carl might know where to find him.”

I apologized, then thanked him, then apologized a second time.

Carl’s was technically “Carl’s Auto Repair Shop,” but seeing as he was the only mechanic in Appleton, most people dropped everything but the Carl’s.

Rich vacationers with thousands of dollars in skiing equipment and no snow chains on their personalized BMWs were his bread and butter. We were both at Blue Moon one night—the other bar in town, the dive one that the year-rounders took to during the season—when I heard him gloating about the look on tourists’ face when they rolled up to his shop. (This was before

the call about my gym teacher, when I still went to the Blue Moon.) It was more shed than shop, set in the midst of a junkyard of spare parts with a single lift in the middle of the yard, electrical cord spilling everywhere. I parked my cruiser carefully at the edge of his property, avoiding a tire pump and what looked like an oversized metal screw.

“Heya, Carl,” I said, waving him down as I picked my way across the yard, dead leaves crunching beneath my feet. I didn’t know-know him, just Appleton-knew him.

“Heya, detective,” he said from his traditional lawn chair perch beneath the awning of his shed/shop. He had definitely forgotten my name.

“Is Ray Damond in?” I asked.

He straightened. “No. Why? Is he okay? What’s happened?”

“Steady on, Carl. I just wanted to check in with him.”

“Do you think a young guy like him tells his old boss where he’s going on his day off?” he asked.

“I just thought you’d have an idea,” I said. “I’m worried about his girlfriend.” Girlfriend was not the right word. Girl, yes. Friend, no.

“Mmm, he told me he was seeing a new girl,” said Carl, bobbing his head. “Wouldn’t say who, though. Boys and their little secrets.” Ray was 23 years old. Why did everyone keep forgetting he was *23 years old*? “Why are worried about her? Did she tell you a story about him?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, her parents are strict. He mentioned that—that they were always sneaking around. So if she got caught coming home late or doing something a good girl shouldn’t ...” Carl shrugged his narrow shoulders suggestively. “Girls say things in those situations.”

“What sort of things?” It slipped out between my teeth before I could stop it.

“You’re a detective. You know this sort of stuff,” said Carl. “Didn’t you go to the Academy?”

He knew that I went to the Police Academy. Everyone in town knew I went to the Academy. I had left town and then come back, and who did that these days? I think they resented it, just a bit, that I had gone off and developed opinions outside of Appleton. At least, the other police officers did. I didn’t like letting drunk drivers off with a warning because I had sat through the classes where they showed us cars that were mangled badly and bodies that were mangled worse. (I had done it in the end, though, the one time it mattered, and look how that had ended.)

“Yeah,” I said. “Of course. I’d like to see—if there’s some spot they met up, regularly, maybe I could find something that proved whether or not they were boyfriend and girlfriend? Like if they’re always sneaking into the Lodge, maybe they’ve got love letters stashed away, or ...”

“Yeah, that’ll be it,” said Carl, happily. He drummed his fingers against his lawn chair like it was a throne, like he was the king of his kingdom of junk. “He said they’d meet up in the woods behind her house. In the shadow of the mountain.”

Right behind her house.

She was curled like a sleeping cat in the fallen leaves of the forest clearing, just thirty feet from the edge of the Gibsons’ backyard. If it weren’t for the green of the pines, I would have seen her from her window. It had been a cold night and her body had changed very little. Her face mostly looked tired, except for her left temple, which mostly looked caved in. The blood was a neat pool around her head, a sticky halo partially obscured by the fallen leaves. Leaves had

settled on her too, caught in the pilly knit of her sweater, the crook of her knee, tangle of her hair. Her nails were clean and smooth, painted a pretty kelly green. Her long skirt was rucked around her waist, with one long rip gaping like a ragged wound. A large rock, coated in blood and other things, lay on the edge of the clearing about ten feet away, like the wielder had tried to carry it away and lost his strength almost immediately. Her silver bike was propped neatly against a tree. Maybe she had been planning on going somewhere with him.

A beetle ambled up the length of her thigh and under the hem of her thick, woolen skirt, and that was when I threw up—into a plastic bag this time, not anywhere near the crime scene. *Not a newbie now*, I thought, staring down at the chunks of bagel and runny eggs swimming in green tea. I thought about the messages, how they had changed, and I snapped my own pictures just to be safe. I called the station. They would be there in fifteen minutes, the dispatcher informed me, so I set the timer on my phone for ten minutes, sat on a boulder, cried until the timer went off, stopped, and reapplied my make-up in time for the others to appear.

The manhunt for Ray barely counted as one. The Chief certainly didn't call it one. We went to his mom's house, who didn't meet our eyes when she told us he hadn't been home all day—he lived in her guest room and paid \$50 a month in rent—so we went to his best friend's house—Kirk, the team's old linebacker—and he said that Ray had stopped by the house that morning to take a shower and borrow a coat—"Ray said that he had gone for an early morning hike and gotten lost and he was freezing and didn't want to go home covered in mud," Kirk said seriously, as though that made any sense—and there were tracks in the snow that led to the still-boarded up ski lodge. The window to the left of the lodge's entrance had been pried open and when Sergeant Burns yelled for Ray to come out and we waved our flashlights at the window—

the sun had properly set by now—he came crawling out, pale and awkward and yelling, “Okay! Jesus! Okay!” And that was it. Part of me wanted there to be a stand-off, then a negotiation, then maybe a shoot-out. At least then it would feel like it all amounted to something, something more than the pointless anger and entitlement of a man-child whose friend’s oversized coat kept getting snagged on the windowsill. Chief Price said, “We have to put cuffs on you. You know that, don’t you, son?” and Ray started crying right then and there. He squeezed his hands together behind his back, gulping and sniffing as his tears fell onto the crust of snow. Sergeant Burns cuffed him and Chief Price led him back down to the car, and that was how we caught him. That was it.

I steered Ray into the cinderblock interrogation room once we got back to the station, unable to dismiss the fear that one of the others would install him on one of the squashy couches under the candy-pink curtains. I think I saw Sergeant Burns frown at me.

“Kathleen, I want you with me on this one,” Chief Price said in a low voice once we regrouped in the hallway.

“Chief?” asked Burns.

“She’s much less scary than you big lug,” said Chief Price. “Grab some dinner, why don’t you? It’s been a day.”

I don’t think he was worried about scaring Ray. I think he knew that Ray was going to be fine, and Ray knew it too, and Price knew that Ray knew. I think everyone understood that but me. I wouldn’t understand, not completely, not for another hour or so. I think he asked me to join him in that interrogation room because he wanted me to see what he was going to do next. I think he wanted me to know that Ray was going to be okay, and why. We walked into the interrogation room together.

“I suppose you know why you’re here,” he said to Ray. Ray had mostly stopped crying. Some fundamental faith that everything was going to work out more or less okay had reasserted itself.

“It’s about Jacks,” he said, swiping at his eyes with his cuffed hands. Someone had transferred his cuffs from behind him to in front of him at some point.

“Yeah, Ray. It’s about Jacks,” said the chief.

“Is she okay?” Ray asked. I didn’t know what he meant. He must have felt the crack and cave of her skull when he struck it.

“No, ’fraid not,” said Chief Price.

“She’s dead, Ray,” I said curtly.

“Oh my God,” he said. He must have seen the hot spray of blood, seen the way her limbs went boneless, but there was an open, guileless shock in his round, blue eyes.

“We found the messages between the two of you, including the one where you planned to meet up last night,” Chief Price said. “Want to tell me about that?”

“Yeah. Yeah. So, you know that we were in love?” said Ray, chest rising and falling rapidly.

“Sure,” I said.

“I know it sounds weird—I mean, a guy like me, dating a high schooler—but it wasn’t gross or bad or anything. She was the one who hit on me, when she came to get reflector’s attached to her bike at Carl’s.” Carl’s did odd jobs like that, during the off-season. “She wanted them after, you know, what happened. And we just ... got to talking. And *she* friended *me* on Facebook, right?” His gaze darted from my face to the Chief’s. “So that’s okay. Like, she was pursuing me, not the other way around.”

I nodded. Encouraging. He plowed forward with renewed enthusiasm.

“I know she didn’t tell her parents, but that was her idea too—her dad’s insanely strict. He’d lose it. She’s not supposed to date until she’s 16.” He bugged his reddened eyes, inviting us to join him in his outrage. “He treats her like she’s a child.”

“Sounds frustrating,” said the Chief patiently. *Playing along*, I thought, hoping. Hoping I hadn’t really seen the cinderblocks reborn, hadn’t seen the messages shift. Hadn’t already seen what his voice, his words, could do. “You’re a good boy. From a good family.”

Ray nodded eagerly. His blonde hair flopped over his forehead.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m not the sort of guy who would do that sort of thing.” He didn’t specify the sort of thing that he would not do.

“This,” said Chief Price, with the same extraordinary, sure voice that had denied the drugs, the messages, out of existence, “*was clearly an accident.*”

A beetle crawled up the wall behind Ray. It was vivid and dark against the cinderblocks, which were bare and white. It looked like the same one that had crawled up under Jackie’s clothing, vanished beneath the hem of her heavy woolen skirt.

“So she obviously came with a plan to fool around a little. Just look at her clothing,” Chief Price said, and pulled his laptop out of his bag. His voice was doing that thing again. Reverberating with this utter certainty about how story went and how it would end.

He opened the pictures the forensic tech—Jim, my old Chemistry teacher who had retired and taken some online classes—had snapped at the scene. Jackie’s skirt was short and spangly and her top was a tight, shimmery halter.

I blinked. I discreetly pulled out my own phone. My pulse thudded in my ears. It took me three tries to enter my passcode.

“Yeah,” Ray said, “that was the plan.”

The pictures on my phone showed the same spangle, the same shimmer. *She looked pretty*, I thought distantly. *She looked like she could have been happy*. The cinderblocks, the messages. I finally accepted it. Reality *was* fracturing. Shuffling around. Reforming. The Chief had never been playing along. I should have known from the beginning.

“And have a little ...” The Chief mimed taking a drag of a joint. “A little dope?”

“She liked smoking pot,” said Ray quickly. “She was doing it more and more.” He cleared his throat. “I would try to get her to stop. She was getting it from this kid at her school—TJ? He knows someone in the city, she said.”

TJ the puking kicker. I guessed the guilt hadn’t lasted any longer than the stain had.

“All this stuff?” The Chief pulled out the evidence bag I had slipped the dime bag into, only now there was three times as much weed. I felt dizzy. “Seems like she was getting into some bad stuff.”

“Then what?” I asked.

Ray opened his mouth.

“Then she tried to have sex with you,” said the Chief calmly. There was a steady pulse to his sure, firm voice. It rolled over me like a wave, resonating with the blood pulsing in my ears.

Ray closed his mouth.

“Didn’t she, Ray?”

She was fourteen. Fourteen-year-olds meet boys in the woods to have sex sometimes, but they don’t wear long skirt and sweaters when they do it. She would have uncorked the bottle of sparkly lip gloss that sat unopened in a place of pride on her dresser. She would have worn the dress she had bought for the junior high prom. She wouldn’t have worn the old cotton panties

that had peeked out from under the skirt and shown a shadow of a period stain. Of course, that had been in the old photo. The photo that was beginning to get vague around the edges of my memory.

“Yeah,” said Ray, “she did.”

Chief Price shook his head, all paternal disappointment.

“And I turned her down, of course. I wanted to wait until she turned fifteen.”

“Sixteen, you mean,” said Chief Price.

“What?”

“The age of consent is sixteen,” I said quietly.

“Yeah,” said Ray, “I meant that. Of course.” He shot me a defensive look, picking at a torn fingernail, and burst out, “I would have checked before doing anything.”

“And when you turned her down?” Chief Price asked. The pulse in his voice, my ears, got stronger. “How did she take it? Did she get upset?”

“Yeah! Yeah,” said Ray. “She completely freaked out. Her feelings were really hurt, I think.”

“Did she lash out?”

“Uh, yeah. She kind of ... attacked me?” I could see Ray try the words on, like the fit. He bobbed his head, goatee twitching.

“How?” I asked, struggling to keep my voice level.

“Oh, like, slapping me—scratching at me,” he said.

“We guessed it was something like that,” the Chief said. “You can tell from her nails.”

He pulled up another picture. Jackie’s manicure was ragged and lined with blood.

“It sounds like she scratched you pretty badly,” I said. “Did she leave any cuts?”

“I bet she did,” said Chief Price reassuringly, and I swear I saw him tip a wink to Ray.

“Uh, she might have,” he said, and made a show of rolling up his sleeve to check. I swear he was as surprised as I was to see the angry red marks running the length of his forearm, but only for a moment. “See?” he said, brandishing his arm with pride.

The Chief was leading him down this path, but Ray was following willingly. He was discovering his instinct for this, for finding the series of trapdoors that would lead him out of the maze and neatly stepping through them one by one. I wondered if someday his voice would pulse with certainty too, if he would speak the inconvenient pieces of reality out of existence.

“So what did you do? Did you freak out as well?” the Chief asked.

“Oh, no,” he said. “I mean, I tried to get her to stop. But you gotta understand, she was just going nuts, okay? Losing her *shit*. I had no idea that she was going to get this upset about *sex*. Seriously. She was flailing around, like, absolutely hysterical.”

I could see the echo of truth in his words. I was sure in my bones that she had, in fact, gotten upset about sex, though likely not the lack of it. But Price and Ray’s words continued flooding out of them in a stream, washing away the evidence in its path. My skin started itching again.

“So she wouldn’t calm down?” asked the Chief. “What did you do then?”

“I,” said Ray.

We had reached the reckoning. Children do not just die in the woods. There is a reason. A harm had been done by someone, and it was my job to twist that sentence into active voice. Someone did harm. Someone had to be held accountable for this harm, because it was irreversible.

Unless—

“Did you send her home?” I prompted, trying to freight my voice with the same confidence and intention as the Chief’s. I could see what the Chief was doing now—not how, but what. The way his words hummed in the air, shifting things, turning them inside out. I had to try. I tried to pick up the pulse. The Chief stared at me. Ray did too. I pushed forward.

“Did you both go home?”

If the Chief could do it, why couldn’t I? But the coroner did not burst through the door to inform us that Jacks was okay after all, that the whole thing had been an absurd mistake, and we could just laugh about what a silly, silly mix-up all this had been. Instead, both men looked at me a bit oddly and I shrank a little into my collar.

“No, I—”

“Did you push her away?” asked the Chief. “In self-defense?”

“Yes,” said Ray.

“And then you hit her in the head with the rock?” I asked, almost pleading.

“No! No, no, no—” Ray was panicking again.

“Did she hit her head on the rock when she fell?”

Chief Price summoned the final picture up on his laptop. For a moment, it showed me the crime scene as I remembered it. The concavity of the skull, the halo of blood, the missing rock gore-covered and abandoned at the edge of the clearing. I clung to the image in my head. I anchored it there. It was *true*, it was *real*, it was *true*. I could feel the weight of Chief Price’s authoritative gaze on me. Demanding, because he wanted something from me. Patient, because he knew he was going to get what he wanted. The splintered edge of bone. The dark red puddle drying on the mat of leaves. The rock dropped like garbage. The frost-lined leaf settled on her

lip. The rent in her skirt. The look of shock and open anger on her face. The blood matting her hair. I held on to it. I held.

I don't know what I'd do to you. A single bag of weed. Ecstasy tablets found in a child's locker. *Hey you whore.* A vomit stain dribbling down the cinderblock walls. I looked at the photo and held the truth in my mind. I clung to it like a child clinging to their mother's legs.

I think you can turn this around, the judge had said, like Brian's death could be turned around, like my old gym teacher hadn't been one DUI short of losing his license altogether, like Sergeant Burns hadn't stopped me that night when I had tried to give him that final DUI that would have stripped him of his license (I didn't know about the old DUIs, I didn't know that he had already gotten all his chances, I didn't know *anything*, I swear to fucking *God*) before any of this had happened because *I know this guy, we drink at the Polar Bear, he just needs to sleep it off,* like I hadn't let him do it, like we wouldn't have sent some tourist off to jail in a *fucking heartbeat*, like any of this mattered to Brian.

This shit doesn't require magic, I thought. I didn't know why this was happening, how he was doing it, and the worst part was that it *didn't fucking matter.* My skin itched harder. *This shit doesn't require the Chief. This shit just happens. All the fucking time.*

I blinked.

The rock in the photo was positioned right beneath her temple like a pillow. It was streaked with blood, discretely, and nothing else. There was not enough blood to pool. She looked peaceful. Pretty, still, and no harm done. Untouched, except for her wrecked manicure. *The funeral director will have to touch it up,* I thought from some faraway place.

"He's a bright boy," said Chief Price quietly. He was still looking at Ray, but talking to me. "Bright future."

I could see that future, unspooling before Ray. He was broad-shouldered and tanned even in November and handsome and young—I could see how young he was now, now that everyone kept saying it—some boys were just always young, no matter how old they were—and some boys always had promising futures, right on the other side of a glowing horizon—futures they had earned, deserved, were *owed*—yeah, some boys were just owed everything, an endless shining heap of everything. Never mind the underage girls—oh, it’s always *girls*, never *girl*, and surely we all know that—never mind the weed that he had almost certainly been supplying Jackie through an old football buddy, never mind the blood dribbling down the rock. No, Ray deserved another chance. He deserved a shining infinity of chances.

“It’s like with Brian. An accident. No one’s fault, really. No need to come down hard on anyone,” said Chief Price.

I could hear in the steady push of his voice that he remembered the night with Sergeant Burns and my old gym teacher, and he remembered what I had not done. How I was in this already, because this was magic but it was also real, and you didn't need magic to do this, and I knew that, had known that, since the day the bartender had called. Blood. Pink slush. A culvert full of snow and a boy who would not have been there if his gym teacher had just been fucking held accountable already.

“It won’t make anyone happy to make a big fuss over this,” said Chief Price.

I could see that too, the way the town would crumple in on itself in the wake of this scandal, how skiers would pick the next town over and the Polar Bear Pub would go out of business and Carl would have to start selling off his junk and the weight of it all was present in the Chief’s voice, in his stare, and I could feel it crushing me, could feel the pulsing in my ears make my whole head hum, felt the itch in my skin turn to an ache, could see the picture of the

girl—definitely stoned, right, everyone’s saying it and dressed like she wanted it, of course, and why else would a girl sneak out to see her boyfriend, dressed like *that*, her poor parents, her bad parents, and the bad timing of it all—right before ski season—and what’s the point of ruining another life, really, and what’s the harm in letting things go—just letting things *go*—and—and—and—

“You see?” Chief Price asked, and I did. I really did.