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Behold, I Am Alive

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Behold, I Am Alive

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by

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And He will raise you up on eagle's wings,

bear you on the breath of dawn,

make you to shine like the sun,

and hold you in the palm of His hand.

Coop

On Sunday afternoon, after church, Mary lay down in the chicken coop, waiting for Jesse. She crawled through the chicken hole and, after slipping out of her dress, positioned herself in such a way that if she looked upward, she could see all her hens around her, and if she turned her head to the side, she could also gaze upon the setting sun. It was tick ticking, dip dipping into the horizon. One notch down, two. A little lower, a smidge orangier, like the Mango Tango crayon.

Wilma, Bernice, and Ms. Seus were already asleep, their beaks tucked into their pillowy wings. Barbie was saying something nasty to Luanne, probably along the lines of how much better Mr. Samson liked her, which made Luanne cluck reproachfully and ruffle her feathers with a miff.

One nest was left empty though. Even after three months, she couldn't believe Delilah was gone. Of all Mary's hens, she was the most beautiful. Her black feathers shined Mountain Meadow in the sun. When Wilma or Luanne dashed to the compost pile behind the house, Delilah would stay and peck grubs wherever Mary was coloring. One time Barbie chased Delilah across the front yard and she flew up so high Mary could have sworn Delilah had soared into the sun. Never before had she seen a chicken fly above fifteen feet, let alone travel beyond the clouds. But, Mary sniffled, Delilah wouldn't ever touch the sun again. Jesse wrung her neck and

threw all her radiant feathers to the wind. Mary found her head in the driveway, reduced to a mushy lump by the dog. Her brother dangled the lump above her head and called her a sissy for crying.

Mama, Gabe, and Jesse loaded their plates with brown cooked chicken. Jesse said grace and the three of them ate ravenously. Mary narrowed her eyes at the rib cage, a knife lodged in the breast. With his thick sausage fingers, Jesse ripped a slab of meat from sinew and skin. Snap went the cartilage. Crack went the bone. Fat dripped from Jesse's nails. Licking his lips, and grinning, he asked why Mary wasn't eating her dinner.

Mary turned her head to watch the sun, still hanging in the sky, clawing to its last rays of life. She was surprised it wasn't nighttime yet. The sun was stubborn like in that battle Mama was talking about from the Bible. The battle when Israel defeated the Amorites. When the sun stood still and the moon stayed for a whole day. Perhaps the sun would also remain glued in the sky tomorrow and the next day. Then Mary would never go back to school because it would always be Sunday. Mama would always be working in the factory. Gabe always shooting his bb gun at the doves. If the sun stayed still, Jesse would never stop rambling on about himself, as he always did on Sunday afternoons. On he'd go, talking talking talking, till he ran out of so much spit he'd die of dehydration. He'd keep droning even in his faintedness, and by the time Jesse was rushed to the hospital, he would have shriveled to nothing more than a dried prune. Mary realized that it was not Israel who defeated the Amorites, but the sun alone.

All the hens had fallen asleep, nestled in their plumage. The boards under Mary's back were warped. Chicken poop squished in the hair on the back of her head. A black feather, a remnant from Delilah, drifted Fern Green in the sun's last rays and settled on her belly button. Mary heard the front door open. Footsteps. Rustling clothes. A faint murmur. Mama. Even when

she wasn't singing at service, her voice carried like hymn. “He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not fear the terror of the night.” It was Psalm 91, Mama's favorite verse. The one she repeated in times of greatest need. For all other times she would pray the Our Father or the Hail Mary—a leftover from her Catholic roots that Our Baptist was trying to expel.

Mama had been praying the Our Father the day she held Mary close, after Delilah's chicks had died. As they started exploring the world with their mother, Delilah taught them how to peck for insects. She diligently cleaned their bottoms so they could use the bathroom. When they ventured too close to a puddle, Delilah clucked at them. She nestled them in her feathers when it was time for bed, pecking at Little Simper when he kept cheeping.

But when the dog ate Baby Bay the rest had to be protected. Mama moved them into a pen with corn and water dispensers. Mama told Mary it was her job to take care of them. If she loved her chickens very much, she would check on them every day. However, Mary didn't remember. Couldn't remember. She was so busy coloring, playing with Gabe, and doing chores for Mama that she forgot they hadn't been fed in a week. Mama had forgotten too. She found Delilah panting in the summer sun, wings spread over her chicks to protect them from the burning rays. After Mary released Delilah, she saw how the chicks were not moving. Not cheeping. Just little balls of fluff disintegrating in the wind.

Mary plucked Delilah's feather from her belly button with her thumb and forefinger. She pressed the bit of down to her lips. Softer than clouds. Much lighter than flight. In reality, flight was a heavy thing. Like a huge palm pushing her into the dirt. Mary and Gabe climbed up the tornado tower so she could fly. Twenty-three steps to the top. They gazed upon the Texan plains. Mary squinted at three white farm houses in the distance. The trees rose up like prickly carpet,

and although it was nearly noon, thick summer mist still clung like a wheeze on the fields. Even at such an enormous height, the air was as sweaty as down on earth.

Gabe stood behind Mary, pointing to a cow field on the farthest edges of their vision. She could fly to that field way way off. She could fly like Superman. He knew she could do it. Mary was the only one who could. Mary remembered Mama talking about the devil testing Jesus in the desert. How could she fly? She had tried jumping off buckets, fence posts, the chicken coop roof. But no matter what, she was only granted a single breath of flight before God's palm forced her back down. Flying was impossible for any human. But Mary wasn't anybody, was she?

Down below, a small blob exited the house, looking left then right. Next, the blob looked upward: Mary and Gabe were to climb down that instant. Mama picked up her skirts and rushed to just below the lookout tower. Devil children, torturing her. If they didn't get down now, there'd be a belting. Mama always wielded that phrase when something was the best of fun. Gabe leaned in closer to Mary, letting his lips roll over a hiss.

Fly like Delilah.

Mary's eyes widened. As if opened for the first time. Her pupils shrank to needle-tips. She spread her arms. She was Delilah, but as huge as an eagle. Mary prepared to lift the entirety of her weight in one heavy gust. Out of the nest. Into the canyon. Mary puffed out her chest and turned her nose toward heaven. The clouds sprinkled teeny pinpricks. Scalding.

Mary aimed for the cows. But flight was a very heavy thing. She couldn't direct herself. Mary was only flying down down down, house melding into trees, into chicken coop, into plains. After she hit the ground, bouncing on the dirt, everything was a warped swirl of Green, Brown, Gray. Then Red.

In time she had come to label the colors of flight. Electric Lime. Beaver Brown. Manatee. But the color Red that leaked through the bandage around her palm was just Red. Not Radical Red. Just plain eight crayon box Red. The closest that could compare was the Red of a chicken's comb. Wilma's comb stood up like four rough and squishy fingers, trying to hold the outside world and fumbling. It was a hand without a palm. Useless.

She heard Mama on the porch, waiting and praying for Mary. The sticky air had her puffing and flapping her fingers back and forth as a fan. Footsteps padded on the grass through the front yard. There was a loud snicker from Gabe, listening for the show.

Jesse opened the coop's door as the sun was finally drowning in the horizon, gurgling on distant trees and grass. He towered over Mary, lying naked on the floor. She couldn't make out his face. It was blocked by his belly. Jesse hadn't changed out of his Sunday best. The suspenders stretched too tight around his gut. His patent leather shoes crushed week-old chicken poo. The leather so shiny it reflected the sun as it traveled over the toe, and then was gone.

Jesse unbuckled his suspenders. He stroked Mary's face, her arms, her torso, down her legs and back up. Her body was thin. Her skin was bare. There was no down to pad her tender back and thighs. Not a single feather sprouted from her arms to grant her flight. Jesse's enormous weight was more oppressive than God's palm, than gravity, than mildew, than oozing beans, than a dog run over wheezing, than a toad mating in the slimy night. Slimier than his sweat congealed like snot, like rotten honey.

On Sunday evenings, Mary was not an eagle, not a chicken, not Delilah. She was just a girl, a human girl, plucked Pink and raw.

The Box Turtle

Rosie, ten and skinny, sits on her bare mattress hunched over a *National Geographic.* She had been planning to steal the magazine until the librarian said she could keep it because it was so old they were going to throw it out anyway. She loves seeing pictures of shepherds, warriors, and infants suckling on their mothers' low-hanging breasts—people from the farthest corners of the planet she would never get to meet. But most of all, Rosie loves looking at pictures of animals. Meerkats and angelfish are just fine, but she especially loves the animals who can swallow you whole or whose teeth can tear you into little pieces. Not that she wants to be torn into little pieces. She just wishes her own teeth were that sharp.

Her shoulder-length black hair grazes the fox on the cover. Surrounded by dark foliage, the fox stands at the base of a tree, licking its nose with a soft pink tongue. Although a fox is not a large animal with razor-sharp teeth, she admires its subtle power. It looks at her directly, like it knows her biggest secret. The picture excites her. Yet, she feels as awkward as if she had stumbled upon the fox using the bathroom. Rosie felt the same way when she watched her brother Bo in his room touching himself. Peering through the keyhole, she observed his pained expression and knew she ought to look away. The sweat beading on his forehead, the tense curve of his back, it all disgusted her. At the same time, she could not help but feel captivated. He looked so different from how she must have looked the one time she tried, unsuccessfully, to suckle her own breast. The whole experience had been so awkward that she felt too embarrassed to try again, or maybe she just didn't have the determination. But she wished to know that focus, to feel whatever he was so intently feeling. And most strangely of all, she found herself wishing

that someone, not her brother, but someone, would watch her through a keyhole. She could hardly admit all this to herself because even wishing it made her feel sick.

Her forehead is dripping, and her stomach feels queasy. Her fingers brush the cool glossy cover, and it occurs to her that this paper must be the coolest thing inside the stifling house. Even in this form, it is always the trees that stay cool. Outside, between her house and the corner store, Jimmy's, is where the trees are. When she was little, there used to be a crowd of them, before all the new houses had been built. But even now that the trees have been reduced to a cluster, they whisper among themselves. Like the rich, beautiful girls gathering on the playground to share secrets. She has always wondered what secrets the trees are sharing, but like the girls at school, they never say. But the trees' secrets are not mean, just mysterious, and Rosie thinks that this is the reason she always enjoyed being in their company. In the woods, she never feels alone. The number of acorns on the ground, the pill bugs in the logs, the minnows in the creek are all too infinite to count. In the evening, when Rosie sits on the front porch and watches their countless leaves tremble hello as a breeze passes through, she imagines their leaves are waving at her. As long as Bo isn't looking, she always waves back. She wishes, as she tears the cover off the magazine, that she could feel that breeze now.

Rosie gasps. Before she even knows what her hand is doing, it rips right through the fox's tail. A white rip, rough as a wound. She was tired and careless, and now the fox is ruined. Rosie thinks about how to punish herself, so she won't repeat the same mistake. One smack or two? When she was learning her multiplication tables, she would crinkle her big toe the first time she got one wrong. The second time, she would knock the balls of her feet together. The third time, she would give her elbow a little scratch, and so on until she was smacking her thigh ten times in a row. She reasons that this mistake is worth two smacks.

After checking over her shoulder to make sure Bo isn't there, Rosie crawls under the bed. A few months ago, she had decorated an entire wall of her room with pictures of carnivorous flowers, but one day Bo ripped them all off and with his lighter burned them one by one before dropping them into the toilet. Then, when she began a new collection of flowers, she hid them in a shoebox in her closet, but Bo and his friends found them there, too. That time he used them to kindle a backyard bonfire, and his friends jumped over the flames.

Now that Rosie collects animals, she hides them underneath her bed, between the mattress and the frame's thin metal slats. Careful not to rip the paper again, she slides the fox under the mattress to join a collage of black-maned tigers, Himalayan mountain goats, and other powerful creatures. Rosie admires her menagerie. On freezing winter nights—when she is stuck inside with Bo and Mama won't shut up about the mark of the beast and Bo won't stop cutting the hair off her dolls—she will hide under there and imagine she is one of her animals.

Rosie army crawls out from under the bed, aware of the lumps on her chest pressing onto the linoleum. A few months ago, they were quarter-sized; now that she's ten, they've grown to half dollars and everyone can see to laugh at them. Bo snickered at her *tiny titties*. Mama chuckled at her *little ladies.* Rosie calls them her *tumors*, but only in her head. She read about tumors in *National Geographic.* A pelican, riddled with the gray masses, died because it ate fish that ate other fish poisoned by a clothing factory. Mama also works in a factory, but she makes furniture, not clothes. Rosie rifles through a pile of clothes on the floor. The heat forces her to wear a tight-fitting tank top. Its thin white fabric does little to conceal the faint brown circles which lie beneath. She curses her tumors, the shirt, and the heat, and she wonders if she's wearing what made a pelican die.

A crow, outside in the woods, is cawing, while in the living room, Rosie shoves her arm into the couch cracks, hunting for change to buy a Bomb Pop from Jimmy's. She pockets seventy-three cents and tosses some old chewing gum onto the carpet. She wants to cut across their neighbor Mr. Halivat's backyard to get to the woods, because it's faster, and he might give her a quarter. He always tells her, "Give this to your mother," but of course she never does. She doesn't know what Mama would do with a quarter anyway. But she never visits him just for the quarter; Rosie likes Mr. Halivat, too. He does all the talking, and she does the listening. Some of the time he won't shut up about the old wife and how she took the kids and bled him dry, but a lot of the time he tells her about the world. He's traveled all the way to Virginia Beach. Once she asked him what the ocean's like. He said it wasn't much to look at. Just a lot of water. That made her feel better about never getting to see it. Mr. Halivat also says Rosie's too pretty and too smart to be stuck in this shithole. She beamed with pride when he said this because no one had ever called her smart or pretty before.

Only recently did it occur to her that all their neighbors, even Mr. Halivat, don't just feel bad for Mama being on her own, but they hate her, too. They hate her for not being married, for not spraying the ants, for letting the grass grow too high, for working at a factory instead of in a school, for having a broken tv and a broken window, for looking dirty and having dirty children and a house full of fleas. Rosie knows that when Mr. Halivat gave her a hairbrush, an item Rosie already owned, it was because he hated Mama. Rosie always knew they hated Bo for running through their yards and kicking their cats, but she knows now that they hate Mama more. After you turn ten years old, you realize a lot of things like that.

Rosie strides to the front doorway but stops when Bo and his friends appear in it. Bo is twelve and wears a stained tank top that clings to his ridgy breast plate. He is all arms and legs,

and he leans into the bb gun slung on his right shoulder like a school boy would lean into the strap of a backpack. His feathery black hair spreads out from his face like a Byzantine halo. Nat is all shoulders and has a mustache, but, at thirteen, it's just a faint shadow. His mom spent a lot of money on tutors, but none of them could make him smart, so he usually just echoes whatever Bo says. Schnauzer, on the other hand, is fifteen years old, covered in acne, and already has a thick mustache. His real name is Adam, but after Bo confessed to Rosie that he looks like Mrs. Palm's schnauzer, they burst into a fit of giggles and never called him Adam again. While Bo speaks, Schnauzer and Nat stand solemn like faithful groomsmen.

"We're headed to Jimmy's," Bo announces. "You comin'?"

"I'm headed to Jimmy's," Rosie says.

"So come on then."

Rosie eyes them. Schnauzer fondles a severe red welt above his eyebrow, and Nat stares blankly at the back of Bo's head. Rosie doubts there are any thoughts knocking around in their heads, but she still doesn't trust they're really headed where they say.

"Look." Bo lowers his voice like he's about to tell a secret, and the sound of it sends a shiver of excitement down her legs. "We need you. Everyone loves you. We wanna cut across Mr. Halivat's lawn, but he'll give us hell if you're not there." The way he looks at her when he uses that voice. He locks her in and finishes her off with a helpless smile and a shrug. Bo is a preacher in the making.

He used the same voice to try to get Rosie to poop on their stepfather Ransom's towel. Ransom was a large, angry preacher with a penchant for pig brains, and his size made him a slow but formidable opponent. Bo pleaded with her to do him this favor. He needed her. He smiled helplessly. Even though Rosie didn't want to wipe her butt with Ransom's nasty towel, she

couldn't say no to her brother, and a few hours later, she pooped. After grabbing the gray towel from the hook on the door, Rosie held her nose and smeared a long brown streak across its length. Then she hung the towel back on the hook, taking care to hide the stain. That afternoon, Ransom went into the bathroom to dry his sweaty face. Behind the couch, Bo and Rosie waited with bated breath, their fingers and toes curling and uncurling.

"Brats of Satan!" Ransom burst out of the bathroom, his face smeared brown. Bo and Rosie's heads peeked over the couch. Ransom cursed Jesus in unspeakable ways, and then he lumbered after them.

"Go, go!" Bo shouted, pushing her. They were a wild flurry of limbs scrambling over each other, out the door and across the street, and only when they reached the woods did they stop and turn to see their stepfather catching his breath on the porch. It makes her sad that Ransom left their mama for a woman in Lynchburg, not because he's gone but because there's no one for her and Bo to prank anymore.

Her brother leads the way across the yard toward Mr. Halivat's. Nat and Schnauzer flank him while Rosie trails a few paces behind. The air outside is not as much relief from the heat inside as she expected. Inside was like an old, nasty quilt, whereas outside with the sun bearing down, her thin-sandaled feet sting from the pavement and the rest of her body feels submerged in a tub of hot water.

Once at Mr. Halivat's chain-link fence, Bo orders Rosie to go first. She scales the fence like a rockface. At the top, she waves to a bathrobed Mr. Halivat seated on a lawn chair in the shade of a back-porch stoop. His pinches a cigarette.

"Hello, Mr. Halivat!" she calls out.

“Hello, Rosie,” he says while staring down the boys as they jog across his yard toward the back fence and the woods. His hand does not go to his pocket for the usual quarter but instead tremors over the hairless bulb of his head. Bo vaults himself over the fence as Nat and Schnauzer gracelessly follow suit.

“Well, bye, Mr. Halivat!” Rosie waves her arm as if he were far away. As Mr. Halivat releases a long trail of smoke, his gaze seems to look beyond the woods and to the edge of town. Rosie wants to ask him if the ocean really does taste salty, but she can tell by the thinness of his lips that he doesn’t want to talk today. She raises her hand above her eyes to peer into the woods where she can hardly make out the boys’ backsides weaving through the trees. There isn’t any time for chit chat if she’s going to keep up.

But just as she starts to climb down, Mr. Halivat speaks in a voice that sounds angry and sad all at once. “It’s time you wore a bra, Rosie,” he says. “Tell your mother you need one.”

Rosie blinks. She wraps her arms around her tumors and racks her brain for what to say back, but her mind is blank. Mr. Halivat has never criticized her before, and most of the time he talks to her like an adult. Yet, now, standing in the hot sun and the glare of Mr. Halivat sipping his cigarette, she feels stupid and small. She turns away and races into the woods faster than she has ever done before. Jumping over roots and brambles, she imagines that she is a goat. Himalayan mountain goats do not need to wear bras, and neither does Rosie.

When she catches up with Bo and his friends on the path, they are pushing each other around. As their bodies slam together and pull apart, it almost seems like they could be dancing. The boys grunt wordlessly. They sound like animals, she thinks. But not like the ones in her magazines. They sound like farm animals. Like hogs.

Bo hangs back and keeps pace with Rosie. She wonders what he wants to tell her. Instead, he eyes her torso. His forehead wrinkles together. His smooth, round face darkens, and then, he punches her. Once, on her rib cage. Rosie yelps. She walks faster now, on the other side of the path through the leaves. But Bo isn't finished. He catches up with Rosie and jabs her left tumor. Pain radiates down her ribs. She doubles over gasping.

The boys double over with laughter. They laugh so hard it takes them a full minute to catch their breath.

"What was that for?!" She crosses her arms as the pain subsides into her stomach. Her eyes focus on the brambles just ahead of her feet, but she is still acutely aware of the boys' eyes trained on her tank top. She wants to turn back but knows they won't let her go home without a fight, and she doesn't feel like fighting on a day this hot.

Bo pulls a cigarette out of his pocket and lets it dangle from his lips. She wonders when he started smoking, and where he got the cigarette in the first place. He lights it expertly, but struggles to inhale with composure. After a restrained puff, he passes it off to Nat.

"Do they hurt?" Bo asks.

"What?"

"*Them.*" He nods toward her tumors. "I wanted to know if they would hurt."

Rosie does not give him the dignity of an answer. She charges ahead, keeping her arms wrapped tight. The boys follow close behind her.

Schnauzer, who now has the mostly ashen cigarette, runs up to Rosie and asks if she wants to smoke it. Remembering the one time a babysitter tried to teach her how to blow smoke rings and the fit of coughing she suffered, Rosie says, "No, thank you." Schnauzer falls back with Bo and Nat.

"God, I'm just trying to be nice. You're such a girl," he jeers.

"Such a girl," Nat echoes.

Rosie ignores them and listens to the birdsong; the high trill of a wren, a catbird's weary outcry. A stream trickles nearby. The sound of passing cars is distant. The whole town seems so far away. Now that she has cooled off from running, Rosie notices how much less hot it is in the woods. The sun is soft here. Beams of sunlight filter through the translucent green canopy. A breeze sends shivers through locust and beech leaves, and they cast shadows on the forest floor. It smells like it's about to rain. It smells like dirt. The air feels electric. They all feel it. They feel like they are on the edge of something.

They arrive at a small clearing set off from the path. A raspberry thicket, over-picked by the children in Galax, skirts the clearing's edge. At the other side of the clearing, a tall pale beech rises from a train of twisted roots. Schnauzer jogs up to the tree and crouches in front of a hollow. The old hollow has sheltered more than a few animals through the years, and for kids who are still small enough, it is tradition to attempt to fit inside. Rosie herself stopped fitting last year. And almost everyone in the neighborhood, at some point in their life, has made use of it as a hiding place. But given how many people frequent the hollow, having your things stolen is always a possibility. Rosie and the boys are not stupid enough to hide things in the hollow anymore, but Schnauzer reaches his arm inside to see if someone else has been foolish.

"Whoa!" he shouts and leaps back from the tree. Then, he crouches down again, this time reaching in with both hands.

Nat and Rosie race over to see what he's found. Bo walks leisurely, so as to express only mild interest. Strapped around his chest, the bb gun bobs against his backside as he walks. Bo's

left arm rests limp against the butt while his right arm dangles from the barrel. Schnauzer stands up.

When he turns around he holds a box turtle in his hands. The legs and head of the turtle are nowhere to be seen. The dome is dark-brown and interspersed between brown squares are yellow-orange markings that look to Rosie like many smeared handprints. She touches the shell. It feels thick and cool as the shade of mama's calves which she used to cling to in the presence of strangers.

"This is boring," Nat whines. "He's not doing anything."

Bo grabs the turtle and walks with it back to the footpath. He flashes a smile at Nat and Schnauzer and then says to them, "Let's get him to come out."

Nat and Schnauzer echo each other in excitement, "Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah!"

Bo raises the turtle above his head and up to the tremoring leaves, a clamor that rises into a deafening applause. A pair of catbirds cry out to each other. Sunlight shines on the top of the shell and the orange handprints seem to glow, as if they are a source of light themselves. Rosie walks toward the handprints. She wants to press her own hands against them and match them finger for finger. Bo releases. The turtle drops to the ground with a heavy thunk. The air gets still. The leaves stop shivering. The catbirds are silent.

He is the first one of them to kick. He passes it to Schnauzer who punts it to Nat who passes it back to Bo in a game of soccer. Bo pauses to take aim and then drives the turtle back into the hollow of the tree.

"Goal!" Schnauzer exclaims.

Stop it, Rosie tries to scream, but all that comes out is a whisper.

Each time the boys kick the turtle, her own stomach wrenches. She is confused, scared, alone. Something must be done, but how can a ten-year-old girl stop what is already in motion? Like the trees, her legs stand lodged in the dead leaves. What can a beech tree do except shiver? What can an oak tree do except let its acorns fall? A girl can speak. So she tells them again. Stop it. But nobody is listening.

Schnauzer pulls the turtle out of the hollow once more, but this time he lets the turtle fall into a dropkick. The turtle careens into the underbrush and rolls into a tree root, belly up. Like the electricity in the air, the boys' limbs are filled with it. A feverish twitch commands their arms. Their legs shift weight, preparing to Go. Rosie knows their bodies will stop for nothing. The electricity fills her, too. It fills her toes and her balled-up hands. It bends her knees and raises her fists. It fills her with a scream that roils in the pit of her stomach and rises to her throat.

"I'll eat you!" she finally shrieks. "I'll eat you all!"

The boys' limbs quiet, and they stop to look at her. Somewhere in town, the church bells ring. As she stares back at the boys, fists steady and calm, she notices the faint burbling of a stream. Then Bo breaks out into a peal of laughter. When he doesn't stop laughing, Nat joins in, and soon they're in fits of red-faced giggles.

"Your sister's hilarious, man," Nat says in between slapping his thigh.

But Schnauzer isn't laughing with them. His mustache scowls at her until finally it says, "Dumb cunt. You love this fucking thing so much? You *love* it?"

The laughter stops. Schnauzer strides to the turtle.

Finally, Rosie breaks free from where she stands. She beats Schnauzer to the turtle and throws herself over its belly. She ducks her head into her arms and plants her bottom as firm as

she can onto the ground. All she hears is her own rapid breath inside the dome she's made of herself. She listens to the boys' approaching footsteps, rustling the leaves until they are upon her.

Their feet tap her, tentative at first. Then, Schnauzer kicks the side of her stomach harder. Nat kicks her back. She yelps. They have never kicked a girl before, and her body is softer than they expect. But with each kick their confidence increases. They grunt like pigs at the trough, out of breath and slobbering, furious. Soon they are kicking the wind out of her. Soon they are kicking her bones.

She remembers the fury of the willow branch in Ransom's hand, as he whipped Bo, half naked and bent over. She doesn't remember what he was whipped for. There wasn't always a reason. What she does remember is that he sounded like a wounded dog. She remembers Ransom afterward, panting as he washed the sweat off his face. That night, his mass laid in bed, and in the shadow of moonlight, his stomach was a dark mound. She remembers the paring knife she took from the kitchen drawer and how it fit perfectly in her hand as she watched him rise and fall. She remembers flipping the light switch, so he could see the blade at his neck, and so she could watch his eyes fill with fear. Only when his eyes had grown so full she could have popped them with the knife, did she finally let her whispers brush his cheek. "You ever hurt me or my brother again, next time I won't turn on the light."

But Rosie does not have a paring knife now, nor the element of surprise. There is nothing to protect the turtle except her body, which is so consumed by fire that it feels cold. She imagines she is on a boat in the middle of the ocean. The ocean's waves rock her body back and forth. She's seen them on television, boats rocking on the waves, and she thinks it would be easy to fall asleep on those boats, just like it would be so easy to fall asleep now.

"Cut it out!" Bo commands, his face red and screwed up. Nat stops and blinks up at him in a daze. But Schnauzer continues kicking, either not hearing or refusing to obey.

"I said cut it out!" Bo throws his weight into Schnauzer's chest, and finally he stops, too. He looks down at his sneakers, as if they have surprised him. Bo shakes Rosie's arm.

"Get up," he says. When she only lies there, sprawled, he shakes her again.

"Fine," he says and drags Rosie, on her knees, through the brambles.

She screams like a toddler, "No no no no no!" She kicks out her legs to try to stand, but they do not obey her anymore.

Bo drops her in front of the thorny raspberry thicket before jogging back to Nat and Schnauzer. Rosie sits on the ground and watches as her brother steadies the bb gun. She tries to push herself up with her arms but falls back to the ground. She watches. She waits. And as she waits, the truth finally sinks in. While their bodies are fully capable of destroying the turtle, her body cannot save it. If only she could chop off her legs with a paring knife and hurl them at the boys. They might be useful then.

Nat and Schnauzer clasp their hands, as if restraining themselves. They observe the turtle, still belly up, nestled in the leaves. Bo's eyebrows knit together. His knobby elbows shake. He hesitates. Bo has only ever shot at song birds in the sky. He has never shot something this close before. The expression on Bo's face is that of a boy trying to solve a difficult math problem. Nat and Schnauzer look at him, wondering what he is waiting for.

"Shoot it. Shoot it. Shoot it," they chant.

Bo looks at his friends then back down at the turtle. The expression on his face changes. He seems to have found the answer. Repositioning the gun into his armpit, he aims the barrel down. All of them hold their breath.

The shot is not much louder than a falling acorn.

Rosie expected Nat and Schnauzer to whoop and holler and pump their fists into the air. But they are quiet. Bo fires again, and this time the bullet pierces the turtle's belly. Blood bubbles out of the hole and trickles down. Yet, Nat and Schnauzer do not cheer. They do not dance around. They step back.

Rosie wishes the birds were singing, so she could have something else to hear. But the animals have gone away, and the trees are silent, too. The woods she used to know so well suddenly feel strange. Where are the catbirds now that she needs them? Why have they abandoned her?

Two more shots drop from Bo's gun. She waits for the echoes, but they never come. Without the echoes, she wonders if the shots ever happened. But they did. Rosie watches the blood dribble down until finally the turtle's yellow legs emerge. Its head erupts. Its neck stretches out. It looks like a baby waving its arms, and the scream that comes out sounds like a baby, too. Not like a baby turtle, but like a human baby.

Although it only screams once, the sound of it rattles inside them. It sticks with them in a thick, painful way. Bo loses his grip on the gun, and it falls into the leaves. Schnauzer taps the turtle with his shoe. He meant to send it into the hollow, but instead he has turned it right-side up. The boys back away again.

Rosie thought the catbirds had abandoned her. But she realizes now as she sits there doing nothing, just watching the turtle dig its claws into the dirt, that she is the one who has done the abandoning. She grabs a thorny branch from the thicket and drags it across her thigh. How many drags is this transgression worth? She can't calculate the number. Maybe until it hurts too bad. But Rosie doesn't feel anything at all. So, she drags it again.

Nat and Schnauzer have backed toward the edge of the clearing, and they avert their gaze from Bo. They cross their arms and try to look away from the turtle, too, but their eyes cannot avoid the trail of blood.

"We're out, man," says Schnauzer.

"What?" Bo says in a daze. "You can't go now."

"Sorry," Nat says. "That thing is retarded."

"You gotta help me," Bo demands at first, but when they make no move to help him, he pleads, "Help me find a rock. Something."

They tell him sorry a few times before turning their backs.

"Don't leave me with this!" His voice is desperate now, and he sounds like a girl.

Nat and Schnauzer break into a jog, and soon they fall into a panicked sprint until they are out of sight.

"I gotta put it out of its misery," Bo says, but Rosie doesn't know who he's talking to anymore. He digs under leaves and looks around the roots. He stretches his arm into the hollow, but returns with nothing but a few pebbles which he casts aside. Bo is getting panicked now, digging under leaves he's already dug under. He cannot find a rock large enough for the task at hand. At last, he picks up the turtle, which has hardly crawled even a few inches, and without ceremony, he smashes it against the tree. Shell fragments fly through the air before scattering on the ground. He smashes it over and over until all he holds are some pulpy remains and a wilted head. Rosie refuses to look away.

Bo drops what's left of the turtle and then sets himself on the ground. She is lying on her side and all the world looks like it is falling off a cliff. Her brother draws his knees into his chest. She observes how large and knobby Bo's knees have grown. He will be very tall when he's

finally a man. The thought of her brother becoming a tall man disturbs her. The thought of herself becoming a woman disturbs her, too, because a part of her had believed she would be a child until she died. Mostly, she can't imagine it. She can't imagine anything beyond the clouds now choking up the sky. It is about to rain, she knows, but she can't imagine what that will be like, either. A soft patter? A downpour? Rosie can't even imagine how she will get home, or if she should bother going there. She can't imagine anything beyond this moment, this dirt that is hard beneath her, this wind that is stinging her legs, this once white beech tree that is now smeared red, and its hollow that is so dark she cannot see inside it.

The Charm Bracelet

Lynn Mayburn sat in her car across the street from the antique shop, counting the forty-eight dollars in her purse. Her husband Herbie wouldn't have approved of Lynn dropping by the antique shop, or any shop for that matter, with only five hundred dollars in the bank. But Lynn would have ignored him anyway, because good things were coming. The Astro Bloggers assured her that this month, Jupiter and Venus would begin their transit into her financial sector and shower their blessings upon her. Proof was in the pudding: she had just qualified for a new credit card, set to arrive in seven to ten days. Herbie had a special nasty look reserved for credit cards and promptly cut each one into little pieces when they arrived in the mail. His words echoed in her mind, *A paycheck penny is worth more than a plastic penny*—to which Lynn would always reply: *I have two pinchers in my life: A Doberman Pinscher and a penny pincher.* Herbie had died on the train in the bathroom, and without a single piece of plastic in his wallet. All he had was $22.39, a library card, and a milk club membership. He was one stamp away from a free gallon.

Lynn stuffed the bills back in her purse and exited the car, stepping out onto the street. Something she couldn't have explained to Herbie, a feeling that tugged like a cord on her belly button, drew her into the shop. Lynn would have preferred to go home first to change out of her work scrubs and brush out her hair that was drawn back tight into a low pony-tail puff. Her instinct did not care whether she was dressed for the occasion. It dragged her past the 60% off sign in the window, through the door, and halted her at the glass counter. It turned her eyes to a jewelry stand in the shape of a leafless bonsai tree. The metal branch seemed like a hand outstretched and begging, pleading for Lynn to *buy me buy me*. There was no confusion in her mind. The charm bracelet was destined for her little Royannie.

When Lynn took her daughter out of public school, they said she needed psychiatry and lots of it. But Lynn knew better. Their clipboards, pills, and stale offices could not help her little girl. No, what she needed was fresh air and to see some ponies, and maybe this charm bracelet, too. Lynn tenderly attached the bracelet to herself, feeling how the cool metal weighed heavily on her wrist like real silver. The links were a little tarnished, she had to admit, but that sort of thing added charm. *Charmed charms!* Lynn chuckled to herself as she observed the charms tinkling against each other. She he had no doubt they would appeal to her daughter. The heart represented Royannie's strength and perseverance. The lighthouse was a reminder of Christ's guiding light through these foggy years of her life. The clarinet would inspire her to finally develop her untapped musical gift. The ballerina encouraged an athletic interest, an outlet her mind and body so desperately needed. And the charm with the engraved initials, "SM." Well, that could be fixed.

"Excuse me. How much to change the S to and R?" she asked a pimply high school boy behind the counter. He was typing on his telephone and had no idea what she was talking about. Lynn jingled the charm bracelet on her wrist and scanned the boy's shirt for a name tag but he was not wearing one. "What is your name, Sir?" She hoped that by calling the boy *Sir*, she would teach him to act with the maturity that such a title demanded. Lynn had come to the realization that the reason children remain children is simply because they are not permitted to be adults. If treated with the respect of an adult, a child will grow up in no time.

"It's Brendan, ma'am," he replied, blinking slowly. His eyes were crooked and small like the rest of his face, and Lynn wished she could take a level to straighten it all out.

"Hello, Brendan." Lynn smiled with all the respect she would give the president. "Tomorrow is a special day for my daughter. She's had a tough year starting a new school and

getting over her . . . condition." Lynn knew that Royannie wouldn't like it, but she couldn't help sharing her story with whomever she met. It was such trials as hers that brought people together.

"You see, my daughter developed an inability to use a public restroom. Now that may seem funny at first. But imagine, you can't go to school for more than a few hours, or you have to hold it until you get home. How do you learn when you have to pee all day long? You can't travel more than a few miles from home. You can't eat at a sit-down restaurant. If you want to see a movie, forget buying a drink."

Brendan looked confused and scratched his head as if he were solving a difficult math problem. "That's awful," he said.

"It really is, Brendan. But you know what? She's getting better. I've had to put her in an expensive private school, because it's the only one with reasonably clean facilities. I mean, the public-school bathrooms were a nightmare. Covered in filth. Have you seen them? What am I saying? Of course you have."

Lynn faltered in her train of thought as she watched Brendan absently touch one of the pimples on his chin. His natal Saturn was probably in hard aspect to his Venus, which she reminded herself was not the boy's fault.

"Anyway, step by step, little by little over the past year, we've practiced using the bathrooms at the library, the movie theater, the mall, you name it. And would you know, it's been one year since her last accident. Isn't that incredible?"

Brendan peered at Lynn as if she were a long way off.

"It was nothing short of a miracle," Lynn declared. "So tomorrow, to celebrate the occasion, we are going on a trip to Chincoteague Island, and I want to get her something nice.

Something meaningful. This is an exquisite charm bracelet. As soon as I saw it I knew my little girl was meant to have it. Isn't it just beautiful? Is it real silver? How much are you asking?"

Lynn didn't wait for Brendan's response as she squinted at the tiny paper tag: —75. What kind of a second-hand shop charged these prices?

"It's 75 dollars, ma'am," the boy confirmed in a depressing drawl.

"Brendan," Lynn lowered her voice to an intimate level. "My husband, God bless him, left me next to nothing after his passing. My little girl is still heartbroken, and I don't know what to do except buy her this bracelet. I'm paying for her private school all on my own, because if she peed herself one more time I don't think I could stand it. Now, I saw the sign outside saying all jewelry is 60% off. I do like the bracelet, but I see it's got some tarnish, which will have to be fixed." She eyed a pair of floral, rubber gardening gauntlets hanging on the wall that would be perfect for Royannie's green thumb. Could she have her cake and eat it, too? "I can pay by check, but if you throw in those gauntlets over there, I'll pay with the 30 dollars I have in my purse right now. What do you say?"

There was a long pause before the boy responded. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but that sign, we've been meaning to take it down."

"But it is still in the window," Lynn pointed out.

"It was for last week's sale. This week the bracelet is 75. And the gloves are 15. But they were 15 last week—"

Lynn rummaged desperately through her purse until she found her money.

"Listen," she pleaded. "It turns out I have 40 dollars in my purse."

"Ma'am—"

"I have 8 more dollars. 48 dollars. That's all the cash I have."

There was a long and uncomfortable pause in which Lynn touched the cross on the charm bracelet, seeking His intervention that He might make the boy understand.

"If it's too much," Brendan finally said. "We have other bracelets."

Lynn's face darkened. She could see now that the child's heart was so devoid of courtesy that he wouldn't knock even a few dollars off for a widow. Her resentment toward him felt like a prickly pinecone in her chest.

"No, it is not too much, Brendan." Lynn smiled. "That's not it at all. I have more than enough." She pulled out her checkbook and wrote in the full amount. Then Lynn counted 10 dollars in cash and handed it to him. She wanted to teach the boy a lesson he would never forget.

"You don't need to do that, ma'am." He looked around furtively. We're not a—"

"I know I don't need to, Brendan, but I want to. I appreciate your steadfast service. Your boss should be proud to have such a dedicated worker. Will you tell him that for me?"

He pocketed the 10 dollars and shoved the gauntlets into a plastic grocery bag.

"Excuse me," Lynn interrupted. "They're a gift for my daughter. Would it be too much trouble to wrap them?" She gestured to a half-used roll of wrapping paper on a shelf behind the counter.

"I'm sorry," the boy monotoned. "But we only do that during the holidays."

"Brendan," Lynn bored her gaze into him and imagined that she was Joan of Arc thrusting her sword into his merciless heart. "I completely understand."

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Royannie and her mother had been driving in the car for over an hour, taking the back roads to Chincoteague. Although Royannie had used the bathroom before they left, she already felt a tickle in her bladder. She reminded herself that there was a perfectly clean staff bathroom

waiting for her at the visitor center. Her mother had called ahead to request its availability. To be on the safe side, Royannie threw her half-finished water bottle into the backseat to join the sunscreen and other preparations her mother had packed. Out of the corner of her eye, Royannie noticed a pair of gloves on the floor, but she couldn't fathom why they were there.

"They're for gardening, of course," her mother explained when she asked.

"We don't have a garden."

"You're the one with the green thumb," her mother said. "Remember how you planted tomatoes when you were seven?" Royannie remembered the dogs had dug it up. "It's for a new garden," her mother continued, "I'll help you if you show me what to do." Royannie didn't know the first thing about gardening. She wasn't one to get her hands dirty.

Tree-lined expanses of flat cropland stretched out on either side of the road. Royannie was prone to car sickness, so she killed time by filing her nails. Occasionally, she looked up to watch a gas station pass by, and if she saw a house, she had to determine if it was ugly or if it was beautiful. Sometimes they crossed railroad tracks, but she tried not to let her thoughts linger on them. She had wanted to stay at home. A trip like this was long and full of unknowns. But her mother wanted to make a day of it, and Royannie could never change her mother's mind. She was 13, old enough to know that she had to resign herself to some things. She looked at the bracelet that felt foreign on her small wrist and never stopped making noise. It was too loose, threatening to slide off at a moment's notice, but she dared not tell her mother who had sat her down the night before to explain the secret relevance of each charm. Of all the charms, the ballerina earned the distinction of most insulting. The slender woman en pointe mocked Royannie's graceless body. Inside she was full of urine. Outside she looked like her father with red frizzy hair, short arms, and a lot of flesh in all the wrong places. The only thing she liked

about herself was her nails, but who ever noticed fingernails anyway? Her mother couldn't have understood Royannie's feelings because she was beautiful.

Lynn adored the yellow sundress she had donned specially for this trip, and it was making her optimistic, even about the initials charm. "You know, I kinda like it the way it is. I wonder what was the girl's name who owned it originally? Sarah? Suzzane? Sarabeth?" It wasn't until the moment when her daughter unwrapped the bracelet that Lynn realized she'd completely forgotten about having them re-engraved, not that she could have afforded it anyway.

The twinge in Royannie's bladder became a burning urge, filling her with dread. To distract herself from the sensation, she asked her mother how much the bracelet cost. Her mother replied that you should never ask the price of a gift, and that it didn't matter anyway because she was worth every penny. This did not fool Royannie. She could tell that her mother had spent a lot of money on it by the way she kept asking if she really liked it.

"We need to start saving money, Mom," Royannie said as she aggressively shaped her right thumb nail. "If you'd let me do school at home, you wouldn't have to waste money on St. Andrew's. I found a good curriculum--"

"You shouldn't file your nails in the car. You'll poke your eye out if we hit a deer. I don't understand what's wrong with St. Andrews. Are the kids being mean to you?"

"Everyone is nice," Royannie said and obeying her mother, she sullenly dropped her file into the empty cup holder. Now she looked out the window in an uninterrupted gaze. Car after car kept passing her mother who drove so under the speed limit it was probably illegal. A brick ranch with an over-grown yard passed by. Ugly. A porch-less, vinyl farmhouse passed by. Ugly, too.

“Don’t ever sell it, Annie,” her mother said unprompted and full of emotion. “Keep it in the family and one day when your daughter is 13 years old, you can give her the bracelet and tell her about the day you were 13 and saw the ponies with your mom.” Tears welled up in her eyes.

Then a towering purple sign displaying an enormous palm and the word *PSYCHIC* appeared on their horizon. Even at a distance, she could see beneath the sign a cluster of gray single-wide trailers huddled to the rear of a double-wide with log cabin siding, all of which Royannie determined was definitely ugly. She held her breath as they neared the sign. The sight of it would send her mother into a frenzy.

Upon seeing the sign, Lynn felt an urgent tug on her belly button and knew she was supposed to stop there, but she also knew her daughter would throw a fit if she did. Lynn slowed down dangerously to get a good look at the sign. A truck behind her blared its horn, and then passed. She drove on.

“Good things are coming,” Lynn announced positively. “Neptune is going to pass out of your sixth house soon.”

Her daughter drew in a long, controlled breath, audible enough that Lynn reacted against it. “I know you don’t believe a word I’m saying, but I’m telling the truth. You know I had a dream before your father . . . and when Royannie Gilman . . .” Royannie was silent. Her mother claimed that God had given her visions before her father and her namesake killed themselves. She didn’t care to hear these stories again, but her mother repeated them for her own benefit.

“Royannie Gilman and I were supposed to be roommates. But she left school that semester and went home. She was a wonderful cyclist. She got on that bike every day first thing. We never would have been good roommates, because I wasn’t much of an early bird. But one day, I woke up fully awake at six in the morning, and I had the most terrible feeling. I called her

parents, but they said she had already gone out for her ride." Lynn paused to wipe her eyes. "At 6:09, I saw a flash of her red hair and a spinning bicycle wheel and I knew. I don't know why God gives me these dreams. I don't know why."

"That's it? You're not going talk about Dad, too?"

"I don't want to right now. Today is a good day for us. Now where is my Celine Dion CD," her mother said, reaching around for the CD so she could sing her heart out.

Lynn was about to pop in the CD, but stopped after she looked over at Royannie and saw a distraught expression on her face. "Your father was a confused man," she said seriously. "He was always a little sad, but he let it get the best of him. It wasn't your fault." When Herbie died, Mars and Pluto were in tight square with his 8th house Saturn, and there was nothing either of them could have done to prevent such a thing.

Royannie wanted to shout at her and say, "I know it's not my fault. When did I say it was my fault?" Instead, she sat silently.

"You're more like Royannie Gilman than I ever expected. I never thought you'd have thick red hair just like her."

"I have Dad's hair," Royannie shot back, looking hard out the window at yet another ugly green trailer house.

"I know you do, sweetheart. Isn't that amazing?" Lynn would have given all the charm bracelets in the world to have Herbie on this trip. She reached out to touch her daughter's hair that was somehow so much like Royannie Gilman's and so much like Herbie's at the same time. When Lynn felt those soft curls in her hand, it was as if she was touching all three of them. Lynn spoke in the moments she could restrain herself from sobbing. "You're a fighter, Annie. An inspiration to me. You've gotten over your last accident—"

Royannie, whose bladder was tight as a hard plate of cancer, shuddered at the word.

"Stop calling it an *accident*. I wasn't in a car crash."

Her mother's hand retracted to the steering wheel. "I'm sensing a lot of rage in you right now."

"You don't sense anything!" Royannie stopped herself there. She wanted to bring up the dream. She wanted to say *You had a dream he was going to die. But you did nothing*. She wanted to say *You killed him.*

Instead, after a long silence, Royannie told her, "I have to pee."

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Her mother raced the car into the nearest gas station, tires squealing. When Royannie got a good look at the building, her heart sank. It was an ugly gas station, split half between a muffler-repair garage and half a convenience store run by the muffler-repair men, who didn't have the decency to wipe the toilet seat.

Lynn looked over at her daughter, whose anxiety was obvious even in her hand that shook in hesitation to pull the handle. "I'm going to get a Ginger Ale. Maybe a bag of those all-natural pretzels. Do you want anything?" Royannie slammed the door without a word.

The bathroom was not as disgusting as Royannie's worst imaginations, but it was close. Paper towels littered the worn green linoleum, and pink soap scum lay in a sticky pile under the dispenser. A near-dead fluorescent light bulb flickered on the three stalls lining the wall, one handicap and two normal ones. The handicap door was duct-taped shut, permanently out of order. Royannie locked herself in the middle stall. The sound of the faucet's recurring drip was the toilet's tongue clicking *tsk tsk,* resounding in the empty tiled room. Royannie moved slowly as she ripped off strips of toilet paper to lay on the seat, and as she did so, the bracelet's loose

rattle joined in the dripping clamor. She sat down slowly. She peed finally, but slowly. She covered her ears, but the bracelet—it rattled there, too. The toilet might have been rumbling beneath her, rocking her back and forth with increasing violence, but she knew in her mind that it was not. Royannie began to read aloud a poem markered on the stall door, "Here I sit now lonely hearted." She only got through the first line before a train's faint whistle descended through the bathroom vent and stopped her. She knew that the whistle was in her head too, so ignoring it, she began the poem again, "Here I sit now lonely hearted." Her eyes scanned the rest of the graffiti on the towering walls. She wondered what was the last image her father saw. What was the last thing he read? Maybe there had been no graffiti in his bathroom at all. Her eyes lingered on an ominous spiky, red scrawl: *The future is in your hands.*

Royannie shook when she heard the bathroom door open. "I'm going to buy us some smoothies," her mother announced nearly shouting, even though she was only feet away. "Do you want strawberry or mango?"

"I'm not thirsty!" Royannie said in a whine that verged on a scream.

After she heard the door close, Royannie grabbed some toilet paper and then reached around to clean herself. In an instant, the bracelet had slid off her wrist and fallen with a heavy clink and a splash. She stood up. She turned around to peer into the bowl. She stared at the bracelet in a paralyzing confrontation. The ballerina, the soccer ball, the cross—they all sat in the depths of her urine as innocently as they would have sat on her dresser at home.

***

Lynn tried to ignore the sting of her daughter's shout. She had almost asked if everything was alright in there, but she didn't want to be the kind of parent who hovered.

When Lynn returned to the slush puppie maker, a short woman wearing a black T-shirt tucked into a long skirt had occupied the mango side of the machine. Something about her was familiar, though she couldn't place how. The woman's hair was balanced like a cinnamon bun on her head. One of her long red-nailed hands gripped the cup while the other held down the lever. As Lynn waited her turn, she watched the spiraling slush in captivated attention. The significance finally dawned on Lynn. Herbie had always loved mango-flavored anything. She told the woman this, hoping to strike up a conversation while she waited for Royannie.

She said in an airy, reminiscent tone, "Now I suppose he's kicking back and enjoying a mango smoothie up there."

The woman turned to Lynn, and she saw that the front of her shirt was not black at all, but emblazoned with a white tiger's face nestled among a starry cosmos. There was a twinkle in the woman's blue eyes when she offered Lynn a smile. It was the first courtesy she had received since her husband's passing.

Mysteriously, the woman handed Lynn the slushie. Then she said in deep and knowing voice, "You're a good woman, and your loss will not be for nothing."

"You know!" Lynn nearly lost her grip on the slushie. "Is he there? Can you talk to him?"

"I'm sorry but if you want me to focus my eye, you'll have to get in line during business hours." Seeing her disappointment, the woman touched Lynn's arm. "Does the name Roger mean anything to you? Roy Rogers, maybe?"

"Royannie!" Lynn exclaimed. "She's my little girl. Well, I guess she's not so little anymore."

The woman nodded sagely and pressed a business card into her hand:

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Lynn's heart swelled with a joy she didn't think it was capable of anymore. "Oh, my goodness. Thank you. Thank you so much." Lynn shook Daisy's hand with both of hers.

"Please don't thank me. Thank Him." Daisy gestured vaguely toward the gas station's brown ceiling tiles. "And don't take the Lord's name in vain. It's an ugly habit."

Lynn was startled. She considered herself a God-fearing person. "But I didn't—"

"No, no, sweetie," Daisy scolded. "Only God is Good. If you'll excuse me, the sushi place closes early on Sundays, and my sweet young thing is waiting on me."

The Witch

Bonnie woke up from her nap smelling the air. She sat herself up in bed and felt as if He had replaced her spine with a metal rod. Something evil had seeped into her apartment, like a sickly sweet and rotten pork butt soup. Her neighbor, no doubt, must have sacrificed some poor animal.

"Damn witch," Bonnie said to herself. "Got to give her a piece of my mind."

Bonnie's daughter, who lived on the apartment building's top floor, had tried to claim that the neighbor was only an artist, and Bonnie joked that the two occupations were essentially the same, but her daughter did not laugh. She was forty-two and a pediatrician, but apart from her work, her daughter did not do a lot of things. She had no intention of marrying or having children, or owning a house, or even inviting her own mother to dinner. She preferred to eat alone on the couch, all the while knowing how much it pained her mother to be so alone. The funniest part is that her daughter was lonely, too. She had said so this past Christmas, while lying on the couch with a glass of wine, after presents had been opened, turkey had been eaten, and the thrill of the day had deflated.

"I'm so alone, Mama," is what she said. "You had Daddy and me. A life. The parents of the children I treat have lives. Even the babies all have lives. Can you imagine what that's like? To not have a life?"

Bonnie told her, "Of course, I do, baby. Ain't I alone every day? I see so little of you, we might as well be livin' in separate states." That's when she suggested they have dinner on occasion during the week, to ease the burden of loneliness. But her daughter didn't say or do anything, except to take a sip of wine. So far, the only days she saw her daughter were grocery

shopping days because she must have felt an obligation not to let her own mother starve. She had been crying at nights. If even a woman as desperate and sad as her daughter wouldn't accept the offer of her company, what did that say about her?

Bonnie wished she were home. Back in Flowery Branch, she'd had church friends, book-club friends, going-out-on-the-town friends, and visiting-for-dinner friends. Everyone knew her name, and everyone waved. But then, one by one, they moved in with their children or died, and Bonnie remained until she couldn't see to drive to church anymore and could barely hear the preacher's sermon even if she got there. Now in Philadelphia, merely three floors under her daughter, only the television and Jesus kept her company.

After putting on her thick glasses which magnified her eyes beyond proportion, Bonnie could not help but narrow her eyes at the Savior, whose portrait hung directly across from her bed. Blood dripped from His thorny crown as His mouth gaped open, and His eyes rolled up to heaven full of pain. Back in Flowery Branch, the sight of Jesus, and the reminder of His sacrifice, moved her to tears, but in Philadelphia, the expression on His face disturbed her. At night when the light was dim and, and her glasses were on her bedside table, His eyes seemed not to be upturned, but white with cataracts, possessed, and she feared that He might come out of the picture frame to strike her deaf and blind completely. These days, simply being in the same room as the portrait made her want to tear it up. She hated it, just as she hated God.

Bonnie had done everything right. She had been faithful to Him and her husband, before he left her for a woman half her weight. Nevertheless, she had been clean, and she had worked. Bonnie had raised up her daughter all by herself, as best as she could. And what did she have to show for all that suffering? No house. No grandchildren. No friends. If she died on a Monday,

her daughter would not even notice until the following Sunday. That was the thought that really made Bonnie want to die.

She looked away from Jesus and shook the thought from her mind. Bonnie told herself that she couldn't die while that horrible rot infected her apartment. She had enough self-esteem not to go in such an unpleasant manner. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and, rocking her body, which sagged like one of her many pillows, she heaved herself upward. Everything about her was soft and heavy and short, except for her hair, which had grown long enough to tickle her bottom. She slid into her pink slippers and shuffled to the front door without stopping by the bathroom to put in her teeth. Normally, Bonnie was not the kind of lady to step foot in the hallway without them, but, being forced to breathe through her mouth because of the stench, and having no intention of getting that smell stuck to her teeth, this evening was an exception.

Bonnie stuck her head out the front door. She looked to the left and then to the right. Empty. The carpeted hallway smelled musty, and the stench permeated even more strongly out here. Although Bonnie was only going a couple doors down, she locked the deadbolt just to be safe. It was new habits such as this that reminded her of what she had taken for granted in Flowery Branch, leaving her back door open for forty years without a worry.

Bonnie walked down the narrow hall in heavy, muted footsteps. The further she walked, the more the smell stung her already weepy eyes. She had never confronted a witch before. In fact, they'd hardly ever spoken except to say good evening. The witch was a tall, skinny woman who wore amethysts around her long neck and pigtails on top of her head, sometimes with plastic daisies poking through. She made herself look like an innocent girl, but Bonnie knew better than to trust her deceptions.

One night, she woke up to the sound of chanting. Those strange and mangled words were loud enough to shake the walls and haunt Bonnie's dreams. The one time, when she was chanting and Bonnie had decided enough was enough, she knocked on the witch's door and blurted out, "What the hell kinda speakin' is that?"

"It's Pali," the witch said, as if it were obvious.

Bonnie could only assume it was one of the devil's tongues. Sometimes when the witch's friends came over, they chanted in time to the beat of a drum and the shake of a tambourine. In one of her nightmares, the witch's pigtails grew wild as the branches of a thorny blackberry bush, twisting and turning as she danced with her friends around a goat. They fell to their knees and offered him skeletal babies weeping for their mothers, and in response the goat reared back onto his haunches. His bearded face turned up to heaven, his eyes bloated to the size of jellyfish, and just as they could bloat no more, they burst like overripe fruits.

Now that Bonnie stood at the witch's front door, sweat bled down her back, and her heart fluttered against the walls of her chest. A festive harvest wreath hung in front of her face. Nestled in the center of sparkling orange and yellow leaves, a sign ordered her to *Live, Laugh, Love.* Bonnie wondered, as her knuckles hovered before the door, if this wreath would be the last thing her eyes would ever see. She knocked. No one answered. She knocked again.

Still no one answered the door, so she shouted, "Yoo hoo in there!"

Her hand tried the knob. It turned. When she pushed the door open, Bonnie felt the stench like a force in her gut. She thought about turning back or climbing the stairs to her daughter's apartment, but she had no idea what she would say when she got there, and there was no way sleep would be coming to her now. Bonnie wiped her mouth. Her back straightened. Her feet stepped forward.

Inside the apartment, the lights were already on, and a voice on the television mumbled faintly. In the front entry hall, a collage of framed photographs lined the wall from floor to ceiling. The witch sat on a horse, wore graduation regalia, and hugged a girl on a merry-go-round. Bonnie walked past the photographs toward the living room. A jungle of dream catchers, hanging terrariums, and giant heart-shaped elephant ear leaves tangled together in a canopy so lush that Bonnie had trouble believing their apartments shared the same floor plan.

"Hello?" she said.

She turned a corner into the room, and there, on the couch, sat a small, silent girl, who resembled the child on the merry-go-round. The girl was so tiny—no wider than one of Bonnie's thighs—that she couldn't have been more than five years old. The pigtails on her head were a mess. Her dusty orange fingers had been eating chips. Her feet dangled above the floor, next to piles of wrappers and banana peels. She could see that the child had not eaten a proper meal in days. The girl was alone, just like herself.

"Where's your mama?" Bonnie said. "And what do you know about this awful smell?" She doubted, or at least she hoped, the girl would not know anything about her mother's sacrifices, but perhaps she might offer some clue.

The child gave no reply. Her eyes were blue as the hydrangeas that used to grow beside her mailbox, but they did not even glance at Bonnie. Her eyes only saw the television, and the jewelry that was on it. It seemed as if the child wouldn't let herself look at anything else, as if she feared what might lurk under the plants in the rest of the room.

The woman on the screen stood still as a barbie with a hand on her hip, and she wore a large oval ring. The camera zoomed closer until only her hand filled up the screen. She lifted her fingers to let it catch the light.

"Look at that sparkle, everyone. Beautiful mint green color. That's the power of the Moissanite. Let me tell you . . ." a woman's voice narrated, but she couldn't hear it very well.

"What's your name?" Bonnie said and sat herself down beside the child, but to her dismay she recoiled to the far end of the couch, never taking her eyes off the screen. She drew her legs up to her chest and gripped her feet. This girl lacked all spunk and personality. When her daughter had been a girl, begging for her mother's attention every waking second, Bonnie hadn't cared for her personality. But seeing how this child shrank away from her mere presence, she had to admit that even her pathetic desperation to be admired, her need for another person, had been worth something. What she wouldn't give now to have her daughter beg for her attention.

"Well, my name's Bonnie Jean Southern." She told the girl where she was from, that she was from the South just like her name suggested, and what a beautiful, kind place it was. She hoped the girl would one day have a chance to visit. Bonnie also told the child that she had been feeling sad after moving to Philadelphia. There were so many places to go in a city that there was essentially nowhere to go. She had forgotten how to ride a bus, and she could never figure out the schedule, and if she did, it was always so late that she would miss her medical appointment anyway. And the noises. Even with her poor hearing, she couldn't block out the honking car horns. Neither could she ignore the smells, which were always something unpleasant like diapers in a garbage bag.

Bonnie told the child about the one time she went to the laundromat. She couldn't figure out how to operate one of the machines. The new ones had so many buttons and knobs she couldn't decipher, and the longer she stood there peering at the impossibly small print, her shoulders growing weary beneath her bag of dirty clothes, the more she felt ashamed. She felt she had no place in that bustling checker-tiled room, amidst those swirling tumblers, where even

other people her age were capable of cleaning their own clothes. She thought of asking one of them for their help, but she could not bear to see their pity. It was easier to just stay at home and let her daughter bring the folded laundry to her door.

"It's hard to get used to things being another way," she said, "when you've lived one way your whole life. Of course, everything must be new for you." The girl grabbed the remote that had been stuck in the crack between two cushions. She turned the volume higher. *Drowning me out,* Bonnie thought. *She's the witch's spawn, no doubt about that.*

On the television, a blond woman sat next to a balding man in a suit. She said, "I've been in the diamond business for twenty-six years. You too, Charles, and let me tell you nothing shines more than a Moissanite. The technology has been years in the making. Everything has been building to this."

"Why are you watching this junk?" Bonnie grabbed the remote out of the child's hand. She considered turning off the television completely, or at least muting it, but fearing the silence that would bring, she turned it to the preaching station. The child yanked the remote out of her hand and turned it back to jewelry. *Some children,* Bonnie started to think, but then her mind trailed off before she could finish the thought.

Her back felt itchy in a place she couldn't reach. The earrings on the television sparkled too brightly, so much so that Bonnie's eyes strained to focus on the screen. That was when she realized that every single light bulb in the apartment had been turned on. Every standing lamp in the living room, the chandelier hanging above the dining table, even the track light in the kitchen, all glared with a hot, blinding force.

Although the lights brightened everything in the room, except for the shadows beneath the leaves, they did not reveal any tarot card, crystal, or symbol written in blood. No animal had

been slaughtered on the dining room table. Bonnie leaned forward to peer into the witch's bedroom where the ceiling fan whirred at high speed. Its lights illuminated a hanging tapestry behind the bed, on which there sprawled a valley of wildflowers basking in sunshine. A circle above it all, the sun bore a stern, human face, and Bonnie felt judgment waiting on its lips. Her own lips felt dry. Her mouth tasted like a litter box. That rotting stench. It lingered like an evil, following her. In each dark corner, in the shadow of each elephant ear, she felt it eating her and everything she loved.

"I remember the first time she hated me," Bonnie said to the child unprompted. "She was just eight, you see, on the day I picked her up from that science camp that was oh so expensive. She didn't want to leave, you see. Wailing and carrying on and stamping her feet and snot dripping all down her pretty dress. All the other children happy and hugging their mothers, and here she was acting like I never taught her how to act! Everyone was looking, seeing what I would do. And so—I didn't know what to do, but you never know what to do—all I could think to say was, 'Dry it up. I don't wanna hear it. I don't wanna see it. You dry it up this instant, Ruby Grace.' And she did, but the whole ride home she didn't say a word. Didn't tell me all the things she learned at that very expensive camp. She didn't say 'I hate you,' but I could feel it all the same. A ball of hatred in the backseat. And I expect she's hated me ever since."

Bonnie turned to the child. The enormous, sinking couch seemed like a mouth ready to swallow the small girl whole. She wanted to wash the child's sticky fingers and brush the knots out of her hair, the same as she had done for her daughter so many years ago.

"Do you love your mama?" she said.

The way the girl hung on to her toes, she might have been hanging from a cliff.

"Only $499.99. No payments. No interest. Just one hundred left. Remember, folks, once they're gone. They're gone."

"Of course you love her." *Even if she is a witch*, Bonnie said to herself. "Where is your mama?"

"Mommy's taking a bath," the girl finally said. Her throat sounded dry, and the words were slow. Bonnie was surprised that she could speak at all.

Pushing with her arms, she heaved herself upward, and then her slippered feet shuffled across the living room floor. It would have been polite to call out the mother's name, and she wished that she had not worked so hard to forget it. When she stood outside the bathroom door, she heard a faucet dripping, and now that she was closer to the bedroom's spinning fan, her good ear heard its whine like a high-pitched ringing bell. Bonnie pushed open the door.

Even in here, the light was on. Whether that meant the mother had left it that way, or the girl had flipped the switch, Bonnie wasn't sure. In that moment, she wasn't sure of a lot of things. At first, she wondered if something was the matter with her glasses. Then she wondered if this was her mind unraveling at its seams. She did not want to end up like her going-out-on-the-town friend Patricia, who in her last year of life only ever asked where her parents had gone, as if she was a little girl.

But no matter how many times Bonnie cleaned her glasses with her nightgown, the tub did not disappear, nor did the water it was full of, nor the mother who laid in it. Her skin was shining. A pink foam leaked out of her mouth. Her body and face were so swollen that Bonnie could hardly recognize her as the skinny witch. Her hair was not tied up in pigtails, but had dried into pieces like thick straw. Her left arm laid across her lap, while her right arm dangled outside the tub. Bonnie would never forget the flies.

They were green, clustered in patches, bright as liquid metal. The flies gleamed. They fluttered in her hair. They adorned her, flashing every color in the bathroom light. The glazed window had been left open, and the mother's upturned head seemed to be gazing at the moon. Down in the streets, cars beeped their horns. No stars lit up the sky here, not like they did in Flowery Branch.

With enough of the flies latched on, they might have carried the woman out the window. But they did no such thing. When Bonnie stepped closer and waved them off, they rose, a buzzing chaos above her body. And then fleeing into the night, they left her, slumped and alone. The loneliest woman in the entire world.

All Flesh Is Grass

All flesh is grass,

And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades,

Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it;

Surely the people are grass.

—Isaiah 40, NKJV

On the school bus, after the first day of fifth grade, Virginia slouched low in the rattling seat as the Property creeped into her field of vision. That's what her mother and stepfather Tom called the house, the barn, the horses, the dogs, the cats, the crabapple, and the eleven acres it all sat on—the Property. The barn was at least a hundred years old, but the house was new, porch-less, and stuck out of the ground at too right an angle. The dormers at the top of the house reminded Virginia of two sad eyes on a flat-faced cat. In Pitt County, North Carolina everything for miles was flat flat flat. The horizon could go on forever if there weren't any woods to stop it.

Virginia fiddled with the ends of her hair that hung straight and plain as a wooden plank down her back. But she felt proud to be the tallest person in the class this year, and the fastest in the entire school. Her long, lean legs could beat any of the boys in a race, and she always imagined that if she needed to defend herself in a fight, her fists could beat them, too. Presently, however, it was not a boy who was bothering Virginia, but her classmate and neighbor Ruby Jo Jameson, who had turned around to stick her honking nose over the seat. She narrowed her eyes, and Virginia narrowed hers back. Ruby Jo had inherited her dad's nose, and whenever she

laughed too hard it sounded like someone honking a car horn. Even though nobody felt bad for Ruby Jo, because her mother would send her to school with the most intricate mermaid braids, she still treated people like they were secretly laughing.

"Why you got so many cats?" Ruby Jo said.

Virginia remembered when Hurricane Floyd hit two years ago. Everyone else's place flooded except for hers, and the old tobacco barn became an arc of salvation. You couldn't tell to look at it, but the Property sat on a slight hill, possibly the only hill in the county. And every cat that survived the flood took shelter in the hayloft's eaves and went forth and multiplied—fathers with daughters, mothers with sons, sisters with brothers. And that's how there came to be over thirty cats. But she didn't feel like saying all that to Ruby Jo Jameson. And fortunately, the bus had just screeched to a halt in front of her mailbox, so she didn't have to.

"It's a long story," Virginia said as she slipped into the straps of her backpack. She walked through the aisle and felt Ruby Jo's eyes follow her all the way down and then through the window as the bus peeled away.

Once sunset came, after her mother returned from working in the nursing home and before Tom finished the spaghetti, Virginia went outside to start the chores. A few eager crickets chirped, though waves of heat still lingered in the air and the sun hovered in a cloudless lilac sky. She shaded her eyes to see Old Man Max and their spotted Great Dane, Bosley, slinging his tongue every which way. Bosley belonged to her mother. Or rather, her mother belonged to Bosley, a fact that always made Tom jealous. It was funny how even a stupid, stinky dog could have that effect on Tom, yet it had taken months for her mother to get mad about his friend Carma—who he claimed was only a friend. But Virginia had seen them stealing kisses in the barn when they thought nobody was looking. The one time she witnessed their affection, she had

been too shocked to do anything but crouch in her hiding spot and gape. However, Virginia promised herself that the next time she saw them together, she would not squander the opportunity. Next time, she would grab a rake and fling horse manure at their lips.

With the smell of that same manure on his breath, the Great Brute Bosley sidled up beside Virginia, nearly knocking her over. She referred to him as the Great Brute for he stood not much shorter than all of her four feet and eleven inches and was constantly in her way. Old Man Max, a slow wheezy beagle, could not have been more of a gentleman by contrast; he followed behind. With both hands, Virginia pushed Bosley off of her and told him to get lost. As the brute galloped away, she beckoned Old Man Max to receive a rub between the ears. Although his breath smelled like a rotting carcass, Max was a good dog.

Before tackling the chores, Virginia liked to sit in the hayloft and dangle her feet over the edge. Down below, slipping past and around each other like ants on a hill, the cats mixed together, grey, brown, and black. There used to be a cat named Orangey Sunshine, but something got him a week ago. Him and a tabby that she had not gotten around to naming. One morning she found the tabby beside a manure rake, and the next morning the orange one laid beneath the crabapple tree. Their paws had curled inward, and their heads turned unnaturally to the sky. The cats' eyes remained wide open in death, but instead of their usual shine, they'd dried to a milky fog. And their mouths. The way they opened. Like their last breath had been a scream. Virginia shivered. There was no blood. Not a drop on them. Not a smear. They weren't sure what got them, or what would have left them so unscathed, but her mother suspected they'd eaten poisoned rats. Virginia imagined an owl, taking on more than it could manage, had let them plummet from the sky. Tom said it was Bosley.

Of the cats that survived the attack, some had stripes and a few sported white patches. She could not find Tom's cat Snowball in the swarm below, but perhaps he was napping somewhere in the hayloft. Trixy possessed two different colored eyes. One an innocent amber, the other blue and sly. She sat on her haunches and reproached Virginia with her sly blue eye. One by one, cats young and old stared up at her and mewed and yowled and demanded. They waited all day to be replenished, and they would wait no longer.

Virginia climbed down the ladder and got to work. She heaved a bag of cat food out of a metal bin and dragged it to a stack of old lumber piled up against the wall. Frenzied cats pursued the bag. Their overlapping cries echoed to the rafters, a cacophony of hunger. Before the hurricane, the lumber was used to repair the barn or fencing, but after the cats came, the boards turned into a feline dining table. Virginia cut open the bag with a paring knife and poured the kibble in a long careful line. The cats swarmed. They feasted. Virginia let the murmur of crunching kibble wash over her like rain.

Then, out of the silence outside the barn, there came a bark. Deep and warning. Bosley. Then a wheezy bark. Old Max. Then a barrage of barks more mean than she'd ever heard them bark before. The horses whinnied, stampeded across the pasture. Then, a cat's shriek. It shrieked, and it shrieked. Inside the barn, the cats scattered from the boards. Kittens cried out for their mothers as adult cats muscled for higher ground. Virginia scooped up a pair of kittens and tossed them onto a hay bale. Inside her chest, a demon beat its hot angry fist. The killer, whatever it was, would not get away. Not if Virginia could stop it. She ran.

She followed the sounds. Around the barn, past the shed, and to the manure pile on the edge of the Property, Virginia found them barking at wine berry bushes. With his hackles raised and tail straight, Old Man Max hardly looked like an old man anymore. Bosley whined as he

paced the thicket. Dead leaves rustled in the trees. Virginia peered through but saw only the Jamesons' pines beyond the bushes.

"Get him, Bosley!" she said. He nosed his way into the branches, but when the thorns pricked his snout Bosley tucked his tail and whimpered all the way back to the house. Useless dog.

Then, amidst the Old Man's faithful barking, she heard a cat's deep haggard cry from the shed where they stored wood shavings. Snowball. Her eyes had missed him at first. His fur so perfectly matched the color of clean sawdust. He thrashed. His front legs jerked him from side to side. He wanted to stand, but his hind legs only lay there like a heavy sack. When he could thrash no more, he lay motionless, breathing too fast and staring at bent nails in the wall.

"I got you. Don't worry. I got you." Virginia tucked Snowball into her shirt like an infant kangaroo.

"Mommmmm!" She ran kicking up dust past the tobacco barn, past the horses grazing once more, like nothing was the matter, past Tom's truck, her mother's car, and to the back-screen door where Bosley, taller than a human, stood on his hind legs and scratched at the window, begging to be let inside.

"Move, Bosley," she said, but he did not.

"Mommmmm! Tommmmm!" She felt Snowball's heart flutter against the drum of her own. What was she going to say to Tom, and what was he going to do? Virginia dreaded even the look on his face. Snowball was his only cat and followed him like a shadow. She remembered when Tom built a secret room in the hay tower that was supposed to be for her, but she would find him in there napping with his face in Snowball's belly and Snowball licking Tom's long hair.

When the door flung open, Bosley went straight for the couch.

"What's wrong?" said Tom, holding a spaghetti spoon. Red sauce speckled the pigeons on his shirt. He looked down. He saw Snowball in her arms. He blinked, as if doing so would make a different cat appear. "What—what happened to him?"

Virginia thought of a thousand ways to explain, but none of them seemed right.

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They didn't have a gun. Her mother, a black belt in jiu-jitsu, had never seen the need for one, and the uncontrollable tremor in Tom's right hand ruined his aim. But he was the one to do it because it was his cat. Her mother told her to go upstairs to her room, but Virginia only pretended to close the door and instead leaned over the banister to listen. She heard the thuds as Snowball flopped against the kitchen table. They said he was such a sweet boy, the most lovely good sweet boy, and then they must have been petting him because they said nothing at all. Soon, there came the rattle of a plastic bag in Tom's right hand struggling to steady itself. Virginia leaned lower over the rail until she could make out the pitiful struggle, the silence, her mother's *I'm sorry,* Tom's *Oh, God,* and his sobs, those gasps, like he was the one with the bag on his head.

***

Virginia and her mother ate spaghetti without a word and without Tom because he could not stomach any food. He lay curled into a ball on the loveseat, while Bosley hogged the couch. Voices on the evening news bickered too loud, but Virginia could still hear him cry into a pillow from time to time. Her mother looked out the kitchen window into a square of black night. The window was cracked to let in the evening sounds, but the crickets weren't singing anymore.

Virginia's mother put on the kettle and rifled through boxes of tea in a drawer. She announced to Tom what she was making and asked if he wanted any, but he did not shout back a yes or a no. When the whistle shrieked, she poured steaming water into a mug and took it to the living room, where Virginia heard a demand for his attention.

"Here," she said.

And in response Tom said that he's never been able to drink green tea after four in the afternoon because of how the caffeine worsens his tremor—and didn't she already know how his stomach ached? Her mother walked away and didn't say a thing back. A stranger might have thought from the evenness of her steps and her expressionless face that she was unaffected. Perhaps even peaceful. But Virginia knew better. She saw how her mother didn't pour Tom's tea down the sink, but dumped it like it was filthy. Like it couldn't get down the drain fast enough. How she splashed water on her cheeks and for a few long seconds pressed her entire face into a hand towel and breathed.

Her mother was the one to bury Snowball because Tom couldn't bear to see him alone in the ground. Virginia wanted to help, but her orders were to stay inside and eat. Though she argued, her mother would not hear it, and with no other choice, she stayed. But she did not eat. Instead, she watched her mother through the window as she shoveled in the far back of the pasture at the foot of a telephone pole. Her back bent in a floodlight's glow, and every once in a while when the Jamesons' dogs barked up a storm, she planted the shovel into the ground and rested herself against it. Then she would look into the bushes as if something were rustling in their depths, but when nothing emerged, she would wipe the sweat off her forehead and pick up the shovel once more. Her mother looked beautiful in the moments when she paused, like that, to

search into the night. But when her mother came through the back door covered in dirt, she did not look beautiful at all. She wiped snot on her shirt sleeve. She sucked a blister on her palm.

She said, “I saw it. *Him.*”

Virginia’s skin prickled to attention. Inside her chest, the hot and angry demon knocked. She knew exactly who her mother meant and saw how he was making her afraid. In a rare moment such as this, when her mother looked anything but self-assured, Virginia wanted to hide under the covers and never come out.

“Where’d you see him?” Virginia said.

As her mother peered through the window, she meditated on the blister in her mouth and said that he took off through the Jameson’s yard and riled up their dogs pretty good. When Virginia asked what he looked like, she was told that he was big. Big enough to rattle a whole bush. And when she asked about the thorns, and why they didn’t hurt, her mother pondered that a moment before she answered, “If your skin gets thick enough, there’s nothing can hurt it, I suppose.”

Virginia wondered if such a creature acquires thicker skin, like a callus, with time. Was his entire body covered in one unfeeling mound of flesh? Or perhaps he was simply born impervious to pain.

“Yellow,” her mother determined. “Yes, must’ve been yellow.” Then she whispered, as if speaking too loud might conjure the beast. “A big, yellow, nasty-lookin’ dog.”

***

Next afternoon, the sun loomed in the sky like a hot fried yolk, and the air conditioner on the school bus could do little more than clank. Tired of dabbing at the sweat on her neck, Virginia stuck her head out the window to let the wind sting her cheeks. Field after house after

field passed in a blur, and in one of the fields, a tractor with large red wings sprayed a mist of fine white over the tobacco leaves. The tractor disappeared as the bus lumbered around a corner and was soon racing past a strip of pine woods. At that very moment, the nasty yellow dog could have been hiding inside them, crouching in the hollow of a tree, eyes glowing hotter and more yellow than the sun. She would never hear the sound of his hungry breath because these woods, layered in pine needles and full of sand, muted voices, swallowed footsteps. She would never hear him coming until his teeth were at her neck.

"Hey!" Ruby Jo shouted and pulled on Virginia's belt loop until she ducked her head back into the bus.

"What!" Virginia demanded.

"The bus lady was shoutin' at you. You can get your head ripped clean off doin' that."

"My head's just fine, ain't it?"

"Well, I'm just sayin' what she was sayin'. My momma says it, too."

"Well, I don't give two farts what your momma or your daddy has to say. Not if your dog is killin' all my cats."

Ruby Jo protested that she had no idea what she was talking about. Their dogs were pure-bred champion retrievers, not mongrel killers. And if some dirty mutt were tramping around her yard, well, its business was its own. Virginia did not accept her excuses. "Just tell the truth. It's your dog, isn't it, killin' all my cats? Well?"

"'s not my dog," she replied with the toss of a mermaid braid.

And after asking every child on the bus and even the bus lady, "Is *your* dog killin' all my cats?" and each of them replying, "'s not my dog," "'s not my dog," Virginia concluded that the

dog must not belong to anybody. Of course, they could have been lying, but Virginia liked to think that she was an excellent judge of the truth.

You could tell a lot about a person just by looking at their eyes. Ruby Jo's eyes were dark green and mean, not to be trusted. While Tom's eyes—dusty as an alfalfa flake—were soft and trusted too much. Her mother's eyes, once a fierce bright copper, were now the color and shape of tired old pennies. Maybe Tom's eyes used to be the color of grass before he met Virginia and her mother, but it was no use thinking of how people's eyes used to be. Back in the house, Tom's eyes were closed as he laid on the couch curled into the same fetal ball as when she last saw him.

"It's me!" she called, but he did not respond. Though he closed his eyes, Virginia could tell he was breathing too fast to be asleep. Outside the sun still lingered high, but inside the living room, with the curtains drawn and the television off, Tom hid in twilight. She could smell him, his unwashed body, even from the kitchen. What is it about sadness that makes a person stink? Virginia only ever saw him act like this for a few days each May, but in the spring she expected it. She could prepare, and more importantly, she knew it would pass if she left him alone, like her mother had told her to do. But now, in early August, Virginia had no idea what to do or how long this would last.

"School was fine. I didn't learn anything," she said to a collage of photographs, so thick on the fridge that not a speck of white door peeked through. In the top left corner her mother feigned surprise while a floppy-eared Doberman licked her pregnant belly. That was Belladonna, before Bosley. Centermost in the right door stood a beaming Virginia, raising a yellow ribbon to the sky; she had just won third place in her first 4-H hippology competition. Tom appeared in only two photographs, above the ice maker, and one didn't even look like him. A fancy suit broadened his shoulders, and gel flattened the cowlicks on his cropped hair. His poofy red face

blew so hard on the French horn it looked like he was farting. Tom promised he would play it for Virginia, but in all the four years they'd lived together he had yet to take it out of the closet. The other photograph, from the first year he moved in, featured Tom glowing in the light of thirty-two birthday candles. Her mother used to joke that if he got any older she wouldn't be able to boast about robbing the cradle, but she didn't make that joke anymore.

It had been nice having him around at first. Before Tom, the house was so new it didn't have carpet or walls or even a toilet. But since Virginia and her mother had nowhere else to go, they lived in it secretly and used the horse stalls to pee. At first, Tom was just the man who installed the toilets, but soon he installed the showers too. And then he was the man taking them out to Panera and the movies and cooking them nachos, and then he was the man sleeping over more often than he slept at his own house, until finally her mother agreed that he should just be the man who slept in their house every night.

Virginia opened the fridge and poured a glass of apple juice. It didn't matter if her mom got mad at her for not leaving him alone. Virginia couldn't stand the curtains, the silence, the smell. She walked the glass to the living room and extended it to Tom.

"Get up, Dumbo," she said. His eyes blinked until slowly and with some groaning, he sat up.

"What have I told you? Those mean nicknames." he said. He was always telling her what to do, even though he wasn't a real dad, but Virginia ignored his commands like they were the buzzing of a fly.

"You wouldn't have gotten up if I was nice."

"Yes, I would have." Virginia made a skeptical face.

"Drink this," she ordered.

"You sound just like your mom."

Tom took the juice and drank it all, and when he was done he stared at the dark television while his mouth hung open in his prickly face. For several minutes, they sat in the false twilight—Virginia petting her own hair, making hardly a sound, while Tom slouched and breathed like even that was an effort.

And then he began, "Did you know I had a girl before your mom?"

Virginia shook her head.

"Once. We were engaged. Annie. Met her in art school. She was . . . classy, dressed like a vogue model, looked like Princess Diana. Dreamed of sewing for the Queen. Meticulous, too. Like one time she cried 'cause her shirt had been buttoned wrong all day. Ridiculous. And ridiculously healthy. She was. Wouldn't eat tofu 'cause it gives you breast cancer." A dry laugh escaped him. "Joke was on her. At least she had always been high maintenance."

"What happened?" Virginia said. Tom scratched his neck and sat up straighter.

"She got leukemia. Died in May. You know what that is?"

She shook her head again.

"It's when your blood turns poison. You get really tired all the time, and a lot of other stuff."

"Tired like you?"

"No, not like me. Much much worse than me."

Sunlight peeked through a crack between the curtains. Virginia wanted to touch it, grab it like a bright vine and swing out of the living room, far far away.

"Why . . ." He took a long breath. ". . . does everything I love have to die." It was a question, but he said it like a fact.

Virginia wondered if he would be this sad if Carma died. They had met at one of her hippology competitions, and for that, Virginia felt responsible. How different would things be if she had carpooled with Ruby Jo, or if her mother had taken her instead? But, at ten years old, Virginia had come to learn that there was no use wondering about what-ifs. Her mother didn't take her. Tom did. And when her mother finally complained, he said she was jealous, there was nothing going on, and why couldn't he show off the horses to one of his friends? Wasn't he allowed to have friends? They didn't try to hide the flirtation.

"They want us to notice," her mother said. "Or they think we're that stupid."

From the upstairs window, she and her mother watched the couple sitting on the tailgate of his truck. Sometimes as they swung their boots, they knocked into each other.

"God, she's ugly." Her mother tasted those words and spat the rest out. "Look at her all *gussied* up for him."

It was true. She might have been the ugliest woman in the entire world. Her short arms, her frizzy hair, her blue eyeshadow and cheap red lipstick. She was nothing, while her mother was everything; tall, tan, burgundy-lipped, hard and soft, all at the same time. And yet. When Carma touched him, for a moment, on his arm, he laughed and pressed his hand against the spot like it had pained him.

"Mom, I think Daddy Tom loves Carma more than you." As soon as it came out, Virginia wished she hadn't said it out loud. She panicked that her mother might hate her for it, but instead, she pulled Virginia into her arms.

"Sweetheart," she said as she kissed her hair, "I think you might be right."

She had never seen her mother cry. Virginia had no idea what that would look like, or what might drive her to it. Would she cry if Tom died, even though he loved Carma? Would she cry the way he did over Helen and Snowball? Would Tom cry for her mother?

"What about me?" Virginia asked Tom. "Would you cry if I died?"

"Of course I would," he said as if he had never been more sure of anything. He turned around, and she felt him study the side of her face. "You know how much I love you, Ginny? You're the only thing left that I love."

"What about my mom?"

Tom did not answer. He reached out for her hand. But Virginia did not take it. Now she knew, really knew. He did not love her mother, and she didn't know how to feel about that. A part of her felt special to be loved while her mother was not, but the rest of her felt in her stomach a midnight black pit, as dark and dreadful as the room, growing darker and deeper by the minute.

She left the room. She opened the back door. But before she walked into the sun, Virginia turned to look at him. This man, the closest thing she'd ever had to a father, slumped there like a sickly child. His once muscular body now in baggy clothes. His skin, at one time a warm olive, looked sallow to her now. And his hand. It was nothing. Just long, thin, callused fingers, open, empty, and waiting.

***

In the barn that evening, Virginia stood under the hayloft eaves. In the sea of dark crouching backs, she felt the absence of Snowball. Who would be there to fill Tom's empty days? Her mom had to work and Virginia had to go to school, but a few months ago Tom hurt

his back rerouting a sewer pipe, and now he had nothing to do but stay home and whack the weeds. Even though they still had over thirty cats, none of them were Tom's.

Through the window she could see her mother and Tom sitting at the kitchen table. Her mother seemed to be shouting at the fridge, while Tom could have been shaking his head at the garbage can. She didn't want to go back inside until they headed to bed, even if she had to tiptoe around Tom sleeping on the couch. It began that evening when her mother came home, cradled Bosley like a gargantuan infant, and giggled as he slobbered all over her face. It was their ritual to embrace every day after work until both of them were out of breath with love. She asked nothing of Virginia's day, and said not even a hello to Tom. Even Virginia couldn't help seething at the sight of Bosley devouring her mother's attention, an anger she would have to tuck into her back pocket and let Old Man Max and the cats melt away. In the past, when Tom's jealousy became too much for him to bear, he had told her that the mere sight of Snowball's blue blinking eyes could dissolve even the deepest resentment. But now that his cat was dead, she supposed that there was no one, nothing, to dissolve his rage.

"You love that damn dog more than anyone, even Virginia," he said. "I've seen it."

"How can you say something so untrue. It isn't true, Virginia. I'm just tired is all. Can't you let me be happy? All I want is to come home—"

"I'd like to be happy too, but, oh yeah, my cat is *dead.* And you won't even admit that it could have been Bosley."

"But I can't come home and relax because, even though I work all day with old demented babies, I still have to take care of big angry babies when I come back. What do you even do all day while I'm gone? It's 9 PM. Why aren't any of the animals fed? If you're so upset about the cats getting killed, then feed them godammit before they wander off!"

The sound of their voices when they fought felt like rocks in her belly. It was all noise. Virginia wanted to shriek, to scream at her mother, to say that she wasn't a big, angry baby like Tom. Instead, she tucked that anger into her back pocket and went outside to feed the cats. Someone had to do it before they wandered off and got themselves dead. Now lying in a bed of hay at the foot of the tower, Virginia let the murmur of crunching kibble wash over her like rain.

After a couple of minutes, two mares squealed in a fight and one of them back-kicked the side of the stall so hard she felt it in the hayloft beams. A frightened calico clawed up the ladder for dear life and then raced across her stomach, at which point Virginia scrambled to her feet. The cat galloped around the hay tower but soon was trotting back to rub itself against her leg. Virginia caressed a spot of peach cream fur, and the calico responded with a raise of its butt and the purr of a steady engine.

"I'm gonna call you Peach Butt," she said and for a split second she thought its whiskers turned up in recognition. Virginia felt like Adam in the garden naming the Lamb and the Lion. She could name them anything she wanted at all. If she named one Poopy or Vomit, there wasn't a thing they could do about it. How powerful Adam must have felt upon being just born—or awoken, rather. Or was he breathed into being? Virginia struggled to remember the specifics from Sunday school, but the fact was that Adam was hardly more than a child—younger, even, than herself—when God placed every plant and animal under his dominion, to name, to cultivate, and to protect from each other, for surely in a garden a lion must still get hungry. And didn't Virginia, too, have a responsibility to protect her own dominion, to keep the lion from devouring the lamb?

She climbed down the ladder. Beside the feeding boards, Virginia uncovered a live animal trap beneath layers of hay and orange baling twine. She blew dust off the metal until its

camouflage green coating emerged. In the far back of the trap was where she would place the bait, and in the trap's middle gleamed a metal spring plate, which if stepped on, would drop a door behind the dog and permit him no escape. Tom had bought the trap a few years ago to catch the ground hogs digging holes in the horse pasture, as one good trip and one bad hole can lame a horse for life. When Tom caught the gophers, he put dandelions and raspberries in the back of the trap, but a beast would want more than just berries and flowers. He wanted the cats, and he wanted them live and trembling, as a snake wants to see the mouse squirm before it strikes. But she couldn't bear to bait him with even the grimiest of rats. Not even a rat deserves to be slaughtered like that.

Unable to think of a suitable bait, Virginia returned to her chores. As she filled the cat's water trough, Old Man Max lapped up huge sloppy gulps before he returned to lie in the soft oat grass, sprung up from Sir Johnson dropping oats out of his lazy lip. Next to the oat grass stood the crabapple tree, stumpy and crooked as a witch's finger but still thick with shivering leaves. As the crickets sang into the dusk and the wind blew a little cooler, the Old Man raised his nose into the air. He almost looked noble.

Max's ears pricked forward as he growled a low rumble. Could the Old Man smell the yellow beast? What does a beast even smell like, she wondered? Like the pungent new mulch on the playground? Like Sulphur in the tap water? Or maybe he smelled like maggot and rot, like the carcass on the Old Man's breath. After whining for a minute, Max finally quieted with a lick of his lips. He lay down his head and looked up at Virginia with those puzzled little eyebrows made of long hairs that only sprout after years of worry. Virginia knew that she should be afraid, too, for the cats and for herself, and for Old Man Max who wouldn't stand a chance in a brawl to the death. But in the safety of the barn, the yellow dog felt so far away.

Finished with her chores at last, Virginia stood at the light switches while Old Man Max crept up to the feeding boards to inspect the remains of the feast. Inside the stalls, the horses nickered, ready for lights to finally turn off so they could sleep. And although she could see through the window that her mother and Tom had long left the kitchen, Virginia didn't want to go back inside. Not yet. She lingered to watch the cats. Hunger finally sated, they settled in for the night. Miss Mama, having born so many kittens that her teats hung like grains of pink rice, licked her son June while he sucked at her belly. Though all his siblings had been weaned, Miss Mama still doted on him as if he were a newborn. On the now barren feeding boards his litter mates, whom Virginia called the Rascals, tussled onto Aunt Rozlyn's billowy tail. She hissed, swatted them in turn, and then leapt up the ladder's rungs to join the others in the loft. Each found a sleeping companion, or two or three, on each rising level in the tower of hay. A flock of roosting hens, they yawned, they curled, they dreamed. Her flock. They had melted her like a chocolate on a warm day, and all that was inside her now was milk. Sweet, warm milk.

Then just as her finger was about to turn off the light, she paused. Something about Max licking up the dregs of their food made her think. Usually, she would shoo him away, with a manure rake if necessary, as her mother had shown her to do. But seeing the Old Man's greed as he ate, like each piece was a Hershey's Kiss, suddenly gave her an idea. Even though with each passing minute the yellow dog transformed into a chimeric demon in her mind, the truth was that he was only a dog, and no dog can resist cat food.

With both hands, she dragged the heavy trap behind her and all the way to the wine berry bushes. After nestling the cage into a patch of high grass, she loaded the spring plate, returned to the barn for a fistful of kibble, and then dropped the pieces inside.

First thing tomorrow, she would find the yellow dog hunched, defenseless in her trap. How he would whine for her to let him out, the way Bosley, having seen a hare through the window, would cry out for freedom. But once she caught the beast, Virginia would never let him free. She would tease him with food. Make him hunger. Place a bowl of kibble just outside the cage, just out of his tongue's reach. She would wait until his bladder burst, and then she would squat right there in front him and mark the Property, her territory. She would look him in his gold eyes and watch how each day they grew sunken and turned to the color of dust. And when the day finally came, when the beast could do nothing but collapse to the ground, she would show them, her mother and Tom, how she, Virginia, had been the one to keep their family safe.

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Early next morning, when she ran out to check on the trap, the only animal she had caught was Old Man Max. His fat body shivered, though the sun's rise was already simmering off the remnants of cooler night air. When he heard her approach, he thumped his tail back and forth against the walls of the cage. Virginia crouched to open the door. As soon as she did, she smelled the urine and feces he could not hold through the night. Imagining the beast soiling himself had been one thing, but it broke Virginia's heart to see the Old Man demeaned in this way. His drooping eyes gazed up at her. He whimpered.

"I'm so sorry, buddy. Let's get you cleaned up, okay?"

She popped the door open and helped the Old Man back out of it. Not realizing she was the one who trapped him, he licked her arm in thanks. Then, before she could grab his collar to guide him to the water spigot, he took off toward the barn. She considered chasing after him, but, thinking better of it, she left the trap discarded in the grass and returned to the house. Spraying

down Max and the trap would take time, but if she didn't get a move on this morning, there would be no time to eat breakfast.

The smell of sizzling butter filled the kitchen, where she found Tom. His back was turned, but she could see that he was pouring batter into a skillet. He slid a pancake off a spatula and onto a towering pile.

"You're awake," Virginia said. "And cooking. Why're you makin' so many?"

"Well, I didn't know how hungry you were. I thought this way I could freeze the rest for later. So you'll never go hungry in the morning."

Backpack already strapped, Virginia sipped a glass of apple juice while she waited at the table. The clock on the microwave read 7:24. Her mother needed to be at the nursing home before the old folks ate breakfast, and Virginia needed to be at the end of the driveway by 7:45 to meet the bus. Her mother had always been the one to drop her off, even though Virginia was old enough to walk to the bus on her own. But when she brought this up, her mother had said she wanted to keep the tradition going for as long as she could. At least until the day Virginia really truly didn't need her anymore. Today, however, she was late for their tradition. The scream of her blow dryer traveled down the stairs ten minutes past the time she was usually finished with her hair.

Sitting at the table, Virginia stared at a pancake with eyes. It stared back at her. Blueberry eyes. She asked where its mouth had gone. Tom, now across the table and chewing, did not seem to hear her.

"Its mouth," she demanded. "It's supposed to be smiling."

They had run out bananas. Virginia nodded. She drizzled syrup in the shape of a frown.

"Isn't it supposed to be smiling?" he said.

She thought of telling him about the trap, her plan, and the morning's failure, but it would probably only get her into trouble. So, she lied that she was feeling sad about having to go to school. Thinking only of washing Max and the trap, she asked if she could stay home today.

"You could show me how to play the French horn," she said.

Though he didn't give an answer one way or another, he asked, "Do you think living on the road would make you less sad?"

"No way." She laughed. "I never wanna have to shower at the gym again."

"Well, what if you lived in a camper that had a shower and toilet built in? A shiny silver Airstream. That wouldn't be so bad, would it? And we—you—could see all the wonders of America. Yosemite, the Grand Tetons, Mount Rushmore. Think of it. How much you could learn outside a classroom."

She wasn't sure if it was all the sticky syrup or Tom's words that made her stomach feel uneasy. At first, she thought he was only playing around, but by the way he kept looking up at her, searching her face in between bites, she suspected that he wasn't playing at all.

"What about my mom? Could she come to Mount Rushmore, too?"

Tom looked down at his now empty plate. "No."

"But who would take care of her? And the cats? I can't leave them with a killer on the loose."

He didn't respond, and he didn't look up, but he nodded in a resigned sort of way.

The clock read 7:44, and through the cracked open window, Virginia could hear a grackle crying out and another screeching back, and, in the distance, she heard the school bus rumbling up their road. Then just when she had decided to ask Tom for a ride down the driveway, her mother came racing into the kitchen; they had to go now or they weren't going to make it. With

no time to even say thank you for breakfast, Virginia ran out the back door and buckled herself into the car. Her mother started the engine.

As soon as she did, Tom threw open the back door and called out Virginia's name. He ran down the steps. Virginia rolled down her window to see what was the matter, but she would never find out, because at that moment, as the school bus slowed to a stop, her mother gunned the engine. The wheels of their car were spitting. A smoking dust plume rose up in their wake.

Virginia looked through the rear window. Tom started to shout something, and then he stopped, and then he started and stopped again. Either she could not hear him, or he was choking on his words; she wasn't sure. But she was certain that his eyes were bright as grass.

As they watched each other grow smaller, she found herself filled with a terrible sadness she could not have explained. With the horses grazing in the pasture behind him, and the grackles strewn out in between, Tom stood there next to his truck. He was right there. And yet for some reason, she missed his crooked teeth. She missed his unbrushed hair and his overgrown whiskers and the way they collected his tears. She wished that she had loved him the way he loved her. And she wished that she had said it out loud. Maybe if she had, Tom would still love her mother, too. Virginia stuck her head out of the window to wave goodbye. Bosley raced the car, barking and galloping pell-mell through the plume, while the Old Man trotted to the side. Waving back, Tom sat on the tailgate as the dust slowly veiled him into a shadow, an outline of a man.

Virginia covered her ears. The bus had let out a final halting shriek so piercing and loud it frightened the grackles in the pasture. They rose into the air. The iridescent swarm twisted and turned until they no longer resembled birds, but a massive river, one swirling black current flowing into the sky, and then, beyond a line of trees, descending into a field she could not see.

***

When Virginia got off the school bus that afternoon, Tom's truck was gone and so was the fridge. Only a nickel, some dog hair, and two crayons remained in the space where the appliance used to be. In the bedroom Tom and her mother had shared, she found his dresser drawers left barren and his night stand picked clean. Even the French horn in their closet had vanished without a trace. Though she knew in her heart that he was gone and not coming back, she called out his name. And what she learned is that even when you think a room is already empty, calling out a name makes it worse. And though she knew it was silly to think he might be hiding somewhere in the weeds, she scoured the Property for any sign of his existence.

Outside, she cried his name, louder and more desperate each time. As she stomped the perimeter, hugging the line of wine berry bushes, the horses and dogs circled her with curiosity until they lost interest, and it was only the old palomino Sir Johnson and Max who followed her trail. The Old Man panted while Johnson's arthritic knees clicked, and on the other side of the bushes a crunch of footsteps in the grass grew louder until they stopped.

"Hey!" came Ruby Jo's voice.

"Hey!" Virginia shouted back.

"My momma sent me out to say that your daddy left hours ago, and your refrigerator was ridin' down the road with him."

"I know that already, Dumbo!"

"I'm not the Dumbo," said Ruby Jo. "You're the one calling out your daddy's name like you don't know he's gone."

Virginia wanted nothing more than to tackle Ruby Jo to the ground, to take both of her long looping braids, and rip.

"He's not my daddy," she said. "I know he's gone, and I'll say his name all night if that's what I want. It's *my* Property!"

"I'm just sayin' what my momma was sayin' . . ." said Ruby Jo as her footsteps walked away.

Virginia balled her fists. She racked her brain for what to shout back, but before anything good could come to her mind, she heard Ruby Jo's back door squeal open and slam.

***

The red sun dipped below the horizon's wall of trees by the time her mother returned from work. Hiding in the hayloft's secret room, Virginia did not hear her car pull in. And even if she had, she wouldn't have been able to climb down the ladder and tell her what happened, how she had called and searched but couldn't find Tom, how Ruby Jo had been so heartless, how in her fury she had gone inside the secret room and beaten the hay until her hands turned raw, how all the cats ran away from her, like how they'd scattered from the beast. Even if she had heard her mother, she wouldn't have been able to get up. After exhausting herself, her body prickled weightless and numb. So long had she curled without a sound or light, that for a while she almost believed that she was floating through outer space, and all that tethered her body to this earth was the smell of timothy hay. There was a moment when Virginia thought she heard a horse's angry squeal, but so quiet and soft was the dark tiny room that she paid it no mind.

It was, in fact, not a horse, but her mother. With Tom's truck and the fridge gone and Virginia nowhere in sight, she burst out of the backdoor screaming her name like the barn was on fire, and it was not until she climbed up the ladder that Virginia finally heard.

“Oh, God,” her mother said when she was found. She pulled Virginia out of the room, and nearly collapsed as she embraced her.

“I thought he took you. I thought you were gone.” She held Virginia in such a tight grip that she could hardly breathe. Down below them, the cats cried for dinner, and above them, a bare bulb dangled its light. “How could you make me think that? Why didn’t you call?”

“I’m sorry,” Virginia said at last. “The house. It’s haunted now. I couldn’t stay inside it, couldn’t make dinner, the food is all gone with the fridge, and even if it wasn’t I wouldn’t know how—I should have—”

She grabbed Virginia’s shoulders, and her eyes, a flaring, frightening copper, grabbed her too. “Don’t ever make me worry like that again. You understand? You’re here. You’re with me. Everything will be okay. You hear me? Everything.”

Virginia nodded. She wiped her tears onto her shirt. She said that she believed her. But for the first time in her life, she knew her mother was telling a lie.

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Since neither of them wanted to return to the house anytime soon, they took their time finishing the chores. The waxing crescent moon hung low and golden in the sky and across the road, a field of tobacco waved in a breeze that hadn’t reached them yet. Virginia let the hose trickle into Sir Johnson’s water bucket, while her mother brushed the old palomino’s fur with Bosley and the Old Man resting at her feet. It was impossible to put weight on Sir Johnson’s bones, but he was content. With age his back had sunk lower and lower until it swayed so severely that not even Virginia could sit there without causing him pain. But his feline friend Jimmy, the same color orange as the palomino himself, had discovered his sway back to be a most suitable hammock. Of all the cats, Jimmy was her mother’s favorite because he was the

only one brave enough to ride a horse. As Sir Johnson lowered his neck to take a sip of water from the bucket, his rider woke up with a mouth-curling yawn. Her mother stroked the top of Jimmy's head until he stretched back into sleep. Over Johnson's washboard ribs, the brush in her mother's hand tremored.

"Am I ugly?" her mother said.

So plain was Virginia's hair and freckled face that she did not think she would ever grow up to equal her mother's beauty. Yet at the same time, and for reasons Virginia could not have explained, it was her mother's ugly parts that she admired most. She loved her grey roots and how they bled from the top of her dyed hair, how bleach stains marred her navy scrubs, how a faded birthmark smeared across her chin. Virginia loved her mother even on the days she cursed God and hit pillows when she thought no one was looking, and she loved her now as her calm, tired body leaned against Sir Johnson. The brush fell out of her hand and down into the shavings. She laid her left hand atop Jimmy, as her right hand threaded into Johnson's blonde mane. When she asked the question, her voice came out so light and airy that she almost wondered if she were talking in her sleep.

Without any hesitation, Virginia told the truth, and when she did, her mother's face scrunched up like it had heard the worst thing it could hear. She realized that she had made a horrible mistake, that everything she'd said had come out wrong. And though she knew her mother didn't want to listen anymore, Virginia tried to explain what she had meant to say, that out of everything in the world, the birds, the trees, and all the people in it, her mother was the most beautiful.

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A week later, all the tobacco had been stripped from the field across the road, and on the Property ten more cats were dead. One morning, her mother nearly stepped on Miss Mama, a cruelly deposited gift on the back porch stoop. And one evening, all the way at the top of the hay tower, Virginia found two grey kittens, no larger than river stones and rotting. Their mother had carried their lifeless bodies in her mouth to the safest place she knew. Each day, the Jamesons discovered dead cats in their yard, and with such increasing frequency that they ceased to call each time another was found, and instead only announced with a call at the end of the week how many they had been forced to bury or finish with their gun. One day after school, after Virginia heard a gunshot crack in their backyard, she went out to the barn to determine which cat had been unlucky now.

Outside, the air was changing, roiling to a boil, but once or twice a cool breeze whispered through her hair. Though the western sky blazed a white hot blue, in the east there came a rumble out of a tall, black, sickening bloom. Virginia stopped. She turned to face the cloud. Though lightning did not flash, at least that she could see, something electric, like a hum, coursed down her legs. She wanted to run. She wanted a boy to race, and she wanted to beat him. For the first time since Tom left, she felt happy. Incredibly, wondrously happy. Danger that cloaked itself in night filled her with hatred, but up in the sky, exposed as the cloud was in broad daylight, an overwhelming wave of love consumed her. She turned up her head and told it to come, get her, for she was not afraid.

Behind the barn, there came another, more familiar, rumble: a growl. And then, there was barking. So much barking. And there was screeching, too. And the horses, so full of fear they could not run straight, were bucking as they fled. For the second time that August, she ran to find the beast.

This time, she saw him in the flesh. Behind the barn, the three dogs, a snarling torrent, raged. Each of them bared teeth. Old Max lunged and Bosley danced to reach his neck, but the beast was too fast. So light and gold was his fur that he could have been translucent; his flesh, the ropes of golden muscle unfurling along his body, were plain as day. So quick and quiet was the strike. Just a glimmer she almost didn't see or hear until Old Man Max was yelping, crying, lying on the ground.

Virginia didn't have time to find the rake. The black cloud in the east rolled into the west, and the electric hum inside her throbbed. She readied her fists. She screamed for all that she was worth, and then she charged.

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The yellow dog was nothing but a coward. He took off down the driveway, ran through the barren tobacco field, and then vanished into the adjacent plot of corn. The tall stalks shook as he rushed down their tunnels. Only when he exited into the far-off woods, did they once again grow still. Old Man Max had also grown still in the hard, over-grazed pasture.

His short stumpy legs curled into his fat belly, which in life had been a charming expansion, so opposite of Bosley's sharp bones. But when Virginia looked at Max's belly now, it seemed like it was already bloating in the sun. Poor Max. Her Max. In all his life, she had not realized that he belonged to her, and now, she could not tell him that she knew it. Scratches crisscrossed his brown shoulders, his gray face, and on the white part of his neck the fatal gash—that horrible, seeping red—opened. Bosley licked his friend all over, but when he could not wake him, he ran up to Virginia and whined, pleading with her to undo what had been done.

Virginia knew she should have called her mother and waited for her return, but she wanted to be the one to do it because he was her dog. As she searched for a shovel in the barn,

she worried if she was equal to the task. Though she had buried her mother's jewelry, her barbies, and bulbs in the fall to become tulips in the spring, she had never buried a dog, and she would have to bury him quick before the rain.

She tried moving Max to the crabapple tree, but his deadweight slipped right out of her arms. She dragged him by his front legs, then his hind legs, and his tail, but could never pull him further than a couple feet. So, she grabbed the shovel and planted it right where he already was. Though she hated that the horses would poop and trample upon the Old Man's grave, she had no other choice. Sometimes you don't get one.

As thunder rumbled in the east, Virginia dug into the dry, brittle grass. She didn't want to dig a hole in the rain, yet a part of her hoped it would; the digging would go faster if the dirt was softened first. The shovel, whose handle rose taller than her head, felt awkward. She grunted and tossed a crumbling layer of dirt, but when she jabbed the shovel into the ground again, it would not budge. The dry, compacted earth had stopped her work completely. Though she struggled over and over, thrusting the full weight of her body onto the blade, she might as well have tried digging through a stone.

Virginia threw the shovel onto the ground. She couldn't save the cats. Couldn't save Max. And now she couldn't bury him, too. The weight of her seventy pounds meant nothing to the earth. She was thinner than a grass blade. Weak. A little girl who couldn't do a thing. She fell onto Old Max. Burying her face into his belly, she embraced his rigid corpse. His fur, at least, remained the same, still smooth beneath her hand. She whispered to Max that she was sorry, and she promised that she would never be a little girl again. Not a coward. Not a sissy like Tom. She would be like her mother. Strong. And she promised, as she watched his fur soaked up her slimy

tears, that she would never cry. After this, she would be angry. Like the horrible, no-good, stubborn, hot sky.

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The night after Max died, Virginia dreamed that she was sitting on the couch with him cradled in her lap. She held and kissed him the way her mother did Bosley, and the whole time he was licking her face. She hated how the slobber dripped off the end of her chin, but at the same time it felt so good to let the Old Man love her. It felt like a relief. Virginia was not the kind of child prone to fits of laughter, but she was giggling now. And soon the Old Man was straddling and pinning Virginia to the couch as he licked her, and the longer he did, the more clearly she saw that it was not the Old Man on top of her, but the yellow beast. His great tongue slathered. So unceasing was his affection that Virginia could not breathe. She writhed to break free, but the more she struggled the more she sank into the crack between the cushions until finally she fell through into a tunnel. At the end of the tunnel came the echo, his hunger, rumbling in a pit. The tunnel floor on which she sat transformed into a tongue rising dark and slippery beneath her, and before she knew what was happening or what she could do about it, she was tumbling down his throat into a blinding light.

When Virginia woke up, she saw, outside her window, silent strobes of lightning flash the nighttime into day, and she heard less than a second later, the whip of thunder crack before the onslaught—the smears of rain, those desperate fists, throwing themselves against the window, begging her to open.

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In the morning, Virginia slid up the bottom window pane. The grass on the front lawn blazed every shade of green, in stark contrast to the tobacco field across the road. Where the

stalks had been severed, only crooked nubs remained, and in between stretched wide swaths of dirt, which had transformed overnight into a near-black mud. Where the crabapple's leaves had drooped yesterday, this morning they'd sprung up, full and alive. Even the air smelled like a new beginning: earthy, fresh, and sweet. Before August, before Tom left and everything died, the smell would have left her feeling giddy—and she wanted to feel that way now, to feel as relieved as the grass outside felt. To wear herself as proudly as the crabapple wore his leaves. She wanted to believe that today was new, that Max's sacrifice had cast a spell and saved them, that the beast had gotten bored and left. Virginia wanted to pretend.

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In the evening, the air no longer smelled new. The full moon, a glowing bullseye in the center of an orb, rose slowly, gradually shrinking the higher it crawled. Her mother was burying Peach Butt near the edge of the Property. There, overgrown with weeds, she found the trap that had yet to catch the beast. She confronted Virginia about what it was doing there, and Virginia explained how she'd tried to bait the yellow dog with cat food but it hadn't worked, and she wanted to try deli meat next. She wanted to protect them. Instead of thanking Virginia for her efforts, her mother discarded the trap in the same forgotten corner of the barn where Virginia had discovered it a week ago. It would never catch the dog, her mother said. That trap was too small to catch anything but a raccoon.

It was not too small, Virginia argued. It would have worked. She just needed a little more time and the right bait was all. At least she was trying to do something. She was the only one trying to do anything. As her mother scooped a wet pile of horse manure, it dripped through the rake and slid off into the bucket. She set the rake down against the wall, crossed her arms, and looked up.

Virginia was the sort of child who never threw tantrums, who made her bed and cleaned her shoes without having to be told. Tom had chastised her on occasion, but her mother never did, and a part of Virginia believed that that she would live all her years never being ordered by her mother to do, or not do, a thing. So when a shadow darkened her mother's face, Virginia never expected the order that came out.

"Don't be ugly with me," she said.

Those words sucked the air out of the barn, and Virginia's breath along with it. She continued, "Do you know I've called animal control? They can't find the dog. I've looked everywhere. Every damn place for the right size trap. I told Mr. Jameson to shoot the damn thing next time he sees it. And I've had to bury so many things, Virginia. I get up and I work with dying people, and when I come home everything is dead, and when I go to sleep, I . . . " she didn't finish what she was going to say, but then she continued, "I have to wake up because I have to take care of things, and I'm trying my best, and I'm sorry if that's not good enough for you, but it's just so hard, I just don't—how can you think all of that is nothing?"

Virginia's face grew hot. She turned off the water spigot and let the hose fall to the ground. She didn't want to hear the things her mother had just said, and she didn't want to see the very sad look on her face. At the same time, she couldn't help but feel that her mother was still wrong. When Carma came around, she let her do as she pleased, and now where was Tom?

For a long minute, her mother remained quiet, just turned her back to Virginia and finished scooping up manure. Finally, with her back still turned, she said that Tom didn't leave because of Carma. She told him to get a job, go back to school, file for disability, or get out. She thought he would get another job. She wanted him to go back to school.

Virginia still didn't understand why he took the pictures on the fridge and the pancakes. Why did he make so many if he was just going to take them away? Her mother didn't have an answer for that. They spent the rest of the night performing the chores in silence and without pause, except to watch the moon, and the herd, their family, getting smaller, and the manure avalanching down the pile, a small stinking pyramid in the dark.

***

When Virginia woke up on Saturday morning, ladders of sunlight touched the barren field in which a doe had staggered from the road and fallen in the night. Her fur looked not much lighter than the now dry dirt, except for the belly which was white on the outside and red in the middle, and that is where the yellow dog ate. He crouched. He quivered. Sunlight glittered on his back. She threw off the covers and ran to her mother's room. Virginia shook her awake, saying, he's here. Her mother stumbled out of bed and into a bathrobe. She peered out the window.

"I've got eyes on him," she said to Mr. Jameson on the telephone. "Bring your gun before he wanders."

When the Jamesons arrived a few minutes later, Ruby Jo looked over their house as if it was smaller than she expected. Mr. Jameson, a large, silent man in camouflage overalls and a matching baseball cap, gave no greeting other than to pat the muzzle of his shotgun, which he carried over his shoulder. And Mrs. Jameson, a frail, leathery woman who looked old enough to be Ruby Jo's grandmother, said, "We got yer call."

Virginia's mother and Mr. Jameson broke off across the front lawn, while the rest of them went inside, where they were supposed to remain under Mrs. Jameson's supervision for the duration of the hunt. Mrs. Jameson used their telephone to ask the farmer who owned the field if

Miss Marlow and her husband, Samuel J. Jameson of Jameson's Tar River Retrievers, could be permitted to shoot the menace in his field and woods, should the menace run that way. Through separate windows, Virginia and Ruby Jo watched the yellow dog prick up his ears at their parents' approach, and then bound across the field. Clouds shifted over the sun. One ladder of sunlight disappeared, and then another. Her mother sprinted with all the grace of an athlete, while Ruby Jo's father, holding the baseball cap onto his head with one hand and his shotgun in the other, labored through the dirt. Once they had disappeared into the woods, and the clouds' shadow cast darkness upon the field, the doe was all alone. Virginia could have kept looking at that doe all morning, if it were not for Ruby Jo and the toy Labrador Retriever she forced into Virginia's face.

"Let's play," she said.

Ruby Jo pulled a toy Border Collie out of her pocket, pressed it into Virginia's hand, and kept the Labrador Retriever for herself. The dog felt a little sticky and warm, and Virginia felt like she had been given a used tissue.

Ruby Jo said, "I'm Sasha, and you're Shannon. Shannon likes oranges, lipstick, and salami. She's had four litters. That's twenty-eight puppies in all. So she's about to be retired. And she's shy, too, 'cause she lost a lotta hair with her last litter. Sasha makes fun of her for being bald. Oh, and she's a detective. She's real good at sniffin' out serial killers and the child perp . . . perpetuators."

Virginia wanted to drop the Border Collie at Ruby Jo's feet. She didn't want to be a gross, bald dog, and pretending was stupid anyway. During recess at school, she had stopped pretending. Make-believe games didn't interest her anymore. All of it was fake. She didn't want to play house, because when the girls played house, they played it nice and sweet. They didn't

want to argue like how parents argue in a real house, and when she pretended to be the dog, they didn't like it when she killed the cats. She tried to explain that she was just playing around, that none of it was real, but nothing she said could sway them; the girls suggested that she should leave. And after joining the boys for a day, forcing them to race and beating them all, they also told her to get lost. The only person left to play with was Ruby Jo, who only ever sat in the hot plastic cottage, by herself, making toy dogs breed one another. Even Virginia wasn't that desperate. At the same time, she knew that she needed to be nice because they needed Mr. Jameson's gun. So, even though Virginia didn't like Ruby Jo or her mom or her weird toy dogs, and she definitely didn't like having them in her house, she tried to play along.

"Do you wanna play house?" she said. "Should Shannon be the mom?"

Ruby Jo wrinkled her large nose. "House is BO. RING. I'm gonna be a serial killer, and you're gonna detect me."

"Okay," Virginia said.

"Okay," said Ruby Jo. She plopped down on the carpet in the middle of the living room, and Virginia followed suit. Ruby Jo sat with her back to her mother, who had turned on a morning talk show and squeezed herself into the only bit of couch that Bosley had not occupied. Ruby Jo held up the Labrador Retriever to Virginia's ear and whispered, "I'm gonna leave clues and you gotta find me."

"What kinda clues?"

"Like cat stuff, but missing stuff . . . like paws with no toes. And butts with no tails."

"Butts with no tails?"

"Yeah. And shaved. To look like a pig's butt."

Virginia wasn't sure how a shaved cat butt would be the same as a pig's, but she didn't argue. She said, "How are any of those things clues? Those are just body parts."

Ruby Jo grinned. "That's what you gotta sniff out. Shannon's real good if you let her, and we're real tired of findin' dead cats in our yard—"

"I'm tryin' to watch the television, and I can't hear a damned thing!" said Mrs. Jameson, who sat uncomfortably straight, nearly perching on the edge of her seat next to Bosley. The Great Dane dozed on his back, legs spread wide, and displayed his genitalia. Mrs. Jameson looked down with disapproval at his penis before returning her gaze to the talk show. Afraid to say another word, the two girls looked at each other and then at the long gray braid dividing Mrs. Jameson's back. She wetted her lips to speak.

"The whole thing is a real . . . aggervation," she began. "I don't like buryin' 'em, I don't like shootin' 'em, and I didn't much care to have 'em shittin' and sprayin' on my lawn. The number a cats you got is just too many. One cat can kill a mouse just fine. Two can kill twice as many. But after three, you ain't got any mice left. Over-saturated is what it is. Those cats ain't got nothin' to do. And when you got a bored cat, you got yourself a menace. This dog is a blessing and a curse, if you ask me. It's like God, how he gets 'em. I'm not sayin' I like it. I'm not sayin' it's nice, but it's God alright. It's natural selection how he's selectin' 'em. He's gettin' the young'uns and the sick, the shitters and the sprayers. He ain't eatin' 'em none either, just selectin' 'em. And he'll keep on selectin' till he's the one selected. I don't buy into that *big bang* evolution crap, but Darwin, he didn't know what in the hell he was onto, but he was on to somethin' alright. There's always somethin' stronger than you, and there's always somethin' weaker. You gotta know where you fall, 'cause it's only the fittest that survive."

Virginia didn't really understand what Mrs. Jameson was saying, and she didn't like the way she said it, but Ruby Jo nodded along like she had heard this speech before.

"It's like with breedin'," Mrs. Jameson continued. "Only a fool breeds a sick, ill-tempered bitch. Over-population. That's what's wrong with a lotta things, if you wanna know the truth. An over-population of weakness. Too many young people don't wanna work. Too many good for nothin' animals fillin' up this world." She looked down at Bosley's soft pink stomach.

"Look at this dog. He could take down a wild boar if he had a mind to, but he don't have the mind to guard even his own home. Doesn't even have the manners to sit on the floor and make himself decent. Paradin' himself around bad as a hussy, but, I suppose, that's hardly a surprise."

Virginia knew by the way Mrs. Jameson kept looking at her mother's portrait on the wall that she was not talking about Bosley anymore. Although she knew it wasn't right, Virginia hated her the way she hated the yellow dog. She was in Virginia's home, on Virginia's couch, watching Virginia's television, and acting like all of it was hers. But none of it was; not even what was supposed to be hers was hers. Virginia tried screwing up her face to keep herself from saying the things she knew were wrong to say, but it all came tumbling out.

"Shut up!" she said. "Bosley's not the hussy. You are! And Mr. Jameson is, too. He's been sleepin' with Ruby Jo's real mama, and everyone knows it except for you. You're a Dumbo, and you're old. And your face looks like beef jerky!"

Both Mrs. Jameson and Ruby Jo looked at Virginia in a way that she found hard to stomach. Ruby Jo's green eyes no longer looked mean, and Mrs. Jameson's brown eyes, small and obscured under heavy folds of skin, blinked. The rest of her features, which had looked so

old before, now could have belonged on a wrinkly newborn's face. She opened her mouth to speak, but before any words could come out, the blast of a shotgun tore the air.

Virginia ran outside to the front porch stoop. The clouds had all but disappeared, and the sun had risen to a blinding height. She shielded her eyes. After a minute and a half of squinting at the tree line, her mother and Mr. Jameson finally materialized as two distant figures heading slowly her way.

The front door opened behind Virginia, and Ruby Jo came crying out of it. She ran, arms flapping, braids bouncing, down the steps, through the yard, and past the dead doe in the field where her father caught her in his arms. Burying her face into his stomach, she clung to the fabric of his overalls. Her mother stopped to hear what happened, and after she'd heard enough, she took off at brisk walk, headed straight toward Virginia. Mr. Jameson knelt before Ruby Jo. His large round face said something very serious and kissed her forehead. Then he hoisted her onto his shoulders. From her high perch, she looked up to the sky and around all the fields, seeing everything that she could see. With his free hand, her father held onto her leg to steady her, and she ran her fingers through his hair. Her free leg bounced against his chest. He propped her back up when she began to slip. Father and daughter, they existed together so naturally, never second-guessing the ways they touched one another. Virginia hated them. She hated their closeness, but that only made her feel more guilty. As far as she was across the road, she felt like the intruder now, like she shouldn't have been watching this private tenderness between them. Yet at the same time, she could not look away or stop feeling sorry for herself.

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On Labor Day, Tom's truck came rolling in while her mother whacked weeds in the far back of the pasture and Virginia scrubbed algae out of the tipped-over horse trough near the

barn. Bosley barked at the truck's approach and then galloped along the driver's side. Virginia crouched behind the trough and watched a man who she knew must be Tom, but she did not recognize him at all. If the man were not driving Tom's truck, she would have mistaken him for a stranger. Instead of a t-shirt and boots, this man wore a Hawaiian shirt and flip flops. Long brown hair no longer fell past his shoulders; this man's hair had been buzzed so close to the scalp, it was little more than a translucent carpet growing out of his head. A black and green bruise clouded his face and swelled his right eye shut. The man backed up to the tack room door, and when he got out to lay down the tailgate, he stepped tenderly onto his leg. He limped as he carried one saddle after another and loaded them onto the bed of his truck. The man did not pet Bosley who feverishly licked his hands nor the cats who crowded around his ankles, but moved quickly past them, only stopping to occasionally glance through the barn towards her mother and the weed whacker's whine.

Virginia was close enough that she could have thrown the algae scrubber and probably hit his head. And although she had not been afraid to charge toward the yellow beast, she was afraid to come out of hiding now. It was easier to be brave when she was angry, and right then Virginia did not feel angry. She was almost happy to see him, but not quite. Ever since he left, all she wanted was for him to come back, and now that he had, she felt terribly sad. It was the sadness that made her scared. She wanted to stand up and ask him where he had been, why he had left, and why hadn't he loved her enough to stay. But the longer she crouched behind the bucket wanting to ask him these things, the more the questions felt bizarre. This man was Tom, but he did not look like Tom. This man looked like a stranger, and maybe that's exactly what he was. It made no sense to ask him why he didn't love her because strangers don't love each other.

After loading all of their saddles, bridles, and horse blankets, Tom got back into the truck. Virginia saw the exhaust spew out the back of it, but she could not hear the engine hum. The whine of the weed whacker had grown louder and closer, and when her mother appeared around the corner of the barn, the sound exploded into a wail. She charged, brandishing the whacker like he was another weed. Tom's eyes grew wide.

Her mother tossed the still screaming whacker to the ground and ran alongside the driver's side door. She pulled the handle. Locked. She slammed her hand against the window. Tom did not roll it down. He accelerated the truck, and if she hadn't jumped back he would have run over her feet. Virginia didn't know what to do, but she stood up. She ducked under the electric fence and stood in the driveway, watching her mother clamber onto the bed as it moved.

One by one, she heaved blankets, saddles, and bridles off the side as the truck sped down the driveway faster and faster. Virginia realized that if her mother did not get off soon, Tom would carry her down the road the same as he did the fridge. Realizing the same thing, her mother grabbed onto the side of the truck, waiting for the moment when he would slow just enough to turn out of the driveway.

Virginia felt like time became slow and sticky in the seconds before her mother jumped, and she herself stood there, stuck there right she was, unable to do a thing. But when the moment finally came, time caught up all at once, accelerating faster than Tom's truck howling down the road, faster the than the weed whacker strings still spinning on the ground.

When Virginia finally made it to the end of the driveway gasping for breath, her mother lay in the fetal position, eyes wide and unblinking, unbreathing, silently clutching her knee. Virginia touched her shoulder. Her fingers twitched just barely, and then with both hands, she grabbed a lump under the skin next to her knee.

She screamed. It seemed to last so long, it peeled her, burned her, and then it filled her up. Even after it ended, and her mother had pushed her knee-cap back into place, and Bosley lay down beside her in the dirt, Virginia felt its echo linger in the air like the heat hovered above the road in waves. When she sat down, the sun was still high in the air, and when the time finally came to help her mother stand, the sun was low.

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That night, Virginia and Bosley sat on the living room floor while her mother lay on the couch with a bag of peas on her knee. They'd put on the evening news, but neither of them was really watching. Virginia couldn't stop thinking about what Mrs. Jameson had said about the yellow dog naturally selecting the cats for their weakness. Her mother said she didn't give a shit what Mrs. Jameson had said, and that she was nothing but a dog Nazi. If it was up to her, she'd shoot every mutt in the head just for being a mutt. But the question remained, and it gnawed at Virginia.

"If he's a stray, isn't he hungry?" she said.

"He's not hungry," her mother said and readjusted the frozen peas. "He just does it for sport."

"What does that mean?"

"For fun. He does it for fun. Some things just like it when other things hurt."

Virginia thought about Tom. She wondered if he liked it when her mother jumped of off his truck. Maybe if he heard her scream, he would have liked that even more. Maybe he would like to know how helpless Virginia felt watching her mother in pain. Or maybe he would have felt nothing to hear and know all of that, because maybe all he cared about were the saddles.

***

Two weeks later her mother had the chance to hurt the beast. Although Mr. Jameson had nearly shot him dead in the woods, one day after her mother and Virginia returned from the grocery store, there he was, blocking the driveway, licking a wound in his chest. He lay there like he lived on the Property, as if he owned it. Her mother stopped the car. The dog stopped licking and looked up.

"Hit him," Virginia said, but her mother did not accelerate the car. She only gripped the steering wheel tighter.

"Come on!"

Her mother pressed the foot hard on the gas. The dog, realizing that his life was in danger, struggled to a stand. Virginia closed her eyes and braced herself for impact. She didn't want to see his face when it happened. But it never did. At the last moment, her mother swerved, and the dog limped off down the road.

When the car finally came to a park, Virginia turned to her mother, completely baffled.

"Why didn't you run him over?" she said.

"I wanted to . . . I just couldn't . . . He looked too pitiful."

Virginia was disappointed in her mother, and she would have said so if her mother hadn't looked so disappointed in herself.

A week later, her mother was punished for her weakness. After Virginia came home from school, Bosley did not show up to greet her, and she couldn't find him anywhere. She searched, calling out his name, just as she had called out Tom's, and her mother joined the search when she came home. But they couldn't find him. It wasn't until a few days later, when they smelled a horrible rot, that they found him beneath the crawl space, where he had curled himself into a ball. After her mother dragged his body out, she crumpled to the ground and howled. It was the first

time Virginia had ever seen her mother weep, and she didn't know what to do. She thought of patting her back, but it was shaking too much. She thought of saying, you're gonna be okay. Except that didn't seem the right thing to say while her mother was hitting herself and the grass. She said, "I'm gonna—I'm gonna—I'm gonna—" but she was crying too hard to finish the sentence.

***

Virginia would never forget the day the yellow dog was selected. While waiting for her mother in the morning, she heard the school bus screech to a grinding halt. When they got to the end of the driveway, her mother parked the car, and they walked out into the road. The school bus was stopped, crooked in the middle and straddling both lanes. The bus lady, who had been inspecting the bloodied bumper before their approach, now stood behind the carcass at her feet. Her arms were crossed. The children on the bus crowded to the front to get a good look.

She said, "He came out—he shot out—I nearly ran into the ditch. I am real sorry 'bout yer dog."

"'s not my dog," Virginia said.

And her mother said, "We're glad to be rid of him."

"Well, that is a relief," the bus lady said and made her way back toward the folding doors.

"You comin' to school, honey?" she shouted from the staircase.

Virginia shook her head. She wasn't ready to go to school. Not yet. She squatted down and inspected the yellow beast as thoroughly as she could. Up close, the blood that seeped beneath his face was an angry shade of red, but the dog itself was the color of pissed-on straw, and he was more raggedy than Virginia expected. His tail was bald and grey. His thin fur was

striped with scars, and his lips curled to reveal missing teeth. But most disturbing were his nipples, soft and baby pink.

Her mother wouldn't look away from the dog. She wouldn't let it out of her sight. She said, "That's the ugliest damn thing I've ever seen in my life."

Virginia agreed and spit on his face. The children on the school bus gaped. Her mom spit too. They spit until their mouths ran dry.

Beulah

On the hottest Christmas Eve that anyone could remember, the afternoon sun beat down on the Elk Creek Methodist parishioners as they prepared for the annual Nativity. The church hummed like a pulsing beehive as over-dressed women shuffled in and out of the candy red doors. They carried wreaths as big as tractor tires and wheeled in carts loaded with cakes and tin-foiled casseroles. On the front lawn, a donkey, hauled in for the event, chewed hay from a bag in the shade of a dogwood tree, and beyond the donkey, in the driveway of the church, men unloaded metal beams from the bed of a tractor trailer. Since the early morning, every able-bodied man in the church had been enlisted in the construction of a giant neon star named Beulah. A local news reporter stood behind a tripod, videotaping the sight. The men hoisted and hammered and glimmered with perspiration, while Pastor Rob, a man with a big stomach and even bigger arm gestures, waved on the carrying of the next metal beam like he was the conductor and they were the orchestra playing a symphony: Beulah. The cost to light her up was enormous, but the pastor insisted that no price could be too steep, for as he said to the nodding congregants after last year's Nativity, "Just as the Star of Bethlehem shined upon the birth of our savior, did not our Beulah's starlight shine the love of Christ like a flashlight on your heart?" And as the pastor's wife, Mrs. Whitehead, joked, what else were tithes good for, if not lighting up stars?

Inside the basement of the church, the boys too young to be enlisted played Bull Shit—or as their parents knew it, Blessed Sunday. Upstairs, set off from the hustle and bustle of the vaulted worship room, Louisa and her best friend Mary sat at the children's craft table with a bunch of kindergartners. They were stuck in time out. Their bodies had been ordered by Mrs. Whitehead to sit, cut, glue, and glitter as many plastic angels as they could or at least until time

was up. She told the girls, “You better be thinkin’ ‘bout these angels, and how to act more like one.” As soon as Mrs. Whitehead was out of sight, Louisa slouched. She scowled. She sighed. She sprinkled glitter on angel wings. Just because her butt had been confined to this chair, and her hand to these scissors, did not mean her mind couldn’t do as it pleased. She daydreamed about Beulah.

In just a few hours, once the sun dropped beneath the rolling blue mountains, Beulah would shine and cars would come from miles around to line up in the parking lot or to simply drive past at a crawl. The children of Elk Creek would don their costumes as members of the Nativity to gather around a manger washed in her light. In just a few hours, the Virgin Mary would bend to kiss the baby’s nose, and the old women riding in their cars would press their wrinkled hands upon their breasts and weep. And the old men driving those cars would weep. And their grandchildren, craning their heads out of the window, would weep. And even their beagles sniffing the wind would weep. But, Louisa let out a long resigned sigh, none of their tears would be for her. Once again, Bob Whitehead, the pastor’s youngest daughter, was chosen, destined, to be the Virgin Mary.

Bob looked nothing like Louisa, who scratched a thick yellow scab on the top of her scalp and then sniffed her fingernails. They smelled like Fritos. After not bathing for a record two months, despite her parents’ loudest protestations, Louisa’s skin had tanned to a dingy brown, and the strands of her mousy hair conjoined into countless greasy strings. But unlike what her parents, her teacher, and Mrs. Whitehead thought, she did not hate bathing nor the frequency it required. Rather, Louisa hated being told to, forced to, corralled into the tub like a cow up the slaughter ramp.

Bob, on the other hand, soaked in a bubble bath every evening. And every morning her mother boar-brushed her hair until it cascaded down her back in thick golden waves. Louisa sliced through the middle of an angel. Pampered, perfect, blonde Bob. The girl who started wearing deodorant when she was eight and a bra when she was nine. The girl whose granddaddy planted pumpkins on every foothill in Elk Creek. The girl who spoke like she was picking those pumpkins in an endless dream, like she had already made it to heaven. Bob.

What fun was Bob having while Louisa suffered her punishment? Probably she was off sitting under some tree reading the Bible, looking all peaceful and holy. Bob claimed boring things like that were fun because she found "joy in nature's solitude" and "peace in God's wisdom." Blah blah bull-Sunday. Louisa knew—well she didn't know for sure—but she was quite confident that if Bob put on her shoes for a day, she would have mutilated the plastic baby Jesus doll just the same. She would have ripped off his swaddling blanket, stolen the adult sewing scissors from the craft closet, gouged out his eyes, sheared off his scalp, pried open his hollow chest cavity, and then finally snipped off the tip of his nose. A nose cannot be kissed if there is no nose to kiss. Louisa had felt confident that destroying the doll would ruin the Nativity and therefore prevent Bob from becoming the Virgin Mary, and with that confidence, she had paused with a wipe of her brow to admire the mess of doll parts on the floor. But, Louisa lamented as she tore off a paper halo, none of it had been enough. Mrs. Whitehead just went to the dollar store and bought another doll for Bob to kiss.

At least, Louisa thanked God, she didn't have to suffer alone. Her best friend Mary, in a neighboring chair, performed her punishment, too, cutting out angels in such ferocious haste and single-minded attention it seemed as if a master with the whip were standing at her shoulder.

"Quit workin' so hard, Mary," Louisa said. "Makes me sweaty just lookin' at you."

Louisa had tried explaining that it didn't matter how many angels they made, but of course Mary didn't understand that this was punishment or why they were being punished in the first place. Louisa had convinced her to do the honors of popping off baby Jesus's head, saying, "Don't you wanna stop Bob from being the Virgin Mary?"

"Yeah!" Mary said. "I wanna be the Mary 'cause my name's Mary."

"No, no," Louisa explained. "You're not gonna be the Virgin Mary. Nobody's gonna be nothin' this year"

"But . . . I wanna be the Mary 'cause my name's Mary."

Mary's emotions lived on the surface and were acted upon as soon as they were felt. And every emotion that she felt was felt completely. Louisa feared that the confusion beading between her eyebrows would soon turn into frustration and then into anger, and then there would be no stopping Scary Mary, the version of Mary that stamped and screamed and bit Louisa's toes.

"Come on, Mary," Louisa said, softer and more loving this time. "It'll be real real fun." And she wasn't wrong; Mary seemed to think that everything was a game. For her, ripping Jesus's arms out of his sockets was the same as ripping grass from the dirt and throwing it, and as fun as watching it scatter like confetti from the sky. Louisa had to tell Mary to quiet down, so they wouldn't get caught. But once Mary started giggling there was no stopping her joy.

Mrs. Whitehead, and other adults, had tried to squash Mary's joy. One time, after Ewell picked his nose and wiped the booger on a crayon, she couldn't stop giggling all through Sunday School. Her giggles infected Louisa and the rest of the class, and Mrs. Whitehead was at a loss for how to stop them from falling out of their chairs. So, she took it upon herself to punish Mary in the worst way possible. She grabbed her naked baby doll—a wild looking girl with over-

brushed curls and eyes painted in eternal surprise—stood in front of the class, and spanked it. The children fell silent. Mrs. Whitehead spanked the doll over and over until Mary finally cried. That was what would happen, she said, to children who distracted other children from the Lord.

Mary's doll sat on the table propped up against a tube of glue. At the rest of the table, kindergarteners and pre-school age children babbled incoherently. One boy licked his neighbor's hair. Another ate glue. And yet another wadded up an angel and stuffed it into his mouth. They may as well have been *babies.* But even though Mary was smart about some things and should have been halfway through sixth grade with Louisa instead of held back in first, she was a baby in her own way, too. As long as her doll did all the talking, Mary could speak to almost anyone. All she had to do was hold it at her shoulder and tap its head in time with her high-pitched words, and she could tell any stranger the name and rank of every Blue Angel pilot or the number of eggs a termite queen lays, but without her doll she could only nod and shake her head or squeal—except when she was talking to Louisa, of course. From the first day they met in Sunday School, Mary could tell Louisa anything. Not even her own parents were granted such a privilege.

Louisa looked up when she heard an electric pipe organ play "Mary Did You Know?" and saw Bob poised at the seat. The reporter stood next to the organ, videotaping as her fingers danced up and down the keys. Louisa seethed at the thought of watching Bob on TV tomorrow night. Next to the organ stood Mrs. Whitehead, a plump, roller-curled fortress of a woman, dressed entirely in red and green, and talking to the reporter about how Bob had been born with water in her brain that would have to be drained for the rest of her life. She loved to talk about Bob's sickness with every newcomer she met, and the pastor mentioned her trials and tribulations each sermon that he could. But Bob's head had never looked swollen to Louisa, and

she'd never heard any water sloshing around in it. She suspected that the whole thing was a show.

"Look at her now," Mrs. Whitehead said. "Look at those long pretty fingers go!"

When Bob finished playing the song, the reporter sat down to start the interview, and Mrs. Whitehead turned her attention to a mother who was burping an infant. At first, Louisa could not discern their whispers, but she was certain that they were eyeing the girls when they spoke and shaking their heads. Louisa poked Mary.

"Hey. Mary. I think they're talkin' 'bout us. Mary." She didn't stop cutting the angel, so it was hard to tell if her friend was listening or not. After a minute, the women forgot to keep their voices low, and Louisa heard fragments of their conversation: ". . . not lifting a finger . . . like we're daycare . . . glad to be rid of 'em . . . dangerous . . . embarrassment . . . that smell . . . hose her down if I could . . . dirty as a dog . . . Are you surprised? . . ."

Louisa ripped the angel she was holding into tiny pieces. She knew that she stank, but she had grown so accustomed to the odor that she assumed it was not strong enough for anyone else to smell.

"Mary?" she said. "Do I smell bad?"

"Babies stink. Cats stink. Everybody stinks," she said.

Louisa didn't know if that was supposed to make her feel better or worse.

"Do you think we're dangerous?"

"I dunno," Mary said.

"I think we are," Louisa said. "Mrs. Whitehead thinks we are. I think nobody wants us here."

For the first time since they sat down at the craft table, Mary stopped cutting. She grabbed her doll, hugged it to her chest, and said, “Shhhh. Don’t cry, baby. Don’t cry.” Then Mary placed the doll on her leg and spanked it. “Bad girl,” she said. “Stop crying.” Seeing Mary treat her doll this way made Louisa wish she’d kept Mrs. Whitehead’s whispers to herself. She was trying to think of how to make her friend feel happy again, when the groundskeeper Beverly burst through the doors. She was a short, muscular, partially-deaf woman, who held a spray canister in one hand and waved at Mrs. Whitehead with the other, and when she spoke her voice boomed so loud it echoed in the rafters.

“I’m here, darlin’,” she said, “and I’m sprayin’ for bugs!”

Everyone in the room stopped talking. The reporter turned around. Beverly patted the canister. Mrs. Whitehead’s face paled as she walked toward the groundskeeper. Then she smiled at the room, and especially at the reporter, until a baby cried. Louisa knew, everyone knew, that cockroaches had infested the church because it was hot, as if Satan’s gate opened like a crack in a boiled egg shell and all the roaches of the world crawled out of it. When Mrs. Whitehead passed the girls, Mary hid her doll under the table.

“Thank you, Beverly for coming to spray the ants *outside*,” she said, and with a guide of her arm, the two of them disappeared into the kitchen together.

Louisa looked over at Mary, who was talking to her doll still underneath the table.

“You’re a bad girl,” Mary whispered.

To get her friend’s attention, Louisa asked her, “You know what’s grosssss?”

When Mary didn’t pull her head out from under the table, Louisa squeaked a fart onto her plastic seat. That was her talent, farting on command, and she took care to practice daily. The other children at the table screamed in disgusted delight. A few of them fake-farted at their own

neighbors. Finally, Mary and her doll came out from under the table. She pinched her doll's nose, as well as her own.

"You better not be sad, Mary, 'cause I wanna play in the basement, and if you don't come, I'm gonna keep farting. All. Day. Long."

Mary did not say ew or squeal, but only shook her head. Louisa farted a hiss, and the children erupted into laughter once more, exclaiming that it smelled much worse this time. Mary shook her head again. Louisa groaned. Her friend could be stubborn as a donkey when she felt sad, and there was only one thing Louisa could do to make her smile. She shoved her way into Mary's lap and sat there, and quick as lightning, she released a pungent, reverberating cloud. Mary feigned disgust and pretended to struggle, but the two friends were screaming with laughter. They tumbled out of the chair and into a chase. They ran past the children, cheering, past the old women, and the mothers with their babies, staring, past the reporter still talking to Bob and not paying them any attention. Nevertheless, Louisa swished her hair as she passed him, and bared her teeth in what she thought was a glamorous smile. With eyes like two full moons, Bob gazed at the pair of them, as they ran past the organ and down the basement stairs. By some miracle, Mrs. Whitehead and Beverly never stormed in, never chased them shaking their fists, and Louisa felt, for the first time in her life, like God was on her side, like He had a special plan, and she was destined for it.

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In the basement, afternoon sunlight diffused through the long skinny windows jutting up to the tiles on the ceiling. It settled onto the walls covered from top to bottom in years of children's crafts—dusty handprint paintings, arks made of popsicle sticks, scenes of Jesus watching over cotton ball sheep. Louisa and Mary sat in a circle on the Noah's Ark rug with

Bob, Ewell, and the Rex twins who had already put on their costumes in advance of the night's Nativity. Ewell, tall, brace-faced, and dressed in a camel suit, attempted to itch a spot on his back beneath the two humps, which were roughly the shape and color of deformed breasts. Next to Ewell, the freckled Rex twins sat in the great tents of their sparkly purple Wise Man robes and fiddled with the flat-topped hats on their heads. The Wise Men used to wear head scarves until the pastor decided that they looked too much like terrorists. Bob sat patient and still beneath the folds of a powder blue cape. Every now and then, her thumb smoothed an invisible wrinkle from the hem of her white dress or the matching curtain pinned to hair. With the dress that Louisa desired finally so close, its pearly fabric nearly grazing her knee, it took all her self-control not to grab a handful for herself.

When Louisa and Mary first ran down the stairs, the boys had claimed the rug for a wrestling match. But when the girls insisted on wrestling, too, even going so far as to dog pile on top of their backs, the boys scrambled away from their touch. Louisa suggested they play truth or dare, but Austin Rex said it was a stupid idea and Ewell echoed agreement, and Preston Rex told them to get lost. Yet, a minute later when Bob descended the stairs, her cape fluttering like a banner of silken sky, she suggested the same thing, and the boys suddenly decided the idea was worthwhile because there was nothing better to do.

"I dare you to make yourself burp," said Austin Rex to his brother Preston.

"Hey!" Ewell said. "You didn't even ask if he wanted truth or dare."

"Shut up, stupid," Austin said, "Nobody plays by the rules."

Bob tried to interrupt them, saying, "But wouldn't the Christian thing to do—"

"You think I wanna tell some pussy truth, Ewie?" Preston said and then belched out a deep croak. His brother whooped. Mary raised her doll to cheer. Bob reminded Preston to please

watch his language while he sat in a church, and he nodded. Reminded of his manners, he took off his hat to respect the presence of a lady.

On Louisa's turn, she dared Austin to find a cockroach and crush it with his bare hands. Claiming he couldn't find a live one, he crushed the dried husk of a long-dead roach. On Mary's turn, she hadn't thought of a dare in advance, so when it came she deliberated and disregarded all good suggestions, until finally she decided to make Preston sing "We Three Kings." And to everyone's surprise, his voice, which had just recently begun to deepen, rose up to meet the high notes of the eerie melody as well as any choir boy.

On Bob's turn, she dared each person to say something kind about someone else in the room. "I'll start." She turned to Louisa. "I think your eyes are the most elegant shade of brown, and I think Jesus would be proud of you for befriending . . . the pure in heart." Everyone looked at Mary in the midst of changing one of her doll's many diapers. Louisa knew what they all thought of her friend: stupid, idiot, retard.

"My friends aren't *pure in heart,* Bob," Louisa said. "Mary's bad to the bone, just like me."

Bob's expression became almost as severe as her mother's. On the Rex twins' turn, they said they liked each other's hats, and then Preston knocked the hat off Austin's head, and then they swapped. When Ewell's turn came, he had to think for a minute, tracing the green and silver brackets along his teeth until finally he told Bob that he thought her dress was really pretty, and Bob said, "Thank you so much, Ewell! That is so kind of you to say!" as if it was the kindest thing anyone had ever said to her. When Mary had to say a kind thing, she stretched out her doll toward Ewell and pressed its face against one of the brackets in his mouth.

"Cecile loves your braces!" she said, "Her favorite color is shartrooooz!"

Ewell's cheeks flushed beet red as he touched the bracket her doll had kissed. He removed his glasses to clean them and reached for his shirt tail. But of course, it wasn't there. When it was Ewell's turn to dare someone, he dared Mary to not fall off while he galloped her around the room. He approached her on all fours, camel humps sticking straight into the air, and she eagerly scrambled atop his back. Grabbing Ewell's hair, she raised the doll in her other hand as if riding a bucking bronco and yelled, "Ya, pony, ya!" On his spindly arms and knees, his gallop around the room became more of a labored trot beneath her weight. Although Ewell didn't cry at having his hair pulled, his neck seemed about to snap as it arched so far backward it revealed the bud of his Adam's apple. When he was done, Ewell heaved Mary off his back into a pile of giggles and returned to his seat with cheeks flushed red from more than just the gallop. It occurred to Louisa that these dares were not so different from the children eating glue upstairs, yet somehow it all felt different. A few years ago, a camel ride would have been just a camel ride, but now, there was an electric charge in seeing Mary bounce atop his back and the power of her fist as she reared his neck into that vulnerable curve. The Rex twins scooched away from Ewell.

"Ewwww," they said. "Ewwwwwell."

Bob said, "Do you like Mary? Do you *like like* her?"

Ewell looked only at the ground now, ashamed of something he couldn't name. He pulled his arms out of the camel legs and in toward his chest. As the sleeves hung limp at his sides, it seemed as if he were trying to sink into the depths of his costume. The twins couldn't articulate any better what they were making fun of, but even if they couldn't name it, everyone understood that electricity. That charge which hung suspended on every dust mote passing through ladders of sunlight, now streaming down into the room and directly onto Bob. She basked in the orange

glow, skin smooth as marble and hair shining beneath the curtain like spun gold. The orange light could have been the holy spirit descended from heaven, and she could have been a real Virgin Mary. The boys gaped at the miracle before them. In that moment, Louisa hated God.

Bob turned to Mary, now in the midst of feeding the doll from her nipple. She spoke in a voice that reeked of divine wisdom, "You're the kind of girl who's going to have sex. I can tell."

"What is sex?" Mary said.

The boys leaned in closer, and Louisa couldn't help but do the same. The weight of this secret felt as heavy as the knowledge trapped inside Eve's apple. She wanted to feel its red skin. To know its taste. Relishing her captivated audience, Bob chewed her lower lip, feigning indecision about whether or not to reveal this secret.

"Oh, stop waiting," Louisa said. "Just tell us, already."

Bob sighed as if she already regretted the impact of what she was about to say. She lowered her voice to a whisper, looking each person square in the eyes.

"It's when a boy and a girl take off their clothes and . . ." She looked away.

"And what?" Preston said.

"Yeah, what happens next?"

"And," Bob continued, "they kiss each other. All. Night. Long."

"Ugh!" Preston pretended to vomit.

"All night?"

"That's just nasty."

"I thought it's when a mommy and a daddy make a baby," Mary said.

"No, stupid," Austin said. "Only God can make babies, like how God made Mary's baby."

“But I don’t have a baby,” said Mary as she burped the doll against her shoulder.

“Don’t call her stupid!” Louisa said.

Bob motioned for quiet. “Austin, God doesn’t make everyone’s baby. Jesus was different. He was born of the immaculate conception. The angel answered Mary, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Luke 1:35.”

Austin nodded, though from the way he kept scratching under the hat on his head, Louisa could tell that he didn’t understand.

Preston crossed his arms. “So, what’s an un-immaculate conception?”

Everyone thought about that for a while, but not even Bob had an answer. Finally, Louisa blurted out, “Well, I dunno about conception, but do you know about the star announcing Jesus’s birth?”

“Beulah?” Preston said.

“No, stupid, the real star thousands of years ago above the real Bethlehem. That one. Well, you know why it was so bright?”

“Because God made it,” Austin said.

“Wrong! It’s ’cause a star exploded. And you know what that’s called?”

“A Super Nova?” Ewell said.

“Wrong! It’s called a Super Ova. But you can’t see it today ’cause it stopped exploding a long time ago. Yeah. I heard all about it.”

“You made that up just to say I’m wrong,” said Ewell.

“Yeah, liar—”

“Liar!” Mary exclaimed, just because she felt like shouting.

“I did not! Am not!” Louisa said, “It’s true!” It was true that the Discovery Channel had run a Christmas special on super novas earlier that week, but Louisa had not been paying close attention.

“Well,” Bob said softly, and everyone quieted to listen. “Even if it is true, couldn’t our God have made the Super Ova? He can do anything, after all. If he could create the world in just three days and destroy it all in forty, couldn’t he blow up a silly little star?”

She went on to profess the other ways in which God’s power encompassed their lives, a dog’s life, and the life of the smallest bumblebee. Even the unsavory roach could not avoid His power. Mary and the boys all nodded agreement. Louisa crossed her arms. Bob just couldn’t let her have a single moment for herself. She had to be right about everything. Bob, Bob, Bob. Her name reverberated inside Louisa’s head until a sharp knot burned between her eyes. Louisa rapped her knuckles against the knot, and then without thinking, she demanded, “Give me your dress.”

Bob stopped talking. She tucked the hem nearest to Louisa under her legs, out of reach.

“I’m not supposed to take it off until the Nativity is over,” she said.

“I *dare* you to give it to me.” Louisa leveled her eyes, and Bob leveled hers back.

“I will do no such thing, and you cannot make me. I will not get in trouble for a game.”

“You can’t deny a dare,” Louisa said.

But she did. And they gaped in awe of her power to do nothing. In the vaulted room above, the steady thud of footsteps hastened to a jumble, and from up the stairs indistinct voices traveled back and forth, sharper and more harried than before. The ladder of sunlight flickered, as if by her command, as if she were the one, and not God, warping light itself.

"Tell the truth then," Louisa said. "Is it your daddy or granddaddy who makes sure you get to be the Virgin Mary every year and never have to share? I got four baby brothers at home. Four! All I do is feed them, play their stupid games, clean their stupid butts, and not never ever do they leave me alone! Do you know what it's like to share anything?"

"Louisa!" Ewell said, but she ignored him. She wasn't quite finished.

"Oh, yeah, and did you start wearing deodorant before the rest of us, because you like the smell or because you STINK?"

Bob's lip trembled. She breathed out long and slow, and then she said, "It hardly needs saying that the only person who stinks in this room is the one I'm talking to. Cleanliness is next to godliness, Louisa, and there are many ways we must strive to purify our body and our soul. The truth is that you'll never get to be the Virgin Mary until you start acting like her, and until you accept that you're not the only one who suffers in this life. Until my mama married my daddy, she suffered all her life on my grandaddy's farm, and my grandmamma suffered before that. And my daddy runs this entire church, but he doesn't hardly keep a penny for himself, and I heard my mama saying she doesn't know how we'll manage my next operation. I heard them say that if anything goes wrong, I may not live to have children, and my body could kill them if I do, but Louisa, I've said my prayers, and I've taken my baths."

"Yeah, Louisa," Preston said. "You're not the only one who's got it hard. A week ago . . . our dog died. Mr. Thompson ran him over. Had him my whole life, and then he was just . . . dead "

Austin said, "You couldn't even recognize him. There were all these flies."

"That's not so bad as your mama being a bank robber," Ewell said.

"She's not a bank robber!" Preston's voice cracked.

Austin continued, “She made a bad choice is all, and she’s serving her time.”

“Bank robber,” Ewell coughed under his fist.

Preston grabbed for Ewell’s neck, but Austin held him back. “He’s nothing, Pres. He’s nothing. He’s just an insect.”

Mary laughed in her high-pitched doll voice. With both hands, she raised the doll in front of her face. Its arms and legs reached out at crooked angles while its glossy eyes reflected the five of them, each bearing a different kind of a frown. “I heard something really weally bad ’bout Ewelie’s mom. Heehee. I heard she dresses like a BOAR.”

Ewell’s cheeks paled. He scratched his eyebrow. He removed his glasses to clean them and faltered, yet again, when he felt for the shirt tail that wasn’t there. When he placed the glasses back on his face, Louisa felt like some invisible beast had sucked all the air out of the room.

Then he lunged. He snatched Mary’s doll from her hands and held it as high as he could above his head. She looked up at him. Ewell looked down at her.

“Don’t you say a word about my mama. I don’t *like like* you. I don’t even like you. You’re nothing but a freak. You’re just a freaking retard.”

“Don’t you call her that!” Louisa said.

Mary rose to her feet, as did the rest of them. Her face bunched into a knot. Louisa knew what she was trying to say, but without her doll, nothing could come out. Reaching on the tips of her toes, Mary stretched out her hands. But Ewell was much taller than her. Taller than anyone in the room. She jumped. He dodged. She jumped again.

“Come on, dude,” Preston said.

“Don’t be a freak,” said Austin, “Give it back.”

Bob clasped her hands and breathed scripture into them, “Leviticus 19:18. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Ephesians 4:26. Be angry, and yet do not sin. Do not let the sun go down upon your anger.”

Then, before Louisa even had a chance to conjure a plan to steal the doll back, Ewell threw the doll into the air. Six sets of eyes followed the doll as it cartwheeled slow and steady whirls, until it landed, butt-side up, on the pair of elephants at Bob’s feet. Five sets of eyes looked at Bob. She tilted her head down to the doll and then lowered herself, beneath the spread of her cape, to pick it up. Mary’s eyes blazed with all the fire of hell. She charged. No one really knew if Mary tackled her by accident, or if she actually thought Bob meant steal the doll for herself. The truth was that Mary had been driven to such desperation that she saw nothing except for the doll, her Cecile, lying helpless on the floor, and she feared that if she didn’t save her in time, the boys would destroy her the same way she had destroyed the baby Jesus doll. Mary was afraid, and when she felt something, she felt it completely.

But, the reason that Mary tackled Bob to the ground didn’t really matter. Either way, Mary ended up clutching the doll to her chest, while the rest ended up gaping at Bob on the floor, and Bob, with the hem of her dress hiked all the way up to her chin, ended up with her underwear out there for everyone to see.

No pattern dazzled her underwear. No prints of hopping bunnies. No Dalmatians, catchphrases, or balloons. They were plain as paper, and they rose up higher than her bellybutton. Anyone looking out the corner of their eye could have mistaken them for a diaper. Even though the boys wore nearly identical underwear themselves, it never occurred to them that a girl would wear the same kind. And certainly not a girl like Bob. Louisa had always suspected

she wore a purple thong. The fluorescent light above them buzzed. The ladders of sun disappeared a while ago, and now, in the glare of the overhead light, the children saw Bob for what she really was: a child.

The boys erupted into laughter. They'd tried not to, and even covered their mouths, but they couldn't help themselves. They laughed so hard they had to bend over and brace against their knees. Mary giggled. Even the doll, bobbing back and forth in Mary's hand, seemed to be laughing. Bob sat up. She pushed her dress back down. She cocooned the cape around and cried into her knees. She bawled.

The sound of Bob's crying disturbed Louisa. As did the way her back heaved through gasping hiccups. It was nothing like the dainty princess sob she had imagined. And the one time Bob peeked up at their laughing faces, she peered between fat greasy welts. Tears, soaking into her dress, stained the pearly fabric dark as ink. And their laughter banged inside Louisa's head. It had to be punished. *They* had to be punished.

Louisa walked in front of Bob. She turned her back on the boys. And then, she pulled down her shorts. On the front of her underwear, a sparkly cat plumped its cheeks and winked, while on the back, a catchphrase scrawled *I'm purrrrfect*. Mary, still giggling, marched up next to Louisa and, joining what she thought was her friend's new game, pulled down her own shorts to reveal highlighter green underwear. The two friends bent all the way over. Butts in full view. Louisa farted thunder. The boys laughed even harder than before.

Her punishment proving ineffective, Louisa tried something else. She stepped out of the shorts, now at her ankles, and flung them behind her back like a bride throwing a bouquet. Austin side-stepped to avoid catching them. Mary copied her. They flung their shirts, shoes, and

socks with wild abandon. Under the rain of clothing, the boys scattered to the back of the room, but their laughter still roared. Even Bob couldn't help but chuckle between sobs.

Unable to think of what else to do, Louisa whirled around to face the boys, beat her bare chest like a gorilla man, and shouted the worst threat she could muster, "Shut up shut up shut up you . . . poops! Or I'm gonna have sex with you!"

As quickly as the boys started laughing, they stopped. Their faces dropped. Their skin grew ashen. Louisa could hardly believe that her punishment had worked so well, and she even allowed herself a moment to cross her arms and grin victory. But when Bob jolted to her feet like something had burned them, Louisa realized that the boys were not staring at her, but behind her, toward the stairs.

Louisa and Mary turned around. Mrs. Whitehead, her temples beading with sweat, stood on the landing, mouth agape at their nakedness, at the clothes on the floor, at her daughter's swollen red face. She ordered them back into their clothes that very instant. Didn't they know Jesus would be ashamed? But Louisa was not ashamed, and she wasn't going to get caught either. Not this time. Crouching on her knuckles, she raced around the room like a gorilla, while Mary transformed into a sister ape, grunting and screeching out chimp noises in her wake.

Mrs. Whitehead stepped off the landing and said to her daughter, "You go upstairs, Bob, and you finish getting ready now. Nativity's just about to start." But for the first time that anyone had ever witnessed, Bob did not obey. Patting her sweat with a napkin, Mrs. Whitehead pleaded with the Rex twins, "Help me, boys. I can't catch them all on my own," but they were as useful as scarecrows. She now turned to Ewell for help, but he shook his head before she could even ask. No one wanted to touch a naked girl.

The pastor, reporter, and Beverly appeared in the stairwell next, but as soon as the reporter saw the girls barreling in their direction, he fled. Likewise, the pastor ushered Bob and the boys upstairs as quickly as he could evacuate them. Beverly, on the other hand, swooped in, pinned Louisa, kicking and screaming, onto her stomach, and proceeded to wrangle her pants up each leg. Attempting to do the same, Mrs. Whitehead pinned Mary's arms to the floor while straddling her legs, flailing in all directions. Before she could pin those down too, Mary kicked Mrs. Whitehead right on the spine, and with an *oof* her whole body fell, and her faced smashed against Mary's face, and before she even had the chance to lift herself off, Mary latched onto her ear. Mrs. Whitehead screeched a sound unlike anything the girls had heard before, and especially not from Mrs. Whitehead's mouth. She rolled away clutching the side of her face, and then hobbled, as quickly as she could, up the stairs.

Blood on her mouth and naked as a baby, Mary smiled as would a lion having satisfied itself on the haunches of zebra. In one fist, Beverly grabbed Mary's arm and yanked her to stand. Her other fist had Louisa, pants on backwards and shirt inside out, but even in defeat, her face beamed, beading with sweat, victorious. Without a word, Beverly dragged them up the stairs, pinching their wrists like slips of paper she would not let the wind steal.

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In the upstairs bathroom, Beverly told Mary to put on a Virgin Mary costume so old it had shoulder pads and which she had grabbed from a box headed for the dump. Hardly believing her luck, Mary squealed pure delight as she put on the Virgin Mary dress. She could not wait to see the look on Louisa's face.

The vaulted room, transformed into a spectacle of wreaths, poinsettias, and streamers, echoed with their footsteps as they walked down the aisle. Besides the three of them, not a soul

remained inside the church. Outside, the moon had risen, the hammering ceased, and the crickets took up their chirping for the night. In the kitchen nook, where one window overlooked the front lawn, the two friends sat side by side with angels, glitter, and glue. After Beverly called their mothers, she silently flipped through a magazine full of hairstyles Louisa couldn't imagine on the old groundskeeper.

Cars packed with families crowded the parking lot and spilled onto the lawn. The smell of wood smoke filled the air as a single spotlight shined on the Nativity scene that was just beginning. The donkey, which had long ago grown full of his hay, now slept standing up. Ewell, crouched on his hands and knees, pretended to eat a pile of straw. One wise man, taking his role very seriously, stood motionless as a statue while the Rex twins fiddled with each other's hats. The boy playing Joseph was extremely handsome and in high school, and he looked down at the manger, bored out of his mind. Bob looked down at Jesus, too, but her face shined with so much love, it would have been easy to believe that the doll she gazed upon was, in fact, a real infant. As she leaned down for the moment all of Elk Creek had been waiting for, the moment when she would press her lips upon the baby's nose, Beulah lit up the night. The audience gasped. They sighed.

She was a tower of kaleidoscopic light. Bands of neon interlocked into a strobing nest of stars, descending in size from red to green, and, in the center, gold. The buzzing of each light joined into a rhythmic hum that spread out from the church, across the parking lot, through the hay field, beyond the dark purple mountains, and into the sky where the real stars scattered across the faint, milky band. Beulah was more than a single star here on earth. She was a part of a whole constellation.

Louisa and Mary had seen Beulah light up every year since they could remember, but her spectacle never grew old. They blinked in awe, and it was only the sound of heavy footsteps entering the kitchen that pulled their attention away. Mrs. Whitehead, whose ear had been wrapped in gauze, spread her arms around the girls like a vampire enclosing them in her cape. Her low voice felt as ancient and real as the voice of God, "Keep glitterin', you two, 'cause, you're gonna be glitterin' angels the rest of your lives."

After Mrs. Whitehead left, Louisa wondered what that would be like. To be a glittering angel for the rest of her life. Angels had to help people, she knew, and Louisa didn't think she would enjoy helping people all that much. Some people, sure, but definitely not Mrs. Whitehead. Glittering, however, that could be fun. Louisa thought about how she would do it. How she would get naked and smear her body with glue. How she'd salt the floor with glitter and roll until she sparkled like a million precious gemstones. How she would climb. Fast as a spider up the dangling string of a web, she would scale Beulah's ladder to the top. She would enter the mechanic's cage and look out at the crowd, at the glow, at the boys, and Bob, far down beneath her feet. She saw it all so clearly, she could already feel her own fists drumming back and forth against her chest.