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For the Love of Things: An Exploration in the Art of Storytelling

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FOR THE LOVE OF THINGS: AN EXPLORATION IN THE ART OF STORYTELLING

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Bachelor of Arts with
Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By
Georgina G. Kleinhelter

*****

Western Kentucky University
2014

CE/T Committee:
Dr. Laurin Notheisen, Advisor
Dr. David J. Bell
Dr. Sara Northerner

Approved by

Advisor
Department of Art
ABSTRACT

This project challenges the perception that are for younger audiences, as well as the belief that illustration is an extension of literary work, rather than a formula for convening a distinct story at once related to, and separate from, literary companion pieces. The project is comprised of six sections. The first half is made up of: an artist statement explaining the intention and influences behind the print series, an essay exploring my fine art influences, and an essay focusing on my literary influences. The second section is the series of prints, the collection of short stories, and the conclusion. The illustrations were made by traditional intaglio printing methods. Continuing the theme of revitalized tradition and craftsmanship, I selected one story from my collection of five to publish, using a digital scanner and printer, into a handmade book. The written story exists alongside the series of thirteen traditional prints to present each in direct relation to one another as complimentary means of storytelling. The hand bound book itself challenges the contemporary attitude that only reading a story through sight is important by emphasizing the value of physical interaction with a narrative work.

Keywords: Rabbit Illustrations, Storytelling, Handmade book, Fantastical themes.
Dedicated to

Gina and Ray Kleinhelter, for supporting me in all my ventures.

This project is also dedicated to Laurin Notheisen, for seeing value in my work and pushing me most when I needed it. This project would not exist without you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The success and final outcome of this project required a considerable amount of guidance, attention, and support from many people, and I am extremely fortunate to have gotten all of this throughout the completion of my project. Whatever I have accomplished is only due to such direction and encouragement, and I would not forget to thank the people who helped me along the way.

I owe my profound gratitude to my mentor Laurin Notheisen, for not only seeing me through the entirety of this project and thus allowing me to attain the success of its completion, but also for being one of the most influential people during my college experience as a whole. I am deeply thankful to Dr. David J. Bell for his encouragement and guidance, which has helped me so immensely in the evolution of my writing and made this collection of stories what it is. I respect and thank Dr. Sara Northerner for her invaluable supervision and assistance in this project.

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I must also thank Dr. Leslie Baylis and Trudy-Ann Crossbourne for their immense help in guiding me through this project, as well as the Honors College as a whole for allowing me the opportunity to make this project possible.

I respect and thank all of my classmates, from my studio classes to my creative writing classes, for the instrumental assistance they have all given me in the development of my work.

And of course, I could not forget to thank my friends and family, and most especially, my parents Ray and Gina Kleinhelter, for their relentless support and encouragement through all phases of this project, and my college experience as a whole.
VITA

July 31, 1991......................................................... Born—Louisville, Kentucky

2009 ................................................................. Diploma, North Oldham High School,
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2012, 2013 .......................................................... Finalist
 Jim Wayne Miller Fiction Contest

2013 ................................................................. Student Juried Show, Best Print

2014 ................................................................. 44th Annual Student Research Conference,
Session Winner

2014 ................................................................. Allan Miller Award Winner

PUBLICATIONS

2010 ................................................................. “Passing Time,” Mezzotint, Zephyrus

2011 ................................................................. “Figure and Roots,” Relief, Zephyrus

2012 ................................................................. “Woman and Plant,” Lithograph, Zephyrus

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field 1: Art—Painting

Major Field 2: English—Creative Writing
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I am a storyteller, whether through text or images, the work I produce relays stories to my audience that are simplistic, subtle, and multi-faceted. The stories themselves may be familiar and well known, but it is through the experience of “writing” and “reading” them that their individuality shows.

My prints include small, semi-anthropomorphic rabbits with no clearly distinguished sex; their genders are instead determined by the stereotypical gender roles of men and women in our Western culture. The story begins with two rabbits on a date that progresses and ends with the “morning after.” From this point, the idyllic, beatific quality of the interaction is over and replaced with the unforgiving reality of adulthood, responsibility, and burden. They are stuck not only with the consequences of their carelessness, but also within the restrictions of their roles in society.

An important feature of these prints is the way the rabbits themselves take up very little space in the environment. Their bodies, like their story, are small in comparison with their lovely surroundings. In several instances, there are multiple organisms featured in the images going about their own routine-based lives, ignorant to the narrative of the rabbits. In this way, their joys and struggles are insignificant against the rest of the world. Some of the earlier compositions have an Eastern influence, alluding to Japanese ink landscape paintings. The mezzotints were notably more stylized, with solid areas of value
and abstracted lines to build the environment. Later in the series, my prints became more European. While still maintaining the quality of classical illustration, particularly in the print “After,” where the image builds a border around itself with detailed flora, the prints pull almost directly from Impressionist paintings of picnic scenes. I make allusions to Monet and Renoir by incorporating lush dogwood trees, lakeside settings, and expressive body language through the rabbits. As the series has progressed and my taste and technique advanced, more detail has been included in the compositions. A good deal of this is pulled from a recent trip to California, where the grandeur of Muir Woods and Lake Tahoe provided a clear, recognizable setting to compliment the narrative of my rabbits. The story concludes in “Life Moves On,” which depicts one of the original rabbits, whether the matriarch or the patriarch, in old age, watching the progression of the world while the next generation moves forward to take his or her place.

The narrative depicted in the series is not necessarily negative or optimistic by the conclusion. The story is as my viewer interprets it, but also establishes a sense of timelessness in the routine.

My prints are designed to be “attractive” images, but with the intention of invoking curiosity in my audience. The atmosphere of these pretty compositions is contradictory and subtle. In this way I am inviting my audience into the narrative, thus providing them with the materials to become storytellers as well.
CHAPTER 2

VULNERABILITY AND THE DEPICTION OF REALITY

In his article “Imitation of Art,” Lance Esplund criticizes not only contemporary painter John Currin’s body of work, but his vast number of supporters and fans. While Esplund is reacting in part to the massive following Currin obtained in the eighties, winning himself the position as the “savior of painting,” (87) he does bring up some issues in the art world that are very much alive, namely, the issue of talent in the expression of paint, and its role in contemporary paintings.

By Esplund’s standards, Ida Applebroog, also a current artist would hardly be considered a master painter—her use of simple, often monochromatic palettes and simplistically rendered human forms, which often give the appearance of being sketched rather than painted, are far and away from the work of Cranach and Rembrandt. Her style is so anti-formal that she often breaches the standard frame of a rectangle, instead piecing multiple frames of different sizes together to create a single, sometimes awkwardly balanced piece. To Esplund, she would be an example of the “artistic path of least resistance” (89). But like Currin, like Gerhard Richter, and to an extent, like me, there is more to her paintings than the expression of masterful skill in the use of paint.

Ida Applebroog was born in the Bronx, New York, and from there only lived in large cities, such as Chicago and San Diego. She agrees when critics say there is a theme of violence in her work, saying, "I do a lot of work on violence all the time, you know."
I’ve also had that come at me, ‘Why are you so obsessed with violence?’ And you know my answer? I look at them and I think. ‘Why do you say I’m obsessed with violence?’ I live in this world—this is what’s going on around me. I can’t change that” (1993).

While our world is very violent, both historically and in contemporary society, by living in these large, fast-past cities all her life, Applebroog has been particularly exposed to the rush, aggression, and unexpected exposure of people from every ethnic and economic background packed tightly against one another.

Her art pulls heavily from television. When asked about her relationship to movies and television, Applebroog says, “I still am a film and TV junkie. I’m even a talk-show junkie.” (Patricia Spears Jones, p 37) This influence is evident in many of her paintings, which possess a strange, some-times hyper real quality to them, a quality like the “reality” of reality TV, which is odd and intoxicating to viewers because it is the impression of reality, an extreme version that couldn’t possibly be true. When viewing Applebroog’s paintings, it is like witnessing sensational news stories that seem too outrageous to be true, but in fact are, because people and their interactions with one another are often more extreme and irrational than we assume.

She does make reference to art history in several of her pieces, such as her painting “Modern Olympia,” which is her take on Manet’s “Olympia.” She distorts the painting by incorporating her own simplified, cartoonish style, but also by repeating the figure, copying her so that her individuality is lost. In this way, the familiar name and pose of Olympia are made contemporary and put into context of our modern society.

Not too unlike Applebroog, the influence of my art does share the common thread of empathy and narrative. We both develop compositions that expose our figures in some
way, whether more physically, as Applebroog does, with figures in compromising positions, genitals splayed out in presentation, or more emotionally, as I feel my paintings and prints do, and even my writing, where the sanity of my figures is called into question.

My own influences from art history might be easier to trace, since my work is still that of a student, and I have been more closely surrounded by the academic side of art than Applebroog, a working artist separate from the school system for decades. Painters such as Van Gogh, Alice Neel, Vuillard, and Egon Shiele have contributed if not my paintings and prints directly, then at the very least to the directions I aspire to head with my work. Applebroog herself has played a role in my level of daring with my pieces.

Where Applebroog’s take on reality is distorted through her overly simplified figures and the collaged way she arranges her compositions (among other things), my own distortions in both my visual art and literary work come through the use of magical realism and to an extent, surrealism. As a double major in English and Art, literature has played a major role in the direction of my paintings.

Like Applebroog, I tell a story through my pieces, but I still appreciate thick paint and a developed surface, as well as bright colors in contrast to seemingly dark subject matter, or, as is the case with my prints, lush, attractive compositions obscuring a more depressive, fatalistic theme. Where Applebroog pulls from television, movies, and tabloids (not unlike John Currin, who references all of these, as well as pornography and fashion magazines), I pull from literary symbols and biology. With this series in particular, I have be able to incorporate a long-time fascination with insects. Insect imagery is nothing new, either in the art world or in the literary world, but by paying special attention to the organisms themselves, their specific species and the
characteristics of their existence, I am attempting to create new symbols associated with my individual work. I try to balance my respect for all the components of my subject matter, and depict my love and enchantment with each. It is not just about making a statement, or getting my point across.

Applebroog does not consider herself to be a painter specifically. She also dabbles in printmaking, photography, sculpture, and film making, often blending all of these together in her work. She feels herself to be an “artist making art” ("Art 21"). As a result, even when she is making paintings, they become sculptural. Rather than arranging her work on the wall formally as paintings are traditionally displayed in galleries, she incorporates and activates the entire floor space of the galleries by developing free standing paintings of various sizes. In this way she invites her audience to move around and through her paintings. The affect is voyeuristic, emphasizing the role of the paintings as windows into the intimacies of human and domestic life. The Kentucky author Silas House has expressed his belief that the most interesting stories are the ones about within the home, and Applebroog’s work is a visual reflection of this. As Applebroog explains:

When I first started putting out these images, especially the ones with text, some people were uncomfortable: I was hitting too close to some of their experiences, feelings. The drawings were about situations that people don’t talk about. They were very private, personal thoughts, and in art, one just didn’t do that. Think of the work that was out there in
the 70s: minimalism, performance, very cool conceptualism. (Jones et al. Summer, 1999)

Probably the foundational reason why I was drawn to Applebroog, and really the most telling quality about her artwork, is the amount of risk she is willing and ready to take. She is daring in every aspect of her work. She is a fearless artist. She is unafraid of branching out into other mediums, and has even said in interviews that she once felt completely opposed to using computers as a means of creating art, and now readily uses Photoshop to adjust her photographs of her crude sculptures. The way she presents her paintings, her style of painting, her color choices and her materials, all of these qualities balk against the standards of talented painting, as Esplund would describe them.

But then she is also daring and fearless in her subject matter. Applebroog says,

I paint who I am…and that’s pretty much it. I imagine people learn how to deal with their anger, but for me it’s part of the baggage. When I get into the studio, I carry all that baggage with me—whether it’s my personal life, my outside life, my postman who didn’t look at me the right way. You walk in there with all that stuff on you and that’s a tough one. How do you start working? And layer by layer, as you’re working, that load disappears. And at a certain point you’re working without the baggage, without even knowing how it happened. That’s when you lose all
the outside static and suddenly come in touch with what’s inside. And whatever it is that’s happening inside manifests itself outside. When I know things are going right, it feels as if the work is making itself. (Jones et al. Summer, 1999)

While creating art is clearly therapeutic for her, Applebroog understands and appreciates the value and strength of her emotional resources. She pulls from her anger and frustration and uses them as a tool to fertilize her ideas. She says “…lot of [my] imagery [is] just dedicated to everyday themes; to clichés of everyday living, trying to see how mother, father, boyfriend and girlfriend, or mother and child interact.” (Jones et al. Summer, 1999) And yet in presenting these everyday themes, she is doing something daring, because the scenes are familiar, they’re known stories, but again, they’re not the scenes people talk about. They’re the unspoken, known truths of life.

I know that as a painter, printer, writer, I am not as bold as Ida Applebroog, and in a lot of ways, I have no desire to be. When Applebroog began her work, she was something new and unheard of, but in the contemporary art world, I feel there is already too much reliance on shock value to garner fame. Even so, I am taking risks.

I have never been very inclined to share my art with my family, maybe my prints, which are often harmless and more focused on making an attractive image, though the underlying narrative can be awkward and off-putting when explained, but rarely ever my paintings, and never my writing. Most of that has been due to a feeling of not meeting the standard put in place by coming from a family of artists, but with my recent body of work, it is something else. Because I have chosen to paint my recently deceased
grandparents, the subject is automatically touchy. Beyond that, I am depicting them as victims in environments dictated by insects. Insects that are in some cases physically destructive to the figures of my grandfather and grandmother.

It would be one thing to say that I am creating these images as a form of therapy, to relieve my baggage, as Applebroog calls it, and in a way I am. Although rather than saying I’m relieving it, I would say I’m analyzing it. These paintings act as a means for me to define my own feelings about the recent deaths of my remaining grandparents. I’m doing this by developing my imagined narratives about their final days. I am almost exclusively a fiction writer—I have not delved into creative non-fiction essays about my life, and while I may some day explore my personal experiences in this literal format, for now by building narratives through physical imagery, I am allowing myself a different kind of intimacy with these grandparent “characters” I imagine, and the sharing of our emotional relationship in this visual fiction.

I know what my intentions are with each individual painting, but I also strive to create compositions that invite my audience to apply their own experiences to the images and build their own narratives, like Applebroog does with her own visual narratives.

Perhaps the most enjoyable way in which Ida Applebroog and I are similar in our work is through our incorporation of humor to balance the otherwise dark, dismal content of our paintings. Applebroog says in response to the question of her grim content, “They’re also filled with humor. Life is hard enough, and the only way to cut through this is with humor. It’s easier for me to go into a low comedy routine when I’m most angry. To show how stupid and foolish the situation is” (Jones et al. Summer, 1999). I personally feel that by adding humor, the reality of the images and what they’re saying is
emphasized, and in this way, so is the tragedy of the experience. I feel there is an ache associated with pure sorrow, but it is not so strong as the one associated with bitter-sweet sorrow, laughing through tears because it can’t be helped. People are real, and because they are real, they are complex, a mix of feelings.

Maybe painting doesn’t need saving. To criticize a painter because they do not use the tools and skill set of the old masters does not lessen their work, it only opens them to the possibility of becoming more adventurous. While I will not pretend that there are not painters that take the “path of least resistance,” Ida Applebroog is certainly not one of them, and I can only hope that I am not either.
A fellow writer in a workshop I took over the winter told me my writing was similar to that of Joyce Carol Oates. I’d never read any of her work before, but the name stuck with me. I assumed the woman had made this suggestion because many of my stories have a mysterious, supernatural quality to them and that Oates wrote with similar themes. But as I read through more and more of her work, elements about sentence structure and character types seemed to parallel. While Oates is still very distinct from me as a writer, reading work that is so reflective of my own seemed like a successful way to clarify my own diverse style.

Do not allow negative reviews to inhibit you from writing.

In an interview with Robert Phillips for The Paris Review, Joyce Carol Oates was asked if she ever read the reviews of her work and if she ever learned anything from them. Oates made a point to say she always read critical reviews, but as for the brief reviews of her work, she believed that since the intention of the review was not supposed to be “definitive,” it should not be held in regard as if it were. Because she is such a prolific writer, Oates is very familiar with negative reviews, and made the statement:
“All writers without exception find themselves clapperclawed from time to time; I think the experience (provided one survives it) is wonderfully liberating: After the first death there is no other . . . A writer who has published as many books as I have has developed, of necessity, a hide like a rhino's, while inside there dwells a frail, hopeful butterfly of a spirit” (Phillips).

In fact, recently Oates published a non-fiction piece titled “A Widow’s Story,” in which she exposed her anguish and struggle with the sudden death of her husband of over forty years. The reviews were not kind. One in particular, by Janet Maslin of *The New York Times*, was very unforgiving. Maslin asked,

“How delicately must we tread around this situation? Ms. Oates can say (and has said, on the rare occasions when interviewers have had the nerve to ask her about it) that people whose long, sustaining marriages end often choose to remarry. Fair enough. And who would begrudge her this respite from the anguish that “A Widow’s Story” describes? But it is less fair for “A Widow’s Story” to dissemble while masquerading as a work of raw courage and honesty. A book long and rambling enough to
contemplate an answering-machine recording could have found time to mention a whole new spouse” (Maslin).

I can’t say I wasn’t equally surprised and confused when I found out that Oates had remarried a man she only recently met hardly a year after her supposed soul-mate’s death. I’m still not sure where I stand on this specific piece of her work, but such a harsh review of something so deeply personal would be painful for anyone. I’m not accustomed to writing non-fiction pieces about my own life. I wrote one non-fiction piece in High School that helped to spur me on to writing more seriously my Sophomore year, one in which I intentionally wrote to portray myself in an unpleasant light, but it’s not a form I have explored much since. I have incorporated elements of my life into my work, and my work is a reflection of me, so difficult reviews are difficult to bear, always. It is reassuring that even prominent writers like Oates are still susceptible.

There can be a freedom in American writing that separates it from English work.

Oates made the claim that “The English novelist is almost without exception an observer of society,” whereas the American writer is “willing to risk being called “formless” by people whose ideas of form are rigidly limited…[that s/he is] more exploratory, more ambitious, perhaps less easily shamed, less easily discouraged.”

Oates is very internal in the scheme of her own work, prone to long abstract passages exploring the process of thought, even in her short stories. Her character
Maureen from them is one that stands out as the embodiment of this idea as expressed in this passage:

“A winter of a bed. The stupor about her is thick with pellets, air thickened to grit, raining upon her. She yawns, she sleeps. A door pens in her brain. She says to herself questioningly, Where is Maureen now? But looking out through the door she can’t see anyone. No Maureen. She thinks, Then what about Jules? A sensation of her fear opens up in her, for Jules.” (342)

The character of Maureen suffers a breakdown midway through the book and becomes comatose for an extended period. She weaves in and out of accepting reality, and while it’s a difficult section to read due to literal lack of action, it feels very daring on Oates’ part.

I enjoy incorporating sections like this in my own stories as well. My short story “Amputation” is perhaps the most similar, in part because of the intimacy of the limited first person perspective, but mostly as a result of the similarities between the preferred female archetype of Oates and my character Rebecca:

His own clothes seemed to melt away and then he was positioning my body around his and driving into it, while my head lay against the pillow and sometimes watched and
sometimes didn’t. Sometimes it looked at the frame and thought about how it deserved this bodilessness as punishment for the body it had cut apart and killed—“Amputation.”

The story is held captive by Rebecca’s unreliability as a narrator, and the reader is left to sort through what is literal and what is not. Again, it’s reassuring and emboldening to find that Oates believes this to be a National trait, as though it is patriotic to write in this way.

Allow characters the freedom to write themselves—do not limit them by an intended audience.

Oates does not write with an exact reader in mind, rather she allows the characters she’s created to develop as she writes them, and from this point, the character begins to dictate the direction of the story. She says, “a character determines his or her “voice” and I must follow along...” The problem with creating such highly conscious and intuitive characters is that they tend to perceive the contours of the literary landscape in which they dwell and, like Kasch of Childwold, try to guide or even to take over the direction of the narrative.”

In my short story “The Age of Regret,” the character Hephzibah, “Heppie,” does not so much take over the story, as demand a continued presence in my work. During the writing process, my clear understanding of her character became so crisp, I accepted the
fact that her story, and that of her brother, Shepherd, and his dog, Heat, would not end with the last page. I fully intend to expand what was originally a short piece into a full-length novel. My immersion in them is too complete to let go.

**Being a woman writer can be advantages.**

Oates sees being a woman writer as a free pass to write what she wants without the oppression of competition. As such, many of her short stories feature desperate women attached to violent men, often resulting in violent outcomes, such as in her short story “So Help Me God,” where she writes:

> The heavy deer rifle I’ve laid across the bureau top, aimed toward the doorway. I think it must be a child’s desperate strategy. A hope that magic will intervene. I don’t know how to shoot a firearm except to aim, shut my eyes, and pull the trigger. It might be a Pitman trick; the rifle isn’t loaded.

> “Hey Baby, What the fuck.” (34)

I have made the pointed effort to expand beyond the female narrator as a means to accomplish my current goals in relation to gender issues. When I write from the female perspective, there is often a sense of simmering anger or resentment that can be not only limiting as a narrative strategy, but also excessively hostile and too easily misconstrued. My interest in writing from the male perspective is an attempt to soften my tone and build
sympathy and understanding. My story “The Age of Regret” is told from the first person perspective of Shepherd, a boy struggling in the confusion and limitations of his masculinity and sexuality, throwing him out of balance when he is forced into positions that challenge him to either revert into childhood solutions and safety nets, or grow into an independent adult.

**Humor can be subtle and sometimes unnoticeable, but it helps to balance and emphasize tragedy.**

The humor in Oates’ work can be difficult to find. While I haven’t read her novels such as *Childwold* where it is supposedly more apparent, there are faint situational traces in many of her works, such as in her short story “ID”:

> Nearly fifteen damn minutes she’d been waiting for her teacher to turn her fat back so that she could flip a folded-over note across the aisle to Keisha, for Keisha to flip over to J.C., in the next row. This note wasn’t paper but a Kleenex, and on the Kleenex a lipstick kiss—a luscious grape-colored lipstick kiss—for J.C. from Lisette. (246)

I have worked more actively in my recent stories to incorporate humor alongside fantasy. In both “Zonza, Queen of the City” and “The Finer Things” the humor is entirely situational and acts as a commentary about limited perception. In “Zonza,” a retelling of
the classic fairytale “Thumbelina,” the humor also adds to the mother’s sense of
displacement in the story.

**Trust your reader—Leave some things up to imagination.**

Oates will write sections such as this one from her short story “So Help Me God” as a
way to convey information to the reader without bluntly explaining the situation:

> He’d snag on a word, sometimes. A word would snag on
> him. I wondered was this a thing that happened to drinkers.
>
> *Face,* for instance.
> Baby-face he’d call me. Angel-face.
> Or, “Just don’t get in my face, Lucretia.”
> Or, “Want me to break your fucking face?” (28)

I love this technique. I value subtlety, but it can be a difficult balance to achieve. Knowing a writer has faith in their reader is part of what makes reading the enjoyable and complex experience it is. John Irving has influenced me immensely, not just in how I write, but also in my reading. He is able to make extensive novels read like short stories in that all elements of the stories will relate in some way to the climax, and despite all the clues laid out before the event, the culmination is still a surprise, and the reader is often forced to reread portions of the story just to appreciate the moment.

In short pieces of prose it is the writer’s duty to determine what is necessary—this is part of the challenge, asking the question of “what can be left out?” This question is
one a visual artist asks themselves as well—“What do I need? What mark is necessary? When do I stop?”

Use subtlety when dealing with the supernatural (if you want to) to add weight to it.

Rather than saying “Arnold Friend was threatening and less than human” in her short story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”, Oates writes: “His whole face was a mask, she thought wildly, tanned down to his throat but then running out as if he had plastered make-up on his face but had forgotten about his throat.” (130) By leaving certain elements unexplained, she exaggerates the sense of suspense and terror in the reader. To try and explain everything would diminish the impact.

The supernatural has played a more substantial role in my more recent work, although an element of it has always been present. Even so, I admire and consistently work to incorporate mild acceptance of the fantastical in my characters. The fantasy of my stories is most often used as a metaphor for some more relatable message, and to have my characters react to the magic as “real” magic would potentially obscure this message and sabotage the intention of the piece.

Sentence fragments and repetition as character development.

Sentence fragments and repetition add to the poetic quality of prose, but they also help to develop character because human beings do not regularly speak in complete sentences. Where we chose to pause in our dialogue exposes who we are as an individual. In her

In my story “Amputation,” I worked to depict Rebecca as an unstable woman unable to work past her self-loathing and disgust at what she believes she did to her daughter. She is unable to perceive her daughter as a little girl anymore, and sees her only as a freak. She obsesses over the word “half.”

Brian carried half of my daughter in his arms up the stairs and I walked behind him, watching her sleeping face where it peeked around his elbow. I wondered what her dreams were like. I wondered if she could have full dreams, or if maybe she only had clips of dreams, like half the reel was gone because her other half had died and taken the missing scenes with her. I began to imagine her half-dreams, where everything in them was just a portion of itself—half-cars driving down highways with the engine and all the seats exposed, with half-people driving them, their organs open to the air, all the trees split as though they’d been hit by lightning, and the Earth cracked in half like it’d broken apart in space. Like my daughter had been. —Amputation
Joyce Carol Oates is a complex, admirable writer with a tremendous work ethic. She is unafraid to drift well beyond the boundaries of her own life experiences and personality to tell intimate stories of a wide range of people with heartbreaking sympathy. The themes of violence, aggression, and humanism in her writing are timeless and fascinating. While I do not strive to find a “theme” this early in my writing career, I have noticed consistencies and will work to either expand or eradicate them to varying degrees. Even if her writing were terrible, Oates’ determination and perseverance in the act of writing are reason enough to plant her firmly on my list of major influences.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

This project has allowed me the opportunity to see my passions combined—my love for writing, art, and books all unified in a single whole. While my intention is to continue on to graduate school for English, art will forever be a part of how I function and express myself and my stories. Creating stories through literal visuals has only improved my writing.

The process and craftsmanship of creating the prints and crafting the hand bound book have only reinvigorated my appreciation for books as objects to be admired. Owning books was once considered a sign of wealth and privilege, and in an age where bookstores are going out of business and everyone is reading novels from the screen of a tablet, I believe the value of physical books will only rise, and I will do my part to spread this perspective, because the physical relationship of reading and literally holding a story in your hands is not something to be forgotten.

In completing this project, I have provided myself with an arsenal of preparatory supplies to ease my passage into the future. Not only have I gained invaluable experience in the culmination of this, but I will leave Western Kentucky University with multiple artistic and literary examples of what I am capable and what I will be growing from. My work as an artist, craftsperson, and writer will not end with this project, they will begin with it.
SOMETHING OTHER THAN ONESELF
(SHORT STORY COLLECTION)
I. Domestication
II. The Age of Regret

It was during mass when Charity Ruth told me she was pregnant on a little scrap of paper. She leaned over the pew, pressing her perfect, doughy breasts into my shoulder blades while she stuffed her message into my clammy fist. She liked passing me notes during the homily (complaints about the heat, or her dress, or something gross her grandmother had done that morning), so I thought nothing of it. I let the bit of paper wilt in my hand and stared straight ahead at the sweaty, blotchy red face of Father Whalen until my mother’s stern gaze left me. Then I opened it.

Charity had broken my heart before, or rather, being with Charity was like an endless loop of feeling my heart break. She didn’t mean to, I was her friend and she just liked telling me about her day. It wasn’t exactly her fault that a day in Charity Ruth’s life was full of boys and sex-stuff with boys, and it certainly wasn’t her fault I’d gotten it into my head that I wanted to be the only boy she did sex-stuff with when she had barely even kissed me. I say barely because I don’t think she remembers the one beautiful night when I dragged her home from another one of the senior boy’s parties and she all but swallowed my mouth with hers. I have clung to that memory, regardless of the fact that she probably thought I was Jethro, or Noah, or Sammy, or any of her other regulars, and that she drove her tongue into my ear before it made it to my lips. In my mind, that kiss was the most sensual experience of my life, and when I think about it in the shower, or behind the shed when it’s warm enough, she always whispers my name against my lips, breathless, just at the end.

Heat was waiting for me just outside the back door, like always. She was sitting in the partial shade of a dogwood tree that had almost lost all its blooms, just a few pink flowers left clinging to the spidery branches. A limp petal had fallen on her blocky black head, but she hadn’t shaken it off, only stood solemnly when she saw me. It used to be I would have caught her rolling on her back in the church’s compost pile, but it had been a
long time since she’d done anything like that. I’d gotten pretty good at pretending I didn’t notice the difference.

Heat and I usually walked Charity home after church while my mother and Rick took the truck (Heppie never went to church and our mother had given up long ago trying to force her). For that afternoon, I figured she’d be fine on her own. Charity wanted to talk, but I knew I couldn’t deal with that just yet without losing control. For all the years I’d agonized over her, I had a pretty good track record of never letting her see me cry, and I wasn’t about screw it up. I laid my hand on Heat’s back, digging my fingers into the thick rolls of skin below her collar, feeling the muscles tense and stretch as we meandered down the street. As if she already knew what I wanted, we turned as one down the crumbling asphalt just past the Old Country Store, squeezing through the gap in the rusty fence, cutting through junk strewn yards speckled with rusted-out cars on cinder blocks and old freezers nestled in thick clumps of weeds, until we made it to the rocky edge of Cleary Creek.

I dropped myself onto one of the larger rocks with a loud groan, imagining I was an old man exhausted by life. Heat sat silently beside me, not even panting despite the humidity of late spring. I toed at a pile of moldy cigarette butts, then grabbed a stick and hurled it into the creek.

“Fetch girl,” I said, “go get it.” She blinked at me, motionless. The stick bobbed as the green water pulled it away. I sighed another weary, old man sigh. “Well, it was worth a shot.”

It was late by the time I made it back home, the crickets roaring in the bushes outside our small house. Rick was out on the porch, slouched deep in his chair, long legs propped against the railing, beer bottle cuddled against the hard swell of his belly. “You’re awful late getting home, Shepherd,” he said, staring across the yard. “You missed Sunday dinner.” “I wasn’t all that hungry.” “Well that’s good, ‘cause there’s none left. Ungrateful brat, trying to break your mother’s heart? Even that ragamuffin sister of yours has the decency to make it home for dinner.” He tipped the bottle back, draining it, then threw it at me. I ducked out of reflex,
though his aim was shot, the bottle careening far to my right, shattering against a tree. Heat growled fiercely, her hackles raised the full length of her back. Rick sneered at her, settling back in his seat.

“Hephzibah, get your pap a new beer!” He shouted, closing his eyes and folding his big arms across his big chest. A moment later, the frizzy dark head of my little sister peered through the screen door. Her wide black eyes stared into me, then flicked to our step-father.

“Mama says you’ve had enough for tonight.”

“Dammit girl, I’ll tell you when I’ve had enough. Now get me another.” She disappeared back into the house, then returned, the screen door groaning in complaint as she held the new bottle out to him. I walked around the house to go in through the back.

I was ten and Heppie was four when our mother married Rick. They hadn’t been dating for very long, but he was nice enough at first. Heppie had always been shy, especially with adults, and was suspicious of him right from the beginning. I was old enough by then to not care much either way, more interested in roaming around with my pack of friends then playing catch with our new dad. He put on a good show, though, always rubbing our hair and winking at us across the table like we were great friends with secret jokes. He always tried to catch Heppie to swing her into the air. At first she just cried, but then she got used to it. He even made her giggle a few times. So it didn’t bother us too much when they got married. Plus, our mom was just crazy about him.

He was younger than her, with powerful ropes of muscle in his arms and thick dark hair that grew everywhere. He was an animal. He would even growl when he swallowed her small body in his huge hairy arms before burying his face in hers. We heard her tell the other young mothers at church how he made her feel so alive, so sexy. I didn’t even know what that word meant back then, but I knew he made her cheeks rosy and her eyes glitter like a teenager, even though she was thirty-two. Passionate, I guess, is a good word to describe him. Funny how scary passion can be—how it blurs words like jealousy and possessiveness together and makes them seem sexy.

Rick wasn’t too big on sharing our mom. My sister and I got to see a lot of that passion over the years.
I was stretched out on my bed in the dark, arms folded behind my head, Heat spooned against me, when Heppie appeared in the doorway. Heat lifted her big head, following my sister as she slipped into the room, tugging off her faded pink shorts but leaving the oversized Superman T-shirt that used to be mine as she crawled into her own bed on the other side of the room. Heat settled back against me without a sound. The three of us lay in silence for several minutes before I broke it.

“Charity Ruth told me she was pregnant today.”

The sheets rustled as Heppie rolled to face me. “Do you believe her?”

“Yeah, I guess. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know. Does she seem like the kind of girl that would lie about that?”

I paused, picturing her in my mind, the wispy bangs of her bleached hair framing her sweet, plump face and wide, effortless smile.

“No,” I said, rolling to face my own wall. “No she isn’t.”

I managed to avoid her in the hallways at school the next day, though not without catching a glimpse of her sad, confused face when she saw me duck into a classroom or around a corner. My chest ached at the look, but I didn’t want to talk to her when anyone might hear. I knew I couldn’t forever, but if I could just hold it off until after school, I thought it might be okay. Charity was two grades ahead of me, so it wasn’t very difficult to keep my distance, aside from the hallway and lunch period.

When the bell finally rang, I made my way out the back doors through the gym exit, a practice I’d been in the habit of since middle school, though the bullying hadn’t really been an issue since Heat got big. Like always, she was waiting for me in the shade of the tall sumac that grew behind the school. She came right to my side.

It was close to summer, and the humidity made everything wet and sticky. My T-shirt was sealed against my back though I’d hung my backpack over one shoulder in an attempt to air out. Every so often Heat’s nostrils would flare, but otherwise she gave no sign of discomfort. Even the gnats left her alone.

Fingering the change in my pocket, I decided to get a slushy from the Shell station rather than go straight home. I liked the blue raspberry best, though the stuff stained my
teeth and made it look like I was wearing lipstick. I had nearly drained the thing, slurping loudly from the bottom of the Styrofoam cup, by the time I saw them. Heat and I were cutting through the old park, the one the elementary school kids used to always hangout at before they built the new one by the library. The old one was now high school kid turf, so when I saw the familiar faces of some of the boys from my school grouped around the slides, it was nothing weird. Self-conscious about my sticky blue mouth, I lead Heat to the other side of the play-set to avoid them when I saw Charity. There were three boys and they had her pressed against the plastic tunnel slide, rubbing their hands on her arms, which she had crossed firmly over her generous chest. I thought she looked nervous.

They were big guys, probably twice as big as me, but this was what Heat was best at, and when a grown man wasn’t going to mess with a snarling Rottweiler, there was no way some punk teenagers were. Beside me I could hear the growl already rumbling through Heat’s chest like a car engine and feel the tension in her legs. I just flicked my hand and she was off, tearing across the woodchips. She didn’t bark anymore, but she’d become such a seasoned sight in this town, she didn’t need to. They screamed, tripping over themselves as they scrambled to get away. She chased them all the way to the edge of the park, right up to the chain-link fence, nipping at their heels, driving them over the fence like terrified squirrels. She even managed to pull the shoe off one boy as he tumbled over the barrier, and he watched through the fence, petrified, as she threw her head violently side-to-side, shredding the sneaker, before racing after his friends.

Like she always did whenever Heat and I came to her rescue, Charity threw herself into my arms, squishing her plump body against my boney one, the sweat on our shirts and skin mingling together. Admittedly, this was my favorite part of our routine.

The three of us wandered along the sidewalk until we settled on the church courtyard as a safe, shady place to sit undisturbed. Being Monday afternoon, there wouldn’t be anyone around, and most of the flowers in the garden were still in bloom. Charity said being near the church and Jesus put her at ease. I gave no reason to disagree.

As we hiked along toward the church, we passed the familiar sight of my sister and her friends. Whenever Heppie was home or at school, she was like any other kid in our town, on the surface. But when she and her friends got together, they played this game. At least, most of the adults thought of it as a game. The common belief was they
put on little plays, which explained what the masks and decorated pillowcase costumes were for. My mother seemed to believe the story and would even go so far as to ask Heppie little off-hand questions about how their little “show” was going. Sometimes Heppie made the effort to contribute a lie; mostly not. When our mother was home, Rick was almost always with her, and Heppie didn’t like to talk much when he was near, and Rick was too scared of her to push. He didn’t have the proof I did to know what Heppie and her friends did wasn’t a game, but he knew just the same. I guess I could give him some credit for that—it might have been the paranoia, or the superstition, but he didn’t mess with Heppie, or Heat, for that matter.

The pack marched across the street, three rows of three, uniform in their handcrafted attire, Charity and I silent as we watched the little tribe of children pass.

“Your little sister’s kind of funny, isn’t she?”
“Maybe.”
“What do they do, anyway? I mean what are they playing? You know, right?”
“Voodoo, I think. Something like that.”
“What’s voodoo?”
“A game. It’s just a game they play.”

We made it to the little church courtyard and sat together on a low stone bench in the shade of a tall water maple. Heat lay quietly at our feet. Charity tapped the bare skin of her thick thighs in an awkward rhythm before letting out a dramatic sigh and wrapping her arms around me.

“Oh Shep, you’re not mad at me, are you? I couldn’t stand it if you were mad at me.”
“No, I’m not mad at you. I just needed some time to think, that’s all. I wasn’t trying to be mean. I promise.”
“What did you need to think about? You’re not pregnant.” She giggled like she’d made a joke, jiggling her chest against my shoulder.

“Having a baby’s a big deal, Charity. It affects a lot of people, not just you.” I looked straight into her eyes and her smile faded. She pulled away from me, folding her hands in her lap, bowing her head. If not for the short shorts that were a size too small
and the tank top that dipped too low, showing the blue satin of her bra, she might have looked saintly. I was probably the only one in town who would think something like that. Even Charity’s grandmother called her a slut, and she was barely conscious most of the time.

“I’m sorry. I guess it hasn’t really sunk it yet, you know? That I’m gonna be a mom.” I chewed my lip and twisted my sweaty hands in the fabric of my shirt, wrinkling it.

“Whose is it?” I asked, finally. “I mean, who’s the father?”

She tilted her head back, staring into the canopy of leaves above us. Patterns of shadow shifted across the smooth, tan skin of her face. She closed her eyes, her eyelashes thick and clumped with mascara resting against her round cheekbones. There was a faint line along her jaw where her foundation ended. Unlike Heppie and me, Charity had no freckles even without all the makeup. My gaze focused on the dark mole just below her earlobe. I wanted to kiss it, run my tongue across it, make love to that mole, prove to that mole that I could make up for my inexperience with enthusiasm and devotion.

“I don’t know,” she said. “That’s pretty bad, isn’t it? That I don’t know who the father is.” She smiled at me and my stomach clenched.

“Well, when—I mean, how long...?” I trailed off, running my hands through my hair.

“I think about eight weeks? That’s how long since my last, ya know, period.” She blushed. “I took a test though. I know they’re not always accurate, but I’ve been throwing up and stuff.” A trail of ants ran along the bench just beside my hand. My fingers cut through the line and I watched them hike my knuckles. “I don’t have the best memory, but even if I knew exactly what I was doing eight weeks ago, I’m pretty sure it wasn’t with just one boy.” She pulled her long yellow pony tail over her shoulder, toying with the dry strands. “You know what’s funny? I can’t remember which boys I was with back then, but I can remember this dream I had.”

“Dream?” I asked, feeling miserable.

“Yeah. Do you ever have sexy dreams?” I blushed, thinking how most of my sexy dreams starred Charity Ruth herself. “Well it was one of those, but it was different than
my normal ones. My normal ones are usually really vague and I don’t remember much about them when they’re over, but this one wasn’t, and I remember everything.”

“So what happened?” I didn’t really want to know, but it felt like I had to ask, the way she just stopped talking, like she’d forgotten I was there.

“I was in the woods, not any specific woods around here, just some woods with tall trees and birds chirping and all that, when this glowing man comes toward me. I knew it was a man ‘cause he was so tall, with big, broad shoulders. He was so bright that I couldn’t see his face, but I knew he was handsome. The most handsome man in the world.” I tuned her out. I thought about my freckles and frizzy hair, my skinny body and narrow shoulders. I wasn’t even taller than Charity herself. Nowhere near the most handsome man in the world. There was no way I was ever going to feature in her dreams the way she featured in mine. Vaguely, I heard her describe his soft touch, and the gentle way he laid her down in a bed of moss and made slow, sweet love to her. In the end she said, “It was like he was an angel— an Angel of Love. Like Cupid, you know?”

“Cupid wasn’t an angel,” I said, sneering, dark fingers of jealousy gripped tight around my heart.

“Oh, he wasn’t? But he has wings.”

“Well he wasn’t an angel.”

We sat in awkward silence on the little stone bench. The birds chirping in the trees were suddenly too loud and my ears started to ring.

“You’re my best friend,” she whispered.

“Yeah, I know.”

“You’re always there for me; I feel so safe with you.” Heat made me feel safe, Heppie made me feel safe. I was never going to have sex with my dog or my sister.

“Shep, when I have this baby,” she said, hesitant and shy in a way that was very strange for someone as bubbly as Charity Ruth. “When I have this baby, I want you to be its father.”

Like I said, being with her was an endless loop of feeling my heart break.

The school year ended, and just about all of us jumped right back into doing what we did every summer: trying to make some money. Charity worked at the little grocery
owned by Mr. and Mrs. Flannigan year round, but picked up longer hours during the
summer. I wasn’t old enough to work in the big name chicken coops or at the lumber
yard like the senior boys, so I went to work for my uncle. I wouldn’t have wanted to work
at those places anyway—I’d heard what they were like. My uncle had a decent sized farm
and sold seasonal vegetables at the farmer’s market. He also had chickens, and that’s
where he put me.

I’d been collecting eggs in the summer for him for years. The smell of the coop
no longer bothered me, and I felt pretty confident handling the anxious animals. The
chickens didn’t even mind Heat—they were used to my uncle’s dogs after all, and they
were almost as big as she was, though they were mostly lab or retriever mixes. But that
summer I would catch myself drifting off, a warm egg cupped in my palm, and wouldn’t
snap out of it until the familiar pecking at my ankles brought me back. I felt guilty,
snatching their eggs. They weren’t fertilized or anything, they would never be chicks, but
I couldn’t help that dark hole in my gut that dropped all the way to my feet.

Charity decided not to tell anybody. I wasn’t surprised. The way the gossip ran
rampant through our town, Charity’s name already such a familiar feature of the
whispered barbs, it only made sense to want to keep it hidden before she started to show.

Barely two weeks into the summer, she started getting sick. Not just morning sick,
but really sick. Mrs. Flannigan at the grocery worried over her, gave her all kinds of
soups and teas she said would help settle her stomach, and Charity took them, though she
poured the tea down the sink and always ended up puking the soup in the toilet anyway.
She told her to go home, but Charity insisted she was all right. They both knew she
couldn’t afford it. In the evenings, I’d meet up with her at the grocery and walk her home,
Heat at my side, though she was keeping her distance from Charity more and more lately.
That night, Heat trailed at least two yards behind us, her smoldering gaze latched onto
Charity’s sluggish body.

“You look terrible,” I said, glancing over my shoulder at Heat, frowning.
“I know, everyone says I look like a zombie. I certainly feel like one. Mrs.
Flannigan said I can keep working as long as I don’t start coughing. She says as soon as I
start coughing, she has to send me home. For health reasons, you know?” She did look
like a zombie, or at least like she was half dead. Her tan skin was ashy, dark purple rings
around her eyes and webs of blue veins at her temples. Her once fluffy hair hung limp and sweaty over her forehead, plastered to her neck. Her lips were pale and chapped. She hadn’t lost weight exactly, though I knew she was struggling to keep food down, but the rosy plump flesh of her body hung differently now, like gravity had a stronger hold of her. And every day she looked just a bit worse than before.

“Why haven’t you gone to a doctor?”

“You know why I haven’t gone to a doctor. Besides, I know it’s because of the baby, and I don’t need to waste my money for some old man to tell me what I already know. It’s just morning sickness. It’ll pass.”

“You know it’s not just morning sickness.” As if to prove my point, her nose started to bleed. Just a slow trickle that stopped almost as soon as it started, but she’d never had nose bleeds before. I took the bandana from my back pocket and wiped across her lip, showing her the dark stain on the light blue cloth. She stared at it, chewing the pale flesh of her lip, tasting the smeared blood. Fear flickered in the milky blue of her wide eyes.

“I know. I know it’s not. I saw my mother pregnant with my little brother and sister, and she never got like this. I just—I don’t know what to do, Shep. I’m so scared.” She started crying, burying her face in my chest, shoulders heaving. “I keep having nightmares, and I’m scared to be alone. I’ve been sleeping on the couch because my room feels weird—it gets too dark in there, and I feel like I can’t breathe.” She lifted her face, now wet and blotchy, her nose dripping. “Shep,” she whispered, anxious, her voice dry and cracking, “do you think God gets mad at us sometimes? Or do you think the devil just follows us around?”

“What do you mean?”

“I think something’s after my baby. I’ve been praying and praying, but it hasn’t done any good.” She pulled free of my arms and raised the hem of her shirt. The baby hadn’t started to show, and the swell of her generous, fleshy belly was soft and pale. The large outline of a cross in black Sharpie was drawn there, severe against the white skin. The lines were shaky, like the artist had to work at an odd angle to make the picture, like they’d had to draw it upside down. “I thought it would help, for protection, you know? Just wearing one didn’t seem like enough. But it hasn’t helped anything. And the baby—
it’s only been three months and I feel it kicking and kicking, all the time. I think he’s scared too.” Her eyes were wide and desperate.

“I thought about talking to Father Whalen, but I don’t really like him. I don’t— I don’t really trust him. I don’t think he would help me. I bet he would say I deserve to be punished.” She trailed off, her words barely a whimper.

My mind fogged, conflicting thoughts all bumping into one another, clattering around in my skull. I knew it was bad, that Charity was sick, but I hadn’t thought it was this bad. She thought something was in her house? Her room? Something that wanted her baby? And she was drawing crosses on herself— was she losing her mind? My eyes sought out Heat, finding her just behind me, staring into me with a fierce intensity that grounded me. The burnt gold of her unfaltering eyes cleared the fog.

“I think my sister might be able to help.”

“Young sister?” The wild look in her eyes faltered. “What could she do?”

I paused, still watching Heat, whose eyes had never left mine, her powerful black body perfectly still in the deep orange light of the evening sun, her dark shadow stretched out beside her, a mirrored twin. “Do you remember last October, when Heat got hit by that truck?”

“Yeah,” said Charity, her voice small.

“How I said she’d been so lucky. That she’d only been knocked out?” There was no reply, just the crickets and a sluggish wind through dense leaves. “I lied. Her chest had been completely crushed.” I looked back at her, my face blank. “She died; almost instantly.” I couldn’t tell if she was terrified or just stunned. She was ripe with womanhood, her body full and developed, mature. But just then, she looked like a little girl, far younger than her seventeen years, younger than me, younger than my nine-year-old sister. “Heppie brought her back for me. Heppie and her friends brought Heat back to life.”

I counted that as the worst day of my life—the day I watched Heat die against the front end of a green 1975 Dodge Power Wagon. The guy always bragged about restoring it, said he’d make the clunker shine like the classic she was. He never has, and whenever
I see it cruise through town, I can still see the dent in the rusted-out front bumper where it collided with Heat’s ribs.

It wasn’t just another story of a boy losing his best friend under the tire of a car. Heat had always been so much more than that. She kept me safe, she kept me alive. Before Heat, my life had been dictated by where to hide next. At school the bullying was relentless, but that was nothing compared to what waited for me at home. I have never once doubted that Rick loved my mother, but there was only enough room for her in his twisted, violent, passionate heart, and it drove him wild to think she could have space for anyone else in hers. He never let us forget that. I was lucky—I was older, and a boy. It was easier for me to get out, to run away. Then I found Heat, and by the time she got big, it was like I had nothing left to be afraid of—I was dependent on her, what could I do without her? What would keep me safe?

Heppie had no great big dog to shield her from the world, and the church offered none of what she needed, so she opted for an alternative route.

“Is that why she doesn’t bark anymore? Or play or anything?”

“I think so, yeah.”

Charity pulled in a deep breath, closing her eyes and pressing her hands to her belly. For a moment thought softened her features, and the sun gave just enough glow to her cheeks that she seemed healthier, if only a bit. Then she winced, clenching her fingers and curling around her stomach.

“Okay. I trust you. Go ask your sister.”

There were three things Heppie needed from Charity, though she didn’t tell me what they were for, not that I had asked her. I’d grown used to her peculiar demands, and after all she’d done for me before, I had no reason to distrust her. Blood was easy enough. The bandana I’d wiped Charity’s bloody nose with was still in my pocket—the stain small and shaped like a fish; Heppie said it was enough. The others were a little more difficult.

Charity lived in a trailer not much smaller than my house with her mother, little brother, and baby sister. Her grandmother had moved in as well after her grandfather died.
from a heart attack three years ago. She did little more than lie in bed and watch reruns of game shows, flip through old photo albums, and hold the baby in her lap, cooing when the chubby infant gurgled. The house always had a thick, wet smell like damp carpet and old vegetables, except for Charity’s room. Charity’s room smelled like her perfume, like flowers covered in vanilla icing and it seeped into everything, even the posters on her walls. I rarely visited, she too embarrassed to invite anyone over, but every time I left I’d smell just like her room, my clothes, my hair, the skin on my arms. I wouldn’t wash those clothes until the smell had faded away on its own. Even Heat would come home smelling sweet and sugary the rest of the day, before her own odor won over. I felt awkward telling Charity what Heppie had sent me for, and I didn’t want to scare her more. Even before the pregnancy, Charity had been very attached to God. I think she wanted to believe Heppie and her friends had been gifted by the Lord and not that they performed pagan rituals in the woods. Instead, I said I was checking the room to see if I could sense the “dark presence” she’d mentioned. As soon as she left to make some sweet tea, I scoured the room for what I needed.

The hair was easy enough—I found her brush on the white chest-of-drawers tucked within the clutter of her makeup, sprays, and creams. The fluff of blonde hairs looked like a small animal in my palm. I wrapped the wad in a tissue and stuffed it in my pocket. The clothing was a little harder. Heppie had specified that it needed to be something she had worn recently and against her skin. I kneeled in front of the hamper of dirty clothes. I suddenly felt awkward and nervous. Charity wasn’t in the room, but her presence was there, watching me pick through her dirty clothes like a pervert. I told myself I was doing this for her, to help her. Then I realized I was holding a pair of silky red panties in my hands. Warmth rushed up my neck and across my face, my ears flaming. The shiny fabric grew large as it neared my face, absorbing everything until I felt the cool, smooth material against my skin. My heart was pounding against my ribs, my stomach tight. Behind me I heard the hallway floor creak. Immediately, I jammed the panties into my pocket and jerked a random thing from the mound of clothes, rolling it into a ball and tucking it snuggly under my armpit. Jumping to my feet, I swung around to face the door just as Charity pushed it open with her shoulder. She held a glass of iced tea in each hand and tried one of her sweet smiles, though the unnerving dead white and
sick purple of her skin ruined the affect. I crossed my arms, squeezing the one more tightly against my body. I prayed the bagginess of my T-shirt would hide whatever I had stolen.

“Well,” she asked, “can you feel anything?” Her eyes shifted around the small space. It was just past noon on a Saturday, and the sun was hot and bright in her room. The window near her bed was open wide, a breeze lifting the lacy white curtains in gentle puffs. The sweet flowery smell of her room teamed with the bright warmth and soft breeze made did nothing but instill a quiet calmness. And yet Charity was just as anxious and jittery as she’d been the evening before.

“I don’t know,” I said, cautious with my words, aware of the desperation in her eyes, begging for understanding, some kind of alliance in her fear. “It’s—it’s hard to say. It being so sunny and everything.” Her disappointment was obvious. She was alone.

The sun was still high when I found Heppie and her friends, or rather, when they found me. I’d never seen their club house, the headquarters Heppie referred to as “The Den.” My theory was it was somewhere in the woods at the edge of Old Mr. Brannon’s property (I’d seen them sneak in there often enough, and it seemed as likely as anywhere else), but the area was expansive and I suspected it was the kind of place you could never find on your own. Sometimes I thought they’d cursed it—hidden it with one of their spells. Sometimes I thought I might believe anything.

Heat noticed the Tribe before I did. I was too busy looking for them to see them standing in the shade of the used appliance store just beside me. The blank features of their masks stared into me. One of them separated from the group and stretched its thin arms out to me. I couldn’t tell who it was, if it was a boy or girl. They were all around the same height, barely reaching my chest, and the patched and painted fabric of the pillow cases they wore effectively hid their clothes and bodies. The one in front of me had downy blonde hair on its arms and no sign of freckles; at the very least, this one was not my little sister. After leaving Charity’s, I’d discovered the thing I had taken to be a thin, pink tank top. Pulling the tissue full of hair from my pocket, careful not to drag the silky red panties still hidden there out with it, I put the requested items into the tiny waiting hands. I half expected the masked child to bow when I did. Instead, it returned to its
previous position in the tribe and they slipped away as one, behind the building, into the woods, through some trap door to a secret tunnel they’d found years ago—it was hard to say. I gave them what they’d asked for, and then they were gone.

Three nights passed. Charity grew weaker. She started to cough and Mrs. Flannigan sent her home. I threw myself into my own job at my uncle’s farm, offering to split wood, pile hay bales, pull weeds, even organize his tool shed. I wanted to be exhausted by the time I made it home, to be asleep before I hit my bed, anything to keep me from lying against Heat, my body trembling with nervous anticipation, aching for a word, a gesture from Heppie, any kind of hint to what she’d found. For three nights, she was silent. The red panties were stuffed inside my pillowcase, and I would wake with my hand clenched around them.

Heat had been acting strange, too. She clung to me in a way she hadn’t since I was little and she barely more than a puppy, long before her accident. I might have been thrilled at the change, a glimpse of her true self finally peaking past the thick walls death had built around her. But after seven months, I knew better than that. The Heat I had known was gone forever, and no her unceasing vigilance only aggravated my stress. She’d become so focused, she was forgetting to pretend she was still a dog.

Early on, just after the accident, after Heppie’s “miracle,” I noticed something wrong with the way Heat laid beside me at night. It didn’t take long for me to realize she wasn’t breathing. She would feel me shift and turn to look at me with her wet, golden eyes, so much deeper now, but her chest remained motionless, like she’d forgotten that living creatures needed air. I think she could tell how much it distressed me, and after those first few weeks, I never felt anything but the warm, breathing body of a dog alongside me. But during those days of waiting, of unending alertness, Heat was slipping up.

On the fourth night, sleep took hold of me with a fierce grip, dragging me down the black void of dreamlessness. I don’t know what woke me. She was sitting on my chest when my eyes opened, maybe for hours. Tiny crescents of light were caught in the deep black of her eyes, her hair loose and frizzed around her ghostly shoulders.
“Do you hate it because it isn’t yours?” Her voice was quiet, muffled by the darkness, but cold. I shivered beneath her. The baby, she meant the baby.

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

“I don’t hate the baby, Heppie. I’m scared of—of,” I paused, chewing my words, staring up into the threat of my sister’s fierce eyes, “of what’s happening to her, but I don’t hate the baby because it isn’t mine.”

“You know when a new male takes over a pride of lions, the first thing he does is kill all the cubs. The mother’s try to hide their babies, but it never works. The male always finds them.” She leaned in close, her breath hot against my face. I could smell her tooth paste. “They take them in their big jaws and crush their squirming, helpless bodies.”

“I’m not a lion,” I said. “I’m not Rick,” I didn’t say.

She sat there, her small body rising with each breath I took. Heat was watching her, and Heppie stroked her freckled hand down the black length of her powerful back rhythmically. The motion seemed to calm her, to calm them both. For a moment I wondered what Heppie had had to do to bring Heat back to me, if she had had to give a part of herself to pull my dog from Death’s cold hands.

“It’s not a baby,” she finally said.

“What?”

“That’s what we found out. I don’t know what it is, but it’s not a baby.” My tongue thickened in my mouth, a mass swelling in my throat. I struggled to make words, to ask the question aching in my belly.

“You mean it’s—it’s some kind of—demon?” She looked at me, her head cocked to the side, frizzed curls a curtain across half her face, one quizzical black eye searching into me.

“Is that the only way you’ll understand? If I say it’s a demon?”

“What do you mean?”

“There are a lot of things in this world and the worlds woven through it. Entities, existences, creatures outside the limits of ‘angels’ and ‘demons.’ I can’t tell you which
one has taken up residence in Charity Ruth. I only know it’s not a human baby, and it’s killing her, whether intentionally or not.”

“Why Charity? Why would a monster go after her?” I thought about what Charity had said, about God and the Devil and being punished. “Do you think someone did this to her on purpose?” I asked.

Heppie shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“How—how do we stop it? How can we save her?”

“There’s not much we can do until it’s born, but I expect she’ll give birth soon; we’re making preparations.” She put her cool hand against my flushed cheek, wiping gently at the wetness there with her thin child fingers. “I won’t let it kill her.” Through her suffering and rage, my little sister had found a level of certainty in things I could only ever wish to achieve.

Heppie was right, not that I even thought to question her. Two days later, sometime between two and three in the morning, the telephone rang. The only telephone was mounted on the wall in the kitchen, central in our tiny, one-story house. No one would ever call in the middle of the night. Heat was already standing by the bedroom door when I threw myself out of bed and raced to the kitchen. I had to get to the phone before Rick woke up, or the flood gates would open and Charity would be on her own. I snagged the phone just as it was beginning its third ring, strangling the shrill cry. My hand clamped over my mouth, muffling my heavy pants, the receiver pressed against my pounding heart, I waited those agonizing seconds for my step-father to come tearing from the bedroom door. I could hear Rick grumbling and shifting in his sleep. With another moan and creak of the bed, the house was silent. He was still asleep. I raised the phone to my ear and whispered “Hello?” I could hear sniffling and an odd, watery gurgle on the other side before Charity’s weak answer came through the line.

“Shep?”

“I’m here, I’m here,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm. “What is it, what’s wrong?”

“I had it. I had it—I felt the cramping so I went outside. I thought I was just going to throw up some more, and I—I didn’t want to wake anyone,” I heard her hiccup and
cough on the other end. “I made it to the tool shed, and it just happened, right there! Already—it hasn’t even been four months, how can it—?”

“Charity? Hey, calm down.”
Heppie was at the mouth of the kitchen, watching me, a question on her face. I nodded and she whispered to me “Go get her.”

“Look, I’m gonna come get you. Everything will be okay, okay?”
“I can’t—I can’t walk very well, Shep.”
“That’s okay. You won’t have to walk. I’ll be there soon, just wait for me.”

I hadn’t really thought about what I would actually have to do when Charity had her baby, or whatever it was. Any imaginings I’d had were fanciful things, myself a valiant knight on a quest to rescue the beautiful Charity trapped in a tower by the horrific dragon she’d given birth to. I didn’t give myself enough focus to consider the reality, happy to accept that solving the problem was Heppie’s role in all this. I didn’t expect I would be stealing my step-father’s truck to pick up a possibly half-dead girl and the destructive creature that’d just forced its way out of her.

It wasn’t my first time driving Rick’s truck. Every so often he would get in a weird, giddy mood and imagine himself to be a real father-figure, taking it upon himself to “show me the ropes” on how to be a man. This was a favorite subject for him—my manliness. Against Rick’s broad, hairy body stooped with muscle, I was the town waif. He could never understand me, even just physically—my smallness, my weakness. I might as well have been made of paper; pink, submissive, girly paper.

These fatherly moods usually didn’t last long, but on a few occasions, they lasted long enough for him to teach me to drive. Of course, he wouldn’t let Heat in the truck, and trapped alone with Rick in the stifled cab, his massive shoulders gobbling the lion’s share of the space, wasn’t exactly conducive to my success. I can’t say I was any more relaxed that night driving to Charity’s, whether or not I was alone in the cab of the truck. Like then, Heat wasn’t with me.

I was creeping along the road, going exactly the speed limit, or just under, my knuckles white against the sticky black leather of the steering wheel. I sure as hell didn’t have a license, and the last thing I wanted was to get pulled over by a cop. The cab
wreaked of my step-father, stale beer, aftershave, sweat. Fast food wrappers and empty pouches of chewing tobacco pillowed the floor in sticky layers, and empty cans rattled around as the truck lurched over each bump in the pavement. I felt his thick arms wrap around my neck and squeeze my throat between his muscles. I rolled down the windows and tried to shake it off. I didn’t have to be big to drive a truck. Sucking in deep mouthfuls of air, I tried to calm my body. Heppie instructed me to take Charity to the far edge of Old Mr. Bannon’s property. She said Heat needed to stay with her. For the first time since I’d found her as a puppy, she wasn’t by my side. I wondered if she felt my albescence like I felt hers, a gaping hole in my body, my soft, tender insides exposed and barely contained. I didn’t know what I would find when I got to Charity’s, but I would have to face it alone. The hairy arms wrapped back around my throat.

Charity was leaned heavily against the mailbox at the edge of her driveway when I found her. Barefoot, wearing nothing but an oversized T-shirt, she looked like a twelve-year-old with a bad flu, hair and face shiny with sweat, eyes red and puffy. A patch of dried blood clotted both nostrils. A bundle of blanket in her arms was stirring. The pale flesh of her inner thighs was slick with black fluid. I took off my shirt, shivering in the cool night air, and lay it on the passenger seat, hoping it would be thick enough. I didn’t think I’d be able to explain the bloodstain to Rick.

A dirt road bordered the wide corn fields of Mr. Brannon’s property. Rick’s truck rattled and jerked over the deep ruts cut into the earth by years and seasons of heavy tractors rolling down the same path. Charity winced with each bump, squeezing the squirming mass in the blanket, holding her thick thighs together. I stole quick glances at her, but the rough road pulled my focus. She said nothing during the ride, only coughed wetly and rubbed the bundle in her arms distantly.

The road ended at a rusted metal gate. The headlights cast shadowed stripes on the masked child stationed behind the bars. I put the truck in park and pulled out the key. The sudden dark made my skin prickle, goose bumps running across my naked chest. Through the windshield I could only just make out the murky form of the kid behind the
gate. I touched Charity’s arm and she jerked at the contact. The blanket squirmed and I forced myself not to stare at it.

“Come on Charity; we’re here.”

The mysterious “den” where my sister and her friends practiced their rituals turned out to be an old barn engulfed by tall wide trees. I hadn’t been expecting it to look like much—after the arts and crafts masks and pillow cases they all wore, there was a very homemade appearance to the Tribe’s magic. I didn’t expect it to be so close—I thought we’d have to hike through the woods to find it. Instead, the barn had come to find us. Only a few yards past the gate and there it was, a rotted, tilting structure leaning against the trees like a tired old man, like Charity on my arm. It occurred to me the trees had to be much older than the barn, but that didn’t make sense—a barn wouldn’t be built inside a forest, and in some places, the trees were growing through the frame. Light flickered through the gaps in the worn planks and a rhythmic drumming and the chanting of young voices seeped into the quiet of the woods. The creature in the blanket gurgled.

The barn held animals once, by the look of it. The remains of stalls lined the length of the structure, though most of the doors had rotted away and thick clumps of weeds filled the corners. The floor was all dirt, but the Tribe had laid down small molding rugs in some places. Old sheets painted like their pillow cases hung on the walls. Collections of tin cans and mason jars full of weeds, flowers, rocks, and tiny bones littered the ground. There were candles everywhere. The Tribe circled a small fire in the middle of the room, bouncing on the balls of their bare feet, shaking their arms, chanting through the open gap in their masks. It looked just like a game, this group of kids’ idea of “magic,” everything about it. The illusion made the reality that much more unnerving. I counted seven of them, plus the one silent beside me. Only eight total. One was missing. I couldn’t find Heat either, and I knew Heppie was the missing ninth.

One pulled free of the circle and came toward us, holding a tin can out to Charity.

“Drink this.” Charity looked into the can, skeptical and nervous, some sense returning to her dazed face. I put my hand on her shoulder, nodding. Holding the squirming blanket in one arm, she took the can and tilted it back, draining it, gulping loudly. Barely a moment later, she started to sway on her feet, eyes fluttering. Her grip on
the blanketed bundle loosened, the child snatching it from her before she dropped it completely.

“What did you give her?” I said, wrapping my arms around Charity’s listless body, buckling under her weight. She moaned, her head lolling back and forth on her shoulders.

“It’s okay Shep. We just gave her something to relax her, to keep her from interfering.” Heppie snaked out from behind one of the stall walls, Heat at her heels. Her mask was pushed back, pulling her dark hair from her face, blue and red stripes painted on her cheeks, chin, and forehead.

“What are you going to do?”

“What we have to do.” She motioned. The kid with the blanket bundle moved to the center of the ring and squatted down, unfolding the blanket slowly. I sank to my knees, Charity folding in my arms, staring with unseeing eyes at the wriggling monster she’s given birth to. Nothing about it was anything like I’d imagined. Despite what Heppie had said about other creatures and entities living around us, I’d pictured a human-like baby with red scaly skin and horns, maybe glowing eyes. Even goat legs. I believed it would look like the devil I’d always been shown.

It wasn’t anything like that. The body was deep bluish color and slimy with mucus and bloody tissue—the fluffy fabric of the blanket had matted and stuck to the creature’s skin. The masked child peeled it away carefully. There were too many arms, and each arm had too many joints. From the diamond shaped mouth full of sharp yellow teeth, a watery green bile spewed forth, soaking the fleshy body and already filthy blanket. No part of the thing looked remotely human. I couldn’t be sure if I was even scared of it.

The masked child stood and returned to the circle. The children resumed to their chanting—the thing hissing in response. Heppie and Heat came forward. Heppie untied the pouch hanging around her neck and held the small bag high over the creature on the blanket. She threw her head back, chanting more nonsense words like the others, then tilted the bag upside-down, releasing a puff of reddish orange dust onto the thing, coating its sticky body like breading chicken. The little monster hissed even louder, thrashing and spluttering bile to clear itself. From somewhere, Heppie produced a match. She looked
down at the thing, then to Heat poised at her side, whose focus had never strayed from the blanket. With one final whisper, she lit the match with her thumbnail and dropped the yellow flame to the writhing body. Immediately, it was engulfed in fire, screeching. The brightness of the fire cast shifting black shadows across my sister’s painted face staring down on the thrashing, burning body. She looked immensely tall as its once moist skin sizzled and popped at her pale bare feet. The suffocating scream roused Charity from her stupor in my arms. She struggled weakly against me, fat tears rolling down her cheeks.

“My baby! My baby!” She cried out, words thick and slurred. None of the Tribe gave any evidence they’d heard her—the two of us were barely there to them.

I clutched Charity’s whipping bulk and stared, my mouth open and dry, as my dog took Heppie’s place, towering over the now charred and smoldering form still stiffly twisting its shrunken arms, emitting muffled whimpers like a hell hound. Heat lowered her great blocky head, her jaws opening like a massive red, wet carven, rows of long white teeth spreading impossibly wide, and ate what was left of Charity’s baby.

The drive back to Charity’s seemed to last for hours, though I know it was only a handful of minutes, even considering my slow, jerky pace. My charge was asleep against the passenger-side door, her head thumping lightly as the car jerked along the pitted pavement. Once again, it was just the two of us. While she’d made it seem effortless, like swallowing an ice cube whole, eating the cooked little monster had taken its toll on Heat. Heppie assured me my dog would be waiting for me when I got home. I had no reason not to believe her, or maybe I was too emotionally drained to argue.

I pulled in front of Charity’s trailer, the gravel of the driveway crunching under the truck tires like grinding teeth. I hopped out and ran around to the passenger side, slowly easing the door open, catching Charity by the shoulder as she fell toward me, still fast asleep. I had never been a strong boy, as Rick so loved to remind me, and Charity was nearly twice my size, but that night, the sky already turning grey as the sun crept closer to the line of trees on the horizon, I didn’t struggle under her mass. I lifted her firmly onto my back, her arms draped across my naked shoulders, and marched my precious load to her front door. Balancing her weight on my back, I found the spare key
under the cracked flower pot and opened the door. Only when I was setting her inside did she wake.

She blinked up at me, confusion twisting her plucked eyebrows, and then a wide, drowsy smile stretched across her face.

“Hi Shep,” she said, the familiar lightness of her voice making my eyes prickle with tears. It felt like forever since she sounded like that.

“Hi Charity.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’m just taking you home. You got drunk again,” I said, forcing a tight smile, hoping she didn’t notice anything odd in my face.

“Oh no, again?” She giggled.

“Yeah, but it’s okay, I got you home, safe and sound.”

The tribe cleared her memory, or maybe just changed it. They did something to her brain. I couldn’t be sure what memories were in Charity’s head now of the past four months. I guess I’d just have to wait and see. While the others worked on Charity, circling her the way they’d circled that thing, rubbing her body clean with wet rags, feeding her, chanting, Heppie squatted by the low burning fire, by the pile of filthy blanket and scorched earth, by Heat. She ran her hands down Heat’s engorged side, the distended stomach pulsing faintly. Heat only blinked her golden eyes, rolling them to the side to watch my approach, the red rims visible. I wanted to touch her too, to be the one to take care of her, nurse her, offer some exchange for everything she’d given me, for all the years she’d protected me. What had I ever done in return? Heppie’s pale, freckled hands worked along the dense, black coat, patient and steady.

“You can forget too, if you want.”

The sky was a light grey by the time I made it home, and a thick, damp fog had rolled in, smothering the ground. I sat in Rick’s truck, my forehead pressed to my knuckles, clammy hands still gripping the sticky wheel. I don’t know how long I cried, probably not too long—my parents would be waking up soon, and I would die if Rick found me in his truck, or worse, caught me crying. I grabbed my stained T-shirt. I would
have to throw it out, but at least it had done its job and there was no evidence of Charity’s ride on the seat. The cab door groaned loudly as I hopped out. My worn tennis shoes sank into the damp grass when I jumped down. Heat was there, sitting just a few feet ahead of me. I hadn’t seen her at all. In the fog, her black coat was a murky grey, but I could see her flat sides and clear eyes. All evidence of the horror she had consumed was gone, digested I guess. I stumbled to her and fell to my knees, the grass cold, dew soaking through the hem of my shorts, and threw my arms around her thick neck, squeezing so tight it was like I wanted to kill her again. And she just sat there, letting me. Scared by the thought, I jerked back, my hands gripping the sides of her face, taking handfuls of the lose black and tan fur.

“Heat, did I do something awful to you? When I made you come back?”

She only blinked her wet eyes slowly. I could feel the stillness of her chest. She wasn’t pretending to breathe.

When she was a puppy, I never questioned how much she loved me. It was just this understood truth. No matter how many times Rick kicked and swatted at her, she always threw herself back at him, relentless in her ferocity and devotion. He might have killed her, and a few times, I thought he had. But she always came back. And she got big so fast. It was never a question. But the dog sitting in front of me wasn’t the same animal, and she never would be.

“Do you—do you hate me for what I did to you?”

Again, she did nothing. I thought of the Charity I fell in love with, the one that didn’t want me, and that sweet, rosy face twisted into a pale, screaming lunatic. I thought about a time years ago, when I found my little sister hiding in my closet, buried in my clothes, her face red and blotchy from tears. The blotchy red patches of skin warped into streaks of red and blue paint, the pleading, scared black eyes aging, so much older than mine now. I saw my dead dog lying in the middle of the street, her chest crushed by a 1975 Dodge Power Wagon.

“What else could I have done?” I begged, rubbing my face in her moist fur. “Look at me, Heat—what else could I have done?” Charity was asleep in her bed, wrapped snugly in her sweet-smelling blankets, maybe forever tormented by nightmares she would never remember. Heppie was probably in bed too, pretending to sleep, pretending to be
like any other little girl so our mom wouldn’t worry. In a little while, Heat would be pretending to sleep as well, right by me like always, protecting me because I didn’t know how to protect myself, let alone anyone else. How much did she love me now? How much did I deserve it?

“Please don’t hate me, girl. Please don’t hate me.”
III. Short Cut

Nina knew time, that’s what they would say. “If you wanted to know how to get somewhere fast, ask Nina. Nina knew time.” Nina would say she knew short cuts. She always knew where she was and the best way to get where she wanted to be in the shortest amount of time. All the streets, all the alleys, all the hallways, all the doors. She thought. So when she woke up that Monday at 6:09 for her eleven-minute shower, she didn’t expect to see a door she didn’t know four feet and six and a half inches from her closet.

She sat upright in the bed, the covers bunched around her waist, watching the door, waiting to see if the new feature would fade back into the butter-yellow wall she was familiar with. Nothing changed. The door was just as it had been when she first opened her eyes. She stood and twirled around, looking to see if anything else had grown out of the walls while she was asleep. Everything was just the way she left it, just the way she liked. Except that door. She walked across the room and crouched in front of the modest addition. Painted white, like all the other doors in her apartment, the frame identical to all the other frames. Even the little knob was the same. But the door was short. When she stood, the top of the frame barely reached her elbows. She was too nervous to try and touch the smooth surface, still unsure that her fingers wouldn’t sink through to the wall that should have been there instead.

A startling screech rang through the room and it took Nina a moment to identify sound as the ring of the alarm clock—she couldn’t remember the last time she’d heard it. Her eyes flicked to her wristwatch: 6:14. She made a strangled noise and stripped free of her nightshirt, dumping the bland cloth on the floor, running to the bathroom. Skipping the conditioner and eating a pear rather than cereal, she was back on schedule. Her hair still damp, she twisted the stringy mass into a neat bun at the nape of her neck and slipped into the steel-gray pants suit she had laid out the night before. Tugging on the
smart black loafers she wore to work every day, she threw one last glance at the small door and then was out and away to the bus stop.

Nina never sat in buses, even if every single seat was open. She always stood as near to the exit as possible and clung to a pole or handle, letting her body sway. She liked to flip through her planner, checking and double-checking everything, arranging time slots for each movement she would need to make. She opened the worn leather binding, the pages cramped and frayed, though neatly aligned. She tapped a blue ballpoint pen against her pursed lips. She had barely skimmed it more than once before she noticed the little door drawn in ink just beside the date. Snapping the planner shut, she faced the window, determinedly watching the reflection of the bus slip across the windows of the towering buildings.

The bus would eventually stop at Kendall, a block from the office, but Nina got off at Robins instead, because she could cut through Magnolia’s Bakery, cross Bridge Street, and then fly into the lobby in eleven minutes less than it would have taken her to walk from the bus stop on Kendall. Besides, the boy who worked the register at Magnolia’s would give her a tomato basil bagel Mondays and Wednesdays if she promised to go to his band’s latest gig. She never had, but he gave her the bagel anyway, and that meant she wouldn’t have to leave the office for lunch, saving her at least twenty-three minutes. Once in the lobby, she went straight for the stairwell. She was never one to wait for an elevator to get to anywhere lower than the eighth floor. Her desk sat on the seventh floor—she took the stairs. “Nina believed in deodorant,” they would laugh.

Her desk was immaculate as always, and she used her extra seven minutes to slip over to Mr. Warren’s desk and assisted the lavish piece of furniture in the struggle for order. She stacked the papers and organized them first by size, then by date. She sharpened all his pencils and tucked them back into the little green pencil jar on his desk, pointy end out, then arranged all his pens parallel to the stacks of paper from largest and widest to smallest and thinnest. Mr. Warren spread open his door and leaned against the door jamb three minutes early. He watched her smack the dust from his leather chair before coughing into his fist.
“Good morning, Miss Bishop.”

“Mr. Warren, you’re early,” Nina said without looking at her watch. She tugged her shirt into place and stepped away from his desk. Mr. Warren left the doorjamb and looked to his own watch.

“Am I? It’s eight-thirty, aren’t I right on time?”

“It’s eight twenty-eight.”

“My watch says eight-thirty.”

“You’re watch is fast.” Mr. Warren chuckled while Nina slipped from the room. She shivered slightly as she closed the door.

By lunch Nina had convinced herself she’d forgotten all about the door, then realized she’d drawn it on three different pages of her notepad. She wondered how many minutes she’d lost. She wondered how she’d lost them.

When Nina got back to her apartment that evening, she toed off her loafers and changed into a T-shirt, her bare legs pale and stick-like, poking from below the loose cotton. She lay the pants suit over the ironing board she kept set up in the kitchen. Grabbing a fork, she took it and the salad she’d picked up at the grocery into her bedroom, where she sat down on the floor immediately in front of the little white door and began to eat methodically.

She’d been thinking about the door since lunch. Mr. Warren had said she looked distracted and asked was she feeling all right? She said she was fine and that he had two new messages from Carson & Sons and that his wife had called to see if he would be late for dinner again.

She had played with the idea that the door would be gone by the time she came home, but below that thought was the knowledge that it wouldn’t be. At least there were no new doors. Nina ate her salad slowly as she studied the door, her hand mechanically guiding forkfuls to her mouth. A little pile of carrot slices, mushrooms, and shreds of spinach collected in her lap. The door was no shorter or taller than it had been when she left, but she could now see a thin ribbon of light peeking between the space where the frame didn’t quite touch the floor. Staring intently at that place, she felt as though she
were sinking into the gap, that space between painted wood and floor, where there was only light. Her fork scraped against the plastic bottom of the bowl, pulling her gently back into her dim, clean room. She looked down, saw the miniature salad that had fallen into her lap and knocked the collection back into the empty bowl. Dumping the plastic and withered vegetables in the trash, the fork in the sink, she busied herself with the monotony of the apartment, washing and ironing her clothes, vacuuming the carpet, even scrubbing the bathtub—anything to keep her mind blank, though her eyes incessantly strayed to that small white door.

The door was open and Nina found herself creeping toward the gapping mouth though she couldn’t feel her feet against the carpet. Her stomach felt like an anchor dragging behind her. She reached the opening, but tried to hold her body back, pressing her hands against the frame, the sharp edges of the wood digging into her palms. Her body moved apart from her. Kneeling on the floor, tears running down her cheeks, her head eased inside the hole.

Nina woke with a jerk, her sheets damp, the sun bright and hot on her face. Immediately she knew she was late. Hours late. The small white door sat patiently against her wall, still closed, the ribbon of light beneath the base bright even in the sunlight.

She tried to twist her hair into a bun while she rode the bus, but the greasy locks fought her, and the rocking of the bus made attempt impossible. Distracted, she missed her stop at Robins and had to ride all the way to Kendall, costing her more time. She finally made it to her floor a solid two hours and twenty-seven minutes late. All the faces that she never paid attention to before turned to her from within their cubicles as she made the long march to her desk outside Mr. Warren’s office. Punctual, they would say. “If she was nothing else, she was punctual.”

As if he’d had his ear pressed against the door, waiting for the guilty shuffle of her loafers, Mr. Warren appeared at her desk just as she was sitting down.

“Miss Bishop.”
“Mr. Warren,” she said, trying to imagine that her hair wasn’t a frizzy mass barely contained in a loose ponytail at the nape of her neck.

“By the look of you, I assume there is a very good reason why you are over two hours late this morning.” His eyes were soft, teasing, mouth tilted in a slight, crooked grin. Nina was quiet and looked away, frustrated and embarrassed. The grin fell away and he pursed his lips, laying a thick folder down on her desk. “Organize these into a letter to the CEO of Carson & Sons and give him my apologies. Bring a copy to me when it’s done. I trust you can work through lunch,” he said, voice clipped.

“Of course, Mr. Warren,” said Nina, already sifting through the papers.

She diligently set to work on the letter after he had left, intent on making up for her lost time, but after little over an hour, her hands slowed and her arms dragged, heavy weights dangling from her shoulders. A strange lethargy settled into her body and her mind drifted away. By the time two hours had passed, she was staring out the window beside her, watching the street vendor below hand out hotdogs and herds of people as they shuffled along the crosswalk. Her hand idly drew little rectangles on the paper she should have been checking for errors.

Nina dreamed about the first boy she ever had a crush on. She dreamed she was sitting at her desk in the office and he was standing beside her, still eleven years old, wearing a Power Rangers T-shirt, teaching her how to cheat on a test. He held up his pudgy little hands for her to see the black pen smeared on his palms, understanding the answers to be there, though she couldn’t read them. “Isn’t cheating bad?” she asked, her adult body huddled forward like a child. “It’s not cheating,” he said. “It’s a short cut.”

Nina woke at 6:09 but stayed under the covers until 6:15. She took a long, hot shower and took her time working the conditioner through her hair. She dug a suit out of her closet and let her hair dry around her shoulders. She wasn’t interested in eating that morning but put on her loafers and left the house. Her planner sat on the table by the door.

She got off at Robins and took her free bagel and languidly strolled into the lobby and over to the elevator, watching the arrow haltingly trail down to the first floor. She
thought to check her watch, but didn’t. She felt nervous and jittery, her body baulking at this sudden change, this wasteful pace, but somewhere beneath it was something else, something light. From the corner of her eye she peered at the tired, stooped people around her. She’d never paid any attention to the other people who worked in the building. When she realized she recognized a woman to her left as someone who worked on her floor, that funny, light feeling in her stomach lifted. She thought it might be something like hope.

Mr. Warren’s desk had grown cluttered after one day of neglect, papers scattered across the surface, dulled pencils and pens spread atop them, post-it notes peppered about. Nina carefully arranged it to crisp, right-angled perfection. When she had finished, she began to walk to her own desk to start her work as usual, then paused and tiptoed into the break room. There were six other people in the room, four women and two men—most of them older than Nina. She shifted awkwardly at the mouth of the door while they stared at her. She didn’t recognize any of them and wondered if she’d miscalculated, if maybe this was the break room for a different department, if she was invading. Then one of the women, a youngish brunette with a wide mouth shook off her shock and said, “Well hi Nina. This is a rarity. Did you need something?”

Nina worked her mouth silently before asking “is there any coffee left?” Her voice cracked at “coffee” and she coughed into her hand. The young woman smiled and steered her to the counter where an old coffeepot sat, a few tacky Christmas mugs beside the bulky container, and readily poured her a cup. She seamlessly began to talk to the other people in the room again and Nina listened, wide-eyed and mute, clutching a snowman mug between her palms while they grumbled and laughed around her. She was hyper-aware of her body and the strangeness her presence brought to the small, stuffy room, and yet she stayed with them for fourteen minutes before they gradually trickled out and returned to their own cubicles. The nice woman with the wide mouth was the last to leave.

She smiled at Nina and said “you know, you’re much prettier with your hair down like that.” She winked then disappeared behind one of the collapsible cubicle walls. That light, hopeful feeling followed Nina back to her desk where she idly began her work.
Nina didn’t look up from the files that sat in front of her until her lunch break. Then she noticed Mr. Warren still hadn’t arrived. She wondered if maybe he had found something in his bedroom that hadn’t been there the night before.

It was late. Everyone else was leaving. Nina knew she should leave with them, but somehow time had run away from her that day and her work stood before her like an impossible cliff face. The impulse to lag that had driven her every action that morning was no match for the ingrained structure of her life in the face of her incomplete work. She watched everyone shuffle to the elevators in clumps. Some chatted amongst themselves in muffled whispers; others were quiet and pretended to ignore one another. Nina sought out the woman from that morning and found her toward the back of the group, laughing with an older man. Nina strained from behind her desk to see her more clearly, hoping the woman might look her way, but the woman simply stepped into the open doors of the elevator beside the man, still talking and laughing openly, and then the doors closed.

Within a few minutes, the office was empty and Nina found herself behind her desk, alone with her stacks of paper work. A little over an hour and Nina was nearly done. The squeak of old wheels being tugged along echoed through the cubicles—one of the janitors, she didn’t know which. The lights went off with a snap, leaving only the emergency lights, plunging the office into a dark gray-blue.

The nervous, jittery feeling was back. Nina wanted to move. The sky was too dark already and she would miss her bus—might have already missed it. She pushed herself up and skulked to the elevators. She could see the arrow travel up, jerking at the seven with a ding just as she reached for the glowing button. The doors opened and Mr. Warren stood inside like a museum display.

“Nina? Why are you still here?” Mr. Warren’s voice was quiet, as if he’d been somewhere too loud and was now uncertain in the sudden silence of the office. Nina said nothing. She had forgotten again that he hadn’t been in the office all day.

Mr. Warren stepped out and gently took Nina’s elbow. She let him guide her back through the aisle of cubicles to his office door. She could feel the sweat from his large palm as it soaked through the fabric of her shirt. She could hear his breathing.
“Nina, I—I had hoped that you would still be here,” he said as he eased opened the door. He squeezed her elbow and pulled her inside, shutting the door behind her. His office was very dark, and Nina rolled her eyes around the room, throat tight until her eyes adjusted and she could see Mr. Warren behind his desk. He was shuffling through the papers there, rooting around for something, destroying the crisp order she had arranged. There was a thin ribbon of light showing from below his door. A way out. She began to move toward it when she heard him call out.

“Here it is. I almost thought you’d thrown it away.” He held up a thin piece of paper, milky and bright in the dimness of his office. Nina couldn’t see much of his face, now more like a mass of shadowy spaces than features, but she could see his teeth. They looked shiny and wet. He must have been smiling.

“When I first saw this, I didn’t know what these were. You know, it’s not like you to doodle on your work. But they’re little doors, aren’t they? You’ve drawn little doors all over this.” He held the paper out to her. She inched closer, peering down at the pallid surface. They were little doors, scratchy and layered on top of one another. She could barely make out the letter underneath. How had she not noticed that when she put it on his desk? She took the paper in her fingers, delicately, as if the sheet would bruise if her grip was too tight. “I couldn’t figure it out at first. I thought about it for a long time. But I couldn’t figure it out. ‘Which door?’ I kept thinking.” He wiped his hands on his thighs.

Nina felt as if her feet had fused with the carpet. She focused on the ribbon of light glowing under the door. What about her door? Was that light still on? Would the door still be there when she got home?

“Then I figured it out.” He’d moved closer to her. She looked up at him, trying to make out his face from the dark blur she found there. He was so tall. So much taller than she had thought. He put his hands on her shoulders, then slid them down her biceps, gripping her elbows. “It’s my door, isn’t it? This door right here,” he tipped his chin, pointing. “You’ve been thinking about me.” Nina was confused. Not his door. Not his door waiting on her wall. The door that might be gone. His door hadn’t meant anything until now. It meant something now. She wondered if he’d locked it.

“Nina. Nina.” He’d pressed his face against her neck, nuzzling between the cool cotton of her collar and the hot skin that pulsed there.
“Mr. Warren,” she said.
“John, please. Call me John.” He kissed her neck, her ear, her eyebrow.
“Mr. Warren.”
“Okay, Nina. That’s okay.”

Nina didn’t know what time it was, but knew she wasn’t sleepy, knew she wouldn’t be sleeping. He offered to drive her home, and she said okay. He tried to kiss her goodbye, but she pulled away, glad she had nothing to carry so she could slip free of the car quickly. She stood on the steps of her apartment building and watched him drive away, body vibrating with anger. She felt light and hot, as if she were made of steam. She felt so cheated. She’d tried. She’d tried.

When she reached her apartment, she kicked her shoes into the corner and pulled off her jacket and pants, noticing how wrinkled they were, but unable to care. She unbuttoned her shirt and let the stiff fabric slump off her shoulders to the floor. She opened all the windows and went to her bedroom, stocking feet whispering over the carpet. All the tension in her body evaporated upon seeing the smooth white surface of the door against her wall. The light was still on. She kneeled before the blank, familiar presence and ran her hands over the slick, painted wood. She gripped the knob in her left hand and twisted.

There was no creak of hinges, no billowing smoke. The door opened as silently as if it had never existed. A hallway trailed out from the open mouth. She sat back on her heels, clammy hands gripping the bare flesh of her thighs, trembling. She was still scared, after all, despite knowing she would not be changing her mind.

The light began to change as the sun rose, inching through the open windows, though the bedroom remained dim. Cloudy. Maybe it would rain, Nina thought distantly. Her body was cool now. A breeze picked up from outside, running over her, flecking the skin with goose bumps. “Nina seemed to like cloudy days like this,” they would say.

The phone rang, but she made no move to answer. After four rings, the machine picked up and Mr. Warren’s voice rolled through the apartment.

“Nina, are you there? Nina, please pick up the phone. About last night.” Nina got up on her hands and knees and crawled closer to the gapping mouth of the door, letting
her face sink just past the frame. “I don’t want you to worry too much about anything. We’ll keep this quiet, won’t we?”

Outside the wind had picked up, the drapes billowing into the space like flailing arms. Nina’s body was shuddering with cold now, but the hallway was warm. “I know you were nervous last night, but it will be okay. Trust me. I won’t let anything bad happen to you. My wife won’t find out.” She seemed to glide forward, her body now entirely in the hallway. She saw that the ceiling above her stretch much higher than the apartment ceiling. She stood and cautiously drifted forward, Mr. Warren’s voice wavering after her. “Perhaps, perhaps you might come to the office later tonight? I’ll tell everyone else to leave, even the janitors. No one will know.” Nina could barely make out what Mr. Warren was saying now. Perhaps her bare feet were still cold, and that was why she couldn’t feel the floor beneath them.

“Nina—.” A sudden gust of wind rushed into the room, slamming the little door shut, and Mr. Warren’s voice was gone.

After five days Mr. Warren made Nina’s landlord open the apartment. They found her shoes and clothes lying where she’d left them and all the papers and loose things strewn around from where the wind had caught them. They found Nina hanging in the closet.

“Nina always knew the best way to get where she wanted to be,” they would say, crowded close to block the wind, their eyes avoiding the long simple box beside them covered in discount, prearranged flowers. They would shuffle awkwardly, giving one another weak smiles that didn’t reach their eyes. In the uncomfortable silence they would stretch, blurt some excuse with their eyes turned away: children with the sitter, a dog at home, a waiting dinner date, and then they would leave, stumbling away from one another gratefully. Maybe they would wonder if this was how Nina imagined it would be.
IV. The Finer Things

The valet opened the door for Wynona, who glided out onto the cobbled walkway of the restaurant like the born blueblood she was, all glittering smiles and refined elegance, literally glowing in her phoenix-feathered cape against the long evening shadows. Anderson tossed the keys to the lanky boy, thumping his knobby shoulder with a manly slap as he said, “be careful boy, she’s a very picky lady,” before taking his wife’s alabaster arm and leading her into the tastefully dim restaurant.

As per Anderson’s earlier specifications when he made the reservation, the Lievenses were lead to a second level table in charming seclusion overlooking the manicured space of the first floor, illuminated only by a small candle resting in the center of the white tablecloth and one of the many tanks the restaurant was known for.

Both having checked their coats at the door, Anderson admired his lovely wife settling across from him, while she admired with dreamy distance the vibrant, shimmering creatures fluttering about in the blue light of the tank. Anderson noted that, as always, Wynona had picked the perfect color dress for her complexion, a pale teal dragon-skin gown that clung perfectly to the very expensive curves of her body, the natural gloss of the skin reflecting the glow of the tank as though she herself was just as ethereal as the creatures she loved to wear.

A waiter appeared at the table, quietly setting down the menus and filling the water glasses. Anderson waved him off with an order for a bottle of the house wine. Wynona sipped her water and said, “Oh Andy, aren’t they just lovely.” She gestured to the tank. “I’ve always liked the little purple ones best, even though I know they’re the most common.”

“They are lovely.”

“You know I read in an article just the other day that they’ve caught ones almost as big as a man before. Of course, they’re no good to eat when they get that big and they
have to throw them back, but isn’t that just wild? It gives me the shivers. They’re so cute and tiny here.”

“Supposedly the smaller they are, the more flavor they have, especially the orange ones.” Anderson peered into the tank, trying to spot a shimmery orange tail. He fully intended to have one on his plate that night—he wasn’t exactly a mermaid connoisseur like his brother, but it was his anniversary and it seemed only right to have the house special.

“When I was a little girl, I always wanted to have a mermaid for a pet. My mother used to ask me why I didn’t want a unicorn like all the other little girls, or a little jack-a-lope to cuddle, but I said no, no, no, it just had to be a mermaid, a purple one. Well they got me one, and of course I killed it almost immediately, forgot to feed it or something,” she laughed, her bright red lipstick making her pearly teeth all the whiter. “My father flushed it down the toilet and I cried for almost two days straight. Then they got me that little unicorn—you know, Sparkle? You’ve seen the pictures—anyway, as soon as I got her I forgot all about my little mermaid.” She laughed again, propping her elbows on the table and resting her sharp chin on her knuckles. “How funny children are, jumping from one thing to the next without a care in the world. It’s cute, don’t you think?”

“Very cute,” said Anderson. “Isn’t that unicorn still alive?”

“Oh, I’m sure she is—they live such a terribly long time. I think that’s why my parents got her for me. I could have forgotten to feed her for a month and she would still be alive.”

“So your parents still have her?”

“No, no. They sent her to some unicorn rescue foundation when I grew out of her years ago. I’m sure she’s having a wonderful time prancing over green pastures and beds of wild flowers.” The dreamy look returned to her face and she turned back to the tank.

Anderson knew that Sparkle the Unicorn was enjoying no such paradise—nearly all of those unicorn rescues were fraudulent labor camps advertising themselves as retirement farms so rich parents could lie more easily to their sensitive daughters. This was common knowledge and an accepted practice. Anderson was certain his wife knew this just as well as he did, but hers was a very caring heart and he kept his cynical comment to himself.
“And how are your parents doing?” he asked.

“They’re lovely as always. Daddy just got a new boat—a sailboat, I think. He called it something specific, but I can never remember those things, you know. He’s as bad as you and your cars,” she laughed, waving her hand, rings glittering in the dim candlelight.

“Ah, a sailboat. Sailing is something I never got very involved in. You know I went out with some of my fraternity brothers a few times back in college. Nothing serious, no racing or anything like that, but good fun.”

“Daddy’s very serious about it. You know he’s funded teams before?”

“I think I remember you telling me about that. How well did they do?”

“Oh, not very well, but that was hardly Daddy’s fault. Sometimes bad luck doesn’t care how much funding you have. I think there was some sort of scandal with one of the sailors and a judge’s wife.”

“I’m surprised you don’t remember their names—you’ve always had such a good memory for gossip.” Wynona slapped his hand lightly.

“Oh please, that was years ago. And having a good memory for names has nothing to do with gossip, so don’t tease me,” she laughed again, throwing her head back.

The waiter returned with the wine and Wynona flipped through the menu, pointing to the page with her long manicured fingernail. “I’ll think I’ll have the Byangoma Soup with a salad. What will you have, Andy?”

Anderson had spotted the orange mermaid in the tank earlier and indicated her to the waiter. “I would like the special, please. That one.” The waiter bowed and disappeared briefly, returning to the tank with a small net, a glass jar, and a folding footstool. Arranging the stool, he leaned over the open mouth of the tank, pausing to find the orange mermaid, before deftly swiping the bright creature up in the net with expert precision. The mermaid wiggled in the net while the waiter scooped some water in the jar then dropped her in with a tiny plop. The mermaid twisted in the jar, pressing delicate hands against the glass, staring out at the two figures seated at the small round table with wide, unblinking eyes.

“Would you like anything else, sir?” asked the waiter.

“That’s all for now.”
“I’ll be back shortly with a selection of breads for the table.” He bowed again and was gone, cradling the jar carefully to his chest.

“So tell me, Andy, how has work been going this past week? I know my trip to the Keys was only three days, but it feels like I’ve missed everything. You know I hate hearing about the company from the television before hearing it from you.” Wynona pouted, her large black eyes twinkling.

Anderson wasn’t overly fond of talking about work when he didn’t have to, and this most recent development was something he was hoping to put off thinking about at least until his anniversary was over. Even so, he knew Wynona hated to be left out.

“I know, dear, and I’m sorry I didn’t call you first, but it’s been very busy with all these protestors and radicals stirring things up. Apparently someone was caught filming in the factories the other day and tried to convince us he had a right to be there with some bogus permission forms. The little idiot even tried to forge my signature. So now we’re going to take him to court, and that’s always such an unnecessary strain on my time.”

“If you hate it so much, why put in the effort?”

“We have to make an example of the little termite, show the public who really has their best interests at heart.” He let lose his trademark half smile, the one that swept Wynona off her feet the first time they met. The recent flecks of grey at his temples and the lines on his forehead only added to his charm.

The waiter brought a small basket of breads and conversation moved on to Wynona’s recent trip and stayed there until the waiter returned with the serving cart.

“The soup and salad for the lady,” he said, lightly resting the shallow bowl before her, “and the special for the gentleman.” He lifted the silver lid revealing the dish in a puff of steam. He bowed then left, pushing the cart away. Anderson grinned down at the plate, raising the delicate berry fork commonly used for eating mermaid. Wynona winced.

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“What doesn’t bother me?”

“The way they serve it whole like that? Oh, seeing the little eyes just staring up at you always gives me the willies. I don’t know why they don’t just cut the heads off. It’s not like you can eat that part anyway.”
“It’s all about aesthetics, Winnie. See how lovely the hair is, twisting around the vegetables and sauce?” He pointed with the thin, spear-like prongs of the fork. Wynona shivered.

“Still, they could wrap the little face in seaweed or something. I just hate the way they eyes seem to follow you.” She tilted her head side to side in demonstration. Anderson laughed.

“All right, all right, here,” he shifted a leaf of parsley over the startled blank gaze of the dead mermaid. Wynona did seem to have a point about the eyes, he thought to himself as the little creature seemed to watch the leaf fall over its face. “All better, darling?” he smiled. Wynona blew him a kiss and went back to her soup. Anderson stabbed his fork into the thick flesh at the mermaid’s hip, tore lose a tiny chunk and held it in his mouth, closing his eyes, savoring the expensive blend of flavors. Perfect choice.

When dessert arrived with a bottle of champagne, Anderson reached into his suit pocket.

“Winnie, darling, I have a little something for you, in honor of these twelve perfect years.” He set the blue velvet box beside her champagne glass. He loved the way her slim fingers trailed the pale column of her throat. Cradling the box in her hands, she eased open its lid.

“Oh, Andy! Oh, Andy! It’s just perfect. It’s exactly what I wanted—how did you know?” She gushed, lifting the chain of the necklace dense with sapphires, the heavy dragon’s blood stone swinging at the base.

“Lucky guess.” He winked. “You know a blood stone is made from the last drop of a slain dragon’s heart blood?”

“That is so romantic, Andy, I could just die.”

They picked up their coats at the front desk, Anderson wrapping Wynona in her phoenix feathers, the brilliant glow of the red feathers flaring the natural shine of the blood stone now resting against the porcelain skin of her sternum. His kissed her cheek and led her by the arm out the doors to meet the valet.

A roar of booing and contemptuous shouts smashed against them as soon as the doors spread open.
“Oh, Andy, not again!” Wynona cried, pressing against him. Anderson snarled and glared out at the surging mob. A line of the wait staff stretched along the length of the crowd, their arms outspread, crisp white shirts and bright red vests a makeshift police line warding off the protestors. The valet hurried to Anderson’s side.

“Our apologies sir, we’re doing our best to hold them off, but there are more of them than usual tonight.”

“It’s no matter,” snapped Anderson, “just get us to our car.”

“Right away, sir.”

Anderson wrapped his arm protectively around Wynona’s slim shoulders, swelling his chest out, straining the buttons of his white shirt, standing as tall and proud as her could make himself. He ignored the snarling faces to his side and their waving handmade signs of “Fantasy Creatures Are Real Too!” and “Eat Your Own Children, Not Mother Earth’s!” He rolled his eyes at their nonsense. They weren’t even trying to make sense anymore.

Just a few paces away from the valet fidgeting beside his car now, Anderson almost let himself relax, when from the corner of his eye he saw a dark blur break free from the wall of waiters and rush toward them. Wynona screamed. Anderson jerked her away just in time for the red paint to splatter harmlessly to the side, onto one of the waiters. Anderson snorted—serves them right for not being more competent in preventing this in the first place. A siren could be heard, and the scene was lit by flashing blue and red lights as the police finally arrived. Heedless of the ensuing chaos as the police charged the scattering crowd, Anderson led his trembling wife into the car, snatching the keys from the quivering valet with a sneer, and sped them away.

After carefully checking her stockings and the hem of her coat for any trace of paint, Wynona recovered herself and gently patted her husband’s knee.

“My hero. However can I thank you for saving me?” she batted her eyelashes and leaned across the seat, squeezing the enticing chest he’d bought her against his arm.

“Oh, I’m sure I can think of something.” He said, slowing the car to stop at a light.

She giggled and the hand on his knee slid further up his thigh when something through the tinted window caught her eye. “Oh Andy, look!” she cried, pointing a finger.
Anderson glanced to the side and saw an old fashion carriage waiting beside them, white with the top folded back, studded leather cushions open to the night sky. The owner had decorated it with cheap silk roses that seemed to have faded in the sun. Attached at the front, eyes staring out in vacant misery, stood an old, dappled grey centaur, his harness decorated in faded red roses to match the carriage. Back hunched, skin lose around the arms and under the neck, tufts of wiry grey hairs poking out from its shoulders and ears, the creature had to have been at least sixty years old. Even through the tinted glass of the car window, Anderson could see the pronounced veins and liver spots on the centaur’s hands. Beside him, Wynona cooed.

“Oh Andy, look how cute—he’s wearing a little bow-tie and top hat—isn’t that the most precious thing you’ve ever seen?”

“Yes, it’s very cute.”

“Can’t we go on a carriage ride? Just the two of us riding along under the stars—wouldn’t that just be the most romantic thing?” she gushed.

“Not tonight Winnie, I think I’ve had enough excitement for one evening. Let’s just spend the rest of our anniversary at home, hm?”

“I suppose you’re right. But I do still want to go on a carriage ride.”

The light turned green and Anderson pressed his foot on the gas, the centaur watching blankly as they drove away.

“All right, dear, next time we’ll go on a romantic carriage ride.”
V. Zonza, Queen of the City

Harriet was named for her father, and she held a grudge against her mother for that, one of many she carried for the woman. Her father had died in his truck, which in turn died in its fall off the bridge into Arrow Creek. A part of Harriet always hoped her mother would get “the call” one day, but when that call finally came, the two found themselves airless and sinking, just like her father in that muddy creek, the three trapped together in the flooding cab.

Never an attentive caregiver, Harriet’s mother at least attempted to play at mothering before the wreck, though she never quite got past being a wife. Her mother’s entire existence revolved around Harry Grisbon, and when he died, so did a part of her. A big part. Most of her, really.

Her father wasn’t much of a provider, but a bit of life insurance made its way into the Grisbon family pocket, and after a few more years of careful saving, Harriet found herself nineteen and ready to flee the Podunk town she’d hated all her life, the one that’d driven her father to drink and her mother to wallow in front of “Wheel of Fortune” reruns, and make her way to the city. She took a bus.

Her expectations were difficult to pin down, but twenty years later, she didn’t think of herself as unhappy with her position in life. She lived in the apartment above the small antique shop she owned near the historic district, alone but for a pug named Chuckles and the stray cats that crowded her fire escape. Even so, the feeling of stagnation hung about her. There were mornings when she found herself staring into the mirror, her dull, dumpy face looking back at her saying, “You’re dried up.”

Harriet had never been popular with boys. Even in her youth she’d been short and fat with too small of boobs to make up for it. One particularly cruel boy, his bony, white face mutilated by acne, bluntly declared her a “two point five—maybe a three if you put on some makeup.” He’d been under the impression that if he was mean enough, she’d put
his penis in her mouth, but even under the onslaught of insults, Harriet stood firm in her belief that oral was “way too gross.” The unfairness of her body used to drive her crazy—her mother had been thin and gorgeous as a girl (before Harry left his mark), with a massive chest that could still drop a boy’s jaw even after pregnancy. But despite years of waiting and aching for her boobs to fill in, they never did, and eventually Harriet gave up. City boys weren’t any kinder to a shy, fat, flat-chested white girl dressed in frumpy hand-me-downs.

And so Harriet was nearly forty, still single, knowing something had to change, but helpless, or hopeless, in the effort to change it herself.

It was a breezy Tuesday night in September and Harriet was taking Chuckles on his last walk of the day so she could go to sleep confident that in the morning the carpet would be clear of messes. It had rained most of that day, and puddles cut dark holes in the pavement under the murky glow of streetlights. Twenty years and the city still made Harriet uneasy, especially at night. Everything made her jumpy and anxious—strangers, rats, roaches, even the pigeons, to an extent. And yet, she never considered the thought to leave. Her memories of life in the country were blurred by childhood pains she couldn’t let go. Instead, she muscled through fears and carried pepper spray wherever she went. She’d never been attacked, or even hassled, but there was always a chance, and she never risked it.

Chuckles waddled to a skinny crabapple tree, snuffling loudly at the little black fence that circled the trunk. He veered back and forth a few times and Harriet checked her watch. Almost 11:45, she needed to be getting to bed. Just as he lifted his stubby leg, Chuckles perked up, cocking his head toward the alley ahead of them. He dropped his leg and growled, creamy hackles rising.

“Oh Chuckles, come on, go pee-pee.” The little dog didn’t listen, straining against the leash, his growl morphing to hacking as his air cut off. “It’s probably just a cat, honey, go potty.” Harriet hoped it was just a cat. She felt herself getting nervous. Then she heard something too, a faint, high-pitched whining. Chuckles’ blunt nails scrabbled at the sidewalk and worried he’d strangle himself, Harriet crept forward. She took the baggies into the hand with the leash and cocked her pepper spray at the ready.
A street lamp stationed at the mouth illuminated the short length of alley, but the dumpsters and trashcans cut menacing shadows through the space. Though faint, the whining was clear. Suddenly, Harriet recognized the noise and rushed forward, dragging the startled Chuckles behind her. Piles of junk and waste crowded the base of the dumpsters and a sticky, rotting smell permeated the air. The day of rain had turned much of the trash to a kind of cold, lumpy stew. Regardless, Harriet showed no hesitation. She dropped to her knees, floral skirt immediately soaking up the black gunk of the alley floor, and stuck her bare hands into one of the fermenting mounds. Chuckles shuffled nervously behind her, whimpering and barking as he watched his master, but Harriet was too driven to care.

Somewhere, in this pile of trash, a baby was crying.

Harriet pulled in a deep breath of the familiar smell her apartment emanated before twisting the switch of a lamp, casting the room in a dim yellow glow. She rarely used the ceiling lights; they felt too bright when it was late and dark. Besides, she had a penchant for old lamps. She held her right hand cupped close to her chest while she bent to unclip Chuckles from his leash. Immediately, he circled her feet, his whimpering constant since she’d unearthed her prize from a wadded up McDonald’s bag.

“All right, all right, calm down, Chuckes, you’ll wake her,” Harriet said, her tone soft and calm. Her impatience for sleep stayed at the mouth of the alley. Now, in the warm dusty glow of an outdated lamp, settled deeply in a bulky old chair, a crocheted afghan tucked snugly around her thick legs, her own sleep was a distant concern. Chuckles wiggled at her feet and she smiled, tilting back in her seat to make room on her lap. The little dog sprang onto the space, circled twice, then snuggled into the crease of her thighs. Harriet stroked his wrinkled head lightly before pulling her other hand away from her chest to smile down at the perfect, tiny creature sleeping in her palm—a baby, the color of a coffee stain, no bigger than her thumb nail.

Harriet felt she’d found her life’s purpose that night. From then on, she dedicated herself to being the most perfect mother possible—she had to be. Her baby was too small and vulnerable to survive with anything less. Nothing would ever hurt her tiny little girl. And she would do it all on her own, after all, all a child really needed was a mother, just
that one special person to give her all the love and attention she could ever want. Harriet knew her baby would grow up knowing for certain she was the most important thing in her mother’s life. And it would begin with her name. A name that would reflect who she was, not who made her. A beautiful name.

“Thumbelina,” Harriet decided while she tried to sew a tiny baby gown under a magnifying glass attached to her desk, pricking her fingers with a needle much too big for the job. Sucking the tip of her finger into her mouth, Harriet smiled down at the newly named baby girl sleeping on a bed of moisturized Kleenexes wedged into the white cap of an Ambien bottle. The baby’s dark skin made her tiny body pop from the white tissues. Harriet would go to a fabric store later and see if she could find some dollhouse furniture. She needed the very best for her perfect angel.

Over the years, Harriet grew exceptional at making tiny clothes, garnering a reputation among dollhouse enthusiasts. While her antique shop never thrived as a business, she kept it open out of loyalty to her first passion. Even so, the displays acquired a particular theme. Tables once topped with authentic Victorian jewelry boxes and sterling silver candelabras were replaced with elaborate antique dollhouses. Shelves once stuffed with collectible teddy bears and china sets found themselves replaced with miniature furniture and traditional doll clothes, all handmade. Harriet had found her market. She even renamed the store. Instead of Ettie’s Antiques, the little shop was called Thumbelina’s. Her patrons thought the name cute, charming, delightful. None of them had ever seen little Thumbelina who lived in the apartment upstairs.

At first, Harriet worried over her baby girl, so tiny, delicate, easy to lose. She wanted her near at all times, always within arm’s reach. As an infant, she kept her on her desk in the shop, hidden behind stacks of old books and stationary, and made sure music always played in the shop, just loud enough so the unsuspecting ear of a customer wouldn’t pick up the occasional faint, keening wail.

But as Thumbelina grew older (and learned to crawl and walk about), keeping her down in the store was no longer an option. Harriet wasn’t sure if it was due to her size or some other genetic trait, but Thumbelina became an exceptional climber, and could (and did) get into anything. Chuckles the Pug was dubbed official babysitter. Chuckles took
his position very seriously, and for the greater part of Thumbelina’s youth, he kept a sharp, bulbous eye on her. In this way, the nervous woman effectively sheltered the tiny girl from everything the city offered, and Harriet was happy.

Thumbelina’s birthday became Harriet’s favorite holiday. Even though Harriet found Thumbelina in the early fall, she had always loved spring best, so she decided they would celebrate Thumbelina’s birthday in May.

“Oh, Mama, it’s so pretty!” said Thumbelina, running her tiny, chubby fingers over the layers of powder blue lace. She sat on her knees, cradling the spring dress in her lap, pressing her nose into the starchy smelling dress. “Can I put it on right now?”

“Of course you can, sweetheart,” said Harriet, beaming at her little angel. “Let me help you—those buttons can be tricky.” Her steady, wrinkled hands deftly tugged the dress over the child’s head, careful not to muss her hair. “Oh, don’t you look beautiful.”

“Do you think so? Do I look like a princess?” asked Thumbelina, twirling, the blue ruffles fanning out around her like rose petals. She tripped over her tiny feet and fell lightly against her mother’s watchful fingers. Gently, Harriet scooped the six-year-old into her weathered pink palms and brought the child up to her face. Thumbelina squeezed her mother’s plump cheek and kissed the soft flesh.

“The most beautiful princess that ever lived.”

The world inside Harriet’s apartment seemed to be a perfect place.

But years go by and dogs age quickly, and Chucbles’ round, buggy eye, once so keen and alert, grew a little foggier each day as cataracts set in, until those round black orbs were milky and blue, and the old dog completely blind. Harriet worried over her faithful pug and wondered if she should get another dog, a replacement so the loyal Chucbles could retire. But Thumbelina was a teenager now, and the danger of her having an accident in the apartment very low. Besides, Chucbles still had a good set of ears, if not quite so good as they had once been, and despite the breathing troubles he’d had all his life, his nose seemed to do well enough. She was blissfully ignorant of the pug’s developing habit of extended napping while she worked the shop, his stiffening joints, hobbling pace, and preference to sit and bark rather than run and chase. Harriet decided there was no need for change; Thumbelina was old enough now to instinctually follow
the rules of the apartment and Harriet was confident she could trust her beautiful young daughter.

What she did not know was one of Chuckles’ main jobs in preserving Thumbelina’s perfect innocence was keeping the stray cats at bay. Despite his years of protest, Harriet continued to feed the parasites, and so they remained a constant presence on the fire escape. His barking through the glass windows did little to run them off, instead often encouraging them to leave little taunts for him to find—dead mice, hairballs, small mounds of feces. They cackled and laughed at him through the glass, rubbing themselves against the barrier, licking its surface, blowing kisses. And they were all very interested in Thumbelina.

Unable to run the cats off, Chuckles turned his focus to steering Thumbelina away from the window. He warned her about the strays, filling her head with the threat of their sharp teeth, claws, and hungry bellies.

“But Mama feeds them, they’re not hungry,” she’d say.

“You think they wouldn’t prefer a pretty little thing like you, warm and alive, to that dry food crud she lays out there?” he’d growl, glaring with blind eyes at her pretty, puckered face.

And yet, he never quite killed her curiosity, because the strays offered something that for all Harriet’s pampering, Thumbelina had never had before. The truth of the city her mother was so terrified of. Besides, she never really believed the strays wanted to eat her, and in a way, she was right. But they did want her, and when she crawled to the window silently while the old, blind Chuckles lay in his spot on the sofa, they grinned wide, sharp, toothy grins.

“Hello, little Thumbelina,” they said, tails flicking in the sun, deep, throaty purrs rumbling through the glass, “you’ve finally come for a chat?”

Harriet couldn’t understand what had happened to her sweet little girl. Years of gentle obedience, and now every interaction with her daughter was a battle. Initially, she believed the new sharp edge to Thumbelina’s tone was her imagination, but her daughter became more blatant in her disrespect. Harriet almost couldn’t believe it when she realized her daughter was being sarcastic. Thumbelina had always been a curious,
imaginative child, and Harriet was used to her questions about the world outside of the apartment. Before, her answers that the city was too big, dangerous, and dirty for a lovely little girl like Thumbelina seemed to be enough. But now her daughter was insistent and disbelieving.

“The city can’t possibly be as dangerous as you say, Mama,” Thumbelina shouted up to her mother from where she sat on the salt shaker beside her mother, her tiny voice rattling through the kitchen while Harriet carefully minced vegetables for her daughter’s tiny dinner. “If it was as bad as you say, why would so many people live here? Why do you live here?”

“And how do you know how many people live here, little lady, hm?”

“I can see them, through the window. Just because I’m little doesn’t mean I’m blind.” Harriet pursed her lips at her daughter’s tone.

“Well, Thumbelina, I live here because this is where my shop is. And the people who live in the city know how to handle it, and they take the right precautions, like me. But it’s much too big a place for someone like you; you know that. You could be squished by something as simple as a bottle thrown out a car window. Why would you ever want to go out there?”

Thumbelina huffed, crossing her arms over her chest and scowling at the bubbling pan on the stove, but said nothing more.

Despite her unease, Harriet regarded this new attitude as a phase, one that would pass. She managed to convince herself, until one evening when she decided to come home earlier than usual.

She found Thumbelina perched atop a spool of thread on the low coffee table, the long, modest skirt Harriet made herself (the one that should have covered her legs to mid-calf) rolled provocatively high, exposing long, chocolate thighs. Her knees crossed, one tiny, naked brown foot bouncing in the air, a lock of inky hair twirling in her fingers. She was surrounded by cockroaches, and she was flirting with them. Harriet screamed.

The cockroaches wasted no time, scattering in all directions at Harriet’s intrusion. Thumbelina jerked her skirt back into place and crossed her arms under budding breasts, pouting her full pink lips. She made no attempt to move as Harriet raced around the
apartment, swatting at the bugs, chasing them from her home. After several minutes, the large woman stumbled back into the living room, her pasty, wrinkled face flushed and damp with sweat, chest heaving as she panted loudly. Taking a few minutes to catch her breath, she then propped her hands on wide hips and straightened her back, towering high over the tiny girl.

“Well, Thumbelina, would you like to explain to me what all that was all about? Maybe how those terrible pests got into my home?”

“I don’t know, Mama, cockroaches get everywhere, isn’t that what you said?”

Thumbelina faced away, staring at the floor, her high, round forehead crinkled. Harriet’s thin lips twisted, the blotchy red flush in her cheeks deepening.

“Did you let them in here?”

“No, Mama,” she said, her tiny voice sharp, biting.

“Are you lying to me?”

“No, Mama, they just got in, okay?” She glared up at her mother. Harriet glared back. Hundreds of times bigger than her tiny daughter, Harriet felt miniscule and insignificant in the heat of the beautiful creature’s gaze.

“Why were you flirting with them?”

“I wanted to talk to someone. I wasn’t flirting.”

“You have Chuckles, you don’t need bugs for company.”

“Oh please, Chuckles is old—all he does is sleep and fart.”

“You watch your mouth, little lady! Chuckles has spent his entire life watching over you.”

Thumbelina huffed and said nothing.

Harriet went on, “I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately. Where has this mean attitude come from? Where’s my sweet little girl, the one who waited to have lunch with me, or loved each new dress I work so hard to make?”

Thumbelina jumped from her perch, grabbing at the hem of her delicate blue skirt.

“Loved? Who in their right mind would love this? Look at this ugly thing!” She twirled violently, almost falling, before glaring back up at Harriet. “You dress me like a little girl, and I’m not one anymore.”
“You ungrateful—that’s it; you’re going in time out.” Harriet scooped Thumbelina into her hand and marched to the dollhouse in her bedroom. Arranged by the window, the structure was one of her proudest accomplishments—a replica of a historical Southern plantation home, with white paneling and two levels of wraparound verandas. She’d even made a model yard, complete with miniature live oaks, tiny Spanish moss hanging from the branches. She’d never used the little mansion as a punishment before. Sliding open the house’s front half, she set Thumbelina on the carefully to-scale canopy bed. The tiny girl fumed and pointedly looked away from the old woman. Harriet stared at her stiff back, guilt already knotting in her stomach, before quietly easing the dollhouse shut. Tears prickled the corners of her eyes. She scrubbed them away with her fist.

Returning to the living room, Harriet frowned at the now tainted space. Every familiar piece of the once pleasant area reeked of suspicion and ill-intent. The urge to cry still coiled in her stomach, but she shoved it down and focused on the issue at hand. Digging through the cabinet under the kitchen sink, she unearthed a massive can of roach-killer, but worried what it might do to Thumbelina. It might poison her tiny lungs same as roach. Tucking it back under the sink, she found an almost full box of sticky floor traps. She wondered again how the roaches had gotten in—she’d always kept the apartment very clean, and it had been years since her last infestation. Maybe there was an outbreak in the building? Shrugging her shoulders, she set about moving all the furniture and rolling the carpets to mop the floors, then set the traps in all the dark crevices she could think of.

Mission complete, Harriet threw the empty box in the trash and made a note on her grocery list to buy more, just in case. Then she dumped herself into the lumpy, floral print recliner nearest the window to the fire escape with a heavy sigh. Her arms hanging at her sides, she stared vacantly.

A pleading meow caught her attention. Long past the time she normally fed the strays, most of the street cats opted to find their dinner elsewhere, save one. In dealing with the strays, Harriet did her best never to play favorites. Even so, one cat wiggled past her misplaced sense of fairness and ranked above the others in her heart. This was the cat that waited on the window ledge. He had monitored the evening’s earlier events with knowing interest.
Harriet smiled, stretched out an arm, and opened the window. Promptly, the cat leapt inside and onto her soft thighs. A grey tabby with blue eyes, he was in rough shape even by the standards of the other strays. Thin scars freckled the bridge of his nose and along his legs. Both ears were missing chunks as well as the tip of his tail. Street life was particularly hard on the poor tom, and Harriet did her best to pamper the miraculously sweet-tempered cat whenever the opportunity arose. This included special treats, catnip toys, and an elastic flea collar, which she now dug around with her fingernails much to the cat’s pleasure. He purred loudly and kneaded the swell of her belly. A few tears dropped to his grey coat, darkening the soft fur, but overall, the pain in Harriet’s heart eased and she spent the remainder of the evening contentedly stroking the stray.

For all her spraying, a handful of cockroaches continued to infiltrate the apartment, resulting in even worse consequences when Thumbelina declared to her mother that one particularly stubborn roach was her boyfriend.

“No.” Bewildered, Harriet could think of nothing else to say.

“But I love him, Mama. You can’t keep us apart.” The beautiful girl threw her arms around the hard, shiny red shell of the bug, pressing her cheek against its round black head. Harriet stared at the creature’s twitching feelers and gnashing jaws, horrified.

“I just, I don’t think he’s right for you. I think you can do better.”

“What do you know about ‘doing better?’” the girl sneered. “What, you think I should wait for the fairy prince to sweep me off my feet? Well he’s not real, Mama, and I’m not going to waste my life pining for some fantasy.”

Harriet was speechless.

Not exactly by coincidence, Support for Single Moms came to Harriet’s awareness after an offhand comment to a customer who responded with enthusiastic gushing about her life-changing experience in finally finding a group of women not only able to fully understand her plight, but ready to share their wisdom of experience. Never one to put herself “out there” under normal circumstances, Harriet acknowledged the fact she could use a few more friends than an old pug and a beat-up stray. She opted to give it a try.
She regretted her choice.

It wasn’t just the stuffy basement room, with its cheap carpet and metal foldout chairs all crowded together in an off-kilter circle, or the way all the women seemed to feel it appropriate to hug first and introduce themselves later, smooshing their moist, fleshy bodies against her moist, fleshy body like childhood friends. Harriet felt at once forcefully exposed, clothes ripped from her, naked body pinned under the florescent lights, and completely alienated, shoved from the circle of overly friendly, domineering women like the awkward cousin at a family reunion. It could have been her imagination; group interaction wasn’t her forte. At the very least, she did not feel her life change, or find her niche in the world as the enthused customer had assured her she would. Perched on the edge of her creaky metal chair, sweaty palms stuffed between her knees, Harriet felt only discomfort. She should have stayed home.

Most of the women were younger than her, in the thirty to forty range, some even younger, barely older than Thumbelina, little more than babies. Harriet worried what lead them to this point, and if Thumbelina was in danger of a similar fate. For a moment, she comforted herself with the knowledge that tiny little boys Thumbelina’s size were probably few and far between. That comfort died when she remembered her daughter’s new “boyfriend.” Was she at risk? Could a cockroach even get her daughter pregnant? They’d never had “the talk,” and her poor baby might be setting herself up for a terrible disaster. Harriet almost shot from her seat to rush home, but in that moment she realized her turn was up and the gaze of every woman in the room focused on her. She froze, wide-eyed, blood rushing through her ears.

“Your name, honey, go ahead and introduce yourself,” a Hispanic woman to her left whispered.

“I uh, my name is Harriet Grisbon, and I’m, uh, a single mother,” she managed. The resounding “Hello, Harriet” engulfed the cramped room. An awkward silence took its place.

“Is there anything in particular you wanted to discuss with us tonight, Harriet?” asked the tall black woman who’d greeted her at the door. Her hair was cut short to follow the curve of her skull and large, gold disk earrings dangling against her jaw—she must have been the woman leading the meeting. Her dark eyes were friendly.
“Well, um, I have one daughter, and I suppose things have gotten difficult now that she’s a teenager?” A collected hum of knowing agreement rolled through the group. Harriet’s gaze shifted over them anxiously. A bead of sweat rolled down her neck into the high collar of her shirt. “I guess I’m concerned about the choices she’s making? With boys?” Her sentences kept sounding like questions, and Harriet decided she was done talking, someone else should take over. The more boisterous women of the group happily obliged.

“My god, I know exactly how you feel,” laughed one woman, slapping her knee. “Just the other day, my little Sandy brought home some greasy punk I swear she scraped off the street.”

“My Cindy did the same thing. I think she wants me to have a heart attack,” said another. Harriet wondered how, if this were a contest over whose daughter brought home the grossest boy, she would probably win, hands down. Did the cockroach even count as a boy? How could you tell if a cockroach was male or female? Thumbelina probably knew, but she needed to be sure. Would she feel better if it turned out to be a female? Harriet added this to her list of things to check when she got home. The urge to leave was almost violent now.

The Hispanic woman who’d spoken to her early touched her shoulder. “Harriett, what you gotta do, is you gotta tell it to her straight. Be firm, but don’t get riled up, ‘cuz that’s probably what she wants. They always wanna prove that they’re independent and grown up. They gotta get it out of their system. Just let her know all you want is for her to be safe.” Self-confidence and experience radiated from the woman, and Harriet found herself smiling weakly in return. She was probably right. Thumbelina wanted to assert herself and experience knew things. Harriet needed to trust her daughter would come to realize the cockroach was utterly disgusting and not right for her all on her own.

The warm, fuzzy feeling of rejuvenated optimism Harriet left the meeting with imploded when she finally returned to the apartment to find old, creaky Chuckles whimpering helplessly, clawing at the open window to the fire escape. Thumbelina was gone.
Three days. Three days of combing the city streets, the back alleys, the dumpsters. She checked parks, playgrounds, libraries, gas stations. For three days the laminated closed sign hung in the glass window of Thumbelina’s door while Harriet bit her fingernails to nothing and tore clumps hair out in her fists. She wanted to go to the police, but she didn’t know what to tell them. “Please officer, my daughter’s been kidnapped—she’s sixteen, black, and only three inches tall.” Who would believe her? Who would think she was anything but crazy? Besides, she’d only heard stories about how useless the police were on missing person’s cases.

The morning of the fourth day Harriet was roused from her sleep by a familiar meow and window rattle. She’d fallen asleep in her chair by the fire escape, a pile of photo albums spread before her, hundreds of pictures of Thumbelina at every age, in every outfit, each lovely face split by a perfect, pearly smile. Harriet had been trying to choose the best pictures to show the police, for proof, for reference, for anything. Her entire body ached, her ankles swollen and blistered from walking all over town, her neck stiff and tight from the angle her head lay at on her shoulder through the night. She groaned, stretching wide, joints popping, the photos tumbling to the carpet. Another pleading, muffled meow and Harriet turned to see her favorite tom perched on the window ledge, dirty paw pressed to the glass, a wriggling Thumbelina dangling from his mouth.

Harriet jerked from her seat, falling hard against her knees when her numb legs gave out on her. Struggling upright, her hands shook and fumbled with the window latch, her body trembling in frantic, desperate joy. The cat leapt lightly from the ledge to the seat of the chair and dumped the cursing Thumbelina unceremoniously to the worn fabric. Tears already streaming down her cheeks, Harriet crawled on hand and knee to the tiny girl standing on the cushion, palms raised as if in worship to an idol.

“Get the hell away from me, you damn cat!” the raging creature shouted, waving her arms at the animal until he bounded to the top of the chair, stretching his body along the length, tail flicking, keen blue eyes monitoring the fuming girl with objective interest.

“Oh, Thumbelina, you’re safe—I was so worried about you, you have no idea,” Harriet gushed, reaching out her hands. The girl stepped back, flinching from her grasp.
“Don’t touch me, you old cow. And don’t call me that. That’s not my name anymore.”

“Don’t talk to your mother that way, Thumbelina. I’ve been worried sick about you!” Harriet cried, startled by her daughter’s sharp words.

“I said that’s not my name anymore! I’ve always hated that name—it’s not me at all. None of my life here was me, Mama. It was all just what you wanted.”

Harriet sat back on her heels finally looking at her daughter. For the past several months, even before her daughter’s sour temper started, Harriet had vaguely acknowledged the delicate body’s rapid change. The natural progression of the girl’s maturation a source of pain and concern for the old mother was nonetheless enchanting in the remarkable grace of its speedy advancement. Now, in the unforgiving white light of morning that so glaringly showed her own sad age, Harriet carefully analyzed the daughter she hadn’t seen for three days.

The face was the same, mostly, though now the makeup was obvious, the short, wide nose unaltered, but the large, honey-colored eyes rimmed in kohl and mascara, thick pink lips coated in shiny gloss, high, sharp cheekbones dark with blush. The inky locks Harriet had styled so carefully for so many years were a fluffy halo of curls framing the perfect heart-shaped face, bleached the same honey gold of her daughter’s lovely eyes. The spell broke when she took in her daughter’s outfit. The carefully tailored dress Harriet so lovingly made, gone. In its place, the girl was wrapped in what appeared to be the wrapper of a fun-sized Hershey bar, slit along the sides so her bare thighs and hips (and even some of her ribs) were visible, the shiny aluminum held together by nothing more than a wire twist-tie, the kind Harriet used for bags of bread. The girl preened under the spotlight attention and struck a pose, jutting out her hip and jaw, smirking at the shocked old woman.

“See, Mama, I’m not that little girl anymore.”

“Thumbelina, you’re wearing trash.” Harriet made another grab for her daughter, and again, she pulled away.

“It’s not trash, Mama—this is how the real me dresses. These last three days, I finally realized where I belong.” She flung her arm out, pointing to the window. “Out there, Mama, in the city. It’s a part of me, and I’m a part of it. Oh Mama, you should
have seen—they love me out there. The roaches, the rats, the pigeons, and the cats! They all love me,” she glared up at the tom, “except for him, he doesn’t count.” The tom scratched idly at his flea collar. She turned back to her mother, propping her hands on her hips and swelling out her full chest. “My real name is Zonza, and I’m queen of this city.”

Harriet’s mouth hung slack, her eyes blank and dazed. All through her daughter’s speech she’d stared at the girl, disbelieving of what stood in front of her. This vibrancy and vicious confidence nothing she recognized. And yet, a sad, weak, desperate part of her clung to the thought that like everything else, this was a phase and it would pass. Her sweet, gentle Thumbelina would come back to her, and the two of them could be happy again.

“Thumbelina, you’re filthy,” she said, “let’s give you a bath.”

“Damn it, Mama, how many fucking times do I have to tell you. My name is Zonza, and I’m not going anywhere with you. You can’t keep me here.”

And it was true. Though Harriet ignored her daughter’s threats, stripping her of the candy wrapper, dressing her in one of Harriet’s favorite of her outfits (the girl struggled and as soon as she could, ripped the dress to pieces, preferring to wear the tied shreds). She locked her in the massive dollhouse, but it was no use. In the morning, Thumbelina, Zonza, was gone, escaped through a tiny busted window and a crack in the floor, and this time Harriet knew, there would be no miraculous return.

Harriet hated the city. Thirty-six years she’d lived there, and while for a good portion of that time she believed herself to be happy, she now understood it never really felt like home. She found no comfort, no kindness, in the slick, towering sky-scrapers, the cold sidewalks, the sickly fenced trees. She thought about how quiet the country had been, how sweet the air smelled, how soft the grass felt between her bare toes. She wondered how she could have forgotten those things.

The little shop sold quickly enough, along with most of the furniture. She wanted to keep the move easy and the idea of a real fresh start sounded nice. Chuckles, old and feeble, snored loudly in his crate on the backseat of the rented car, tucked beside boxes of books, blankets, clothes. Harriet wasn’t interested in a last look at the place she was leaving. The apartment made her stomach knot painfully and she was eager to leave. She
almost missed him as she dumped her thick body behind the wheel. He sat patiently on the sidewalk a little ways behind the meter, his blue eyes wide and unblinking, tail flicking absently.

“Well, look at you,” Harriet said, “What are you doing here?” The cat stood and rubbed himself against the meter languidly, his purr audible inside the car. A weak smile pulled at the corner of Harriet’s thin lips and her tired, sad eyes twinkled softly in the midday sun. She dropped her hands from the wheel and leaned back in the seat. “Well come on then, I don’t have all day.” The cat bounded into the car, setting himself in the passenger seat as though he’d been there all morning. Harriet ran her hand over his head to scratch behind his ears and under the flea collar, and the cat leaned heavily against her touch, his purr rattling through the car. The sick heaviness in her heart never really left her, but in that moment, rubbing between the tom’s boney shoulder blades, the resignation that lead her to give up waiting for the tiny fragment of her daughter to come home tasted just a little less bitter. The feeling was slight, and Harriet knew there would always be a three-inch hole in her heart, but it seemed to be enough. After all, maybe “Zonza” really was big enough for this city, made for it even. She tried to convince herself that though made her happy.

From the backseat, Chuckles snorted and coughed, then resumed his snoring. Harriet returned her hands to the wheel and eased the car out onto the street. “Well, I suppose now I’ll have to give you a name,” she said, and pressed her foot to the gas.
VI. Amputation

Two years ago, I took my daughter into a hospital and paid a surgeon to cut her in half. One half lived. The other did not. The little tombstone in the German Town Cemetery said that half was three years old. It said her name was Angela. My husband would tell me that wasn’t true. He said things like, “that’s not at all what happened,” and “I don’t know where you got this idea into your head.” He said he was trying to be strong for both of us, to be supportive of me, but that I was making it difficult for him with my looney fantasies. Looney, like Looney Tunes. My daughter used to watch them. Half my daughter still did.

I was standing in the kitchen. It was two-thirty in the afternoon and the sun poured in hot through the kitchen window against my face and neck. Half my daughter ran in, her tiny bare feet slapping the checkered tiles, and grabbed at the leg of my pants. I flinched. Even when she let go I still felt the skin beneath the fabric crawl.

“Mommy, you have to be the ogre,” she said, and held out a muscled alien action figure I’d found at a yard sale.

“Mommy’s doing the dishes,” I said.

“But mommy, you have to be the ogre. I can’t be the ogre because I’m already the princess and the prince.” Barbie was in her other hand and Ken had been stuffed under her armpit so she could hold the alien. She was right. Half my daughter couldn’t play all the parts. She wiggled the plastic alien at me again. I leaned over to take the alien from her fist, but as soon as my fingers touched her soft baby flesh I recoiled.

“Mommy can’t play—she has to do the dishes. Just make the princess go to sleep while the prince and the ogre fight.”

Half my daughter pouted, scrunching her tall, flat forehead into wrinkles.
“Why do you have to do the dishes? The sink is empty.” I looked down into the empty sink and then to the rack where the dishes I’d just finished washing were dripping dry. I grabbed a still damp, spotless plate and turned on the faucet.

“The sink is empty because mommy hasn’t gotten started yet,” I lied. Half of my daughter wrinkled her huge forehead more then left the room, the alien dangling at her side.

I used to have a job, something other than keeping my house appropriately immaculate so the half of my daughter I hadn’t killed yet wouldn’t die from some microscopic germ swimming over a door handle like all the advertisements on TV told me she would. I used to cut and style hair. I worked at the salon down town. It wasn’t anything remarkable, just a little place for the locals, mostly women from the senior center at the edge of the city where the trees were tall, but it got me out of the house and I had my own money to spend. They said I was pretty good. For a while there had been rumors about making me a manager. That was all before I got pregnant.

I re-washed all the dishes and re-mopped the floor and re-vacuumed the carpet. I dusted the tables, cleaned the windows, made all the beds. I did everything I could think of to keep myself busy so half my daughter wouldn’t ask me to play again. When I had polished the little bit of silver we still had from my husband’s great-grand mother, I finally paused. I whipped at the bit of sweat on my forehead and flexed my stiff hands. I sat at the kitchen table for a moment, staring blankly at the refrigerator door, listening to half of my daughter play by herself in the next room. I couldn’t hear much of what she was saying, just the faint muttering of her small voice. I stood and crept to the living room doorway as quietly as I could so she wouldn’t hear me and perk up. She was kneeling at the coffee table, her wispy brown curls pulled back into awkward, lopsided pigtails on the top of her head—her father’s handiwork. My daughter’s hair used to be my job, but after I mangled her I couldn’t bring myself to touch what was left. So she sat at the coffee table with her sloppy hair and miss-matched clothes and all her dolls in front of her. Sure enough, she was holding Ken and the alien, wiggling them as they argued, and Barbie lay sleeping on a bed of Kleenexes. Half of my daughter was shifting her
voice to fit the characters, the alien’s guttural snarl against Ken’s eloquent enunciation. My daughter had been very good at voices. She used to spend hours muttering to herself back and forth, twisting her faces around to fit the different accents. Whenever her father would hear he would tell her to stop—unflinchingly stern—but I would laugh and play along, surprised as each new character entered the room. Suddenly, the scene before me heated up as Ken lifted his weapon to the alien and the duel began. As she slapped the toys together, filling the house with the clicking of plastic, half of my daughter’s tiny voice rang out in impassioned cries, as Ken demanded the magic wake-up potion from the evil alien.

“I’ll never tell,” growled the alien, spraying spit all over the carpet.

“Yes you will, or I’ll kill you!” shouted Ken, raising his popsicle-stick-sword high above his head for a triumphant blow.

“If you kill me, then Princess Angie will never wake up,” said the alien with a plot-thickening laugh.

My stomach lurched and I stumbled backward, knocking into the kitchen table and sending the silver tumbling to the tiles with a clatter.

“Mommy?” half my daughter asked, her voice back to its usual high-pitched chirp.

“It’s okay sweetie,” I called, “it was nothing—that was just mommy being clumsy. You just keep playing.” I scrambled over the tiles, desperately piling the silver in my apron. I prayed that she wouldn’t come into the kitchen. But even as the silver clanked in the basket of my apron, I could hear the shuffle of half my daughter’s feet across the carpet. I looked up and there she was in the doorway, Ken and the alien in each hand, just as before, but with her face twisted a different way. She looked strange, foreign. I jumped to my feet when she came toward me, jostling the silver in my apron.

“I’ve got it,” I said, my voice tight. “You just keep playing.”

“You’re still not done?” she asked, tucking Ken under her arm so she could scratch an itch at her chest. My heart constricted painfully.

“No, Mommy’s still very busy.” Half my daughter stared at her feet and rubbed at her chest.
“I miss Angie. She always played with me.” My pulse was loud in my ears, my head felt swollen and tight, my eyes hot.

“I know. Go and play.”

I had to get out, away from the disfigured remains of my daughter playing by herself in the living room. As soon as she sat back down on the carpet, I walked out the front door and down the sidewalk to the bus stop at the end of the street and sat on the bench. After a few minutes, the bus pulled up to the curb. I thought about getting on, about quietly slipping out of town and pretending I was someone else, some middle-aged woman who’d graduated college and never been married or had children. But in the end I shook my head at the driver and the bus pulled away. I stared at my house. Inside, half my daughter, the half that had survived to five years old, the half that had a list of medications and allergies long enough to fill a book, was sitting in the living room playing with her dolls with no idea she was alone. I wondered how long it would take her to realize I had left. I wondered if she would trip and fall into the glass coffee table before she had a chance to notice, or if she would pull a drawer full of knives out onto herself, or if she would try and stuff her mouth full of cleaning fluid. Amelia, my little Amy. Any number of horrible things could happen to her, or she could do to herself while I wasn’t there to keep her safe, and yet I didn’t move, and just sat watching the house. I told myself “at least I’ll know if she tries to leave, if she tries to cross the street, if someone tries to break in.” It didn’t make me feel any better about purposefully neglecting half of my daughter, but I still didn’t move.

In reality, I was only outside for thirty-seven minutes before I forced myself to walk back down the sidewalk and into my house, but relief still spread through me like heat when I saw Amy sitting on the floor of the living room, her short round legs spread wide, her dolls all around her. She’d never noticed.

My pregnancy wasn’t an accident. Brian and I had decided together that we were ready to have a baby, and I went off the pill. It took a little longer than we’d expected, but we said that was because we were older than our parents had been, and things go slower when you’re older. I was only thirty-two, but my mother had been eighteen. At eighteen
anything and everything could give you a baby bump. After fourteen months I finally missed my period and we went to the gynecologist.

I knew twins ran in my husband’s family—his baby sisters were identical twins and his uncles on his mother’s side were twins. We had planned for that too. But it’s difficult to plan for what I had.

My husband tried to keep it simple. When our neighbors asked about Amy, or the teachers from her preschool wondered if she had any special needs, my husband would always make sure to answer before me. He liked to say things like, “Amy was a unique baby, but she’s perfectly fine now—she’s just like any other child.” He would tell them Amy was one of twins, twins that had grown together in my belly—he preferred to describe it like that, to use words like “belly” and not words like “conjoined”—and that when the doctors cut them apart, Amy’s twin didn’t make it. He would say “didn’t make it” like dead little Angie buried in the German Town Cemetery “didn’t make the Honor Roll.”

I won’t ever forget that first ultrasound, that first moment of revelation. Brian was with me again, and held my hand while the ultrasound technician applied the jelly to my stomach. My heart was pounding in my ears as I watched the technician’s face. It had been a woman, younger than me, though not by much. She was Indian and wore heavy black eyeliner all around her large brown eyes, and there was the telltale scar of a nose piercing on her left nostril. She was probably beautiful, but I could only see the ugly dark frown of concern that built on her face that day as she rolled the camera over my slicked stomach. When she excused herself from the room, explaining that she needed to find the doctor, I thought I would die. I was so sure my baby was strangling to death from umbilical cord that when she returned with the doctor, an older woman with short brown hair streaked with grey, I almost didn’t notice. The doctor peered into the screen, her brow knotted like the technician’s had been, but with a sparkle of intrigue in her pale eyes. She straightened and looked right into me. Conjoined twins. One in every fifty thousand to one hundred thousand births and one of them would be mine. A twenty-five percent survival rate. I might have collapsed if I hadn’t been lying down. I remember she looked at me when she asked if I wanted to keep it, ignoring my husband beside me. Her gaze had been so intense—she hardly flinched when Brian said, “of course we want to
keep it, keep them.” I asked what she thought their odds were. She said it was hard to tell at this stage. I said I would wait.

We started going to a different hospital, one that was two and a half hours away instead of twenty minutes; one that assured us it had dealt with conjoined twins before. The new doctor was a man, white, and it was harder to determine his age—his face was young and self-assured like he was fresh out of graduate school, but his hair was turning grey at the temples and there were deep lines across his forehead. He seemed very excited about my babies. He explained that it used to be believed that conjoined twins were the result of a fertilized egg that didn’t fully split, but that the modern and more generally accepted theory was that it was actually the result of fusion between two previously separated fetuses that were drawn together by stem cells. He held up two vinyl gloves while he explained, pulling them apart and pushing them together like that would make what he said mean something more to me than that my babies were deformed. A medical phenomenon, he called them.

He pointed to the hazy, blurred grey masses on the screen and circled his finger around what he said was their chest.

“They’re joined here,” he said. “It’s called Thoraco-omphalopagus.” I rolled the word around on my tongue silently. “It’s the most common form of conjoined twins, about twenty-eight percent of all cases.” His blue eyes lit up during his lesson. Apparently this meant they were joined at the chest, sharing a heart, maybe their liver, maybe some of their digestive system. I stared at the screen. I felt like I could barely hear him, like he was trying to talk to me through a closed door. My body was poisonous, and I had let Brian put his children there, let him trust me with them.

The ride back to our house felt even longer than the already long two hour drive, the car tight as though the air had been sucked from it. I rolled the window down and leaned back in the seat, staring out at the weedy sidewalks and chain-linked fences wrapped in milkweed. German Town could never be considered “rough” but it wasn’t exactly high quality living. Even so, Brian and I felt safe there and most of our neighbors had children. Only the Kaufmann’s and the Huber’s had ever had their cars vandalized, but everyone knew it was the Meijer boys and they were in the army by the time Brian and I were trying to conceive. Brian had been raised in the city and couldn’t imagine
living anywhere else. I’d grown up in the suburbs, where half the people on my street left their cars unlocked at night and their windows open. I’d moved to the city to go to the small liberal arts college there to study anthropology, though I dropped out two years early when Brian proposed. After we were married I got accepted into the local beauty school and got my job at the salon shortly after graduation. Living in the city had made me nervous at first and I was too scared to even open my blinds at night. I always imagined someone on the street was looking up into my window. But as the years swept by I became comfortable and could confidently take late evening strolls around the block without my hand gripping my bottle of pepper spray. By then I was in love with the place and watched the milkweed drift by fondly with a kind of nostalgia—I didn’t realize until that moment that while I was in the hospital room with that blurry grey screen and that clean-cut doctor, I had forgotten what the outside looked like. I pressed my hands against my swollen belly and felt my babies kick against my palms.

The doctor had said it was likely separation surgery would be possible.

It was nine-thirty when Brian finally opened the front door and shrugged off his suit jacket. I was sitting in his recliner with the fold-out feet still folded in, my feet planted firmly on the floor, a magazine I hadn’t been reading spread over my lap. Half of my daughter had fallen asleep on the couch. I’d been studying her, like I did most nights when I let her pass out on the couch because daddy was late getting home. She was on her stomach, her pink cheek pressed against the cushions, forcing her plump lips to pucker out from her face. A thin noodle of drool had slipped free and was soaking into the fabric. I heard Brian walk towards us and stop behind the chair. He was quiet a moment before he huffed an aggravated sigh.

“Why do you always let her sleep on the couch? Why can’t you just put her to bed?” he asked.

“She wonders where you are and won’t go to bed until you get home,” I replied, still watching half of my daughter create a small dark spot of slobber on my couch cushion.

“Oh please, Rebecca, I don’t believe that for a minute,” he snapped. I stayed silent, but twisted my neck to look at him.
When I first met Brian, he had been a tall, lean boy of nineteen, with broad shoulders and a head of thick, dark brown curls that fell down to his shoulders. He used to wear my headbands to keep the mass out of his face whenever he had a basketball game. I thought he was the most beautiful thing on the planet. But he had aged, and I had aged, and now his forehead was twice as tall as it had been and what was left of his hair was cut close to his skull and the flat stomach of his youth had expanded with neglect and disillusion. He crouched down by the arm of the chair and looked up at me, the lamplight reflecting on the shiny skin beneath the sparse sprouts of hair on top of his head. His face was placating—cautious concern pouting his lips and wrinkling his forehead. I wondered what he thought I would do.

“Rebecca,” he asked, voice soft. “How are you feeling today? Did you remember to take all of your pills?”

I opened my mouth wide and stuck out my tongue, then shut it and said “all gone doctor, do I get a special treat for being a good girl and swallowing?” The sensitivity dropped from his face and he frowned darkly, then stood, tugging his tie loose before he walked over to the living half of my daughter and stroked her tangled hair.

“I wish you wouldn’t say such vulgar things with our daughter so nearby.”

“She’s asleep.”

“She could still hear you.” I rolled my eyes and sank deeper into the chair, focusing on the dark stain by half of my daughter’s mouth.

“How could she hear me when she’s missing half of her ears?” I muttered, thinking he wouldn’t hear me. But he did. He looked at me sharply, jaw clenched.

“Rebecca, I thought you said you took all your pills.” I didn’t respond. “Rebecca,” he said again, louder and more forceful this time, “you can’t say things like that. This is our daughter Amy, and she’s not missing anything. She’s perfectly normal, just like any other little girl. It’s been two years—it’s time for you to get over this weird delusion and be the mother your daughter needs you to be.” The dark stain began to blur and I felt the hot tracks of tears drag down my cheeks. Brian melted immediately—he could never handle it when I started to cry. He pulled me tight against his chest and I pressed my nose against his collar and inhaled deeply, hunting for some whiff of perfume that wasn’t my own, some reason I could grab at to switch the blame onto him, to take it.
off me. Anything, any reason at all to say that he was the bad parent, the one who had ruined our child, to say that it wasn’t me. But there was nothing. Nothing but the faint minty odor of his aftershave and the stink of a long, boring day at the office seeping from his armpits. He’d been working over-time nearly every week still trying to pay off the medical bills that would forever haunt me, proof of the Devil’s pact I made to be popular in the PTA. My eyes drifted back to the half of my daughter on the couch while I thought about the other half of my daughter tucked into her box in the earth to sleep forever.

The night we returned home after we first learned about the fusion, I had been so vulnerable and anxious that when Brian crept into the bed beside me I nearly attacked him. I let him do whatever he wanted, whatever he wanted so he might forgive me for what I had let happen. He had put his seeds inside me under the assumption that I would be able to keep them safe and help them grow into healthy, normal babies, but instead I let them fuse together into a medical phenomenon and potentially destroy themselves. The guilt of my betrayal made me more submissive to him that any bout of rage he had ever had.

Before we were aware of what was happening in my belly, when the fetus was still small and normal and its mysterious sex was the most important question to be answered, I continued to work at the salon. I liked the work, the meticulous quality of it, the way the women walked away from me looking better than they had coming close. After I announced my pregnancy, it was even better, like a dream. I was showered with affection from the stylists. My space was always swept and my sprays and gels were always organized by product and size whenever I arrived. They were all very sympathetic to my extended restroom breaks, and if I arrived two or three minutes late, no one seemed to notice. My customers were even better, fawning over me, animatedly asking questions about the baby’s room and when I was expecting the little angel to arrive. Most of them were older women, and happily shared photos of new grandchildren to expand on the beauty of childbirth.

I quit immediately after that first ultrasound. I was convinced it was the hairspray. I needed something to blame, and it had already put a hole in the ozone layer, so it was just as likely it had tempted my babies to fuse together. So I quit. I spent my sudden
surplus of free time at the home figuring out new ways to style my own hair. I began to buy only hair products that said things like “organic” or “green.” I stopped dying my hair and tried to style it to make the roots look intentional and charming. I worried about makeup too, and bought products that promised to be “all natural” and good for the skin. I worried about every chemical my body might have ever absorbed affecting my already so affected babies. Brian said he liked the way I looked. He said the change was nice. He said “natural looks good on you. You’re a mother now.” I said “maybe.”

I tried to start a garden, too, but everything about food and eating made me impatient. I felt like I was starving all the time or I felt like I never wanted to eat again. I had never had a green thumb anyway. My childhood was spent in a house where someone was hired to deal with our lawn, paid to make it reflect our family values. The garden failed, but I still bought food at the local Farmer’s Market until the cravings got so bad I broke down and ordered three roast beef sandwiches at the Arby’s down the street.

I was putting on weight. I was taking all the yoga classes, desperately hoping that by bending my body I could twist my daughters free of each other and have the two, beautiful little girls I had planned for, that my husband and I deserved. I took water aerobics and took what used to be my hairstyle time and injected it into the stationary bike at the gym. And still the pounds piled on. The doctor said that was the weight of the twins inside me, but the soft flesh on my arms and the saddlebags on my thighs made me skeptical and depressed. My breasts were bigger than they had ever been though, and Brian couldn’t keep his hands off me, off them. For a while, it helped. But as my body destroyed itself and the mutation inside me grew, I began to question my husband’s touch, and shied away from it suspiciously. He pretended patience, but as time wore on and I continued to reject his advances, his frustration boiled over. He called my doctor demanding to know what was causing my sudden disinterest. The doctor said I was hormonal.

Brian carried half of my daughter in his arms up the stairs and I walked behind him, watching her sleeping face where it peeked around his elbow. I wondered what her dreams were like. I wondered if she could have full dreams, or if maybe she only had clips of dreams, like half the reel was gone because her other half had died and taken the
missing scenes with her. I began to imagine her half-dreams, where everything in them was just a portion of itself—half-cars driving down highways with the engine and all the seats exposed, with half-people driving them, their organs open to the air, all the trees split as though they’d been hit by lightning, and the Earth cracked in half like it’d broken apart in space. Like my daughter had been.

I jerked back into myself when Brian stopped at her door and I nearly ran into his back.

“Rebecca, are you feeling all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” I said, and tried to look like I meant it.

The doctor said my baby would survive to birth, and they scheduled me for a Caesarean. They said a natural, vaginal birth might be disastrous, and in these cases was usually only used for stillborns, as it might cause severe damage to the fetus and the mother. My mother had never had to have a Caesarean and she had had five children, her youngest when she was forty-one. The doctor reassured me that it was a quite common procedure, and that many women, even with completely average fetuses, chose to have them. I noticed that he made a point to say “average” instead of normal, and I felt a blanket of depression fold over me. My husband ran his fingers through my hair and promised me that everything would be fine. Cynically, I wondered if he was happier with this arrangement because of the trauma my vagina wouldn’t have. This way it would stay nice and tight.

The day of the surgery I kept my hands tightly wrapped around my swollen belly. I was scared. It was one thing for the doctors to point to a blurry black and white photograph and to tell me what it meant. It was something else to see the actual product. I was afraid of being afraid of my daughters. I was afraid it meant I was a bad mother. My husband knew how concerned I was, or thought he knew, and the last thing I heard him say as they ushered him out of the room was his deep voice reassuring me that they could be separated. That everything would be fine. That we would have two, perfectly healthy little girls, just like we—
We had decorated Amy and Angie’s room to look like a garden, with sky blue walls and long-stemmed flowers painted all around the baseboard and a floral print with blues, pinks, and purples on the comforter. All the bright pastels in the room were murky and gray in the dark. A pile of gray stuffed animals rested against the headboard and Brian pushed them away as he laid half of my daughter on the bed. I stood in the doorway, obstructing most of the light from the hallway, turning my husband into a malicious shadow stooping over the milky face of the still-living half of my daughter. My heart began to race and my hands trembled as I watched his shadowy body hover above her and I let out a strangled whimper when he shifted and blocked her from my view completely. Immediately he turned around, his face illuminated and his eyes wide with concern. Behind him I could see half of my daughter again, face soft and unchanged. I relaxed.

“Rebecca, are you all right? You made a noise,” he whispered, his voice husky with worry. I shook my head to clear it.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.”

He studied me for a while longer, then leaned back over Amy and kissed her on her large forehead. Then he stood up and silently walked back to me.

“Well?” he asked. He pointed back toward her, challenging me. I stared at him, frozen in place. “Rebecca, please. You have to work past this. Now go over there and kiss your daughter goodnight.”

Cautiously, each step slow and pained, I crept toward the half of my daughter on the bed. As I did, my shadow crept toward her too, and reached her before I did. It laid itself over top of her, blocking her from me. I could feel Brian’s eyes heavy against my back and forced myself not to let my fear halt me. I stopped when my shins touched the edge of her mattress then stiffly leaned as close as I could bring myself to her. When my lips were half an inch from her skin, knowing that Brian couldn’t see, I made a soft wet smacking noise, imitating a kiss. Then I straightened up and marched out of the room. Brian had a gentle, weary smile on his face like he was proud of me and I felt my stomach drop. I forced a smile back, though it felt like a grimace. As we left to our own room down the hall, I heard Amy twist in her sheets and grumble to herself before becoming silent.
The surgery was strange and my body felt distant from me. I kept my eyes shut and tried my best to block the sound of Brian and the doctors out. I felt them cut into my stomach and stretch my body open but with no pain, though I wanted it. I thought maybe the pain of being sliced open and spread out would cleanse me. The only sound that reached me was the cries of my babies. Only then did I sink back into myself. They were crying, like any baby would cry. They sounded no different. They were human. After they had put me back together and my daughters had been cleaned and wrapped, they let me hold them. In their blanket, sleeping, they were beautiful and perfect.

They took my little girls away, but before I could drift away in sleep, the doctor came in to explain the situation. We would have to wait at least six to twelve months before a separation surgery would be safe. They would need time to develop, to see how healthy they remained and so the doctors would be able to tell how much between them was shared. He said, “What I mean is, if they’re sharing a heart, separation surgery will not be possible.” I imagined I could still feel their little heart beat pulsing through the palms of my hands. I tried to remember if there had been more than one.

There was a framed photograph I kept on the nightstand beside my half of the bed. Brian consistently asked me to put it away, or at least to move it somewhere else, somewhere less visible. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. It was a photo of my daughter and I had become dependent upon it. Brian went into the bathroom and lifted the lid of the toilet without closing the door. I sat on the bed on top of the covers and held the frame in my lap while the hiss of my husband’s pee filled the background. The two beautiful faces of my daughter smiled up at me, and I smiled down at her.

We waited three years before we took Amy and Angie into surgery. Waiting that long was not my husband’s choice. At six months he began to remind me what the doctor said. Amy and Angie were smaller than they should have been, and I told him that. I was still giving them baths in the sink, and I was concerned they were too small to handle surgery. I said maybe after a year.
At the first birthday he gave me an article he had found on the internet and printed off. He set it on the kitchen counter while I was spreading icing over their cake. We had invited our parents, my brother Simon, my only sibling who was less than two hundred miles away, and Brian’s baby sisters, both of which were still living in the city, since they were going to the college there, the same one I had attended years before. My brother had arrived the day before and was playing with Amy and Angie in the living room. I’d been keeping my eye on them, to try and see how he reacted. It would be the first time this much of the family would have seen Amy and Angie in person, other than Brian’s sisters, who made a point to visit every other weekend after the girls were born. Brian and I were trying to keep things private. Brian especially, who was constantly reassuring his parents of the doctor’s promise to separate them. He said there was no point in forcing anyone to get used to this, because it was only a temporary impediment. Brain was stiff around the girls on the best of days. I wondered if he had bothered to force himself to get used to it.

He left the kitchen, walking away with his finger still pointing to the article, mouthing, “Read it.” I set down my spatula and licked the icing off my fingers before I picked it up and took it with me into the living room. Simon looked up at me as I came in, and Amy and Angie imitated him, both grinning widely when they saw me. The three of them were on the floor and the TV was on to one of the toddler stations playing something with large, solid pastel colors. I sat down on the couch behind them and crossed my legs skimming the article, which Brian had so thoughtfully stapled for me. It was all about the new strides surgeons had made in separating conjoined twins, about miraculous, seemingly impossible surgeries that had resulted in moving success stories. There were pictures provided as well, most of them before and after shots, some of them diagrams. I stood up and marched back into the kitchen, folding the article in half as I did and purposefully dumping it into the trash. I was confused and anxious and wasn’t in the mood to face that reality just then. And so I tried to ignore it. But then my parents arrived, and Brian’s parents. They walked through the door laden with presents wrapped in shiny paper with patterns of smiling animals or princesses all over. Amy and Angie squealed from the living room—Amy and Angie had already figured out how to walk at ten months and stumbled toward the grandparents they had never seen with wide, baby-toothed grins that the old people struggled to return. Behind the smiles, behind the gifts,
there was repulsion. It was clear in the stiff hugs and kisses, in the way they never asked to hold my daughters. Thankfully, Brian’s sisters fought between themselves for that particular right, cooing at the round faces of my babies, and whisked them away from the judgment and confusion of their grandparents before they could notice. I washed the plates and cake pans in the kitchen and cried quietly while my husband talked to our fathers about last night’s game.

The next morning, as I walked Simon to the door, Amy and Angie in my arms, he whispered conspiratorially, so Brian wouldn’t hear from the kitchen, not to be concerned with what mom and dad had said, or how they had behaved. They were old and from a different world.

“It’s up to you Becky, and whatever you think is best for your little girls,” he said. With that, he kissed Amy and Angie and me and drove away before Brain came down the stairs. I resisted making the appointment.

I managed to stay strong in my convictions for nearly two more years, shutting the judgments of the world out of my love for my daughters, accepting only short, polite visits from neighbors where I perfected the at of steering the conversation. I would ask about other people’s children, or other people’s husbands, and only flippantly respond to questions about my own. I pretended not to notice the whispers that followed me whenever I left to refill the tea. I only ever trusted Brian’s sisters to baby-sit. I called Simon often. But when the threat of preschool arrived, and with it the understanding that my babies would not always be babies and could not always be protected from society by me, my resolution faltered.

The flush of the toilet and the groan of the faucet caught my attention and I put the frame back on the nightstand just as Brian was walking back into the bedroom. I hoped he hadn’t noticed, but he did and he came up beside me and slowly laid the frame down on its face.

“You have to let this go,” he said tenderly, leaning close to me, his breath, minty with toothpaste and warm against my skin. He closed his eyes and began to kiss my face. My eyes stayed open, watching the down-turned frame. I felt disconnected from my body, as though my head were separate from me, as though it had been cut off. I watched
my husband slowly remove my body’s clothes, unbuttoning its blouse, tugging the jeans and panties down its legs. He was very focused. His head and body had not been separated from one another. He had not been cut apart. His own clothes seemed to melt away and then he was positioning my body around his and driving into it, while my head lay against the pillow and sometimes watched and sometimes didn’t. Sometimes it looked at the frame and thought about how it deserved this bodilessness as punishment for the body it had cut apart and killed. My daughter had been healthy. I know she had been, despite what Brian said to everyone else, despite what he said to me.

It happened at the park, that moment I made the wrong choice. I didn’t take Amy and Angie to the park often, instead letting them play in the safety of our backyard, with its high fence and privacy. But it had rained for three days and our backyard had become a soupy pit of mud and I decided I couldn’t isolate them forever. Brian had been at work, and his sisters had midterms to study for. So it was just the three of us. It was still chilly, so I had laid a blanket over them in the stroller. It wasn’t because I was trying to hide them. It wasn’t.

There were several children playing while their mother’s chatted with one another on the benches beside the woodchips. Amy and Angie had never seen other children their own age except on TV. They stared at them with awe and excitement. It was a moment I had pictured a million times before, completely different, yet the same. Time slowed as my daughters pulled away from me, running together, graceful in their synchronization, laughing in elation. The other single-bodied children, the ones whose mothers’ wombs understood normal and how to make it, stopped abruptly and stared, their jaws loose, pink mouths filled with tiny sharp teeth gaping wide. Their mothers, alerted by the sudden silence, perked up like meerkats. I froze, helpless. My daughters screamed in joy and ran to the slide, deftly climbing to the top and plunging down. All the other children met them at the bottom, surrounded them. The panic set in as the swarm compressed around them, gobbling them. All the other mothers were standing by then as well, and like me, stood frozen in wait. I couldn’t tell what they were thinking. I couldn’t see if there was disgust on their faces or not. Then I heard one of my daughter’s scream, then the other before it was lost in the roar of questions and shouts as the other children broke
free of their awe. I lurched forward, weaving through the children to reach my own trapped in the center. They were crying as two nasty faced little boys tugged on their arms and poked at their chests. I swatted the boys away, hearing their mothers yell behind me, then scooped my girls into my arms and ran, abandoning the stroller where it sat on the sidewalk as I fled to the car. As soon as I slammed the car door behind me, I called Brian. In a gurgled mess of tears said I was ready, that we had to make an appointment.

The doctors had promised so much. They had assured us, assured me that the percentage of total success was very high and that both my little girls would have a full and healthy life like any other child.

But none of them, none of us, knew then what I know now.

Brian fell asleep after, as always, rolling over to face away from me, pulling the quilt high over his shoulder and burying his face into the pillow. I picked up the frame and held it against my chest then scooted toward him, pressing my nose between his shoulder blades. I could feel the beat of his heart through my skull. In the dark of our room, against the back of the husband I knew was deeply asleep, I felt the turmoil in my gut, the need to expel. The same craving I felt every night. My moment of confession, always the same. I began my mantra.

“My daughter’s name was Amy and Angie,” I whispered, “and she was perfect and beautiful and happy.” The thumping back said nothing. “And I was happy,” I continued, “and the rest of the world doesn’t matter and never did. And you didn’t matter either, because you weren’t my daughter.” My voice cracked and I stopped, breathing deeply, smelling him and me on him, and the stink of the union of our bodies.

My voice was softer when I began again, little more than a breeze against his skin.

“We picked our favorite side, then cut our daughter in half and let the rest of her wither away. Only you haven’t noticed she’s incomplete, that she’s only a portion. My daughter had two faces and four arms and four legs and one strong heart twice the size of ours’. So we amputated half of her body so the world would think she was normal. And now,” I said, raising myself higher so that his thin dark hair tickled my lips, “my daughter is an abomination.”
I shrank back from him, staring at the flat space of his back, hateful. Then I slipped from the blankets and into the bathroom. In the dim light I could only barely make out the contours of my body—I looked like a corpse. In college I had been lean and lovely, all long legs and arms, slim hips and small, perky breasts. Charming Brian had been easy. My pregnancy had changed my shape, adding a sturdy solidity to my willowy form that had never been there before. Even after the birth, when I worked so hard to cave out the nymph of my youth from the fatty mass of my “maternal” body, that thickness had held onto my belly and thighs. But after the surgery, after the funeral, my body revolted against itself, and I let it. Now, after two years my skin was sallow, nearly translucent, and was stretched thin across the sharp knobs of my brittle bones. I looked half dead. I pulled my robe from the hook on the bathroom door and wrapped it around myself and wandered out into the hallway and down into the room that had been my daughter’s.

Amy was still asleep, lost in her partial dreams. She was a deep sleeper, like her father. She had rolled onto her side to face the door, her stuffed animals spread over the floor in front of her where Brian had pushed them. I walked forward as I did every night since half my daughter died, my bare feet whispering over the soft carpet, and methodically picked each plush toy up. Then, careful not to touch her, I arranged them against the other half of my daughter’s chest, filling the part of her that was now empty the best way I could. When I was done, I let my hands hover above her, trying to force myself to touch her, to love her as she needed me too, but my disgust and hatred for myself and what I had done to her, the horrendous deformation I had inflicted on her kept me away. She stirred in her sleep, clutching the stuffed animals to her chest and nuzzling into them, a name on her lips. My breath caught in my throat. I stumbled backwards from the room and slammed the door shut. Inside, Amy called out, startled awake by the bang. I held the door shut with the palm of one hand, leaning into it as the other clamped over my mouth to hold in the vomit.


