Not unacquainted with pain

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Not unacquainted with pain

by

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~Dedication~

To my parents, for million reasons—but mostly for teaching me to turn from despair to hope, and for never telling me “No, it tastes like French fries.”

&

To my brother, for being my partner in crime for all these years.
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The Force of the Blade

The phone rings. It wakes us. My husband rolls over and grabs the receiver. I hear his clipped French greeting, gruffer then normal after the sleep shakes from it. Then, the French gives way to English. The tone of his voice changes completely from language to language.

It’s Benjy. I can hear his burst of speech through the ear piece. My husband’s hand sweeps back against my hip.

We’ve slept together since we’ve come to France. But we haven’t made love.

I roll to my side and watch the light press against the heavy fabric of the drapes. It’s already midmorning in Avignon.

I stand and walk to the window, listening to my husband speak cheerfully with his son. Benjy will be eight in the fall, and he’s obsessed with baseball. The Seattle Mariners are his favorite. From the long pauses, and appropriate ‘ohs’ and ‘ahs’ he throws in at certain moments, I’m guessing Benjy is reading a score card. I pull back the curtains and cringe at the light.

The hotel was built right into the wall of the papal place. Well, more exactly against the wall, a holiday inn, kith and kin with the bastion of the papacy. In most circumstances, the vulgarity would taint things. But here, it’s the other way, the beauty elevates the hotel.

“That sounds great, Benj. And how’s your mother? Good. Good. Yes, she’s here.” He turns slightly, and watches me standing in the column of light. “You wanna talk to her?”

For a moment I contemplate shaking my head, begging off the conversation. But he extends the phone to me and smiles like a much younger man. Benjy always makes him seem younger. I don’t have the heart to refuse.
“Hi Benjy,” I say, putting all the energy I can find into my voice. I release the drape and the column of light disappears.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

He sketches on cigarette paper.

I read him a story about Anna Akhmatova once, about how she wrote her “Requiem” on cigarette paper stanza by stanza, then memorized them, rolled them and smoked them.

“How terrible.” He said. “And wonderful. Tell me, is that osmosis? Ingesting your work like that?”

“I don’t think so. It came from her first. And then returned.”

He was so smitten with the drama and elegance of such a process that he took up hand-rolls solely for that purpose.

I watch him scrawl wildly on the tiny square of tissue. He never drafts—no, words come later, after he has a fixed image of what the words must show. He draws his scripts out frame by frame, each paper becoming a building block, a brick in the structure of his tale.

Though, I notice, he only smokes the particularly dreadful drawings.

“Damn you Vincent!” He sneers around his cigarette (a wall eyed little girl in pig tails). “You filter through my mind like dusty air today.”

His latest project is a biopic, a magical realist yarn about the last two years of Vincent Van Gogh’s life. Though, at any given time, the story changes. Sometimes it’s a love story, last week it was a tale of madness and obsession, and last night he whispered in my ear, “A tragedy. A ghost story.”
The studio put up a lot of money to send him here, to the South of France, to explore the factual setting that will be meticulously, potentially Oscar Award-winningly recreated on a studio set.

He had suggested I come. It’s a boon of his job, and his success, my being able to travel with him for no good reason besides that I can.

I watch him scribble as his cigarette fumes, clenched in his teeth. We’re sitting at the Lapin Doux, a little café in the plaza. Mid-morning breakfast.

“I can’t hold him,” he says to me over his café American.

I look out at the shops that dot the plaza. “Like he’s a ghost?”

“Like he’s a mirage. It’s the strain of the real—What was he exactly? A genius? A myth? An icon? Of course—all of these things—but he was a man first. So there’s the trick, he has to be both man and myth—but he has to be fully man first and myth only in suggestion.”

I put down my pain au chocolate. “Why does he have to be both? Can’t he just be a man?

He jerks his head and ejects one of his monosyllabic negations. With a sigh, he rolls the picture he’s just drawn of a scruffy man sitting in a chair into a cigarette. “The audience won’t recognize him unless he’s both.”

“That’s a reductive at best! Don’t you have any faith in your audience?”

“Mm, none my bride.” His smile is all teeth, the perfect white boxes that line the top of his jaw. “None.”

For a moment the term rankles under my skin like it hasn’t in years. I can’t help but smile as he lights up his latest masterpiece.
“Don’t call me that.”

In response, he only grins.

I look out over the towers of the palace. “Savage.”

He leaves me to catch his train, dropping a kiss on my brow. This morning he is going to Nimes. Van Gogh didn’t live in Nimes—but he may have traveled there, and the studio has given him free rein to explore the area that surrounded the potential locale. He’s badgered me to come with him, but I can’t. I haven’t done any writing since we’ve left home, no real writing.

I’m on sabbatical from the school, so I haven’t had to worry about any of my usual lesson planning concerns. Technically, I’m on sabbatical. That’s what I demanded we call it, because I couldn’t swallow, couldn’t bear the idea of calling it a leave of absence or personal time. The school’s been very generous with me. After the hospitalization, which turned out to be lengthy, they still allowed for personal leave.

I sit for a long while watching the plaza. It’s lined with little shop-fronts and the street is cobbled together, brick on top of brick on top of brick. Just like one of his storyboards.

I pull out my notebook and try to cobble together my own words. But today, like the several days that have preceded it, I find myself lacking the mortar to hold them together. The bricks are there, solid and sturdy, but I can’t use them to build yet.

_In this, we are like two circling planets of grief—suffering has broken our orbit—our collision is inevitable—our collision is now . . ._
And they stretch on and on like this, mournful and pointed, but empty. Not tethered in space, or time.

In the margins I have written the words of Tennyson, as if in comfort, “So runs my dreams but what am I? An infant crying in the night: an infant crying for the light: and with no language but the cry.”

My cheeks tighten and my eyes go fuzzy. I pick up my pen and write, half maddened:

*If I am to succumb to despair, it will not be now, while my husband gallivants around southern France, it will not be here in Avignon, just months after my body betrayed me, and it will not be because someone else has said it better.*

I put down my pen and look off into the distance.

I wish I had gone with him.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

When we met, I’d been alone a long time.

He was in the final stages of divorcing his wife, Gloria, who, then as now, remains a phenomenally likeable woman. Benjy was just 16 months.

We met at a friend’s party in Vancouver. I’d gone up to Little Korea for the weekend to channel my inner Atwood. I’d written nothing, and in the late evening I called around the old gang in desperation, searching for somewhere to go to escape the musty apartment. I had ended up at Lily’s that night—she was having a party and she had oodles of interesting people (her words) for me to meet.
He was there, in town for some pick-ups for the Van Earst film. Usually screenwriters don’t get any say in the writing of pick-ups. When Lily introduced us, she gave me a puckish wink and said, “He’s that important.”

When she introduced me to him she said, “She’s a writer too.”

I wasn’t a real believer in love at first sight. I was barely a believer in love.

Ten months later, we were married.

On my way back to the hotel I stop to buy us a bottle of wine from the little shop at the base of the palace. It’s a sizable walk, several city blocks on the orthogonal city plan. But distance can’t be measured that way in Avignon, the city that had built itself up around the enormity of the papal structure and pinned itself against the river. Its streets flow like that water way, elegant, seemingly without order.

On the walk home from the shop, I hear music filtering through the afternoon air. I’d noticed earlier in the week that there was a music school near the hotel. I’d seen its little, gold-tinted sign above the doorway.

The full, lush notes of a tuba hang in the air. Awkward, yet full of grace. Ugly, but filled up with sharp, unseeming beauty.

I stand for a moment, my arms akimbo at my sides, the bottle knocking against my knees, cocking my head listening to the music.

“Full of grief, yet always rejoicing,” I whisper.

The music on the street spoke with the emotions I could not yet muster. It wrote silent words of air and sound around my head, with articulation I could not yet call up.
When I enter the hotel room, the drapes are still drawn against the midday sun. I think for a minute that I’m there alone, but then I see him, his bony feet at the bottom of the bed, like two broken fish. He must have returned from Nimes while I was out.

He’s flat on his back, sprawled out like a little boy. I shouldn’t wake him. But just as I turn to leave, he calls out to me.

“Come here, baby.”

He must have been sleeping. When he’s fully awake he never calls me that.

I sink down onto the bed beside him, half hunched, with my knees still under me, so I’m bent like an arch over him, my hand in his hair. He looks up at me, and smiles. Without his glasses, he looks disquietingly boyish, and much older.

“Good day?”

“Yes. Do you know how many fountains there are in Nimes?”

“No. How many?”

“I don’t know, but a lot.” He rolls over and nuzzles my knee with his chin, “It’s called the fountain city. Did you know that?”

“No.”

“What did you do today?”

“I went for a walk. There’s a music school up the way.”

“Oh yah?”

“Yes. There was a tuba playing on my way home. It was beautiful.”

“When I hear ‘tuba,’ I don’t think beautiful.”

“No. But I’m telling you it was.”

He rolls over on his stomach, and props himself up to look at me.
“I saw a little girl today.” His hand rested on my knee, half caressing, half steadying. “She was playing in one of the fountains. Her hair was so blonde and her laughter was like—everywhere. It filled my head.” His hand moves further up my thigh. “I watched her a long time.”

Something swells in me, like rage and disgust and anger all at once. Or maybe it was shame. It’s so difficult to tell with all of these emotions pressed flesh-up against one another inside me.

I push his hand away. “We should go, if we want dinner.” Then I stand and walk to the bathroom door. He freezes on the bed, his hand still extended where I had pushed it away. Finally, he seems to relent.

“Alright.” He puts his head back down on the pillow. “Alright.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

I take off my clothes and climb into the shower. Unbidden, the image of Gloria dances before me.

I remember our first encounter, just after their divorce had been finalized. She’d called and quite pleasantly asked me to lunch. I thought it was some kind of trap—or a test, or something, like she was checking me out—or worse, trying to scare me off.

But that wasn’t the case. For someone who prided herself on understanding the subtly of human emotion, I’d read Gloria wrong.

“You’re a part of his life now—he’s so happy. I’ve never seen him this way. Not even when we were young.” There was no sadness in her tone, not even resolve or acceptance. Just kindness and interest.
I knew I was lucky—unbelievably lucky, that his first wife and the mother of his son approved of me. More, seemed to like me.

“I see what he loves about you. You’re like him—driven, brilliant.”

I told her she didn’t know anything about me and that I certainly wasn’t brilliant.

“No, you are,” she’d replied with a smile. “I can tell. I’m so glad you’re in his life.”

And she genuinely was.

It was after that meeting that I first began to think perhaps he and I were truly suited.

“We’ll watch out for each other,” he’d promised me, one morning several weeks before our wedding. “We’ll keep each other from getting crazy.”

“Or drive each other there,” I’d offered with a smile.

“Better driven by someone other than yourself.”

Our life together was far from an Eden. But we were happy. We did love each other.

I lean my head against the cool tiling.

“It’s not right to mourn forever,” he whispered to me last night as we lay beside each other in bed, chaste as children. “I don’t want us to. I don’t even know if we can.”

And I think that too. But everyday, the failure comes upon me. He doesn’t blame me. That’s the worst. I almost wish he would.

Because it was my flesh that did it.

I step back into the room, which is still dark. He’s standing, his boney elbows jutting apart from his torso. He smiles at me, in my wet hair and a towel. It’s the sleepy, secret smile he saves just for me—lecherous and boyish and genuine at the same time.
He is so beautiful. Sometimes, I feel as if he is secretly handsome in surreptitious ways that only I fully understand, that only I know. Other times, I feel like everyone can see how beautiful he is and I’m crushed by jealousy.

I smile back, and dress in silence. He sits on the bed to tie his shoe. My bag is open on the floor, the busted contents spewing forth from where I dropped it when I entered the room. Scraps of paper with my inelegant script are visible, crumpled napkins with hasty notes jotted on them—curled, ripped thoughts I’ve discarded. He looks down at them as I button my shirt. I can tell he’s trying to appear disinterested.

“You’ve been writing?” he asks at last.

“Yes. Well, sort of.”

His eyes gleam like pits of oil in the darkness as he looks up at me. “That’s good.” I know he cannot read what I’ve written from his angle. I shrug.

“You will let me read it, won’t you?”

“It’s not ready yet.”

In my heart, I’m not sure if it ever will be.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

I’m very private about my writing. He once fished a manuscript out of my drawer and sent it off to The New Yorker. I knew nothing about it until I received a rejection letter for a story I had never submitted.

I took it to him marveling, intent on making a joke about how strange it was to be rejected for something I had not dreamt to publish. His face was so guilty.

Suddenly, my desire to make a joke evaporated.
“Why do you write these things, anyway, if you’re just going to lock them away in a drawer somewhere?”

I was cradling the rejection letter to my chest. “You had no right.”

“This story is brilliant!”

“You had no right!”

Splotches of color came up on his cheeks.

“Why create something only to hide it away?”

“It’s none of your goddamn business!”

“Don’t you think you have a responsibility? You’ve brought something into this world—don’t you think at some point you have to be accountable?”

“They’re mine! I can do whatever I want with them!”

Amongst business insiders, he’s known as the master of dialogue. This means that not only is he brilliant at replicating the natural rhythms and patterns of actual speech, but also that he can perfectly authenticate lyric, absurd nonsense that no one would ever say. And on paper it’s true. But in life, in our life, in that moment of our life, his reply was,

“What a thing to say.”

That still stands as the worst fight we ever had.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

We sit at the same table we’d used at breakfast at the Lapin Doux.

He orders the entrée the restaurant was named for, and inexplicably I am outraged.

“A rabbit?”

“Sure. Must be good if the place is named for it. Worth a shot.”
I know it’s a ridiculous thing to find shocking, but for some reason it is. I kick him under the table. “Savage.”

He pulls a face of mock pain. “What is it about Americans?”

I just raise my eyebrow in response, because what it is could be anything with such an open ended question.

“Americans and rabbits,” he smiles, almost cheekily as he raises his empty fork. “It seems so arbitrary really—when do you suppose the flip came? When do you suppose we started teaching our children that rabbits are pets and not entrees?”

He bites his tongue at the end of that question, and I look away politely as he winces. “I haven’t the foggiest.”

We watch the sun sink beneath the spires of the tower as we wait for our food.

“I had one once.”

He lights his cigarette languidly, his eyes rising to my face as he shakes the flame of his match out. “You had what once?”

“A rabbit.”

He laughs. It isn’t the laugh he makes with his voice though, it’s the one that comes from his body, his shoulders lift slightly and his head rears back behind his smile. I remember suddenly, how I love him.

“I was about six, maybe seven. It was my first real pet. We had a dog, you know, but the bunny was mine—the first thing that was really mine. We kept it in the back yard, in a little cage made out of chicken coop wire. I only had it for about a year. One morning, my dad found the cage ripped open, and the rabbit was in pieces. Wild dogs, he thought. And when he came to tell me, I could tell he was afraid, afraid that I would be totally broken up.
But I didn’t even cry. I just sort of nodded. And I thought to myself—well, maybe I didn’t really love it that much, after all.”

His smile has faded slightly, but the corners of his lips are still slightly curled, as if frozen. He looks strange in the lamplight. Suddenly, I’m taken by the urge to say something clever and funny, to make what I’ve just said disappear.

But I clamp down on the urge, clamp down on my desire to elevate our discomfort, clamp down on the longing to make things easier.

“Did it have a name?”

“I’m sure it did. But I can’t remember it.”

He doesn’t reply, just nods. In my periphery, I see his hand, slowly advancing across the table. His fingertips brush the edges of mine, and I pull away. I try to pretend the brief contact isn’t bruising, and put my hand nonchalantly in my lap. I don’t look at him. I don’t need to.

“Anyway,” I smile into the tabletop. “Maybe we should just eat them, hm?”

He is looking away from me, off into the distance, over the towers of the palace. His finger scraps his chin slightly, and he nods.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

That night we tumble into bed. I’m half drunk from too much wine—red—and I’m sure the tannins will make me pay in the morning.

He’s not nearly as drunk as I am, but he’s far from sober. His hand is like a paw on my shoulder as he buries his face in my chest.

“Remember Granada?” he whispers, his breath against my skin.

“Of course.”
“What a horrible honeymoon.” He laughs, his eyes searching my face for something.

“It wasn’t! I loved it.”

“It was too hot, and you cried at the Alhambra!” His hand brushes a stray hair away from my face.

I press a hard kiss to his brow. “I cried because it was beautiful, you yutz.”

His mouth finds mine in the darkness, full of need, stinging with the afterbite of alcohol. The contact is searing and brief.

“And because you loved me?” he asks. If he was sober it would be playful, but now the question is edged and raw with quiet need.

My hands find his cheeks. “And because I love you.”

He settles his head into the crook of my neck. “I made love to you everyday in Granada.”

I smile and stroke his brow affectionately. “That sounds like the first line of an epic poem.”

“A bad one.” He scoffs.

I kiss his brow again. “Maybe.”

“I would right now, you know,” he says through a yawn, “But you’re too drunk and I’m a gentleman.”

“Hm. Big talk.”

His head rears back suddenly and I’m afraid that my joking was actually a provocation. I don’t want to tell him no. But I know I will. His black eyes burn in the darkness as if he knows it too.

“Come to Arles with me tomorrow.” It’s a command, not a question.
Still, I hear myself say, “Ok.”

He rests his head against me again. And I shudder with relief to have been asked a question I could say yes to.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

In the night I dream of the hospital. This is the first I’ve had in several weeks.

I see myself in the steel girded bed, my eyes down, watching the pulse cuff on my finger. He sits beside me, intent. Mournful. And, I know, worried.

For many hours we haven’t spoken.

Then I say, “At least.” My voice cracks from lack of use.

He leans forward intently, “At least what?” His hand seeks mine over the top of the covers and holds it firmly.

For a long time I don’t say anything. Then finally, I croak, “At least you have Benjy.” My throat is dry.

I don’t watch his face, but I don’t have to.

“Don’t say that!” His voice has gone from concerned to horrified.

“God!” Suddenly, I’m screaming, my voice already damaged by the breathing tube they inserted for the surgery, “Just give me that.”

I wait for the tears to come, only to realize with bitterness that it’s too soon.

“Please, God,” I whisper, “Please, just give me that.”

He says nothing then. I know he is feeling empty and helpless.

I just feel empty.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~
When I wake, I feel the lingering fingers of the dream grasping at me. Panic stings my throat, and I fight the urge to throw back the sheets to see if I’m sitting in blood. I make a noise like a broken sob, clawing at my chest with blunt, untended fingernails.

“Baby?”

I freeze, suddenly aware that I’ve woken him.

He sits up beside me, and I see the movement, the crimpling of the sheets as his legs stretch.

“The dream again?” He’s so close I feel his words against my skin. I nod. He drops his head and rests his brow against my shoulder. My hands are still at my chest, clutching through the sheets, leaving red swaths on my skin.

“I dream too.”

I say nothing, and I cannot look at him.

“You want to talk about it?”

I shake my head no.

His hand slides up my back and tangles in my hair. The other gently pries my nails out of my skin. He brings my gnarled, fisted fingers to his lips.

“Don’t.” The command is so gentle I could easily mistake it for a plea.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The ride to Arles is shorter than I thought it would be. The train does nothing for the wine induced pinching behind my eyes. But I’ve vowed to be good today, to be positive and helpful. To be his accomplice, a sidekick. It’s a relief in a way, to have a role to fill. He wants to spend the morning marking off the Van Gogh spots, and I have no objection.
When we come to the Night Café, I’m struck by how normal it looks. The culture has absorbed the art of it. Or perhaps the art was never but an illusion.

“A madman and a genius sat here once.”

I poke him. “Sit down, and that will be true right now.”

“You’re awfully glib.”

“You’re right, you better not sit. St. Remy is twenty miles up the road that I’m not willing to go.”

He shudders at the thought of the rundown mental hospital where Van Gogh lived out the last of his life. “Me neither. Say, wife?”

I look up, eyebrow indignant at my pet name, “Yes?”

“I’m not willing to take that trip either.” He whispers in my ear. “You hear me?”

I try to keep up the playfulness, tugging my earlobes. “See? All present and accounted for.”

He takes my hand and we walk away. After about a block he whispers, “It’s nice to hear you say that.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

After we finish the Van Gogh sites, we take a tour of one of those big Roman Coliseums. Actually, I learn, it’s an amphitheatre, one of the largest that the Romans built in Gaul. If our smiling tour guide is to be believed, the main use for this amphitheatre in modern Arles is bullfighting—which is quite a popular and jubilant spectacle, with up to 20,000 people watching. I take my husband’s hand as we pass a row of authentic matador costumes that have been used at the bull fights here. The suits are enclosed in glass and
backlit by large halogen beams. The many sequined details of the suits sparkle under the glow.

“We should buy one of those for Benjy,” I whisper in his ear, “He’d love it.”

He laughs. “He would love it. But don’t you think he’d stick out a bit on the first day of second grade?”

That, I concede, is probably true.

We stroll through the arched hallway, its Roman architecture buttressed with later 20th century renovations. It is dark and poorly lit on this side of the coliseum, even though this hallway is punctuated by sporadic flood lights that illuminate various paintings along the corridor.

I feel as if I’m picking my way through semi-darkness, each footfall is heavy and intentional. We’re surrounded by that foreign familiar smell of damp, ancient stone, and the air is warm and tastes metallic from the halogen.

The taste of those bright little bulbs seems an appropriate accessory to the drab little canvases that depict the historical purpose of this structure. Some are lovely, if a bit Art Nouveau—others feature water colors so blunt it might as well be crayon—the walleyed smile of one Caesar-esque Roman leading a sacrificial elephant to his doom is particularly heinous.

“What a hack,” I whisper into his shoulder.

He smiles. “Well, it’s certainly not a Van Gogh.”

“A staggering understatement.”

My eyes stay with the Caesar as I fall behind in the darkness. I discover that I’ve been leading with my nose because that’s the first thing that makes contact with his back,
smashed brutally against the blade of his shoulder. I groan. The noise seems unnatural and unbecoming in the long echo of the hall. He doesn’t respond with the usual zest. He doesn’t respond at all.

I look up, and his face is drawn—his lips have gone thin and white with unhappiness. This is not the mere irritation of inconvenience or the skeptical bent that sometimes accompany certain conversation. This is true displeasure, an expression he’s given to so rarely I hardly recognize it at first. I follow his line of vision to see what has so offended him.

It’s an oil painting—a burst of mid-thirties fauvism, if my fanatical consumption of art terms has taught me anything. The splashes of supernatural color illuminate a strange, nearly cubic depiction of a matador and a bull locked in a death dance. I’m so taken aback by the sharp color and strange beauty that for a moment, the brutality of the scene escapes me. But, I see what’s upset him.

I’ve never really thought much about bullfighting. But the guide explained that the battles that culminate in a slaying, in the actual killing of the bull, are the most lauded. My only point of reference prior to this has been cartoons—the true violence of the thing has never occurred to me.

The paint, in a burst of pink and orange, makes the act clear. The matador, as lithe and graceful as a brushstroke, has buried his blade between the bull’s eyes—his feet turned in, as if he is dancing. The bull is still powering forward—unaware of the burst of color on the blade that has already sealed its fate, unaware that it is its own forward momentum against the blade and not the hand of the matador that will cause the killing stroke. It is beautiful. And savage.
My hand finds his elbow, which is limp at his side. I contemplate whether I should soothe him or distract him and I tug his sleeve like a child. He turns his head slightly—a silent acknowledgement of my presence.

“What does it say?” I can’t read the plaque that describes the picture in French, other than the visceral squish of the severe words like “mort.”

He sighs and then hedges. For one moment, I wonder if he’s struggling to translate or debating editing. Then, I become convinced he’s trying to spare me some ugly content. I’m about to reel at him, when he says, “The death that is the most venerated of all is the clean death. Sometimes it is referred to as the lucky death.” His voice—which I would know in the darkness—seems hard and foreign. Then he tsks, like he’s dismissing a naughty child.

I look back at the black beady red of the bull’s eyes. For a moment, I’m viewing death with a tourist’s wonder, as if it were something strange and new. And I know too, that he has momentarily lost the mantle of traveler. He has returned to the gravity of existence—to the world a thousand miles from here—the world where we will inevitably return.

“Are we the matador,” I say at last. “Or the bull?” We stand there side by side as if neither of us is unacquainted with pain.

“Savage.” His voice is full of feeling—none of it unkind.
Blue like a Bird’s Egg

I learned what I was on Easter Sunday when I was seven. My entire family was gathered at my parent’s house to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, and I had just killed a baby bird.

It started this way—I found a speckled Robin’s egg beneath the lilac bushes in the back yard and smashed it open with a rock. I crouched there, looking down at the tiny, snap-necked little birdling with the blunt edge of stone clutched in my palm. The Methodist’s bells rang, endlessly, tolling “Jesus Christ is Risen Today.” Those notes hit my ears like tinny little chirps—empty alleluias. The creature lay before me, covered in mucus like the yolk of an egg from some breakfast, if I had ever eaten eggs before that, and I hadn’t, never trusting the gooish consistency. I certainly never ate them after that morning. The labored breathing rocked the transparent chest, the little beak clicked futilely. I could see the tiny half-formed lungs trying to flap. I could see the flailing of its heart, shuddering.

I only realized what I’d done after I brought the rock down again and ended the poor creature’s suffering.

I ran inside—through the kitchen, where my mother was bent over the stove, and through the dining room where my father, my mother’s brother, his wife, their two children and my great uncle were all discussing politics, and then through the living room, where my mother’s father, my great aunt and the ape my father’s sister married were dozing in the half light of the afternoon. Only Aunt Ainsley was nowhere to be seen. No one seemed to notice me as I ran by.

My breath was coming in short hollow gasps—I hadn’t meant to do it. I hadn’t! or maybe I had—maybe I had—Of Course I had—
I wanted to see what would happen when that rock came down.

But why?

I snuck into the cool darkness of my Father’s study—which hung with shadows, even in the noon day sun. That was my hiding place as a little girl, where I would run to hide after I’d done something naughty, and crawl under my father’s desk and wait for my mother’s sweet voice or my father’s gentle hands to coax me out. I went there then, creeping through the dust, and curling up in the hollow gully where the chair rested, rocking back and forth and trying not to cry.

In the eye of my mind, I saw the breaking of the half grown heart, and I heard the clicking of a tiny mouth trying its best to form an Alleluia. And I saw my hand crush it.

My stomach churned with bile, and a surge of nausea overtook me.

Thankfully, I’d always had a sensitive system. I knew how to handle nausea.

I began to recite the words to something long remembered. Sometimes it was a nursery rhyme, or the words to a familiar song. But that day, what with the resurrection of the flesh so fresh in my mind, the words that fell from my lips were the ones the Son taught the disciples. As I whispered them, over and over to stave off the rolling, I thought of how my father always took my mother’s hand during the Lord’s Prayer, instead of pressing his palms together like the holy were supposed too. I thought of how just that morning I’d watched the cage his fingers formed around my mother’s slender hand tremble when my head was supposed to be bowed and my eyes shut. My mother always said her “Amen” with her lips pressed to the fleshy part of his palm.
My stomach started to calm after the fourth repetition of “Thine is the Kingdom” and I thought that I had finally calmed down enough for the tears to come. And they may have, but—

The door squawked open on hinges that had made no noise when I’d entered, and my Aunt Ainsley appeared in my sanctum.

She stumbled slightly, her awkward dance accompanied by the music that followed her everywhere she went—the soft clink of ice against the side of a glass. Before that Sunday, I hadn’t seen her in a year at least—the last time had been at a wedding where she’d had too much to drink and started yelling about ‘sick blood’ until my father had to carry her out. She always ended up causing a scene. But she was my father’s only living family, so my mother insisted we invite her.

The truth was she frightened me.

When Aunt Ainsley’s first husband left her, it made the front page of the Oshkosh Herald. Not because their actual separation had been so noteworthy, but because when he’d attempted to leave in their Rolls Royce, Ainsley had pulled a stone out of their cobble sidewalk and hit him in the face. She landed three good, cartilage smashing blows before a neighbor pulled her off him. By then the police had been notified as well. Though he pressed no charges, Ainsley’s first husband had a crooked nose for the rest of his life.

For this reason, my father always said, “Ainsley wouldn’t know what love was if it hit her upside the head.” He would turn to me then and smile, before adding, “With a rock.”

I froze as she entered the room and silently hoped that maybe she wouldn’t see me. Her compact little body, which despite its age and the amount of drink she regularly enjoyed was still lithe and attractive, shifted slightly as her eyes adjusted to the dark. She wasn’t
looking at me—but I had the sudden feel of a game hen about to be overtaken by a fox.

Then Ainsley’s smoky voice crackled through the dark room. “Clover?” She used the nickname my father had given me. “You in here?”

I didn’t say anything.

Her heel caught on the edge of the carpet. Another woman would have fallen—but Ainsley was used to the tide of intoxication. She’d had her sea legs for years, no carpet could bring her down. She paced forward a few steps, her pretty, girlish little face draped in half light. Then her head drew back slightly, her nostrils flaring, as though she’d caught my scent. Her eyes dropped to the desk.

“Is that you under there?” She asked. I shuddered. But she’d seen me—there was no point hiding.

She smiled when I crept forward, a thin, fibrous twisting of the lips, her teeth sharp and crystalline in the darkness of the study. Her shoulders hunched forward, her eyes holding me fast, two quick pacing steps making her appear feline and predatory. Then she was on her knees, folding up gracelessly and crawling towards my hiding spot.

“There you are, bitsy,” she said once she was eye level with me, straightening her dress. “You know, when I was little, my Daddy used to call me ‘Rabbit.’” Air escaped her lungs in a tinny burst that sounded like laughter, but rattled like a cough. “Rabbits eat Clover, don’t they?”

Then, she leaned forward and bit my nose. She didn’t bite it very hard, but her teeth still left a dim impression of sharpness on my skin, and her breath was heavy with the prickly scent of iced evergreen.

My voice sounded very small and muted like a sob. “And carrots.”
Ainsley laughed—a sharp, jagged bark. “So, what are you doing in here?”

A sudden surge of anger over took me. “What are you doing in here?” I replied, in a tone that my mother would surely call rude.

“Hiding out of course,” she replied matter of factly, straightening the black lace brocade of her dress. “We got a sickness in this family, and I can’t stomach it. God almighty knows there’s not a family around that doesn’t have ‘em to a degree—Hell” she smiled puckishly and poked me in the arm, “Even God Almighty’s family had ‘em! Course our family can’t do that raising from the dead thing, can we?”

I shook my head. Her black eyes fell on me then, and though I now know it was a trick of the light, for a moment I thought they were glowing yellow. “What’s a matter, Clover?” There seemed to be real concern in her voice. “You look pale? Something upsetting you? Scaring you—beside me, of course,” She gave me her wolfish smile again, but I thought that it looked a little knowing. She paused for a moment and waited for me to speak. I didn’t.

Her head lolled back slightly, making her neck bend at an unnatural angle, her nebulous eyes looking at me blankly, as though not really seeing. I thought of the bird, and choked back a sob.

“What’s a matter, hm?” Her voice seemed suddenly sharp, a little demanding. “You done something bad?”

I was trembling, terrified, and I didn’t reply, but I was pinned down by Ainsley’s hard stare and a surge of guilt crashed like a wave and broke on my back. I didn’t have to say anything.
She nodded. “Yah, you have. Well, it isn’t your fault.” Her eyes seemed dark and bottomless, and suddenly very far away. “That’s what you get with your daddy’s blood.”

“What do you mean?” I could hear tears in my voice.

Her eyes went up, for a moment I thought she was looking heavenward. Her pretty, expensive dress looked wrinkled up close. And her face seemed horribly haggard as the dim light of the study cast her features at a most unflattering angle.

“See that picture, Clover?” her eyes glittered with alcohol, “That’s my Daddy.”

The man in the picture she pointed to was not my grandfather who died before I was born, but my own father as he was at 15.

“My Daddy was a real handsome man—his hands were so big. He was beautiful and good—but,” she shook her head. Then her head swung around—like it was too heavy to pivot on her neck, and her expression wrinkled with accusation. “Don’t you know nothing about our family?”

This was what I knew about my father’s family at that moment—there was no family left but he and Ainsley. I knew that there was money from a trust that my grandfather who died before I was born had left them. And I knew that sometimes, my daddy woke shouting in the middle of the night. And that his hands always shook slightly, even when they were pressed securely between my mother’s soft ones, or my own small ones.

Ainsley grabbed my chin, forcing me to look into her face—dark hollows had formed under her black eyes, making her look skeletal and sickly. “You deserve to know.” Her mouth smelled like medicine. “My Daddy was a good man. He was. But the ghosts in our veins poisoned him, and made his mind sick. He didn’t mean to do what he did . . . but he did it.”
“What ghosts?” I was trembling.

I watched her pretty lip curl back over those sharp white teeth. “You’ve never felt them, Clover? Tugging in your blood? Making you do things?”

I thought about the fluttering little lungs under the transparent chest that I had freed. I thought of the helpless little life that I’d just destroy because I’d wanted to see what would happen.

She nodded then, correctly reading the terror in my face. “Me too—that’s why I do this” her toe pushed idly against the empty tumbler. “We got an evil in us. I don’t know where or why for, but I know it’s there.”

Her nails bit into my chin, and I whimpered slightly. With a violent flick of her wrist she turned my head out, towards the study, and suddenly I could see us—Ainsley and me, reflected in the opaque surface of cabinet glass. There we were, a little girl and a drunk woman, dim and ghostly, shimmering yellow with echoed light. I watched my reflected aunt’s mouth move.

“When I was thirteen, my Daddy came home from work one day, and took the shot gun off the wall. Then he walked into the dining room of our house and shot my mother in the head. Then he shot himself. We never knew why. It was your Daddy found them that way. He hasn’t been right since. And he ain’t never gonna be right. We none of us are.”

And then, my reflection and Ainsley’s disappeared and I saw it—I saw the man who looked so much like my father—storm into the room, clutching a gun—I saw a pretty woman who was not unlike my mother stand, scurry, try to run—my body shuddered at the sound the gun made as it unloaded, and I closed my eyes so I didn’t have to see the burst of viscera the explosion released—but I felt it, I felt it, I thought I did, the warm, wet shower, my nostrils
flaring beneath the iron bite of spilled blood—and then I saw it, I saw the crushed goo of the liquefied birdling, covering my hands. I screamed—I wanted to—but couldn’t, my voice was gone—only a small whimper of air escaped my mouth—a nothing sob in the dark room.

It seemed that hours passed. But I know they didn’t. It was only seconds, and when I opened my eyes, I saw the pale reflection of the ghost me looking back with clear eyes, colored like the blue of a bird’s egg. Ainsley was there too—her hand stretched out—reaching for whatever it was she saw in the glass. Her lips twisted, and she moaned something that sounded like “Daddy.”

Her grip slackened on my chin, and I stood up abruptly. I made no goodbyes.

As I scrambled to my feet and made for the door, I heard Ainsley’s dry sob. “Thank God,” she moaned, “Thank God I’m satisfied to only hurt myself.”

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I leaned my head against the cool white paneling of the house—feeling like something was kicking my heart. No wonder. No wondered I’d done such an awful thing. We were bad. I was bad. We weren’t never gonna be right.

I heard my mother’s hurried steps clack behind me, but I did not turn. Her hand was smooth and warm from the dishwater as it brushed the hair off my forehead.

“Baby, what’s the matter?” she asked.

Maybe it was the bitter scent of the lilacs that had yet to drop off the bush beside me, or maybe it was the sweet familiar smell of my mother, but suddenly my body could take no more. I pitched forward, and vomited, spewing the entire contents of my stomach onto the soft April ground.
Pudding Eyes

I’m sitting on the floor playing with the model train of Pidge’s, when Momma comes in suddenly. She sits down in the old rocker that’s right next to Pidge’s bed, and her face is strange. It’s all slack—sideways and gray, like she was gonna sick on the floor. She’s shaking all over—like a leaf. Like a leaf in autumn my daddy says, when I come in shivering on a cold day. I look up at her, my hand still on the remote for the train. Pidge just looks, seeing nothing, with his wide pudding eyes.

“What’s matter, Momma?” I ask, quiet, so I don’t startle her.

“Sibby,” she starts, one hand over her heart, like a distressed damsel in a movie. She stops, her top teeth are pretty white, biting into her lips till the bottoms go red, and she starts again. “Sibby, you used to play in the cul de sac with Mary didn’t you? You know, Mary Thomas?”

I nod.

Then Momma starts shaking and her eyes tear up, and she reaches out for me, but her reach seems strange and I don’t move.

“Baby,” Momma says. She hasn’t called me baby in a long time. “Baby, I’m sorry. Mary got hit by a car this morning.”

I don’t know what to say. I just shrug, cause I don’t know what else to do.

“She’s in the hospital?” I know all about hospitals, cause of Pidge.

“Baby,” Momma says again. I wonder, is she really talking to me? Her voice cracks, and she half speaks, half whispers, “Baby, Mary was killed. She’s dead.”

I don’t say anything. I know there’s a difference somehow between being killed and dying, but either way you end up dead.
I still don’t know what to say—but I feel like I should say something. So I open my mouth, and look back at Momma, and then she starts crying real hard. Loud sobs, her hand over her mouth and nose kinda, and I haven’t thought of anything to say so I just don’t.

But Momma’s crying gets Pidge going, and he starts doing his yowl. Daddy calls it his back-up beep, short, loud little moany noises. I guess he didn’t like seeing Momma cry. I don’t like it either. I’m just used to it.

Momma hops up and runs over to Pidge’s bed, and turns him on his back. I always turn him on his side when I play Train, cause I know he likes to watch. The Doctors say he doesn’t really know anything that’s happening, even if he’s on his side looking at you, but I don’t believe that.

“It’s alright baby boy, Momma was just foolin, everything is all right.”

I hate it when Momma lies to Pidge.

I hit the speed button on the little train remote, and the car hits the hard curve going way too fast. The engine makes the turn, but the cargo cars don’t stand a chance. They flop sideways off the track, the caboose flipping upside down on top of them, and the engine stuck in place, on the tracks.

The wheels keep spinning, even though they aren’t going anywhere. Their tiny gears squeal.

* * * * *

You lay here. You watch Sybi, playing on the floor—your train woo-woos in a weary circle. Sybi says your name, and you almost remember it.

Mama comes through the door. Her eyes fall on you—but its not you that she wants.

It’s never you anymore.
She drops on her knees by Sybi. Sybi looks up. Your eyes are on Sybi, she’s the one to watch.

Mama speaks all warbled about the Mary. You did not know the Mary. She came after—after your eyes turned to pudding.

Sybi says nothing.

Mama starts crying.

Sybi tips your train.

You are tired of Mama’s tears.

* * * * *

“Damn cul de sac.” Daddy says. He’s standing in the kitchen talking to Momma about Poor Mary. They sent me to bed a little while ago, but I am listening on the landing of the kitchen stairs. Daddy always says, Sibby, you’re a clever girl. I have to be clever like this, because Momma and Daddy never talk about the good stuff when I’m around.

“It’s criminal, that any car should come in here barrelin’ down the drive like that! Maybe now the city will take that speed limit issue seriously.”

“I saw Janice this afternoon—I didn’t even know what to say—“

“Aw Eileen, what can you say? It’s a tragedy, a damn shame.”

“I know, it’s just . . .”

Momma trails off. I can’t see her, but I imagine she’s looking out the window, her eyes glassy. She does that a lot.

“Just what, Eileen?” My father’s voice goes deep—like it does when I do something wrong and need a talking too.
“I feel like,” Momma’s voice is so quiet I have to lean way over the landing to hear her. “I just feel like we, of all people . . .”

There’s a pause. It seems loud to me.

“What?”

The pause goes on. And then Momma says, her words sharp around where the quiet was, “We should go over there—we should, I don’t know, talk with them. . . .”

Again, the room goes quiet. Then I hear this strange noise, a bubbly sort of sound, like when the sink in the kitchen backs up. I realize after a while it’s Daddy. Daddy’s laughing.

“Right—we should go over and offer our professional grief counseling, being the experts we are. My God, Eileen!”

“Erik—“

“No. You’re right.” Daddy’s voice is hard now, like it gets when he’s angry.

Then Momma’s voice goes hard too, but it’s shaking. “And there are other things we’re experts in, aren’t there?”

“Oh. I see.” There’s another long pause. “You mean guilt? Is that what you mean, Eileen?”

“Erik—“

“Don’t you talk to me about guilt. Don’t punish me—“

“Oh for God’s sake! You think you’re the only one suffering? You think you’re the only one who feels guilty about what happened? You think I don’t feel it? You think Sibby doesn’t feel it?”
My head snaps up at the sound of my name. I don’t breath, just in case they decide to start whispering. They do that sometimes, mostly when they are talking about important things. Or about me. Then I hear Daddy’s voice, and it’s not a whisper.

“Don’t you dare bring Sibby into this!”

Momma laughs like she’s barking, and her voice is very sassy, “Erik, Sibby is never out of this!”

Once, when Pidge and I were younger, our Uncle Ross took us out on the Fourth of July, and we shot rockets out of an empty beer bottle. They weren’t very pretty, not like regular fireworks, but they made sharp popping noises when they shot out of the bottle. A noise like that comes from the kitchen now, a kind of quick *POP* noise. But I know that wasn’t a rocket. It sounded like a hand landing on our Ikea chrome table that Daddy says was a hell of a steal.

I lean even further forward. There’s bustling in the kitchen. And then Momma says, “God. I keep thinking it’s going to get easier.”

“It will eventually. I hope.”

“I still feel like maybe we can help somehow.”

“How? Give a talk on tragedy?”

“Travesty,” my Momma says quietly.

“What?”

“It’s a travesty, Erik, not a tragedy. A travesty is something humans cause.”

Daddy’s voice gets warm when he grins. It’s like that now. “Semantic bullshit?”

I kind of gasp. The BS word is very bad.
“It isn’t bullshit.”

I can’t believe my Momma just said bullshit.

“And what happened to us, Eileen? Was that a tragedy, or a travesty?”

Momma doesn’t say anything. Dishes clank together.

* * * * *

You hear Sybi come in. Her feet sweep, skin-toe skin-toe, against the floor.

“Hey yah, Pidge.” Her voice tastes like tears in your dry mouth. Mama and the Father fight.

You feel cold little flesh bones press against your hand.

Your Sybi will sleep there all night.

Tucked up on the floor of your room—her fingers twined up with yours. Tucked beneath the spider ribs of your medicine bed, she holds you, tight-tight.

* * * * *

I dream of Pretty Mary, her hair in two matching braids bound up with red. She is playing in the street, her hands flail like she’s being buffeted by the wind—sailing up and down. She dances in a strange breeze, somehow flying, her arms flap wild at her sides.

She’s going to jump—she’s going to take off and leap.

I suddenly feel scared watching her—I run forward—“Don’t Mary, don’t jump! Hold onto the chains!”

But I’m too late. All I see is the white bottoms of two perfect new sandal sneakers flying through the air.

Everything gets slowed down—and I scream. I scream out—“Pidge!” and I hear the awful crack as the body strikes the support pole and drops head first into the ground.

* * * * *
You sleep—sleep is what you are.

You wake—every moment is a waking.

* * * * * *

Momma talks all the way to school. “Everyone is going to talk about it, I’m sure.”

Her knuckles white up on the wheel. Daddy says that it’s a sign of weakness to always drive with two hands. I’ve never seen Momma drive with less.

“When they do, Sibby, what are you going to say?”

I look up. This is a test. I don’t think I’m going to pass.

“About what?”

“Sibby! What are you going to say when they ask about Mary?”

“That she’s dead?”

“Sibyl Anne Rose!” That’s the closest Momma comes to yelling at me. “You say ‘It’s not polite to talk of the dead.’”

“Ok.”

Momma kind of cuts her eyes sideways at me then. “You don’t look very good. Did you sleep alright last night?”

“Yes.”

“In your own bed?”

“Yes, Momma!”

Momma hates it when I sleep in Pidge’s room. She doesn’t think it’s normal.

The school comes up on the left side of the road. Momma makes this ‘hm’ kind of noise, and then whips the car across the lane, so that we’re against the sidewalk on the driver’s side. I make to get out, but she stops me.
“Sibby, don’t!” She looks scared. “Come on. This way.”

For the life of me, I have no idea where she expects me to go.

“Well come on,” she says impatiently. “Climb out over me so you don’t have to get out into the street.”

I try to keep my penny loafers from getting caught in the steering wheel, and accidentally hit myself in the face with my lunch box. I rub my nose as I stand on the sidewalk beside the school. Momma looks sad, but she’s smiling.

“I love you sweetie. Have a good day.”

And then she’s gone, whipping a U-ee out in front of traffic. A blue car blasts its horn at her. She waves apologetically, and peels away.

* * * * *

You watch the branches sway like ticker tag waters.

Light strict-scratches on the window.

Time passes—but just how much is impossible to tell.

* * * * *

“I heard she got killed,” Sinead says. One of her pigtails is lumpy and over puffed—the other’s real skinny. Sinead’s mother left her father a couple of months ago—I heard Daddy talking about it. I guess her hair’s suffering the most.

My friend Ryan sucks the guts out of a Twinkie. “Yah, that’s right—she got hit by a car. She lived by me—right across the street from me and Sibby.” He looks at me, like he’s waiting for me to talk. Sinead (and her sloppy hair) look at me too.

“Um, It’s not . . .” I pause trying to remember what Momma told me. “It’s not good to talk about dead people.”
Sinead snorts and her lips curl around braces with pink and yellow bands. Ryan looks at me weird. Suddenly I feel really stupid.

“Look, it’s not nice, alright. I’m not gonna sit here and talk about this bullshit anymore.”

Ryan’s jaw drops, and Sinead just shakes her head. “What are you so pissed at?” She asks snottily, “I think you’d be used to talking like this, what with your zombie brother.”

I wheel around, about to pop her in the mouth for talking about Pidge that way, but Ryan beats me too it.

“Don’t say that,” his fat little face scrunches up, his fist squashing his empty Twinkie, like a protective guard dog. “It’s not Sibby’s fault her brother’s a vegetable.”

I punch Ryan in the shoulder so hard my fist hurts. He looks shocked, then sad, like he always does when I lash out as the therapist says. Ryan never swears, but judging by the stinging in my knuckles, I bet he wants to.

“Don’t call him that.” I make my voice small and hard.

Ryan’s face goes from hurt, to kinda scared, his eyes get long, like a puppy guard dog. “Aw, jeez, Sib,” he says.

I don’t say anything back.

* * * * *

Mama comes to you during the afternoon. It’s always the same.

“I guess at the end of the day, I feel like it’s all my fault—Your father was so proud of that swing set. Oh Pidgy, (she cries now) I’m to blame—I knew that I should have been watching you—and then, I heard Sibby scream . . .”

She leans over you, her tears sting your eyes.
“Can you hear me, Pidge? Are you in there?”

Your heart says yes.

Your gelatin eyes betray nothing.

* * * * *

When I get home, Momma’s set out my white shoes for the funeral. I haven’t worn those shoes since that day.

It was Good Friday, and we’d just got back from church. Daddy had just put the swing-set in, the best on the G. D. block, he’d said. Mom was checking the lamb, and I was bored of waiting and wanted to play. We had some time before supper. Pidge wanted me to push him. I told him he was too big, and we had to wait for Daddy to come, but he kept asking and asking, till I told him to shut up and wait. Then Daddy came out to push Pidge—and then . . .

Then I don’t remember what. At least I think I don’t. I hope I don’t.

I wish I hadn’t done it, though. Told Pidge to shut up like that. I really wish I hadn’t done that.

* * * * *

“Push me Sibby, push me.” You say, as you pump your little legs. You’re six, wishing for seven, and Easter is two days away. Sybi is in pretty white dress. It doesn’t suit her.

“Push me!” She does—her hands, bone flesh, smack against your back. Your brand new sandal sneakers graze the ground as you swing back and forth.

Forward “I want to go higher!” Backward

Forward “Wait Pidge, Daddy’s coming soon.” Backward
Forward “But I want to go higher! I want to go higher!” Backward

Forward “Come on Pidge, shut up already!” Backward

Forward “I want to go the highest Sibby, the highest!” Backwards

Forward The Father comes out, and runs towards us Backwards

Forwards “What are you yowling about, Pigeon?” Backwards

And then just forward, just forward, higher, higher, the highest.


They put you in a hospital bed forever.

But part of you is always swinging.

*   *   *   *   *

I walk into Daddy’s study, and wait for a minute. He’s sitting at his desk, his head in his hands, the little lamp light shining on his glasses.

“Daddy?” I say quietly. He looks up, startled, and picks up his glasses. Like he needs them to see me.

“Aw, Sibby-girl,” he smiles. “What’s up? Come into my office.” I walk in and sit in the leather low back chair that Daddy says cost a mint.

“So, what’s on your mind?” Daddy asks.

I swing my feet. I feel gross on the inside, my tummy is gurgling. My eyes scan Daddy’s desk. It’s cluttered with pens and pencils, crumbled up papers and those yellow backs that you get after you sign for something you buy. There’s a picture of me and Pidge there too—an old one, from Halloween a couple of years ago—Pidge is 4 and I’m 8. I am dressed up like the Princess Pea, Momma made me a big round pea suit out of paper mache and we painted it green. I wore pink tights and a little tiara, and Momma even let me wear
makeup—I got to wear lipstick and rouge. Pidge has a hat made out of green felt with a blue ostrich feather stuck in it. He went as Peter Pan.

Daddy looks up at me, and his eyebrows are scrunchy. I know it’s because I’m not talking. Daddy always says that I was born talking—when you were a baby you used to open your mouth before you opened your eyes. His mouth is in a tight little pucker. “What’s amatter?”

I shrug.

He scoots forward a little, and pokes my knee. “You thinking about tomorrow?”

Tomorrow is Dead Mary’s funeral. My tummy squeezes at the thought.

I nod.

Daddy’s eyes are heavy on my face. “Yah, it’s not gonna be any fun, but it’s important.”

I don’t really know why, but I suddenly hear myself asking, “Daddy, if Pidge were dead, would we have a funeral for him?”

Daddy’s eyes go up and I hear all the breath go out of his mouth in a little *whoosh* and he looks at me real weird for a minute. When he speaks his voice is tight. “Sibby, your brother isn’t dead—“

“No, I know that, I just . . . I just wonder sometimes . . . if things were different . . .”

Daddy looks sad. “Baby, things aren’t different.”

My feet stop swinging. There’s a funny lump in my throat and my eyes are burning. “I know.” All I can do is whisper.
“Sibby,” his voice low, strangely serious, and I don’t want to look at him, “I know this last year and a half has been difficult. But you never know. Things could get better. Pidge could get better. You never know.”

I bite my cheek hard trying not to cry. And my guts that were twisty earlier are twisting even more—but angry twisting. Because sometimes you never know—but there were some things that I always know.

I want to look up, my jaw clenched so hard it’s hurting me. I want to look up, but I don’t, because I hate my father all of a sudden. He’s to blame. He’s the one that did this to us. He’s the one that pushed Pidgy too hard. But then I do look up, accidentally, and he’s watching me, his eyes big and sad. His eyes are like water and brown like chocolate and they love me. My Daddy loves me.

I want to run out of the room, out of the house, out of the cul-de-sac—I want to run till I can’t any more, till I fall down and cry and sick on myself.

I want to leap forward, into my Daddy’s arms, and bury my face in his chest and cry, and let him cuddle me and pet my head and tell me everything will be alright.

I just sit there for a moment and stare down at my toes.

Daddy reaches out and pats my knee. “I’m sorry, Baby.”

I think I might cry—because I think he’s really sorry. Instead I nod. “Don’t worry, Daddy.”

“Worry about what, Sibby?”

I look up at Daddy. “I won’t tell.”

Daddy’s brow draws up like he’s confused. His eyes stay big and wide, strangely sad. “What do you mean?”
I’m whispering now. “‘Bout Pidge.”

His head rears back slightly. And when he starts talking his voice is choked, “Baby, what happened to your brother—it was an accident—it was a tragedy—”

I just look at him, biting my lip, trying not cry.

He’s silent for a long moment and his face stays like that—sad and surprised. But he nods, like a promise. “Alright Sibby. Alright.”

* * * * *

You hear Sybi at your side, her hair resting kinda gentle on your arm.

And she’s crying—or maybe that’s laughter.

You can’t really tell.

But if you could tell you wouldn’t.

Because in your twisted flesh you keep the secret.

And that’s where it stays.

Unseen.

Unreachable.
**The Shopping Cart**

Somebody lost a button. And it’s shiny one too—one of those pewter heirloom types—definitely too big to be from one of our school uniforms. I wonder what kind of contraband civilian clothes that rode in here on. I’m half tempted to bend down and pick it up, but that might attract unwanted attention. This is the part of the day I like least—right after the school bell rings, but before Mom gets here to pick us up. There’s no order in a high school as it is, but when things are like this, everyone just milling around, I get nervous. Not that anyone ever notices *me* in particular—just that I’d rather much be protected by the protocol of ringing bells, or blend into the background. The uniform definitely helps.

The buttons on this skirt are so simple, blunt blue buttons. They have a little shine. But not too much, we wouldn’t want anybody to get all wound up by our plaid skirts. I suppose that has been a concern of the administration since Britney begged to be hit again while wearing one. Maybe longer. Probably, I shouldn’t underestimate how long perverted old men have been around.

Not that I can even begin to fathom how anyone could ever be turned on by these outfits. The skirts are itchy and too long to flatter anyone, but particularly me, with my stupid knobby knees. My brother says I look like a newly foaled colt from the waist down.

Ok, well Connor actually said, “You look like you have damn horse legs.” And there are lots of girls with lots of different types of bodies here, and none of them look even remotely good. I once saw Laura Travers at the mall in Roseville on the weekend, and she was wearing jeans and a sweater, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone look that good. And you wouldn’t even notice her in the uniform—she’s not hideous or anything—you just won’t pick her out from the crowd.
I watch her and her gaggle of girl friends walk down the stairwell I’m somewhat hiding behind. No, she’s totally normal looking—drab even, in the shackles that are the uniform. Connor dated one of those girls—the one with the high pony tail and the eyes that seem too far apart. She had a boy’s name—Taylor? Tyler? Anyway, she was pretty and dumb. She didn’t last long. My brother dates a lot, but never very long. That’s high school I guess.

I’m trying not to look at Jake Sundue. He’s standing directly across from me, leaning against a tree, looking all devil may care and beautiful. On. Purpose. This is what I do with most of my spare time actually, try not to look at Jake Sundue. It’s an endeavor. He’s a year older than me, so he’s on the Junior track, which helps. But I see him every day in band and in choir. He plays the trumpet, and he’s a first trumpet, so he’s in direct view from my seat with the second clarinets. He’s right across from me. He sings bass in choir. That’s better. Since I sing soprano (badly) I get to sit in front of him, which helps. But if I have to turn and look at the clock, which I always do—pow! There he is! All bangs and doe eyes, and sometimes he wears this simple black zip sweater over his uniform and . . . this line of thought is making it hard not to look at him right now.

I look, but I don’t mean to. It happens like that all the time. I’m trying to ignore him, but my eyes have a mind of their own. Oh God, he’s looking back. He’s smiling! Is he smiling at me? I’m leaning against the wall of the school, so there’s definitely no one behind me. I’m always afraid that this sort of thing will turn out to be a cruel joke—like one of his friends dared him in the locker room (“Hey, you should smile at that weird girl who’s always looking at you”). I remember that sort of thing happening to girls in middle school. Those over-eager girls who made their likings too obvious. Boy did I learn from that stuff. Much,
much better to hide what you want so well you don’t even know yourself than end up a dare in the locker room.

“Heya Teara.” My sorta friend Aaron Phillips has appeared out of nowhere. Connor calls him Charlie Brown head. That’s because he has this absurdly large round head, and his hair is so blonde that in the right light it looks like he’s kinda bald. He’s never insulted by that though—he always says, “Charles Schultz is from here!” all enthusiastic. Actually he’s not insulted by much. He’s a nice enough guy, but he’s always smiling—always smiling, smiling, smiling. You got an A on a paper? Smiling. Just found out your beloved gerbil got eaten by a passing messenger hawk? Smiling. Got pushed butt-naked out of the locker room during passing time? Smiling. And I’m pretty sure that last one happened.

Jake isn’t looking any more. Aaron shoves a clipboard under my nose. Aaron’s always having causes. And there’s the smile as he says, “Teara Jo, will you please sign my petition against the fur trade.”

I look down at the clipboard. “I didn’t realize you had a problem with 18th century French trappers, Aaron.”

He laughs. His laugh is like his smile, plus ten. “No, no, the fur industry. Like fur coats. Like the kind J-lo wears. I just think clubbing baby seals is so wrong.”

Well, duh. That’s like saying, “Hey, you know what’s bad. Setting babies on fire! We shouldn’t do that!” You’d have to be pretty thick not to just know that. And what kind of a screw up clubs a baby seal? Clearly some one whose Father didn’t hug them enough. Or hugged them too much.

I’m signing the petition when I hear, “Shake a leg, Tezz.” Connor. I hate being called Tezz, which is apparently what he called me when he was a baby and couldn’t say his
R’s right. But I don’t make a thing about it because he’s gonna call me it no matter what, and if I don’t make a thing of it, he won’t know it’s a thing. There’s not a lot of subtlety to older brothers.

“Heya Connor,” Aaron says, with smile.

“CBH.” Connor’s a great abbreviator. I’m sure he likes to bank every valuable second that he saves by not saying whole words so that he can spend them judiciously under the bleachers with Sarah Kendrickson. Or Emily Norfolk. Or whoever he’s canoodling with this week. I find it hard to keep track. And slightly beneath me to try.

He’s looking at me. “Move it. Mom’s here.”

Huh. In all the animal advocacy I’d been doing, I totally missed Mom pulling up. And she’s hard to miss, in the blaze red Cadillac Escalade Dad got her for their 24th wedding anniversary.

“See ya, Aaron.” I follow Connor. I get nervous following him, cause he’s reasonably attractive (you know, if you like that kind of thing) and I always feel like everyone’s looking at him. He doesn’t seem to mind it. Mom sees us coming and waves out the window. We’re about to cross the last plane of grass incident free, when someone calls Connor’s name.

We both turn, and Jake Sundue is running over to us. Suddenly, my face is putting out so much heat I think it’s gone nuclear—there’s a good chance that everyone around me is going to be Chernobyl-ed by my toxic cheeks. Jake smiles, and asks Connor a question. I mean, I think he did. I have no idea what he said because I’m contemplating how to keep my face from turning inside out. Connor answers, something about basketball. Basketball? Is
that the one with the courts? Jake’s sweater is zipped. It’s never zipped during class hours.

This is why the after school time is dangerous.

“Hey, thanks man.” Jake is saying, to Connor. “Have a good night, yo.”

“See ya,” Connor says, totally oblivious to that fact that the most beautiful boy in the
eleventh grade is talking to him. As per usual.

“See ya, Connor.” And then this amazing thing happens. He looks at me, and smiles, and speaks three whole words.

"See ya, Teara.”

And my spleen falls into my butt, never to be found again.

“Move it horse legs!” Connor orders. Somehow, I summon strength and force myself
to move normally.

“Connor?” My voice is like a squawk. He looks back at me, one eyebrow up, older
brother code for ‘proceed.’ “Do you think clubbing baby seals is wrong?”

Now both eyebrows go up, older brother code for ‘what the hell are you talking
about?’

“What kind of fuck-up clubs baby seals?”

Exactly.

Mom, predictably, is all questions when we climb into the car. “Hey guys! Who was
that?”

Connor lumps sullenly into the front seat. “Jake Sundue.”

“Oh,” Mom catches my eye in rear view mirror. “Pretty cute, Teara.”

Connor sighs. “Gross.”
I try to laugh dismissively. I sound like a duck choking on a kidney bean. It’s useless, Moms always know.

“Whatever Mom.”

Mom puts the car in drive and slowly pulls away from the curb, checking her rearview obsessively. “So!” Sometime Mom gets pep squad peppy—like she might have swallowed the entire cheer section peppy. “How was everyone’s day?”

“Fine,” Which is more or less the truth. A passable day—no surprise quizzes, no random selection to answer a question, no unforeseen awkward reading out loud.

Connor doesn’t say anything. Mom kinda glances at him, and he’s looking straight ahead, like he’s in the military and he’s going to get court marshaled if he turns.

“Connor?” Mom’s prodding.

“It was fine. What do you want a diagram?”

Mom sighs and turns up Tamarack Road.

Connor’s been snappy with Mom for a couple of weeks now. It’s because of the car thing. Dad told Connor that when he turned 17 they would buy him a car, if he could go the whole year without a traffic violation. Then a week before his birthday he got pulled over for speeding in the speed trap over by the Best Buy. Connor said it was a trumped up charge, and Dad seemed to agree. But then Mom put her foot down, and said that going back on an agreement was an ugly thing to do and a bad example to set. Mom and Dad conferenced about it in the kitchen for most of the night. When we woke up the next morning, Mom and Dad were a unified front—and Connor had to wait another year to get the car. Connor was pissed. And he blamed Mom. I told him to blame the cop, or the speed trap, or his own
stupid need to go by the new Atmosphere CD. He told me to shut up. And he’s been pouting ever since.

“Hey Mom,” I’m leaning forward because I hate the seats in the Escalade. They’re supposed to be comfortable, but I always feel paranoid that they are trying to swallow me with plush leather relaxation. It’s like those creepy underwater fish that have the pretty lanterns attached to their heads. They woo the little fishes, and when they get to close, CHOMP. I know that’s crazy. I know these are just car seats. I just don’t like them. And, I don’t trust them.

“Yah, Teara?”

“Where are we going?”

Connor looks out the window suddenly, as though he’s only just realized this isn’t the way home. Apparently pouting leads to blindness.

“We have to go to Coleski’s for groceries.”

“Why?” Even when stuff was good with Mom and Connor, his tone has always held a bunch of incredulity. He’s of the age, I guess. But now that he’s cranky with Mom, it’s worse.

“The Fischers are coming for dinner tonight. Maya is home from Georgetown, and Mary Jo called and asked what we were up to, and I invited them over.” Mom makes this sound breezy, but it’s a big deal.

The Fischers (Dale, Mary Jo, Maya and Ellie) were our neighbors in the old neighborhood. Before Dad got promoted and moved to the new firm in Woodbury, we lived in Minneapolis, in the Seward Neighborhood, which is about 10 blocks from the University. I miss it. There’s not a lot of Zazz in the ‘burbs. Sure the house is bigger, but it looks
exactly like the neighbor’s house. We moved when I was eleven and for weeks I had to count houses from our corner street just to know which one was ours.

“The Fischers?” Connor finally looks at Mom, and his face is pinched up like a baby about to pitch a wobbly. For a reasonably attractive human being, my brother can make his face get the ugly like nobody’s business. “Why the hell are they coming?”

“Because they’re our friends Connor, and watch your mouth.” Mom’s been trying to take the high road with Connor since the Great Car Schism of ’07, but sometimes I see her temper start creeping in. It makes her lips get flat and thin. She’s a pretty lady, our Mom, but when she smashes her mouth down like that, only an idiot would think she was happy.

Connor grumbles. “Well why are we going to the fancy grocery store?”

Coleski’s is the fancy grocery store. They always have pomegranates and they carry several kinds of European sparkly water. I also think they are a tad over priced.

“Because this is a fancy event. And because it’s easier to find organic things for Ellie.”

Ellie was a year younger than me and allergic to everything. Gluten, milk, processed foods, peanuts—when we were elementary school she had to bring a note with her to class because if one of her peers had so much as a crumb of peanut butter on their cheek her throat would close up. I’m not allergic to anything. Which, pragmatically is a good thing. But I always thought the immediacy of that was glamorous.

Mom pulled the car into the parking lot. Sometimes there’s this awkward pause before we get out of the car, like no one wants to move first. Connor grumbles. I hate it when it’s like this, all tense—so I have to do something.

“Is Dad gonna be home for supper?” I ask.
Mom looks up at me in the rearview mirror and smiles that big smile of hers.

“Maybe. He didn’t make any promises; you know how busy it gets at work. But maybe.”

Dad works a lot these days. Actually, he’s seemed to be working more and more since we moved to Woodbury. I guess fancy cars and year round pomegranates don’t pay for themselves. But we don’t talk about the money stuff. Actually, we don’t talk about much.

Connor and I follow Mom into the store. Connor has his hood up. I wonder if he finds the idea of being seen with his mother embarrassing. Personally, I don’t really mind. Well, maybe if Jake Sundae were to come around the corner I would feel differently. But, he’d probably be with his mom too.

Mom grabs a cart—the carts here are weird, really high, and elongated, but not very deep. There’s a top seat, but it’s not big enough to fit a kid in—so I don’t know what people with kids do when they come here. Maybe just hold them. Or carry them around in designer snugglies. Maybe there’s a weight ratio for babies with these carts. Must have this much body mass to ride the Coleski’s cart.

“Ok, let’s do this quick. Connor, you go to the organic grains and get a couple pounds of barley.”

Connor grumbles, pulls his hood tighter, and walks away slouched, hands in his pockets. I bet he thinks he looks street. I think he looks like he has scoliosis.

“Alright kiddo,” Mom maneuvered the cart with natural skill. “Let’s get some sides and fixins that won’t trouble Ellie’s delicate palate.”

We stroll up the boxed rice aisle. “It’s amazing how high quality these things have gotten. When your dad and I were just married, and he was finishing up his Masters program, I swear we were living off Rice a Roni. And it did not look like this. It was pretty
nasty, honestly. And loaded with sodium. Oh well,” Mom smiled at me. “I guess that’s what being young is—being able to handle that kind of diet.”

I don’t know that I’ve ever given a lot of thought to what Mom and Dad’s life was like before Connor and me. I can’t even imagine them like that, living in an apartment somewhere and eating Rice a Roni. It seemed absurd. Alien.

We rounded the bend to the frozen veggies—cheaper and sometimes better quality than fresh, depending on the time of year. Mom starts rooting around in the freezer. Mom doesn’t look young per se, but in the right angle, in profile, she looks much younger. I’ve seen the pictures of her from high school—all smiles and so pretty. And I’ve seen the pictures of Mom and Dad’s wedding. Dad keeps them in the bottom drawer of his desk in the study. And they smile out of those pictures, two beautiful, happy strangers. Two people who are like my parents, but who I don’t completely recognize.

It’s weird to think how little I actually know about Mom and Dad. I mean, you can look at your parents everyday, and talk to them, and love them, and be pissed at them and even kinda look like them—but you don’t really know them. You don’t really know what they were like before you. It’s like there was this whole other person before you happened. I wonder sometimes—does that other person grow and change? Or do they just disappear?

“Whatcha thinking,’ Teara-baby?” Mom asks me, not looking up from the bag of frozen peas in her hand.

For this crazy moment I want to tell her. But I don’t. “Nothing. Um, green beans are better. We can butter them. Ellie’s not allergic to butter is she?”

Mom snorts. “I hope not, cause that’s pretty much my whole cooking arsenal.”

“Plus butter is delicious.”
“I don’t know how one lives without it.” Mom tossed the beans in the cart. “Now, where did that brother of yours get to?”

“Who knows? Probably off somewhere being emo.”

Mom smiles, and looks for a moment like she wants to hash uglies with me about Connor. But then the ‘Mom-urge’ takes over and she rises above it. “Teara, Connor is Connor.”

Mom uses those kind of ‘Confucius says’ maxims a lot.

“Yah, and Jerks are Jerks.” To be honest, I don’t know why the hell she puts up with that crap. Connor acts like a spoiled little brat that needs a spanking and he’s seventeen years old. And the Mom that I’m familiar with—the one that raised us, gave us time outs, and made Connor apologize to the neighbor when his baseball broke a window in person and in writing, wouldn’t stand for this kind of behavior. These days, it’s like she gives up before she starts.

Connor’s waiting for us at the butcher’s counter. He’s holding a bag of organic barley in one hand (kind of akimbo—holding it away from awkwardly like it might bite him or something. He looks like a total tool.)

“Thanks Connor. Ok, I was thinking filet mignon, maybe brisket if we have the time; let’s see what they’ve got.”

“Brisket?” The choice of meat has made Connor incredulous. “What is it, Hanukkah?”

“No. We’re just trying to have a nice meal.”

“Nice like the fucking Ritz?”
Mom turns around and looks at us. Her face is a little hard, and her mouth clutches up, like it does when she has to say something, but doesn’t particularly want to.

“Alright, I wasn’t going to tell you, but maybe you need to know. I don’t want you to bring this up, and I certainly don’t want you to ask any questions about it. But the fact of the matter is, Mary Jo is leaving Dale.”

Whoa. Dale always seemed like a nice guy. He was a house husband when we were growing up, always playing with his girls next door, or hanging out with Mom during the afternoons, while we were at school. But he got a job a couple of years ago working for the Art Institute, and that seemed to occupy him. After that he was never around. Then we moved.

“That sucks!” Sometimes I’m remarkably articulate.

“Yah.” For once Connor has no smart remark. Maybe he’s on sabbatical.

“Right.” Mom’s giving us that interrogational look of hers. “So we’re having them over to distract them and cheer them up. So I was thinking brisket.”


“Connor, Shut up.” Usually I prefer to stay out of it, but Connor is being more of a pain in the butt than usual.

“Don’t fight you two.”

The butcher appears, in a pristine white smock and dress shirt. He makes nice with Mom for a minute and tries to romance her over a shank of brisket. Above the sprawling, immaculate meat counter there’s this huge pastel painting of butchers through the ages. A bloodless depiction, no-less. And I look at the butcher pointing out cuts for Mom, in his
perfect white outfit, and I just can’t believe it. They must keep the real butchers—the ones that do the actually butchering—in back, out of sight. I guess all that blood, that genuineness might put people off their stomachs. Still I can’t believe anyone falls for that white. I bet there was a time when Mom never would have fallen for that.

But she does. The butcher wraps up the brisket.

Mom turns to us.

“Alright, just dessert and then we are out of here. Any suggestions?”

“Cheesecake.” Connor says without pause.

“I think Cheesecake is out of the running. Probably way too many preservatives for Ellie. And we must think of the Fischers.”

“Aw, fuck the Fischers.”

For a moment, I really think Mom is gonna club him. But all she says is, “Connor. We are in public.” Then she picks up a bag of organic peaches.

And things are pretty much silent and awkward as we check out, and load up the car. In fact, nobody speaks at all until Mom has backed out of the parking space. Mom sighs and slaps the wheel.

“Oh, would you look at that?”

I lean forward. There’s a cart in the middle of the parking lot. That’s one of the weird things about the suburbs—it’s all city people who say they want to get out of the crazy and the ugly of the city, get back to a more human environment. But then they come to the suburbs, they don’t talk to their neighbors, they don’t do for anyone but themselves, and they leave shopping carts right in the middle of the parking lot. People are such jerks.

“Connor would you move the cart for me?”
Connor doesn’t say anything, he just kinda grumbles.

“What?”

He looks up at Mom, and says, “No.”

Mom looks at him. He looks back at her. It’s high noon at the OK Corral.

“What did you just say to me?”

“I said no. You can’t tell me what to do. You can’t tell me I have to have dinner with the Fischers, with those stupid girls and that bitch Mary Jo. You can’t make me pretend to feel sorry for her, because her husband is a cheating asshole. You can’t make me pretend that life is like it was before. You aren’t in charge of me.”

“Connor, that’s enough.” When Dad gets angry he gets really quiet. It’s freaky, actually. When Mom gets angry, her voice gets kind of screechy—like when the needle on one of those old record players hits an area that’s warped. “I know that you’re angry and I know that you’re put upon—but for one night can’t you cut the bullshit and act like a human being instead of a spoiled little brat?”

Connor is aghast, more at being called on his behavior than offended. He’s gasping for air like a guppy laying upside on a shag carpet and formulating a response to the attack on his character.

And that’s when Mom loses her mind.

She revs the engine of the blaze red Cadillac Escalade, throws the car into drive and guns it. The cart isn’t that far ahead of us, but she gets the speed up fast. Then when we are about 10 feet from the cart, she slams on the brake, slides several feet, and smashes into it. The cart flies forward, makes contact with the bumper of Mercury, spins around and takes a swath of paint off a Firebird.
In a remarkably short sighted move, I’ve forgotten to put my seat belt on. When she slams on the brake, I fly forward, face first into Connor’s seat rest. My nose collapses like a puzzle box. There’s something wet on my upper lip. A future flashes before my eyes where I am cursed to walk around with a nose like an accordion and a deviated septum.

Nobody says anything. Connor has both his hands on the dash, his mouth open in a frozen O of shock. Tears sting my eyes. Mom is looking straight ahead, her hands clutching the wheel. And then she says, her voice soft and deliberate, “I am your mother, Connor.”

Then she drives out of the parking lot without a second look.

A block later, she looks up at me in the rear view mirror. “Teara, you’re bleeding!”

Oh. I guess I am. I reach up and brush away the blood, touching my nose to see if it’s collapsed. It feels ok, it doesn’t feel like the bone has bent or anything, but it’s definitely bleeding. I meet Mom’s eyes in the rearview. Suddenly she looks really old, with these scribbly little care lines all clutched up around her eyes.

“It’s nothing!” I say brightly, bright as Mom’s was when she told us that Dad might be home for dinner tonight.

“Don’t worry about it, Mom.”

She doesn’t say anything, but holds my eye for a long moment. Her eyes are wet.

I smile at Mom. I press my hand against my nose to stop the bleeding, and I don’t look away.
Jesus’ Holy Lightning of Truth

Daddy never did the sermon with his shoes on. It pissed her off. When she thought about her father, Josie always remembered him in his big clompy farm boots, stomping the clay and hay off on the rug in the mud room. But now, in the latter days of Jesus’ holy lightning of truth, her father found the shoes an offence to the Most Holy. Even here, on this ticker-tack stage that he built for himself at the old drive-in, the Lord was watching. And He might be offended.

So Daddy claimed. As far as she was concerned, the only person her father was offending was her.

Her brothers and she used to play at the old drive-in behind their 10 acre farm when she was younger. The last movie she’d seen at the drive in was Jurassic Park. It was the last show they’d played, and they’d played it for the entire summer. Then the drive-in had fallen into general disrepair. It was great open space, but Walter Owens, the neighbor who owned the land the drive-in stood on refused to sell it. That was until Daddy had gotten the brilliant idea to make it his base of operations. His sacred place—Preacher David Evan’s Drive-in Church of Jesus’ Holy Lightning of Truth—future home of an actual Church of Jesus’ Holy Lightning of Truth.

And here she sat, as she had every Sunday for the last 16 months, up on the raised podium in a little row with her brothers, looking out over the ever growing crowd of the devout, the curious and the crazy who had come to hear her father preach. She tried not to sneer as Daddy rose to take his place at the head of the crowd, to begin his sermon. Beside her, Simon had toed off his shoes, while Robbie was worrying a hole in the two by four beneath him with the toe of his. She didn’t care what Daddy said, she kept her shoes on.
Daddy lifted his hands and an awe sort of silence fell over the crowded lot. Most people were sitting out in front of their means of transportation on woven lawn chairs—some leaned out of windows or open car doors. Several were sitting on the roofs of their vehicles. In the distance, a young man leaned against a motorcycle. Every head was facing him, every ear waiting in wonder.

“Brothers and Sisters,” he began, as he always did. The mid-morning Wisconsin light seemed to catch him up softly, flittering through his white linen shirt, and gleaming around his hair. His hair was thinning—not balding—just getting a little thin, baby fine and still a bit blonde, dirty blonde, dingy, but not gray. His eyes were alight too, but that light was coming from inside. And his mouth was puckered in what might have been a smile. He was the center of the spectacle.

“Brothers and Sisters,” he said again, his voice pitched loud enough to carry, but low enough to make everyone feel that he was speaking directly to them. A showman’s trick, rather than a prophet’s truth. “It heartens me truly, to see so many of you gathered here today, in the name of the Lord’s Truth. Many are the blessings and mercies that he offers us. A gracious thanks and Amen.”

The crowd murmured ‘amen’ as well. Simon said “Amen!” with some enthusiasm at her side.

Josie looked down at her brother, little Simon, almost seven, blushing in front of the crowd, pink to his toe-headed roots. She wondered if he was blushing because of all of the eyes upon them, or because of the unseasonable warmth of the morning. Poor Simon. She worried about him. His heart was too kind, too eager to please, too gentle. She and Robbie, they would be ok. They would be fine—damaged, half sort of people, sure. But one day
she’d be somewhere else, she’d be someone else entirely, and she would look back on these
terrible, twisted spectacles of devotion and spirit. And she would nod, and she would
shudder, and she would go on with her life. But Simon was so young. So soft.

Daddy was speaking—starting the ramp up to the best epiphany moment seen this
side of Damascus. Robbie’s eyes were in the clouds. Simon was looking intensely at their
father. And she wished that he’d nod off, that he would daydream, that he would look away.
That he didn’t have to hear the damn story again. That she didn’t have to hear the damn
story again.

But, after all, that was what everyone was here for.

Everyone was just longing to hear the tragedy again—the traumatic story of how
Brother Evans became a widower and struggled to take care of his children amidst his grief.
Until one day, while walking in his fields he was struck by lightning—the Lord’s Holy
Lightning of Truth—and he was no longer a simple farmer. He became the silver tongued
profit of Jesus’ true Word.

And boy, did he love to tell it.

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It wasn’t always like that. When she’d been younger, Daddy had been the mostly
silent figure at the back of every room. Taciturn, her mother had called him. But Josie
supposed she had long mistaken his silence for stupidity. That’s why she was so shocked the
first time he’d started proselytizing, eloquent as anything, in the grocery store one day about
two months after Momma died. Daddy had attributed it to the power of the Holy Spirit.
Josie didn’t quite know what to attribute it to, but she wasn’t going to run right out and
assign holy responsibility.
They’d been standing there in the dairy aisle, Josie trying to keep Robbie from knocking over the yogurt and Simon from wandering off, and all of a sudden, Daddy just started screaming.

“The lightning makes me speak!” he’d shouted. Everyone in a two aisle radius heard and turned to look. “The power of Jesus lightning of truth makes me call out to you brothers and sisters! You sir!” He pointed wildly to scraggly breaded man reaching for cottage cheese. “Have you opened yourself to the truth of Christ’s love?”

And Josie just stood there, frozen, exposed, and watched Daddy climb onto the sideways freezer and call out nonsense to the other shoppers. And she realized that this was one of those strange crystalline moments when everything changes. When you never go back.

Then, Robbie tipped over a stack of yogurt. She bent down and picked up carton after carton until the manager came and asked them to leave.

Josie hated school. Not the school part so much—not the learning and classroom portion of the thing. It was the minutiae of the passing time, the awkward and busy social interaction as everyone mingled in between classes. Josie had friends, plenty of them. In fact, in spite of the weekly spectacle her father was responsible for, or perhaps because of it, she was fairly well known. But she didn’t have the time for her peers’ nonsense. People stared. She hated it. Consequently, she spent much of her time with her nose in her locker until the warning bell rang. Then she’d rush to class and sit in the back of the room.

She was pulling her history book out of her locker when a shadow fell across her.

“Hey there.”
She looked up into a laser beam gaze and gap toothed smile.

She feigned indifference. “Do I know you?”

Of course she knew him. Everyone knew Jesse O’Keefe. He was a senior, but he was 19. He’d had to repeat because of excessive absences—though everyone seemed to think he was bright enough. He was on the good side of the handsome line. He swaggered like a rebel, and he had a weathered grin. He wore a ridiculous leather jacket to and from school, and he had a motorcycle. And he was probably the only person in school that people stared at more than her.

In response to her jibe, he just smiled, tonguing the toothpick he was chewing.

“Went out to the show at your place this weekend. Saw you there.”

For a moment she could do nothing but stare at him. Of course he saw her—she was up on the stupid platform on display for the whole world to see. So she leveled a sneer at him.

“Did you?” She closed her locker slowly and turned to face him.

“Oh yah. Did you see me? I had my bike—I was in the back.”

She did remember. She remembered the way the light had glinted off the bike. She shook her head. “No, doesn’t ring a bell.”

He smiled wider, the small gap between his teeth all the more apparent. “Funny,” the toothpick bobbed up and down with the words, “usually I leave an impression.”

She nodded. “Enjoy the festivities, did you?”

“You mean the babbling and the poor acoustics?”

“Some thing like that.”

He smiled around the toothpick. “Sure thing.”
It was something about the grin, it seemed so easy. It infuriated her. “Well everything that man says is bullshit.” She hugged her books tighter to her chest.

“Oh yah?” The more she looked at the smile the odder it got; it seemed relaxed and tight at the same time, natural, yet concealing. “But I wasn’t there for him. I was there for you, pretty girl.”

There was something disingenuous about the smile—a bit too predatory to be real. But his eyes told another story. Round brown bowls, full of welcome, and something else, something a bit like longing. Josie felt the half developed desire to reach out and touch his eyelids.

“Really?” She tried to keep her tone icy, but the curve of her mouth might have suggested that she’d heard him say she was pretty. “Pick up lots of girls at church?”

He made a strange sort of snorting noise—like a laugh. “Not really, no. Don’t call that show church, though. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“Yah,” he whispered his eyes suddenly heavy on her mouth, “somehow I didn’t think you’d be offended. So what’d you say?”

She looked up at him blankly. “What do I say about what?”

“You and me. Sometime, I don’t know, hanging out?” The toothpick dropped to the ground, and he bit his lip waiting for her answer.

She couldn’t think of a single reason to say no. The warning bell rang.

The grin returned, his incisor still buried in his lip. “Better hurry off to class, like a good girl. You don’t have to answer me now.”
He pushed his thumb gently against her lip, smiling that crooked grin, and he was gone.

When she got home from school, Daddy was in the living room. He taped the evangelical ministers who were on late night TV, and spent his afternoons watching them. He would stand in the living room, mouthing along with the more emphatic parts, practicing hand gestures, and repeated the best bits out loud. “Accept love,” he’d say, making a slashing gesture in the air. “God’s vengeance,” he’d shout with a stomp. He used to spend the afternoons in the field but they hadn’t planted since Momma died. They paid for groceries with the money from the ice cream pails that got passed around the congregants every Sunday.

He turned when she walked in the back door.

“Good afternoon, Daughter.” He had called her that as a child, in jest, as a tease. Now he meant it, he meant it to sound holy.

She dropped her book bag in the mud-room. “Hi.”

He paused whichever Reverend of Hellfire he’d been watching, and turned to look at her. “School went well?”

She nodded.

“Good.”

Even before the lightning fried his brain, they’d always had difficulty talking. All she really wanted was to go to her room. But she tried.

“How was your day?”
Daddy nodded. “Good. The new blueprints came today.”

The blue prints for Daddy’s church—the reason they passed the collection bucket so many times every Sunday and why there’s a giant donation bin in the old concession stand. That was part of Jesus’ truth—the building of the church. All the money that was collected went to the building fund. Or to the needy. The needy, like Robbie was for new Nike’s, or like Simon was at Christmas.

“I’m glad the new blueprints came.” The old ones had mysteriously disappeared.

“Yah, that’s great.” She shifted her weight from foot to foot. “Well, I have a lot of homework, so I’m gonna—“

“Yes,” Daddy said, with one of his practiced hand gestures, the one that was supposed to indicate benevolence, “Go. Study hard.”

“I will.”

She was halfway to the stairs when he called her name. “Josie?”

“Yes?”

He gave her an appraising look. “Remember to say your prayers.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Her room was half of the attic. She’d had a regular bedroom, but she’d moved up to the attic after Momma died. Now her old bedroom was full of Momma’s old stuff, and the other half of the attic was full all the household items Daddy couldn’t look at anymore. He never came into the attic—it was far too full of relics with painful meanings. That was the supreme advantage of living there.

And it was a good thing too—because she didn’t think he’d be amused by her favorite poster, the first copy of the blueprints for the church. Not to mention any of the other things
that she’d collected that used to belong to her mother. Because as much as he couldn’t bear
the sight of them, she couldn’t stand to be without them.

She flopped down on her bed, and stared up at the ceiling, where the blueprints stared
down at her. The design actually tried to make use of the drive-in novelty of the thing—
making the wall behind the Narthex the screen. Unbearable.

Josie started up at the inky blue dots and knew she was having one of those
afternoons.

She hated everyone. Everyone was stupid. She hated her brother’s for failing to
comprehend the irreparable damage that was being done. She hated her Momma for crossing
the street without looking both ways first. She hated the driver that hit her for drinking four
tallboys at 3:30 in the afternoon. She hated her father for making them the freak show of the
world. And she hated every single person who came to watch just for breathing.

She rolled over onto her belly. “The truth is,” she whispered aloud to herself, “I
could leave at anytime.” And she supposed that that was true. She could do anything. After
all, hadn’t the notorious Jesse O’Keefe talked to her today? He would probably run away
with her. All she’d have to do was ask him.

She imagined herself climbing onto the back of Jesse’s bike with him and leaving this
town far behind. The glamour of the thing was slightly muted by the fact that, for some
reason, she pictured herself wearing Robbie’s football helmet. Probably Jesse didn’t have a
helmet anyway; she’d certainly never seen him wear one. She imagined the dives where
they would eat after they crossed state lines, the seedy low rent hotel rooms they would sleep
in. There her imaginings got a bit fuzzy. Because, what would it be like to be alone with a
boy like Jesse like that? With a man like that? Scary, and exciting. But it was hard to say whether it would be more exciting than scary.

She sighed. She was completely miserable, and unable to distract herself.

On her way home she’d promised herself she wouldn’t do it. That this afternoon would be different. That she would break the cycle. But, she knew it was a lie.

Rolling off the bed, she reached down into the dark recess underneath and pulled out an awkward bundle wrapped in a blue fleece blanket. She unwove the blanket, and placed the sacred item inside on the floor.

Once the answering machine was plugged in, she pushed play. It was the message Momma had recorded well over two years ago, the day before Simon’s fifth birthday. If she listened carefully she could hear him babbling in the background.

“Hi, this is the Evan’s house,” Momma said from the tape, “We aren’t here right now, or we’re in the fields, or we’re otherwise occupied,” here she laughed. “But, if you leave us a message, we’ll get back to you soon as ever we can. Thanks!”

The message stopped. Josie’s knuckles were pressed against her mouth.

She rewound the message, and played it again.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Josie had never had a boyfriend, which at sixteen might have embarrassed any other girl. She’d never gone on a date. She’d never been kissed. She figured she probably should have been nervous as she waited for Jesse O’Keefe on the raised platform at the drive-in. But she wasn’t.
And she didn’t get nervous, not even when he appeared in his battered leather coat, and leapt onto the platform next to her, kissed her hard on the mouth and offered her a swig from a bottle of Wild Turkey.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said, grinning his crooked grin, “I was a little worried you wouldn’t show.”

“I said I would, didn’t I?” She was mildly impressed with her ability to be indignant within 15 seconds of her first kiss and her first shot of hard liquor.

He chuckled and brushed a stray hair behind her ear. “I like you, pretty girl. And, I’ve like you for a long time. I’ve been watching you for months.”

She took another swig from the bottle. Her insides burned. “Yah?”

He nodded. “Yah.”

That seemed bizarre to her. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why have you been watching me?”

He laughed. “You really have no clue, do you?”

She bristled, and jumped down from the platform. “What—I fascinate you? Little freak mission girl, mommy’s dead, daddy’s a charlatan, a laughing stock. Or is it the religious aspect of it? Is it because I’m a good girl?”

He jumped down after her, took several long swallows from the bottle, and leveled the most serious gaze he’d ever given her. “Are you a good girl, Josie?”

She swallowed hard. “That’s what you said, the other day.”
“Yah, I guess I did. But—” He looked away, up at the screen. “Look kid, this is how it is. You do fascinate me. But not because of what you think.” He paused for a moment, and cautioned a glance at her. “And it was damn shame about your mother.”

Her lip trembled. Sometimes the smallest moments of sympathy shook her the most. “Well why is it then?”

He smiled. It wasn’t the usual grin, it was a different smile entirely. A kinder smile. A younger smile. “Because you just used the word charlatan in a sentence without blinking an eye.”

Then he kissed her again, gentler and sweeter than before, and deeper too. When she pulled away she was quite breathless. Her cheeks felt hot, and her head was a little spinny. Probably from the alcohol.

“You sure it’s not because my father’s a preacher? It’s not some sacrilegious thrill?”

“Aw, pretty girl,” he said with a sideways grin, “your daddy isn’t a preacher. He’s just a nut with an audience.” His hand came up and his thumb pushed down hard on her lower lip, causing the flesh to pool around her teeth, the blood to ebb away and leave a spot of shocked, white skin. “Though he does seem to have a pretty devoted little following, doesn’t he?” He ghosted his thumb gently over her lip.

“That’s because they’re all as crazy as he is!”

He chuckled again, a dry, rattling sound deep in his chest. “Maybe.”

She shrugged. “Maybe you have to be crazy to believe something. Maybe you have to be crazy to believe anything at all.” He was standing so close to her. His nearness felt strange.
“Maybe. My mom’s sister’s family are Witnesses. They believe some crazy shit. Cruel shit too, all about being a certain kind—chosen.”

His hand dropped, his fingers brushing her collar bone. She covered her gasp by saying, “They’re all like that.”

He nodded. “I’m not knocking faith or nothing—but if that shit’s true about God, that exclusive bullshit, well heaven’s gonna be just like high school.” He paced a few steps and pitched the bottle he’d been holding at the platform, and it shattered. “If that’s my holy reward you can fucking leave me out.”

Josie’s eye’s stayed on the patter of glass haloing out from the stage. She heard the crunch of gravel underfoot and felt his warmth as he once more invaded her space. That heavy thumb came down and pressed her lip again.

“God, your mouth,” he said. He was so close again, his breath strangely wet on her cheek.

“This is where I like you best,” he mumbled, “I like you best where your shiny bits come together.”

She pursed her lips. He licked his.

Then he seemed to draw back slightly and consider. Consider her, maybe, or the place they stood, or the way they were touching. And then he asked, with genuine curiosity, “What do you want, pretty girl?”

She thought about lying. She thought about trying to be flippant, or cruel. But she told the truth.

“Mostly, I want to grow up.”

“I don’t know,” he whispered, “You seem pretty grown up to me.”
“Looks can be deceiving.”

“Probably time then?”

She looked up into his pretty brown eyes. Then she closed the distance between their mouths, hard.

Yes, it was time to grow up. And growing up was accepting that everything sacred at one point or another will be compromised.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

It was Sunday again. Church had just ended. Daddy’s sermon had been a real monster—a 45 minute treaty on how to turn from sin and offer your love to the love of Jesus’ Truth. Yet in all that time, he’d never managed to elaborate in any detail about what, exactly, Jesus’ truth was. Only that it involved accepting Jesus’ love with all your heart and offering up your own. And turning from sin.

When she was a little girl, Momma used to bring her and Robbie to Sunday school at Zion Lutheran. They talked about Jesus quite a bit there too. They said that Jesus loved everyone, a lot. They also said that that was just the way it was. Jesus loves you and there’s nothing you can do about it. It’s not a choice—or if it is, it’s not your choice. And that seemed right to her—when she was small—that there was some force in this universe that loved militantly, regardless.

Daddy’s Jesus wasn’t really like that. He threw lightning bolts, and gave people epiphanies, and told people that even though love was the ultimate answer, it had to be their love, and there was a chance, at the end of the day, that it wouldn’t be good enough. She wondered what her Momma would think of that.
He was shaking congregant’s hands. Josie and Robbie stood slightly beside him. Simon was leaning against Josie’s middle, his face buried in her hip. His was still young enough that he wasn’t embarrassed to be close.

He tugged her dress. “Josie?”

She looked down at him. His cheeks were pink again.

Simon’s face was drawn. “I try to love Jesus. I think I’m doing it alright. But what if I’m not?” He looked close to tears.

For a moment, Josie saw lightning.

She crouched down so she would be at eye level with him. “Now you listen to me, Simon. You love Jesus just fine. And he loves you.”

Simon’s face got more pinched, and when he spoke his voice trembled. “But how do you know for sure?”

Robbie’s cheeks were clenched. He was acting like he wasn’t listening, but it was clear he was.

“Because I love you,” Josie said in a harsh whisper, “Because I love you very much. That’s how you know.”

Simon gave her a little smile, but his face stayed quite grave.

Behind them, Daddy kept shaking hands, making introductions, greeting the faithful, and subtly encouraging them to leave a dollar in the building fund bucket.

“Good morning, young man,” she heard Daddy say, “I’ve seen you here a couple times before, haven’t I?”

“Yes sir. I’ve attended a couple of times.”

Josie’s head snapped up. Jesse O’Keefe was talking to her father.
“And what do you think of our operation?”

Josie’s heart was pounding. Jesse caught her eye over her father’s shoulder and winked.

“Oh, it’s quite interesting.”

Daddy nodded. “Well it’s nice to see the youth involved. How did you find us?”

“Actually, I’m a friend of your daughter, sir.” What he said was perfectly polite. But it was accompanied by that crooked grin. Her father didn’t seem to notice.

“And what’s your name?”

“Jesse O’Keefe, sir.”

“Jesse,” her father repeated it, like he was trying it out. “Nice to meet you.” He took a step forward.

“Son of a!” her father shouted. That forward step had taken him right into the circle of broken glass from the other night. “What the hell? There’s glass here!”

“Daddy!” Simon shouted, and tried to run forward. Robbie put out an arm out to stop him. He was not wearing his shoes either.

“What is it?” Josie asked like she didn’t know.

“Nothing,” her father, the great man, was crouched over awkwardly examining his foot. “It’s nothing, just glass.”

Josie cautioned a look at Jesse. He held her eye and did not smile.

“Dad, we should take you to the hospital,” Robbie said quickly, “Glass works its way in—”

“No, no, that’s alright.” Daddy waved a dismissive hand.

“Daddy—really—“
“I said no, damn it. I’ll be back in a minute. I’m going to get my shoes.”

Josie watched as he hobbled away, a confident king injured in his own castle. The late morning light glinted off the glass as he limped off to wait for Jesus’ healing hand.
The Lesson in the Letters

TO: aaronadamson@greton.edu
From: rinedalys@greton.edu
Subject: Findings

Aaron Mine,

Well, here I am! Safely arrived and working for my mother, like so much cheap labor. Things have been relatively productive—well according to Mom’s agenda. Mine sucks. I haven’t written a word (except for these) since I arrived. Thank goodness I submitted my grades and finished that Caliban article before I came. This place makes me feel impotent. I have all the imagination of a not terribly imaginative person (See!). Oh, well. I don’t have the time for it anyway. There’s entirely too much family paraphernalia (letters, letters, letters) to categorize. You were right. I shouldn’t have waited, now it’s really crunch time. Mom’s closing on the house in two weeks. And that’s not much time to sort, organize and catalogue 60+ years of claptrap. But with the semester ending and all the stress of the last few weeks, this was the only time. The best time, really. Inconvenient. But welcome. And it gives me a chance to show Mom my degrees have a useful application.

Transcribing, Mom says, is an ancient and revered art. Apparently, once upon a time, only the most trustworthy and respected of the community were allowed to commit history to paper. If so, I don’t know why she’s asking me to do this. Doesn’t she know we creative types are notoriously unreliable, and prone to exaggeration? Poor Mom, so trusting.
Sean called, hm? I’m sorry he bothered you. I don’t know why he’d call you, he knows I’m at my mother’s. I swear he always pushes me to produce when I’m away from home. If he calls again, feel free to tell him that you are very important and can’t be bothered.

Oh! Another thing. I’ve found something. You can tell me if you’re too busy. (How many times have I forced you to read something or other (usually dreadful, usually written by me!) over the years?) But, I have to share this with someone. I was in Mom’s closet, gathering up the last of the correspondence, and I found an old shoebox. It was full of stacks of old receipts, and documents of little importance, but at the very bottom, there was a small packet of letters, yellowed. Pardon the dramatics, but I was suddenly hit with this awareness of importance. They seemed to beckon to me—staring back from the bottom of the box—at once so simple and insignificant sitting there amidst all those memos and notes. I might have opened the shoebox and found a heart with a hatpin through it. Really.

I read them, of course. And, honestly Aaron, I can’t get them out of my mind. This woman—she must have been only 20 or 21 when she wrote them. And they’re all addressed to my great grandfather—but I’ve been unable to find any of his replies. There’s something in the family histories about him taking on a ward—the orphaned daughter of a colleague or something—but I can’t find out anything else about her.
Am I crazy? Read these letters—these are the earliest—and tell me if you feel it.

I hope you are well. All my love.

Katie Lou

P.S. Do you suppose its human nature to seek parallels in events wholly unrelated to oneself?

ATTCH: LETTER DOCUMENTS

Dearest [Here the name is indistinguishable],

July 30, 1923

There is an inherent duplicity to this letter. You see, it has all the appearance of a simple note of thanks, tucked into an understated letter of greeting. In actuality, it is a young bride’s way of staving off a late onset of honeymoon malaise. Ennui, or boredom, or melancholy, call it what you will. When trying to shake this peculiar mind frame, the only plausible comfort I could find was in thoughts of you. So, here you have it. A polite letter of greeting, which is actually a comfort and distraction to its writer. I use you very cruelly, but at least you’ve had fair warning.

The wedding (what’s that delightful term?) “came-off” without complication. I am assured, by all in attendance, that it was a lovely affair. Though more than one marked your absence. I felt it keenly myself, but of course, I understand. And, apparently, it’s really quite in vogue for a woman to walk herself down the aisle. Your mother, gracious as ever, stood up on the bride’s side. The bride was awfully glad of that—her side was a bit empty. Your mother’s so impressive. I’m certain the out of town Markelsons thought me far more important than I really am due to her presence.
She tells me you’re in Venice again, on your lecture circuit. I do hope you find the canals less carcass strewn than when we last visited. (Why is it that they never show you St. Mark’s with the dead pigeons and floating dogs in postcards? One would think the Venetians would want to discourage us boorish tourists—but there you are.) I hope you are finding Italy as enjoyable as it was several months ago. Perhaps it is selfish of me to wish you here (or me there) but . . .

Your card was lovely. Many thanks. So charmingly you. 13 words was it, no, 14! You’ve always had a gift for brevity. Still, it’s a small comfort in your stead.

But now Roger is calling me for dinner, so sadly, I must adieu. These full service Hampton [this might be an actual hotel name—but it’s difficult to read] hotels are so serious about promptness.

Count on receiving more of these letters. Steel yourself.

Yours,

Sophia Markelson

P.S. Tara said that the first time you sign your husband’s name as your own is at once thrilling and droll. For my part, it’s merely odd not to be signing yours.

Dear August 16, 1923

Greetings, my [here the word is gone—but I think it was ‘friend’] How are you finding the continent? You’ll have moved on now to the lower coast, I assume. Such beauty! I’m looking at beauty right now—the seaside view at Hampton. This country tour has been beautiful—but I must say a touch showy for my taste. Such gaudy beauty. This will be our last stop before making our return home. Home—
I’m finding myself somewhat anxious about returning to Hartford [I think it’s Hartford, but I can’t tell—that was the location of my Grandfather’s house so it stands to reason]. It will be such a change from our house. How many servants they have! To think what they’d say if they saw your study or bedroom—so thick with dust I could leave full hand prints behind me! And I will be mistress of all that. Intimidating.

I know that it will take adjusting. I know this. But quitting your house was more difficult than I’d imagined. Or admitted, perhaps. To think, of leaving you, who’ve been my friend and comfort since my own excellent parent’s death (How long ago? Can you remember? What a historian I’d make! Has it been 10 years, or 12?). It’s painful.

But I’ll make you worry with this talk. I am really quite happy. Roger is a gentleman in all things, and marriage is no exception. I think our seaside honeymoon has saddened him—he has these ideas that any proper husband should have his wife overseas for the occasion. I’ve told him it’s no matter—I already have done, after all, but he’s strangely taken with melancholy about the matter. I told him it’s too early for melancholy. He seemed amused by that, in his way, and promised to wait until after lunch in the future. So, you see, it’s quite convivial.

When are you returning from your lectures? Soon, yes? Roger says you’re to come up to the house when you get back, as long as you won’t talk hours about “Van Gogh or some such tripe.” So there you have it, no Van Gogh.

Safe Journey,

Sophia Markelson
Dear

One last letter as a honeymooning wife. We’re on the train back to Hartford. It still counts as a honeymoon even if you’re returning, yes? I’ve just had a letter from your mother, and she tells me you’re on your way back to us as well. I’m sure your tour was a great success. I can’t wait to hear about it.

Oh that reminds me! Your mother means to have us round when we return. Be forewarned, she’s said in no uncertain terms that you will be in attendance. Roger’s eager to meet you. He’s heard a great deal, from me, of course. Why, just the other day he said, employing one of his quaint little Englishisms, “Sophie, the way you talk about this bloke, I’d be amazed should any fellow measure up!” Won’t he be surprised when he meets you, hm?

Then! Roger, all eager to impress, asked if he should address you as ‘Father’! I couldn’t stop laughing. I laughed till I trembled. And then I trembled for hours. If he ever does address you as such, I authorize a firm reprisal. I’ve told him, such was not the nature of our relationship. Guardian would have been a better term, but that’s hardly an addressable title one could use in polite company. Till such a time when it is, I’ve told him to merely call you by your name. Is this acceptable to you? If so or if not, trust Roger to make a muck of it. He’s terrible with names. But he’s really quite charming when he’s befuddled.

I’ve only just realized, I should send this to the house. That way you’ll have something waiting for you when you return.

Yours,

Sophia Markelson
TO: aaronadamson@greton.edu  
From: rinedalys@greton.edu  
Subject: More again

Aaron Mine,

Ah, the non-intimacy of email. I wish I could talk to you in person—but Mom has this thing about cell phones. She’s afraid of radiation—she’s convinced a cell phone fifty feet away will give her a tumor. I’d call on her landline—but Sean called last night. It was awful, and because I was on Mom’s phone, Mom was part of it. And you know, she’s been really understanding about the whole thing—there have only been several sarcastic asides about ‘business and pleasure’ and ‘marrying your editor/publisher’—she actually says “slash”! At least she hasn’t called me a quitter yet, or brought God into this. Of course, it has to be difficult for Mom too. I mean, she always liked Sean so much. More than me, sometimes. As always, the choices we make affect more than just us. As though I need to tell you that. Anyway, that’s why I’m experiencing dialing hesitancy.

I knew you would like the letters. There’s something so tender about them. I can’t explain it. As always, knowing you’re backing my play is so gratifying. I’ve attached several more. Let me know what you think.

Mom thinks I should be able to finish converting everything by the end of the week. I already booked my train ticket, so I hope she’s right. I haven’t been feeling well, so
there’s no telling. I haven’t woken up sick so often since my binge years in college. You’ll be at the station to meet me, yes?

I hope your summer session is ending well. Don’t fail too many of them, Aaron, Renaissance Poetry is tricky anytime of year—but especially in the summer.

All my love. Katie Lou

Dear

October 13th, 1923

I was so delighted to get your telegram! It’s been weeks and weeks with no word, and now you’re going to be in the City! I’ve been pleading with Roger to take me to your lecture. I think I’m making headway. Well, he sniffed and mumbled something about Goya—but it was one of his more approving mumblings.

Your mother tells me you hope to publish your Goya studies? [My mother has his book on her shelf—“Goya: The Last Great Master and the First New Modernist”—you’d love it Aaron, it’s a first edition!] Always a favorite of mine, I confess. I tried to describe it to Roger, what it felt like to walk down that pillared hall in the Museo del Prado. The way the light seemed to fall away, except from the paint, the way images lined the walls like silent, hungry, spirits, the way those canvases seemed to watch the watcher, to inspect even as they are inspected. And how, at the end of the hall, stationary Saturn seemed to actually lurk, his tortured frame hunkered and bulking, his face twisted into some strange amalgam of
horrified regret and delicious pleasure as the body of his child hangs from his mouth, half-consumed.

What sort of person am I? That room, so haunting, so hallowed, pricks my skin with dread—yet I yearn to return there. I yearn to feel the rolling chill of the grotesque again. I yearn to feel that terror at the god anew. How could such a screaming canvas rest so silently?

Roger was unimpressed. He’s always been more of an Impressionist man himself. He likes things that look dauntingly beautiful from far away (even if they seem an utter shambles when you get close enough to get a good look.) Forgive me, I’m sure my ruminations seem quite amateurish to a critic of your level.

I can’t recall—did you like the Saturn? I’m sure that it means I’m off—but it’s my favorite.

Yours,

Sophie Markelson

[P.S. My Grandfather’s book says this in regards to Goya’s “Saturn Devouring His Son”: “It is the very essence of violence and madness—and perhaps one might dismiss it as mere barbarism, if not for Saturn’s hauntingly human eyes. The viewer is left to ponder the power of jealousy and fear. One leaves the piece all the more unsettled because Saturn represents humanity, represents the evils that humans are capable of justifying—of the tortures and destruction that selfishness can make appear reasonable.”]
December 17, 1923

Dear

Hopefully this note will reach you at your hotel before the lecture tonight. I wanted to let you know that I will be in attendance after all. Roger, however, was called away on unexpected business (Honestly, is ‘business’ ever really unexpected—especially if it’s your business?). In any case, I am here, on the train, listening to the rain as turning wheels and winding track close the distance between us.

Don’t you feel you’ve spent most of your life on a train? I do sometimes. It makes me happy, I mean, I think of all the traveling we did as I was growing up, and I can’t help but be filled with pleasure. How familiar the rhythm of the rolling track, like a friend, or a long cherished companion—this inertia makes me feel safe. It’s nice to have that comfort, especially after months of adjusting to decidedly unfamiliar surroundings.

I hope the weather brightens up. Rain’s so gloomy here. I remember how I used to love the rain in Italy. Is that odd? Surely it was the same rain, from the same sky, but there always seems to be something so shoddy and sad about American rain.

I remember standing with you in the rain in Florence. I remember standing on the Pointe du Vecchio. I remember the way your hand curled around my throat. Your fingers were so soft, so well kept. They were cold from the wet, that first bite of spring, and beneath the skin I could feel the steel of your strength. If you’d closed your fist, I would have breathed no more.

Your hands were so big. I thought they could hold out the rain.

Forgive my foolish ruminations—travel always spurs memory.

I look forward to seeing you afterward.
Dear February 2, 1924

I feel I must write to make apologies. My apology is two-fold. The first—I’m sorry for Roger’s appalling behavior at Chateau Mélange. Believe me when I tell you he is harmless. He speaks, but he has no connection between the words he says and what he thinks. It’s terrible folly, but there you are. What you, no doubt, beheld as wild impertinence, was merely Roger’s own inability to be tactful. He’s of that particular and rarified breed of men who has never had reason to be couth—he doesn’t need to take care, to be wary, to be cautious of offense. As your dear mother says, “We forgive the very rich all their foibles.” Forgive him now. He has no idea what he said, I firmly believe, no inkling of the unhappy impact it might have had (indeed, has?) upon you.

Poor lamb. Roger lacks the wit to accuse someone of impropriety in jest, and is far too jelly-boned to ever do it in earnest. His comments in regards to you were merely more evidence of his passing heedlessness. Nothing more.

As for my part in the Tiff, I feel you raised me quite well. I was afforded the best education, every luxury of comfort, the security of a home, the benefit of travel and companionship. I came into womanhood wanting for nothing in your house.

Surely, you know that.

And here is the second. I apologize for allowing this, which I knew would be a brutal debacle, to happen in the first. As far as words of comfort go on this account, know only if you felt humiliation or rage, it was nothing in comparison to what I experienced. Roger’s
like a child; he needs to be cared for, tended, coddled. And, like a child, he sometimes makes scenes unpleasant to all, and leaves me to play the role of bedraggled mother, tidying up, making amends.

Lastly, I can only say that if that explanation cannot induce you to forgive my poor, foolish husband, consider this: Any reproach you bear him will be felt all the more keenly by me. Do let the matter go, for my sake, if nothing else.

Perhaps this is a cruel card to play. Sadly, I find it to be the only one remaining in my hand.

Yours,

Sophia Markelson

TO: aaronadamson@greton.edu
From: rinedalys@greton.edu
Subject:

Well. I'm glad you didn't hold back on my account. No need to censor yourself. Not to me.

A straight answer, hm? Is that what you want? You think I'm a charlatan, a manipulative child who created this woman and her feverous words to hurt you? At times you really surprise me, Aaron.

You're right, of course. I could have done it. I could have invented Sophie Markleson, given her words and life and woe like I would any other character. Truly,
the similarities between our love affair and hers are undeniable. I married a man I
didn’t really love, like her. And for years I pined in vain for a man who I respected
and adored, like her. Oh yes, Aaron, I could have done it. But would I do that to
you? Do you really believe me capable of doing something like that?

Maybe you do. Well, do you also believe me capable of doing this?

I found this in a box of newspaper clippings. It’s from the Hartford Star, 1924.

Mrs. Roger Markelson died Saturday June 17th, when her car stalled on the double
track outside of Union Central. Though the conductor made all attempts to stop, the
vehicle was struck. Mrs. Sophia Markelson, it is believed, died upon impact. She
was 22. This news is especially tragic, as next month was to herald her one-year
wedding anniversary to tycoon Roger Markelson. The Star and its readership wishes
to offer its heartfelt condolences to Mr. Markelson, and all Sophia’s surviving family.

You know, I’m an academic professional, and accusing me of fabricating something
and then representing it as factual is really quite serious. I’m going to carry that.

But this changes nothing. Whether I invented them or not, now they exist—between
us—reminding us. Reminding us of what else it between us. And what isn’t.

Really Aaron. Only children threaten with lies.

In other news, Sean says he won’t sign the papers. Then he said he would—but
that he wouldn’t agree to ‘irreconcilable differences.’ He even threw about the word
‘cuckold.’ As though I wouldn’t know what that meant! I teach Shakespeare!
I’m pissed, sure. But I still wish you were here with me. I wish it so much I can make up for the conviction you obviously lack.

These are the last of the letters.

Katie Lou

Dear  

March 21, 1924

Your mother assures me you are well, but I’d feel much better if you told me so yourself. I don’t know if we’ve ever gone so long without communicating. I’m sure you’re busy with your lecture circuit and all. Still, surely you have time to send me a quick note?

I, for the most part, have just passed the time. I have been unwell lately, but the doctor assures us it’s nothing. I think it is all weather related—remember how easily I used to take a chill? That’s what I told the doctor, and he said seasonal difficulties are perfectly normal. But Roger kept insisting it was something else. I suspect he thought I was pregnant. Can you imagine? This tired flesh carrying another life? Not likely.

I’ve been well enough to get about this last week, and to read and write (obviously) but I haven’t been up to much else. And Roger’s always hovering about, watching me with his big over-anxious eyes—just as Helena must have watched Demetrius—anxious to see how long fairy magic will last. But we mortals know it only lasts a summer. He’s become so obnoxious that I would make that comparison to his face—but he isn’t one for books, and the reference would be wasted on him. But perhaps I’m being unfair. You know better than anyone—sickness always puts me out of sorts.
I do hope to hear from you. Strange. No matter how old I get, you’ll always be the first person I turn to when something isn’t right.

Yours,

Sophie Markelson

Dear

April 3, 1924

I confess, I found your last letter quite shocking. You! Who in my lifetime has never sent me a letter over a page! You have a gift for brevity—and the circumstances that force you from it must be extreme indeed.

I’ve read it, of course. Every page. And I put it in the fire, which I am sure you will thank me for when you are in sober mind. Though you said nothing to me that would not be perfectly appropriate for a father to say to his daughter in regards to her marriage and times of difficulty, the length of the missive spoke for itself.

May I ask you what you imagine such a measure will achieve? I’d half suspect you of planning some great intrigue, of putting into action some wild plot—were you not so totally disinclined towards such behavior. But, I know better than to wait for anything like that from you. No gesture of romance, or feeling, not sentiment or sweet words, God help us, not even acknowledgement. No! I learned not to need such favors; you’ve taught me again and again and again that they will never come. You are not demonstrative. I know. It changed nothing.

And that’s just the thing of it, you see. You can change now, if you wish it. But it is pointless. Because I am wholly unchangeable. And so is my situation. And, I’m confident
that when you stop reasoning with the logic of a schoolboy whose prize marble has been stolen, you will see this.

Please don’t send me another letter like that. You cannot know how seeing so many words written in your hand burned me.

Yours,

Sophia Markelson

Dear May 30, 1924

It seems we’re in a state of things. Whatever the reason for it, things cannot continue this way. I can’t bear it.

I’m writing this from the gardens. You’ve never been round to Roger’s home, but the grounds are really quite extensive—massive gardens. I’m a great one for gardens. Remember when I first came to you, just a young child, and I used to stick cut flowers right into the ground? They always withered, though—of course they did, how could you expect a thing to live when you’ve taken away its roots? Granted, I wasn’t to blame for that first cutting—but no matter. Roger’s gardens are quite beautiful.

Listen, here’s the thing of it. (How disjointed this letter must seem!) I’m not sure what you expect of me. I’ve done my best. I’ve always done my best! I’ve endeavored to live as I ought, to make the wisest decisions I could, and yes, to honor you. I owe you everything—and don’t make light of that aspect. I am utterly beholden to you. And I’ve ventured to repay you in the only way I could—I became a Markelson. Now no one can say I’ve disgraced your house. Not even you. Because, you see, what was there that you could ask of me that I wouldn’t willingly give? That I didn’t willingly give?
You see, of course. I did only what I had to. Surely you can see that.

These choices, such as they are, are mine. You don’t have to approve of them. But you will take responsibility for your role in my choosing.

Please, tell me you can live with that. As I have.

Your Sophie

TO: aaronadamson@greton.edu
From: rinedalys@greton.edu
Subject:

I’m sorry. I realize I owe you an apology.

You must know, that there’s no way I can prove the letters exist. Not now, not over email. When I’m home again, I can show them to you, you can hold them in your hand and read them yourself, but until then you simply have to trust me. When I got your last email, I was so angry. I’m already tortured by the idea that you find me childish and when I read your response—response to these letters which have been a labor of love for me since I arrived—it was like all my insecurities had been laid bare.

Only you have the power to do that to me.

But I do owe you this—I did become obsessed with the letters. I couldn’t see that it was all about you, from the very first. I honestly thought I was only sharing them with you because they were something interesting and archaic and sad . . . and
you’re the person I want to share things with—anything! The things that matter to me, the little and big alike. And that was part of it, of course.

But I became so single minded. From the moment I found that first letter, it was my story I was reading, mine and yours. A young girl marries, trying her best to please those around her by doing what she ought. A young girl falls in love with a man much older than her, a man who fears his own affections for her. Or was it that you feared mine? Was it that he feared hers—too young, too foolish and headstrong to be true? Oh yes. I felt her pain.

I’m no child, Aaron. I spent too many years in a loveless marriage with Sean. But no more. He’s signed the papers. I’m no longer Katherine Dalys—back to plain old Katie Lou Whitman.

Oh—I’d nearly forgotten. There’s one last piece to the puzzle of Sophie Markelson. I found a telegram, sent to my great Grandfather, June 17th, 1924. It said only:

J’accuse, my love

I wondered if the comma wasn’t an error.

I know you think I’m foolish. And young. I know, too, that you think we’ve transgressed—but all this guilt! And for what? We love one another!
I can’t bear this any longer. Think about the cost. Think about what happened to a bright young woman who only tried to do what she thought she had to. The lesson is in the letters.

Stop trying to spare me. Stop trying to be sensible. I’m coming home on the train tomorrow. Be there to meet me.

Yours,

Katie Lou
Lady Malevich on the 4am to Munich

“So little is known about her—only that she was married to the painter Malevich, that she was his third bride, and that her name was Natalia.”—Historical Record

February 3rd, 1967

The Lady dreamt of boxes. The boxes were red in the pleasant, comfortable dreams. But when they turned to nightmares, the boxes were black.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

She stirred from sleep, jerked awake by the sudden phantom kicking of her legs. As if they were runner legs remembering a time when they moved at full stride. Although that time never was, not even when she was young. When she was young, a million years ago.

Across from her, the boy was keeping vigil, watching out the window as the train clicked steadily along. She wondered what he was watching in the darkness, in the vast immutable landscape of rolling shadows that passed by the window in the nighttime. An artist’s eye might see much. But, neither she nor he possessed that particular skill.

That’s why she was so terribly fond of the boy. She snorted. That had to be the clearest sign of her age, that she considered him, a young man of nearly thirty a boy.

His eyes moved from the window to wash briefly over her semi-reclined form. He had two faces, the one he showed to everyone everyday, with its studied lines and expressions, and the other face, with its features unguarded, slack and naked. It was this face he turned towards her now, as he glanced away from the window. Then, when he realized she was awake, it was momentarily paralyzed by shock and swallowed by his first face.
“Oh,” he said, straightening up in his seat, and smoothing imagined wrinkles out of
his clothing. Always he did this, as if he were a school boy making himself presentable for
the headmaster. He smiled somewhat sheepishly, a tight little grin.

“I didn’t realize you’d woken.”

She stretched slightly. “I only just did. Tell me, why do my legs only think we’re an
active person in the night?”

His smile became more earnest. “I don’t know. Tricks of the mind I suppose.”

“Nonsense, my mind is the reason we never were.” Outside, the darkness seemed to
crowd. She could make out nothing of their surroundings, besides the idle brushing of a pine
branch that leaned too far over the track.

“What time is it?”

He bustled up his sleeve to reveal the watch he carried so proudly, an heirloom of
some sort, and an eyesore. “Nearly 3.”

She nodded. “Not long now.”

His eyes rested on her, examining, and she was plenty happy to ignore it, except that
his eyes could become as heavy as tactile weights on her shoulders if she let it go on long
enough.

“Yes?” she asked at last, with asperity.

“You know, it wouldn’t cost that much more to get a sleeper car.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Truthful, she had no inkling of the expense of the thing. Since the boy had been hired
as her assistant, he’d taken over the secretarial work, the correspondences and the finances.
But, as a courtesy, he deferred all major decision making to her. Though perhaps it wasn’t that much of a courtesy if he insisted on complaining about it.

“It wouldn’t, and, if I may say so, if you keep insisting on these overnight trains, it might be the best option.”

She crossed her arms. “Worried about my ancient old bones are you?”

“Not nearly so worried as I am about my own, Lady.” From the boy, that qualified as sass.

She smiled, “We’ll see.” This was her way of saying no.

He nodded, a small defeated smile on his lips. “Do you think we’ll be lucky?”

She peered out the window again, looking up at the sky, searching for the outlines of red that guided her way. *Give me a sign, Kasha*, she thought as she looked hard into the black.

The boy watched her intently. Silence settled between them.

She turned away from the window at last and offered him a slight shrug.

His nod was curt and serious. “There’s still time. Nearly a whole hour yet till we arrive.”

“Yes, Jamie. Don’t give up hope yet.”

His eyes betrayed his secret belief that he’d done something right when she said his name.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

In the bleak winter of the first year of the Second World War, the Nazis came. They took down all of the paintings her Kasha had left in Warsaw and Berlin, his early, revolutionary nonrepresentational work. They invaded the homes of their friends and
comrades and took away the work that was so precious to him. They buckled it into a great black box with straps and chains upon it, and carried it away.

Or this is what she was told.

She was not there. He had asked her, begged really in his own way, to leave the country. She said she would not go. And she kept her word, long after he was in the ground.

She received the telegram that very winter, waiting out the war in Nemchinovka, waiting for Stalin’s men to come for her because she’d once been married to the wrong man. All the telegram said was: THEY’VE TAKEN EVERYTHING STOP

And she stood for a very long time looking off into the whiteness of the horizon.

Even then, with her husband some six years dead, she felt this phenomenal and unshakable sensation of failure come upon her.

In that moment, she thought of Kasha, as he had been 12 years before, in the second year of their marriage. It was 1927, and he was furiously scribbling on a scrap of parchment in their little apartment in Warsaw.

She was used to his artistic temperaments, but the urgency of his actions startled her. She told him so.

“Talia,” he said, his long earnest face gathered in concentration, “I must make a will.”

She almost laughed at him. “Are you planning to die suddenly?”

He was far from amused. “Everything is changing at home. And after the exhibition here, we must go back there. And I’m determined to be prepared.”

“Everything is always changing.”

“All the more reason to be prepared.”
When he read what he’d written to her, it began with “In case of my death or permanent imprisonment.”

She scolded him. “Don’t you think you’re being a bit dramatic?”

And he’d looked up over the parchment, over the top of his glasses, and smiled sadly. “You are very young, my love.”

And she bristled then, but he had been right. She was 27, his third wife and thirty years his junior. His friends thought she was a child, a well meaning philistine. They thought she was an undeserving neophyte. And maybe they were right, because either her youth or her lack of perception affected her read of changes in the homeland. She could not see.

Then he died, and left her alone, with only his most ‘approved’ paintings to keep her company.

She stood there, staring at the white that hid Leningrad from her sight. She stood there waiting for resolve to come and bolster her along. When it didn’t, she settled for the anger. She crushed the telegram in her hand and vowed she would get them back. All of them. Every last one of his children would be returned.

She would prove them wrong. She would prove that she was more than a child, more than a hopeless hanger-on. She would prove that she was the worthiest of all.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

She kept her eyes on the sky, waiting for the sign, the indication, the beacon to light.

The boy was watching the sky as well, but she had no idea what sign he was searching for. Though she knew he was searching.
The boy. That’s what she called him, what she’d always called him since they first met, though that was nearly five years ago now. Perhaps it was insulting, what with him being nearly 30. Of course this was nothing when compared to her 70 years, but there was little doubt that he was a man and not in fact a boy. However, she couldn’t stop thinking of him as something tender.

Even for these years of precarious companionship, she knew remarkably little about him. His full name was James Harold Templeton. He was the second son of a rather prominent British family. He had an easy demeanor, but his manners were impeccable, with a precise British accuracy that was as much a veneer as a behavior. He concealed much, and she did not feel the need to pry into his private matters. Whatever it was he concealed was his to hide, if he wished it.

Though this didn’t stop her from speculating about him. She knew there was a crumpled telegram he kept in his breast pocket. When he first began to travel with her, she often caught him reading it, his face etched with naked desperation. Even now, she would see him slide an idle finger across that pocket, something drawn and grim in his expression. She didn’t ask, because she didn’t like the idea of being responsible for that haggard longing in his eyes, even if merely through suggestion. Besides, she didn’t really have to ask.

It was obviously about some woman. It always was.

And the boy, her Jamie, even for his manners and his rigidity, he was the sort who felt things deeply. For her, this made the key question not had there been a love affair, but what had the nature of the love affair been. He’d spoken to her only once of the phantom girl, in lustless freewheeling metaphors that made her sound like a creature of air, or water, rather
than a human. But she had also sounded golden and friendly and good, and she had little
doubt he’d loved the girl very much. Perhaps it was that which made the ruin so calamitous.

“Does it make me a bad person,” he’d asked her once, “To be so crippled by this
shame and guilt?”

She’d looked deep into his eyes, looked into the anguish and kindness and dear, dear
youth within them, and shook her head. “It doesn’t make you bad. But, I’m afraid it does
make you human.”

She turned to him now, to watch his eyes on the blackness of the night sky. She knew
what she was searching for in the darkness. And she supposed he did too.

Both of them could keep each other company, as they waited for their separate signs.
And she was thankful for that.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

When she was sixteen, she fell in love with a boy who climbed a tree. He was the
child of her family’s closest friends, he was nearly 20, and she thought he knew everything.
He’d been away at school for a time, and his return for that holiday summer was a surprise to
his family. And to her, for she didn’t remember him to have been so beautiful, tall and thin,
with a crown of dark curls. His smile was straight and captivating, and when he turned it on
her, she lost what little reason there was in her sixteen year old head.

She had flown the kite only in jest, to appease the younger children. She’d been
indignant about it too, because it was holiday and they were out of the city, and she was
nearly a lady. And as she was contemplating the injustice of her circumstances, a hard wind
came up and buried her kite in the branches of the nearest tree. The children laughed, and
she felt what little was left of her pride crumble to ash. So furious was she that she didn’t
hear his approach. He placed a hand on her shoulder and offered to gallantly rescue her kite from the wicked tree. She stammered that it was unnecessary, but he was already slinging himself up through the branches.

She watched with rapt fascination as he climbed higher and higher, his movements sure and steady in the swaying tree. He reached the kite and battled the snagging branch for the tangle. By now, the parents had come over and were watching the display, the children encouraging him, and his mother, clutching her hand to her chest, crying out for him to be careful. But she just watched, one hand shading her eyes from the brightness behind the tree.

At last, he was victorious, pulled the kite free, and held it up with one hand above the branch. The children cheered and several of the parents clapped. His smile was wide and beautiful as he scanned the crowd. Then his eyes came to rest on her.

Suddenly his expression changed, and though his smile remained fixed, his eyes seemed to grow clouded, and sharper. And even though a delicious tremor ran up her spine, she didn’t look away.

Later, when he took her by the hand and led her away, she didn’t stop him. He kissed her, and kissed her, and kissed her. “Talia,” he whispered to her breathlessly, “I only climbed the tree to impress you.” Oh, she was impressed. “Talia, stay with me.” And though her parents called for her, she ignored them. When she finally returned to her father’s side, her dress was helplessly crumpled. She wore it like a badge of honor.

He was her first love.

The next year, she did not go to the country. And that summer he fell from that same tree he climbed to impress her. The fall broke his neck.
Now, she thinks it was probably for the best. He would have gone for a soldier eventually, and died on the battle field, or burned and hardened in the long cold of the revolution. And that would have been worse—watching the light behind his eyes slowly die, while the rest had to linger. She thinks it was for the best.

But fifty years later, she still cannot bring herself to say his name.

She kept it locked away, in the black box chained to her insides.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“I keep thinking about the box,” she said, suddenly, parting the silence around them.

The boy shifted slightly in his seat, his deep intake of breath indicating that the train’s rock and his concentration on the sky had nearly put him to sleep. For one disquieting moment, he looked small and quite young, as he tried to focus his eyes upon her.

“The Nazi Box, you mean?”

She smiled slightly. “Foolish of me, I know. But I wonder what else was in there.”

He shrugged. “History will probably bear out the answers.”

“History,” she snorted, “By the time history does its work, I’ll be long gone.”

The boy squirmed, clearly aware he’d wandered into dangerous territory. “Who do you think was in the box, then?” Dear Jamie, ever the obedient boy, eager to make everything right, everything comfortable again.

“I don’t know. Everyday, who I wish was there, who I wanted to be in with him changes. But I always know who I hope was far from that box.”

The boy grinned. “Who? Who are the artists you fear?”

“I don’t want Kazimir anywhere near Gaugin. I shudder to think of his genius pressed up against that fool’s harem of syphilitic Tahitians. Or Degas! You know, Degas is
becoming quite popular and for the life of me I don’t understand that. All his little dancing
girls—and people think how quaint! Can you imagine? Thinking it was darling, while
ignoring the darkness of the lense—those pieces are painted from the perspective of a leering
rapist! And I hope that if the Nazi’s had that walleyed boating party of Renoir’s, they were
in another box.”

He chuckled at that, as though he hadn’t heard her various well studied rants many
times before. “Not much for the French, hm?”

“Nonsense,” she crossed her arms resolutely, “I’d be honored if Chagall was there.”

“Yes, Lady,” he said with a little smile, “but he was Russian.”

“Yes, and a Jew, but I don’t think that would matter much to the Nazi’s if they
thought it had any value.”

“No, I meant he wasn’t French.”

Her smile was somewhat wily. “Ah. I see.”

He nodded, and tried to keep the gloat off his face at her admission of defeat. Slight
though it may be, it was an admission.

“Who would you like?”

She sighed and looked out the window. “Oh god, anyone. Anyone Jamie, the
classicist, the mannerist, the surrealists, the symbolists—anyone! Just not the blasted
impressionists!”

“What about the cubists?”

She was silent for a long moment. She wondered if the boy could see her age upon
her in the greenish light of the train car, if he could see the deep lines of exhaustion creasing
her face. She was always tired these days, though she slept but rarely. That’s why she preferred these overnight trips.

“The cubists?” She traced her fingers lazily over the window pane, “Imagine it, Kasha beside one of the masters. We should be so lucky.”

“Picasso.”

“Oh, Picasso,” she imagined her smile as much younger. “Our patron saint. Did you know he was in Paris for the entirety of the second world?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“The Nazis came to his studio often, they destroyed his work, messed his space, mocked him, tired to shame him. They didn’t arrest him, no—he was an icon, it was far too dangerous, even for them. Picasso would merely scorn them right back, speak only Spanish to them, try to sell them postcards.

“Then one day during a routine patrol of his studio, one of the Gestapo came upon a replica of his great masterpiece, Guernica. He must have been moved by it, though one can only imagine looking upon it and not feeling something inside you twist. The man turned to Picasso and asked, ‘Did you do this?’ And do you know what he said?”

The boy shook his head.

She smiled. “He looked the Gestapo straight in the eye, and replied, ‘No. You did.’”

Jamie grinned. “A fine patron saint.”

“It is the artist’s job to stand up. They do not have to fight the stream of malice, or try to change it. Much of the time, just to stand is enough. Much of the time, just to stand is the battle.”
When she looked up to him, his eyes were clouded with concern. What exactly he was thinking, she could not guess. He could have been thinking of her many years, or the two world wars she’d seen, or the revolution. He could have been thinking about her years as the widow searcher, her dogged endless quest. Or he might have been thinking of himself, of his life, of what he had sacrificed to be here with her, at her side, her faithful, steady vassal.

“Oh for pity sake!” She snapped, lifting the cloud from his eyes with her tone, “Don’t look at me like I’m already dead, man!” He set about straightening up again, smoothing out the imagined crimps of his jacket. He really was a dear boy. A good little soldier.

“That’s better,” she said resolutely, glancing back out the window, “We have work to do.”

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When Stalin’s men arrested Kasha, they came in the middle of the night. They woke them, and told him he was being taken in. And then they took him.

She wept, and begged them—begged them to take her too—to declare her an accomplice, a clear conspirator, but to no avail. They took her husband from her arms so easily she might as well have not been there.

They held him for days, and neither she nor their friends with connections in the government could get any answers. She found out they’d jailed him nearly a week after it happened.

“Burn it,” Kruchenikh told her, “burn everything that might be in question. All his writings, Natalia—you must destroy them all. Their mere existence puts you in terrible danger.”
She told him that they were Kasha theoretical notes for his next book. She told him she could no sooner destroy them than she could set herself alight.

“If you will not, I will,” was his resolute response. He took the sheaf from the desk and put them in the stove, holding her down when she grabbed after them stupidly.

“Think, Natalia think,” he hissed in her ear as she watched the papers burn. “You are his first concern, for God’s sake. The only thing you can do for him now is keep well.”

She hated him. She hated him for being right.

They kept Kasha in prison for months, with no word on why or how long. She never felt so helpless—not even when she heard about the paintings and the black box.

And then one day, with no word or reason, they released him. And he came home to her, sick, weakened, but still very much himself.

“They told me,” he said, “that I could cooperate, work for them in the State Museum. Be around art. Create it, if I wished—fully sanctioned. But they told me, ‘you must do good work, good traditional Russian work, work that venerates the Motherland. No more of this showy European trash. No more boxes and circles.”

Idiots.

He took the job at the museum.

That was his sacrifice. That was the price he paid to stay out of the labor camps, that every day filled more and more with neighbors, with colleagues, with friends.

“I was prepared to die,” he told her one cold afternoon before his final sickness took hold, looking out of our window down at Leningrad, “To die rather than give an inch. But it was only for selfish reasons, for blind stubbornness. There’s nothing to be gained. Perhaps,
in time, perhaps I can do good things through the museum, more good than dying anonymous in some mass grave.”

She told him he was right. She told him he was brave. But he never believed her.

“~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“So what do you think, Lady?” Jamie asked. “Any word?”

She straightened her legs and gave the boy an appraising glance. “Nothing. Not one bloody sign. How about you? Have you divined anything?”

The boy shook his head solemnly. “No, though generally I leave the divining to you.”

That was true. In all their time together they had moved across the continent mostly by her whims and impulses. Sometimes they had an actual tip. Things were easier on the western side of the curtain, where communication was a little more open—but mostly they went by her instinct.

“Indeed,” she returned.

“Do you remember that time in Paris?” Jamie looked out the window. “It was bloody supernatural, you just knew where to look—the private collection of Vincent Pena. And those white ties from the Louvre were such skeptics. It was amazing. I’ll never know how you do it.”

“No you won’t. You’d have to lose everything you love to be able to do what I do.”

The boy shifted slightly in his seat. His chin tucked and his shoulders hunched, just like a child who had been reprimanded.

“Oh, I’m sorry Jamie,” she said quietly. “That was a bit uncalled for. It’s just the long night. Forgive an old woman.”
“Lady, you’re not old.” The boy was looking down at his thumbs.

She laughed. “I’m nearly a septuagenarian, darling, last time I checked that was quite old."

“Only chronologically. Anyway, I don’t think of you as old.”

“Well that’s something, I suppose.”

“Anyhow, we have some grounding—the institute in Munich seemed to have tracked and held several pieces during the American occupation. That might lead us someplace useful.”

Her eyes swept up over the boy, who was busily riffling through his stack of letters and notes. Of all the things she valued about him, the fact that he was a numbers man was in no way the least.

“Well might it.”

The boy was examining her over the top of his ream of files. “What are you thinking about, Lady?”

“Art. What are you thinking about?”

The boy traced an idle finger over the pocket of his shirt. “The same.”

She smiled, happy to let the lie, if it was a lie, rest between them.

“Do you know, Stalin once commissioned a portrait made out of Uranium?”

The boy snorted. “Fiction.”

“I’d have thought so too once. But, having heard the things I’ve heard, I believe it. Besides, those were different times—earlier times. But strictly speaking, I’d believe any story of Stalin’s hubris.”

“I suppose that’s wise,” he replied.
“So they found an artist brave or daft, or stupid enough to attempt it. And he did, he crafted a huge likeness—a giant life-size portrait.”

“And what happened?”

“He died of course. Who knows if it satisfied Stalin—indeed, if he was ever able to look upon it. I always figure it’s somewhere—in a basement, hidden in a crate in a safe made of lead. At least,” she gave the boy a puckish smile, “I bloody well hope it’s somewhere behind lead—far away from people.”


“Yes. It killed him. Perhaps he did it out of fear, but I’m inclined to believe differently.”

“Are you?”

“Yes,” She leveled a clear gaze at the Boy. “Sometimes, we do things, even though we know they will hurt us. It’s true of artists, but it’s true of people in general. And I think we do it—drink, or create, or search, because we have to. Because without it—there might be life. But life is nothing—without it. ‘That what kills me sustains me’ so they say.”

“And what sustains you, Lady?”

She looked back out at the night sky. “These days, Jamie? More and more, you do.”

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The first time she met the boy, it was in Paris. She’d been asked to sit on a panel during a conference that was discussing Artistic Reparations. And sit she did, though that was all she did, because the discussion quickly descended into a talk about the restoration of the Elgin Marbles. She wasn’t wholly unsympathetic to their plight, just largely uninterested. She had a task and she had to focus upon that solely.
Then, as the symposium was breaking up, she noticed the boy for the first time. Two things immediately drew her attention. The first was his hollowness—he wasn’t abnormally tall, but his height against his weight gave the sharp and unhappy impression of something gaunt, of illness. His shoulders were drawn and hunched slightly, his cheeks sharp and slightly sunken, which gave his eyes a bombastic, looming prominence. But for all that, his figure was not bad—there was the distinct suggestion of handsomeness beneath that veneer of sickness.

The second thing she noticed was his gaze, which had fallen with raptorlike intensity, upon her.

Occasionally she encountered ‘fans’ at these functions, misguided and lonely souls who borrowed comfort from her quest. They were tiresome sorts, glassy eyed yawners, but generally harmless. The boy, however, seemed like he could be trouble.

He approached. “You are Natalia Malevich.”

Such a statement—his voice seemed deep and dry—not with out melody, but clearly out of practice.

“I am.”

“My name is James Templeton.” He extended a quavering hand, which she took in a strong grip, mostly out of the wish to demonstrate some strength. Then she looked back at him, wary, but undeniably curious.

“Did you enjoy the symposium?” she asked, in her best English—only to be shocked when he responded, fervently, in Russian.

“I didn’t come here for that. I came here for you.”
She supposed his earnestness frightened her a bit, but she’d seen too much to be quelled by a child. Instead she laughed. “For me? What do I know?”

“I’m here for you.” he said again zealously. “I’d like to help you.”

“Help me what?”

“Recover you husband’s work.” He glossed over her incredulous expression, and put his head down, sputtering his obviously prepared piece into his chest. “I have worked cataloguing materials for the finest auction houses of Britain, I have a great knowledge of art and antiquities, I’ve taken my term at university”—

She stopped him abruptly. “I’m not looking for a helper right now.” Then she swept past him. But he was quite persistent and followed her out of the room.

“I’m qualified.”

“I’m sure you are.”

I speak Russian—”

“As I see.”

“Yes, as you see, and English, German. I also can read Latin, I have a little Italian—”

”Italian and Latin, how useless.” Then she stopped and peered up at him aggressively, making him shrink back, though he was a full head and a half taller than her. She dropped her volume, and her eyes narrowed dangerously, “You aren’t Catholic are you?”

He seemed flustered by the question. “No ma’am.”

“That’s good, at least,” She began walking again at a brisk pace.

And then he said the word that stopped her—quite unexpectedly too.

“Please.”
Such a simple thing—but the desperate break in his voice drew her up short. She turned and looked at him, his face a portrait of pain, and loss and longing. And, most certainly against her will, she sensed something kindred about him.

Then he spoke again. “I can’t fully explain it. I just feel that I have to do this. I feel that I can be of use to you.”

She smiled. She didn’t know why she did it truly. Perhaps she was lonelier than she’d realized. Perhaps she saw in Jamie something of herself—it was hard to say.

“You have to understand—this isn’t a mission of ownership. Nor of the good faith of memory. These are not just paintings. This isn’t about belongings. It’s about honor.”

The boy straightened his shoulders. “Honor. That is something I completely understand.”

For a moment she was silent. And then—“I go to Berlin next. If you can be ready in an hour, we’ll see how it goes.”

And the boy smiled brilliantly, and she saw that her initial impression of his hidden beauty was quite correct.

“Thank you!” He said, “You won’t be sorry Lady Malevich!”

Part of her thought it might have been a trick of the language, putting obeisance in the place of mere respect—but he’d looked so embarrassed and horrified that she could only laugh at his seriousness.

“Just ‘Lady’ will suffice,” she said.

And then the boy smiled up at her. And they knew they’d reached an understanding.

But for whatever reason, the name stuck.

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They were nearing their destination now. She could see the early fingers of dawn touching the faraway horizon the train pursued. The boy’s head was drooping with fatigue. There was something about her Jamie, he always chose to sleep right before they pulled into the station. But she let him be. He would need his rest.

Her eyes returned to the sky. She was waiting. She’d been waiting all night.

“Come on Kasha,” she whispered softly. “Show me the way.”

The train whirred along. The stillness of the sleeping passengers seemed to permeate the room. The sky yielded nothing. And then suddenly—

The beacon appeared. Five glowing red boxes—just like the ones that were in his first Suprematist paintings.

It was the sign.

It was Kasha guiding her. Guiding her to the nearest of his missing children. Her instincts were right. The beacon had lit and she knew they were on the right path. Faith could be a beautiful thing. The Lady smiled. And for the first time in hours, she was thankful.

Jamie mumbled into his tie, nearly asleep, “Almost there now.”

And she was thankful for the boy. And, even in spite of everything, she was thankful for her long years. “Yes.”

Almost.