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The Gardens Below, or Sundown

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The Gardens Below, or Sundown

by

Brontë Wieland

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Program of Study Committee:
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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2018

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PREFACE

The Gardens Below comes from uncountable sources—academic, personal, interpersonal, and beyond—but the seeds of story were planted in the spring of 2016, when I began my first semester teaching English 250 at Iowa State University. One of my most active and perceptive students wore on his arms tattoos that were wholly incongruous with my understanding of him within the context of the classroom, and I began to ponder how we as people control what we show to others and what happens when we change but our bodies don't and vice versa. What happens when mind and body represent seemingly irreconcilable people? What if a person has no control over what stories their skin tells? From there, it only seemed natural to explore the meaning of memory, memory loss, storytelling, and mortality through living, moving, magical tattoos. Ecaterina, who narrates the story, sprang from this environment of curiosity, and she is curious and thoughtful and observant as a result. *The Gardens Below* has grown from these ideas into my attempt to tell the truest story possible of family, art, love, expression, acceptance, hardship, wonder, and death in the world we now inhabit as I see it.

My academic work has focused on many large-scale social and environmental issues through historical, scientific, and literary lenses, and many of those topics—climate change, post-9/11 militarism and jingoism, the protection of water and environmental racism, colonialism, healthcare, to name a few—appear in *The Gardens Below* not as central questions but as artifacts and components of the characters' social environments, reflecting both the interconnectedness of these issues and the way they often take a backseat to the most pressing moments of our lives. If one social concern is most central to the ideological underpinnings of the novel, it is a question of bodily autonomy and sex work. Ecaterina's

mother, Bianca Constantin, spends much of her life in pursuit of a better world for the bodies of women only to have her body and mind slowly taken from her by an Alzheimer's-like disease, and at the end her family learns how far their communities must still progress before her goals become a reality. While the action of the novel primarily takes place around Ecaterina and her relationships to Bianca and her brother, Michael, Bianca's ideas and work populate the family's environment and their stories.

Likely, readers will be tempted to question my motivation and inspiration, as a man, for writing such a story, and this concern is just. The subject matter of *The Gardens Below* is in many ways deeply personal. Like Bianca, my mother is the owner of a pole dancing studio. While writing the poling parts of the story, I wanted to convey positivity and acceptance as an expression of how much I respect the dance—simultaneously as art, fitness, and profession—and as a response to the pervasive prejudice our society holds against sex work and all related expressions of the liberation of bodies, regardless of gender or gender assignment. This book also represents how integral I believe it is that revolutionizing our relationships to our bodies be a shared responsibility. The onus of reshaping how we interact with human bodies is on us all, especially those of us in positions of privilege, and I would be remiss to exclude that thinking from my writing. I hope to have done justice to the representations in my novel, though I am all too aware of the ways that this story extends far beyond my own lived experience.

This limitedness applies also to the setting of much of the action of the story: St. Vitus Regional Hospice Care. Bianca, knowing her illness is terminal, finds a new home in the hospice and spends the rest of her life there. While I have indeed taken liberties with some of the details of how a standard hospice may function, I have also committed myself to

portraying it as an environment and a home as accurately as possible. In service of this, I have been volunteering at the Israel Family Hospice Home in Ames, IA since September of 2017 and researching hospice care in the US for much longer than that. This has been an illuminating and humbling experience, as I see the daily workings of the hospice as place and I experience the myriad ways that death affects all people. This volunteer experience has been invaluable to my work on the novel.

Without a doubt, one of the most unique and challenging aspects of *The Gardens Below*, for both the reader and myself, is its treatment and exploration of memory through two inextricably linked avenues: the experimental use of a nonstandard present tense and the magic-like, animated tattoos caused by Bianca's disease. The novel is written in what I have called an "eternal" present tense, obscuring the familiar temporal reference point of a story and blending past, present, and future into a narrative *mélange* that mimics the way memory often relies on context and community. Ecaterina's numerous recollections blend in and out of time, creating a narrative fluidity to connect periods of her life. In the 2015 edition of *Steering the Craft*, the late Ursula K. Le Guin argues that "verb tenses have so little connotation of actual presentness or pastness that they are in most respects interchangeable." The "eternal" present tense is a response to the very idea of a set temporality, and it questions if memories are indeed timebound as we tend to treat them.

This present tense also aids in decomposing and deconstructing the linear constraints of a novel and thereby mimicking the non-linear process of learning someone else's life. Just as we learn the lives of new acquaintances and friends in an order of their choosing, readers learn the story of this family in the order that the narrator, Ecaterina, chooses to tell it. In this way, she maintains control, to some degree, of both her story and her body. Bianca's tattoos

enable the exploration of memory in a similar way within the narrative. They are physical, visual representations of memories lost to her decaying mind, and they require her to renegotiate her relationship with her own body while restricting the agency she has in telling her own stories and sharing her memories with those around her. Like the tense of the narration, the tattoos are indiscriminate of linearity, and they lead the narrator through endless cycles of memory and recollection.

While most of the narrative of *The Gardens Below* is decidedly “realistic,” moments of magic, the unreal, and strangeness are at the heart of both the reader’s and the characters’ experience. In other areas, the novel is speculative in that—set just a few years in the future—it looks forward to possibilities our world may face. It is also speculative in how certain of the social issues mentioned above are treated. At times, I am hopeful and have manifested my desire for a better world in these pages—particularly, I hope this comes through in how I have attempted to make the characters’ relationships as transparent and as healthy as possible. At other times, I am less hopeful, and so the world of *The Gardens Below* doesn’t always mimic ours beyond the superficial and the tattoos. This duality of hope and fear has its roots in the works of Ursula K. Le Guin.

My treatment of memory and relation has been largely influenced by the works of Alejandro Zambra, who also reintroduced me to a love for the compressed narratives of short novels. There is an ineffable magic to short novels under 200 pages, just over novella length but not quite thick enough to feel like a full novel. The form requires an admirable simplicity of character and style, and its impact is all the more powerful as a result. Novels like Zambra’s *Ways of Going Home*, Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*, Yuri Herrera’s *The*

Transmigration of Bodies, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, and Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* all embody what I have attempted to achieve with this novel.

Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Jorge Luis Borges, and others of the magical realists have inspired my conception of Bianca's tattoos, though I do not claim to label the novel a piece of magical realism and would reject the classification forthright. Magical realism, though it has permanently altered how I understand the idea of the "real" and showed me both word and world through a unique and fantastic lens, has its roots in a cultural syncretism and resistance to colonialism that I am not a part of. These thoughts are present behind my writing, but *The Gardens Below* rarely treats them directly and isn't born of the—particularly South and Central American—magical realist tradition. Instead I find myself in the company of those who resist definition and have thus come to be known as the New Weird. Kuzhali Manickavel stands out among these authors as a major influence. I am similarly inspired by Yuri Herrera, China Miéville, and Octavia Butler.

Finally, I want to address the focus on the mortal and the fleeting in the novel. As trite as it may be to write about the contemplation and realization of death, the task felt—like death itself—inevitable. It would have been dishonest to write about anything else, because of how thoroughly it influences my worldview and how silent we learn to be regarding mortality. In the course of writing this novel, I gained, parallel to the characters, a far greater understanding of what exactly it is that makes being alive so unfathomably beautiful. If the closing pages of this book lean toward wonderment rather than drear and levity rather than gravity, it's because Ecaterina and I found it impossible to despair without celebrating, or mourn without commemorating.

CHAPTER 1. FIRST

*

When Michael and I find St. Vitus Regional Hospice Care, there are still so many intervening years before we will keep our mother there. The walls protrude from the broken asphalt of the parking lot, and they protrude from the wide field of brown and gray withered grasses open until the horizon's slope many acres back. They become inconsiderate obstructions in a swath of months-dormant land. Patches of dirtied snow—melted, frozen, and rejuvenated with new snowfall how many times during the season—dot the ground like cold, dim spackle. The vision startles me, stops the breath in my chest, but Michael, immersed in the road, doesn't stir.

Even much later in his life, Michael focuses on the road before him as if it were the unfolding of some forgotten secret revealed only now, only to him. This quality never falters. He tells me once, my second year out of college, that sitting in the driver's seat of our lumbering car, always with me in tow in the days before he moves from town, leaves him wrapped in a sense of duty. That our lives pulse through his hands and he alone can guarantee their safe passage. "But driving never stresses me," he says. "It's freeing." To be in control like that is a relief when so much beyond the confines of the tempered glass windows and steel frame is uncertain and unknowable. And so likely to betray you, Michael knows, in ways you can never prepare for.

As we drive past the hospice, Michael sits peacefully, self-contained in the small sphere of existence he feels he controls. He's intent behind the wheel and my perplexed mien

doesn't register. I wonder if he even sees what I see: the building intrudes on the barren landscape, begging to be challenged, displaced. I could never miss it, never forget it.

And yet, how many times do Michael and I drive down Herald Road and never find this strange outpost before now?

It's only a moment in motion, my view of St. Vitus, but I see the rubble in the lot. I see the weeds sprouting from the cracks, the dirt that washes out during rains, the fading paint of the stalls, the curl of weathered shingles, the thin dust on the windows, the detritus spread across the pavement, the wind whipping the air around it all. I see that it has stood there for years. But I see something else too: people. Entire lives—crowds of them and only for an instant—populate the grass and the parking lot and each of the rooms inside the building. I know they're not there right now, in this very instant, but I see them anyway. Do any of them look familiar, years later I wonder. Could I have known?

Soon these almost-seen specters have disappeared, and just the building is back. All of it is worn and weathered but for the untouched walls, which must reflect every single ray of sunlight that strikes the façade, its white is so deep.

My window is rolled down, my arm held out and chilled to pink in the biting cold of the air. The short hairs stretching across my forearm oscillate between being pressed back into my skin and waving in the wind. They dance freely from their follicles, without form or training or need of either. I swell the arc of my arm, feeling the way the rushing air lifts the arm's weight in haste and plunges it even faster when my fingers turn down toward the road. My fingernails, which I can never manage to trim properly, cut sharp through the path to the trough of my wave. I whip the hand back up with too much enthusiasm, or maybe I'm too absent-minded to control myself anyway, and my own unexpected body breaches my field of

vision, obscuring St. Vitus, which I fear might crumble and lose veracity without my gaze. I can't have been staring at the demesne for more than a pair of seconds, but I haven't learned enough about it to lose it yet, and the prospect of losing it alarms me.

With a jolt, I'm sitting upright again, bare feet ripped off the dash and dropped on the nearly dry carpet next to my boots, the soles glistening with a thin layer of water and sand. My arm dangles limp out the window. I inhale deeply. Michael looks at me wide-eyed and worried, something finally claiming priority over his dedication to scanning the road, and eventually the ruckus I've made reaches my own ears.

"You okay, Ecaterina," he asks. He knows that I drift off while we drive, but he always checks on me in the illusory moments when I'm returning my mind to sea level. Despite the inevitability of his question and how I sense its familiarity on his tongue, the words never carry apathy with them. His inquiry is concern, not reflex.

"Yeah. Got lost for a second."

We drive with the heat cranked all the way up on cold days like this one, and I try to soak in the warm currents blowing from the vents while the cold billows in through the open window. Where the two meet, they create a constant shifting center in which they both hold influence, both work their magic on my nerves. Between these extremes I find balance. I focus on it now.

Sometimes it feels like they're engaged in an unending debate that neither of them intend to win, a battle of fundamental substance. Hot and cold are a glimpse into eternity, and I sit on the precipice of each force, breathing deeply, slowly. Perhaps I'm lost again, but instead I'm present for the *allargando* written in the score my heartbeat sings to, accompanied in quiet flourishes by the rest of my body and mind.

Practicing this body-song anchors me, just as reliable in my childhood as in all the years of Mom's disease. The first night that I suspect she is gradually slipping away—losing small, unnoticeable things first, then faces, names, places, days, and finally her own body—I draw a bath with the warmest water my home's winter-chilled pipes can muster. It's late in December and colder than we've seen in years, a welcome surprise after the flurry of unpredictable seasons around the globe. My afternoon drives with Michael seem to belong to a different world. Only recently Somya, my wife, and I have moved back near home to be near Mom, and part of her is already retreating, at such a young age. Steam crawls across the mirror from the sharp edges like it's stalking the center reflection until I open the bathroom window wide, and the steam retreats, frightened off its hunt by a greater predator.

The outside air carries with it the scent of ice and salted sidewalks, and only occasionally does the susurrus of a car passing over the wetted pavement strike through the night and enter the bathroom. Whispering across the threshold of the pane, the wind riles the room, sending currents of hot and cold air running in tumultuous circuits. This wind has a voice unlike what I've heard before, or at least it seems that way in this dazed space my mind has found. The only other voices this night are the titters of the raccoons who range the neighborhood, the occasional door, the filling tub.

From the rippling water, my agitated, upset reflection stares back at me before I step in and lose sight of her. As soon as both my feet are in the water and I begin sliding in, I can feel the worry vacate my skin. The thoughts of my mother and the small, black-and-white image of a ferret sneaking across her wrist never fade from me that night, but, in the swirl of the air and the water around me, I can finally parse it all. I think of what options we have, she has. I think of St. Vitus and the day Michael and I drive past it. I'm there.

The hospice is at the edge of my sight and fading, but it's permanent I know, a fixture, and my breathing calms. The hypnotic clean surface yields to a white wooden sign that grabs my attention. A strip of gold paint along the edges of the sign encloses the name of the residence.

St. Vitus Regional Hospice Care: Take Our Hand, the sign reads in thick red letters etched deep in the wood.

"Odd name for a hospice," Michael says. "Have you ever heard of Vitus?"

The name means nothing to us now, and it vanishes behind us along with the building itself, falling behind the horizon like the sun that's setting soon too. The sunsets at the hospice resemble this one even late into summer, I one day learn. Behind the all-encompassing gray of the cloud cover, the sky simply grows dimmer and dimmer until the world around us has, unnoticed, faded to black. On the edge of the sky, though, just before the sun is fully gone, the air wisps orange in the last light. That color reminds me of the eggs Dad has beaten one morning, in a bowl, lightly diluted with whole milk, which he pours delicately into a pan to make omelets for Michael and I. We're young then, middle school, and Dad is leaving on a business trip within a couple weeks. I remember the taste for as long as I watch the clouds. When the sun disappears fully, and with it the milky orange striations, the taste leaves my tongue and the memory walks away. It's dark.

"I guess we should head home soon," I say. "Mom's probably waiting for us."

I don't believe anyone is inside St. Vitus on this day, it's too empty. But it closes its doors to patients only once, I know, permanently. And that's many years from this first early spring day of our acquaintance.

I know Michael and I will be there again.

*

This first day is just one of those thousand afternoon drives we take together in high school, after Michael turns sixteen. In a year and a couple months, Michael graduates from Arrowhead High, leaving me there alone—but at this time the school hasn't yet imposed their monthly parking stall fee, so Michael brings the car every morning. It's a low, heavy Buick with leather seats that threaten to meld with my back and my legs and never let me go. By the time Michael rolls us gentle into the stall, I can almost swear I've never been awake before in my life and hope to never be. First block this semester, though, I can afford the torpor. I never do struggle in Spanish class, and Mrs. Brent never minds either way. She runs her class with an apathy that deepens successively every year, while the decades-old posters of Teotihuacán and Machu Picchu—already dull and muted—fade quickly along with her. Once in a while I pipe up with an answer nobody else has the interest to volunteer. Once in a while I write an extra zany sentence to make her chuckle while she grades our exercises. It's enough to keep her sated while I spend the period slouched in my desk, staring at those strange hangings she's deemed appropriate decoration for her classroom and slipping peacefully in and out of hazy sleep.

One day I ask her why she decides to tack to her walls these images of such beautiful places enveloped in gaudy black borders. "Teotihuacán," she tells me, "means a place of ascendance." She wants that in her classroom, she says. She wants it to be a place in which we become more than we are. She wants her guiding hand to lead us into enlightenment. She must have abandoned that hope long before I arrive in her class. I never see any of that spark

in her eye, except for the short moment she recounts this wish to me. Maybe it's the first time she remembers it in years.

After school, Michael sticks a scratched up, overplayed *Miseducation* in the CD player, cranks it, and waits for me in the parking lot chewing his fingernails. I'm always staying after the bell to pester Mr. Gosset about college, even before my sophomore year. He knows me from the junior high math team, and now I'm in his pre-calculus class. He may as well be my diary of academic anxiety.

"Even if you do, somehow, drop to an A- in AP History," he says, "a 3.99 GPA in your first two years is in no way going to tank your chances at acceptance. No matter where you apply."

"You know how hard my mom badgered the school board to let me in this class," I say. "They weren't supposed to allow me in without the prerequisites. If I get anything other than a solid A, they'll never make exceptions again."

"What are you getting right now?"

"94 percent."

"Ecaterina," Mr. Gosset says, pushing his glasses up the long bridge of his nose. "Give yourself a break now and again. You have two more years to accomplish everything you want. Don't take it all at once." Mr. Gosset wears a blue button-up almost the color of denim. He always keeps his sleeves rolled and just at the elbow. Today I find him as soon as my final period lets out—I can't stop thinking about my history grade—so the chalk he's covered the blackboard in is only half erased and it blankets the floor before him like ashfall. From his back pocket he pulls a cloth handkerchief and uses it to wipe the white dust from

his fingers and palms. “And remember that what you need to worry about most is the AP exam. Your score there is more important than the difference between A and A-.”

He pushes his sleeves, which have begun to slide down, back to their resting spot around his thick elbows. There isn’t a speck of chalk dust on his cuffs or his arms or his chest. He somehow manages to keep clean in a room where even the air seems saturated with the remnants of radians and wave equations. “I guess,” I say. “But when’s the last time you applied for college?” I leave without another word.

The hallways press in on me as I hurtle through them, head down, to the parking lot. I don’t process the brick pillars that line the walls or the wood-wrapped girders holding the ceiling up above me. Mr. Gosset is right, I’m sure, but I can’t stand it when he tells me to take a break or to cool off. He can’t see how important these grades are to me or why. That just doesn’t register to him. I watch the tiled floor pass under, blurred with each step, until the ground morphs into asphalt and I find myself outside, striding already to the car.

When I throw open the back door, the music jumps down like it’s preprogrammed—“Doo Wop” is playing. Only a moment of the song, a single crooning note from that voice that always manages to send me staggering, escapes through the threshold, and I drop my book bag in the seat, then close the door again. I let myself fall limp into the passenger’s side of the front bench seat and stare up at the tan ceiling while I try to kick off my boots on the jamb. I catch myself sighing emptyly.

“Cool it, Ecaterina,” my brother says, knowing the way that, in these days, I get uptight about anything beyond my control. “We’re out of here. And whatever it is, we deal with it later. That’s the rule.”

Instead of starting the car while waiting for me, he runs the stereo off the battery, so it's still cold as ice inside, and the fingers of his one hand are red from gripping the wheel mindlessly while he bites the nails of his other hand. My jacket is unzipped, barely donned since I escape from the building so quickly, and I soak in the temperature. "Just let me breathe," I plead, and when I say it, I can hear him consciously taking in a breath of his own, starting deep in the bottom of his lungs, practically in his stomach. It sounds like he's extending a wide bellows. He doesn't experience the incessant complaints my mind makes when I'm under stress—he doesn't react the same way I do—so I learn early not to appeal to him that way. What he does understand is breathing, ever since he is hospitalized in elementary school due to pneumonia mixed with the asthma we don't at that time realize is causing his lungs to creep ever so slightly through the cracks of his ribs, searching for just a little more space to hold a little more air. We breathe for different reasons, but we breathe together, in the cold of the afternoon.

Eventually I sit up, but I ask him not to leave yet. The Buick is parked facing a playground covered in ice where, even in this cold, children from the elementary school come to jump and yell. Only a year before, in summer, I sit in the field surrounding the playground with my friend Lena—who's just moved to town—and we pluck handfuls of the never-ending grass and sprinkle them over the disappearing figure of her dog sleeping at her feet. The dog becomes buried in a mound of hand-shorn grass that glimmers like emeralds in that vibrant summer, and we pass much of the day there in conversation. I don't yet realize that I love her, or what for. By the time I do, she's left town again, and we lose touch.

That field now is lost under a blanket of snow packed down by children's bootprints. No evidence of the green of the previous summer stands out among the white and the gray, and I miss it.

"Do you mind if we start the album over," I ask looking over the park, my hands in my lap. Michael glides his palm over the face of the dashboard and clicks the track button back with a few quick motions, then eases the volume up. As the music starts, a school bell rings and I hear the voices of children and a man, a teacher. But it's not the same as the school bell at Arrowhead. It's not the same children or the same teacher, and I need that. Once the spin and thrum of the wheels beneath us and the worlds the songs weave have fallen into sync, I should find myself blank, like I'm in a trance, and I let the worries of school fade away.

Driving with Michael is the only time I don't feel the need to know exactly what is going to happen. That and when I'm dancing. It's not that Michael's necessarily smooth in the driver's seat, but there's a cool that rolls off him in drafts, a confidence and calm in way he spins the wheel, and that intense gaze toward the road, that helps me let go and watch the blur of road and snow pass evenly by.

When we leave school, I always roll down my window, and Michael his, no matter the weather. He spits the last crescents of ripped nail onto the asphalt, and we eddy out the lot at a cool fifteen miles per hour, not expecting anything but for the sun to set eventually.

*

No conscious decision sticks out to Michael and I when, reminiscing on childhood in the St. Vitus waiting room one day, we wonder how our ritual drives come to be. Mom has been living here a few months already, and this is Michael's first time home since the diagnosis, the first time he sees her here. He plans to stay for the week. I stare at the hands resting in my lap—my hands, I realize—and scrutinize every mark on my palm, every nearly-invisible hair on my knuckles, every pore, every valley of weathered skin between raised blue veins, and I try to walk them all back day by day, back into my adolescence, the days when my hands don't look much different but have seen so much less.

It is the fifteenth of March, about a month after his birthday, when Michael passes his first driver's test. Mom picks him up in the car at lunch to take him to the DMV. When the final bell rings, Michael still hasn't come back to school, so I assume he must've stayed at home with Mom after the test. But when I step out of the building to stand in the rare beam of sun falling in the lawn of the school and wait to catch the bus, there he is, across the street and just off school grounds, waving at me wildly. He tells me he loses a few points parking, for which I chide him relentlessly. "The curb was iced over on that road still," he says. "There was no way to tell how close I was." I ask him if there is even a car behind him when they make him parallel park, and he blushes. We've just left the town limits and hit the county road leading home. The fields surrounding us are stark with snow and soil, except for those sections that aren't harvested before the first snows and still bare the soybeans or corn stalks of the last season. The houses on either side of us feel empty, too. There's no motion in sight, save us and the occasional bird.

"Let's not go home yet," I say. "Millions of miles of road are all yours to traverse now. An eight-mile drive is no way to celebrate."

Michael rubs his hands over the steering wheel, smiling. “We do have a full tank. Thanks, Mom.”

And just like that, we’re driving. Not just that day, but every day. The first time, it feels natural for Michael to steal a couple short hours behind the wheel, like a gift to himself. By the second, it feels like habit.

“Did you ever feel like this day wouldn’t actually come?” I ask.

“I’m still not sure I fully believe it, but it did come. Now it’s your turn to wait for a day that is impossibly far away.” In my lap, I run my fingers down the length of capped black pen and try to twirl it between my fingers like I’ve seen some people at school doing. It keeps falling to the floor between my feet, and I retrieve it and begin again.

“I don’t want to do it again,” I say, knowing that the wait never truly ends. I wait, as a child, to finally start school. I wait for summer to come, then for summer to end. I wait to turn ten. I wait for our dad to come home from New York. I wait to start high school. I wait to drive. I wait for college, then graduation, then the next time I can see Michael. I wait until I own a house, until adoption papers are approved. And on and on. The things I wait for—feeling that they occupy a space in the future that may never be reached—arrive relentlessly, or they transform themselves into events that I can hardly recognize, not by how they look and not by how I expect them to feel. But still they come to pass.

When we drive, though, the weight of things yet to pass doesn’t press on me as heavily. It’s no ghost, sitting on my chest and pinning me down, but a silent friend in the backseat waiting patiently to speak in private.

In St. Vitus, Michael and I seated in our uncomfortable chairs with wooden armrests and waiting to see Mom, I feel the sitting ghost crawl toward me, threatening to squeeze the

breath out of me with its ethereal weight, undeterred by my brother's company. The milestones I wait to reach, now especially that Mom is here, seem to have so much more gravity than those in my past.

For almost a year before Mom's diagnosis, I don't see Michael and only little more than that do I even hear from him in that time. A post card, a phone call from a friend's number. My brother and I never grow apart during our lives—even when he's notoriously out of touch. We've seen together too much to be driven apart by something as intangible as space or time. But I help Mom move into the hospice by myself, I see her transition and live it with her and through her, and I feel in Michael's movements and in his smile and in the cut of his hair that he hasn't lived this with me. From the moment I recognize him bending over a tattered suitcase at baggage claim, I see the gap made by this trial we don't share but should. Where in my mind live the memories of days spent folding a closet full of Mom's t-shirts from old competitions, conventions, and showcases and packing them to be donated, of wrapping her million statues, figurines, and photos in newspaper—inquisitive owls, ballet dancers stuck in motion and pristine pointe shoes cast in pewter, pictures of Michael and I on the beach with Dad or of all four of us in full winter gear with sleds—where live my memories of helping her sell the house we grow up in and the acres we tread every inch of as children, Michael has memories indiscernible to me. Our experiences are irreconcilable. How can he miss these things? We sit beside each other in the waiting room, and we are disparate now.

I always ring ahead on the afternoons I come to visit Mother even though the nurses and volunteers know to expect me almost every day. They are excited for me to bring Michael with and finally introduce him to the staff and residents. During the first few months

of Mom's stay at St. Vitus, during summer, I spend more time here than at my own home, making sure she feels comfortable in this new residence. We pass most of the season in the clinic's courtyard, reading together, telling old stories, sometimes drifting into sleep as evening waxes. The nurses take no issue with this. Sheryl and Mahfouz are happy that I visit so frequently—though I see the hard look in their eyes that says they've steeled themselves for the day I stop showing up.

And I don't blame them. The faces of the few long-term residents that populate the halls of St. Vitus seldom cast shadows on the walls. They are content, and they brighten at the sight of Sheryl's or Mahfouz's gaze, but no one else haunts these halls with them, I notice. Many days pass with few visitors besides myself, and a sense of searching weighs in the air. In the summer months, I only meet the eyes of maybe a dozen visitors' faces more than once. It's a hard space to inhabit, but it's not an unhappy place. In the way they speak to one another and steal glances across tables and through the thresholds of each of their rooms, the residents betray how they themselves form fast, effervescent communities, perhaps even cliques, and how vital these creations are for each of them. That's not enough, though. The folks around them only remain in their lives a handful of months during the best of times, and, while friendships forged under a quick hammer can be as strong as any, no bond can exceed the power of decades of companionship. That of siblings, children, cousins. And those presences are often lacking here. Every evening, when I leave, Sheryl and Mahfouz exchange a look that tells me they wonder if this is the last time I walk through those doors.

But despite the nurses' worries, I keep coming, day after day, and they warm to me as much as they can. We agree that at this early point, the best thing for Mom is that she feel comfortable, surrounded by as many familiar friends as possible, and that she be outside,

enjoying herself and not letting her mind and body atrophy. Staying in St. Vitus means she relinquishes her right to curative care, that she can receive treatment only for symptoms and not for her illness, that the disease is left to progress at its own pace until it's eaten each of her memories and spit it back out again.

She, realistically, could still live on her own, possibly with a part-time assistant, but she's opted for St. Vitus for its atmosphere. Plus, she loves the name. It makes her decision easier yet that I now teach history at Brandville a couple towns over. I can't blame her for wanting to extract herself from the farm with so many phantoms of her memory residing there with her.

On top of it all, she's convinced that Michael is coming back for good soon, and if we both live so close together, she doesn't need the extra room to put anyone up, she says. It's one of the days we're combing the house on the land that's been in the family for just over a century, emptying it of all her possessions. This day, she wears a thin, light blue sweater and we have the windows open, rather than using the AC.

"You know you don't have to leave," I say. "The sales aren't all finalized, and we have enough saved that you could stay here with some help."

"I've lived here a long time," she says, scanning the living room for nothing apparent. "I could use a change of pace. This is too much space for me to maintain at my age, anyway. Has been for a while. The last time I planted the garden, you were still in college." She moves over to the off-white couches purchased perhaps twenty-five years before and flops down on one, flinging her feet up on the arm. As a kid, I'm frightened dead of sitting on these couches for Mom's wrath. A single scuff or stray hair on the soft cloth covers spells a

day-ruining haranguing for both Michael and I. Between the chairs is a long, low coffee table of dark stained oak she finds at a rummage sale while I'm in college.

“At your age.” I scoff at her. “You’re not even sixty. I won’t allow you that excuse.” Mom shifts on the couch and her sweater falls below her collarbone. On her otherwise clean skin just under the bone lies a dull, colorless border collie traced by thin black lines. Rosie. I wonder if she’s coming or going today. “Rosie,” I say quietly, remembering the day Dad brings her home. When the image of the dog swings her head slowly toward me and blinks, I wonder if maybe she can hear me.

“Rosie?” Mom says like there’s a spark trying to catch somewhere behind her eyes. The image of Rosie on Mom’s collar flutters and the dog seems untroubled by fading from existence, but eventually the image settles again and Mom gives up the thought, her momentary look of clarity fading slowly. “Anyway.” She’s trying not to let the moment disconcert her. “Since when did you become the one who sets the rules for me instead of vice versa?” She stares out the south-facing window at the tree line marking the limits of our property. She’s both teasing and pondering, earnest. Rosie looks out the window, too, like she’s basking in the sun again.

“When you became the one who never called me back, even on weekends, and stopped wearing your seatbelt, you relinquished all claim to the title ‘mother,’ and somebody had to pick up the slack,” I say, shrugging. “I was supposed to be the irresponsible one.”

She taps her temple with a curled pointer finger and gives me a look of mock disapproval. I wonder if I see a tremor in her motion, but if I do, it’s too slight to say for sure. “You can’t be so hard on me,” she says. “My memory isn’t what it used to be, and phone

calls slip through the cracks just like that.” She snaps her fingers. “Give a poor old tattooed woman a break.”

“Those unreturned calls started long before your tattoos found you. Don’t try to weasel out of this one, Mom.” Her sigh is duly unapologetic and conceding. “How about this? We get you a small place of your own. We’ll get one in town so you’re close to people, but you won’t have to jump all the way down the line. We’ll save St. Vitus for a last resort. You can have your change in scenery and your independence.”

She laughs.

“What,” I say.

“You’re more attached to my independence than I am,” she says. “They won’t take everything from me the moment I walk into St. Vitus. For as long as I can walk and interact by myself, I’ve even got their permission to leave once in a while to keep helping at the studio. I’m not ready to leave the girls behind yet. Or the poles. I’d love to get your brother into the studio and teach him the dance, but I’m sure he’ll resist it like he always has.”

“If he’s ever here, that is.” I plop down on the other couch, and Mom narrows her eyes at me, on the verge of scolding me, likely for sitting too fast: I’ll tear the fabric.

“He’ll be back within the year, I guarantee it. For good.”

“Unlikely,” I say. “He can’t even work up the headspace to return a call. How would he survive the process of moving home?”

“I know he’ll be here,” she says. “As unlikely as it seems, and I’d agree with you normally, he’s already planning. Call it an intuition only a mother can have.” We sit in silence after she says that, both contemplating the property line. I never want to believe in the things she claims to know, but by now I’ve learned how infrequently she’s wrong in her

estimations, especially regarding my brother. She sees through him like through the open window of the living room, where there blows a wind that dances a foxtrot across our skin and carries the simple heat of the sun with it. No light shines in directly on us, but a sliver falls on the coffee table, bisecting it almost exactly. We wallow in the humidity hanging in the air and breathe our separate breaths, though I'm sure we, in this moment, both find our thoughts settling on Michael and where he might be.

I think of all the ways Mom tries to get Michael to visit the studio, to feel comfortable in the presence of the mirrors, in the presence of his own mother, a pole dancer now, and how he resists her from the very beginning. At first violently, emotionally, with tears and bursts of confusion and aggression. She teaches. Teaches mostly women in need of something fun to do, an escape, something to feel good about—proud—but he can't reconcile that with a dance he sees through so much stigma. I resist at first, too, eighteen years old and worried what the kids at school might think when they find out, but the dancer's curiosity in my hands and core overcomes my insecurities. The first time Mom helps me chalk up my hands, I'm enthralled. When Michael finds out, his anger evolves into acceptance tempered by derision.

Mom shows him videos of the most innovative dancers, the acrobats practicing the highest levels of the form, hoping he can learn to see the art where she does. He humors her, watches the clips, admits they're not bad, but he never reciprocates any interest. Once, a couple years after Mom buys the building space and transforms it into the shelter it is, she convinces Michael to accompany her to the studio before a class and she has him watch while she spins once around, climbs to the ceiling, drops back down. In the mirror, she sees him trying not to look, and when she dismounts, she asks him if he'll try to climb, just test it

out. Instead he shakes his head, walks downstairs, and leaves for the restaurant across the street.

“When’s the last time you even got him into the studio?” I say almost unintentionally, breaking myself out of my own thoughts and pulling Mom out of hers. He no longer speaks out about the dancing, no longer disdains it, but he is never comfortable with the thought and ignores it as well as he can.

“Must’ve been four years ago,” she says. “Somehow I tricked him into putting on gym shorts before we left, so his normal excuse was useless. We didn’t have any classes that morning, so no excuses of modesty or nerves, either.” I know this story, too. Michael makes no promises but comes to the studio anyway. Mom shows him proper hand placement for lifting himself off the ground, tells him he has an advantage being a man. Better natural upper body strength. Mom watches in awe as, for the very first time, he wraps his hands about the pole, mimicking her hand position and posture. Mom lays her hands on him to adjust his hips, and that touch drives him away. “I don’t remember what he said to get out of it that time, but damn was I close. One of these days.”

This particular summer, many days are beautiful like that day. In fact, this summer is one of most lush I can remember, at least in the years since we lose Dad, when I am twelve. The acres surrounding the hospice explode with native grasses and flowers—I later learn the area is part of a preserve project, one my father once takes part in during his freetime—and the leaves of the oak and maple trees among the back paddock are a deeper green than I’ve ever known. In the mornings, heavy dew spots the lawn and falls like rain in miniature from the branches of the trees if the winds gust strong enough, and at midafternoon what water may have evaporated away is renewed by daily misting that usually pass for only a few

minutes. After that, except for during larger storms, the days remain clear consistently through September, but the earth is always wet, and many parts of the state experience unprecedented flooding when a big rain does come. The sun is infrequently too warm, but Mom and I are careful in it either way. When I'm a child, the Wisconsin weather never behaves this way, and Mom says she doesn't remember anything quite like it either. We take advantage of it, as do many of the residents, which Sheryl and Mahfouz are none too upset about. Patient or employee, it doesn't matter, any walls seen too often become septic, and the outside air heals us all.

To exercise Mom's mind, we spend much of the summer sitting in the hospice yard playing memory games and quizzing each other on trivial details of the past. Mom's favorite is reconstructing scenes, sequences, moments, lists, and the like in childhood homes and favorite libraries. Someone has introduced her to the World Memory Championships and kicks off her intrigue with building mind palaces. I find the popular obsession with the task gimmicky, even foolish, but Mom believes it keep her sharp, and I can't deny her such small pleasures.

I ask Mom where she is building her hiding spots on the day we try to memorize the names of each of Danielle Steel's hundred novels and their various editions. Neither of us read Steel, which only makes the list more challenging to internalize, but a few volumes sit on the small bookshelves in the hospice lobby and urge us to remember them.

"In the eighties, before I got pregnant with Michael, your father and I lived in Atlanta while I was a flight attendant," she says. I've heard this story dozens of times over the years, but I have long since decided that every story is worth listening to over again as many times as the storyteller is willing to recount it. A story is an experience every time. "We lived in the

Sunset Ridge apartment buildings, and it was the most cabinet space I've ever seen. It's like those things were a gateway to Narnia. I worked three-on, three-off, and the days I was home alone, I spent pulling whatever I could off those shelves to imagine what I could throw together. I swear, I never bought most of those jars and boxes, they were just there! We didn't have much in our pockets then, so I never questioned it." Mom turns to me and tips her head like she's emptying water from her ear. We're both sitting in the grass, and I see the fibrous strands knotted around the knuckles of her index finger. "Have I told you this before?" she asks quietly.

"You have." I smile. "I don't think there's a story of yours I haven't heard, Mom. But I want to hear this one again." She affirms with a bat of her eyelashes, and the truth is that I do want to listen to this story today and take it all in. I don't know how many more times our conversations might lead us to the strange Sunset Ridge apartments—which I never get to see—and I'm cataloging her words in a cabinet of my own, for safekeeping.

"One afternoon, I was making pelmeni and needed paprika, which I wasn't sure we had. I dug through the cupboard for fifteen minutes looking for the paprika before I moved a can of evaporated milk to find a copy of Emily Dickinson's poetry, stuck shut with honey that had dripped from the shelf above. But if I could find one book in the pantry, why not hundreds?"

"And how is it working?"

Mother quickly glances at the list of titles and covers before looking back to me. "I keep finding a bunch of extra shit next to the books and some are stuck together, but I'm confident up to *One Day at a Time*. Progress is progress. Where are you storing all these memories?"

“Do you think,” I say palming a stack of Sheryl’s well-worn playing cards, “we can jam three decks into Ms. Geiger’s classroom?”

“If I had realized how much that woman terrorized you both as third graders, we would’ve moved you to public school even sooner!” I chide her about this at every opportunity starting in college, when I learn to laugh at the same things that make me clutch my chest, the things that stir my anxiety just to think about.

“Michael and I probably have more vivid memories of it than you do, but you had your fair share of encounters in the witch’s lair.”

What I don’t tell Mother is that I’m not tucking away mental books in Geiger’s room. I’ve confined myself to St. Vitus. The building, the signs, the cracks in the parking lot all look just the same as they do when Michael and I drive by over a decade before. I’m learning that it’s possible to hide memory not only in place but in time just as easily. The people I meet junior year of college are lined out the door and sitting in the waiting room in an image of St. Vitus Regional Hospice Care from the first high school drive Michael and I take. An image of the same place two years later is home to the names and images of all my friends’ pets, past and present.

One day near the end of July, I ask my mother if she ever builds scenes in the dance studio.

“There are too many mirrors there,” she says. “I’m afraid the reflections would get confused with the real memories. Things are hard enough as it is.”

In these summer months, Mom’s skin is often so clear, it’s hard to believe she has to be here at all. Likely, she’s covering the tattoos she’s acquiring, keeping them hidden under her dresses and jeans, her layers of concealer. Likely, I’m looking for every reason to ignore

them if they are indeed present. When Grandma gets the markings, I'm nineteen years old. It's not even ten years later when Mom finds one of her own winding around her wrist, a crawling ferret, and she checks herself into St. Vitus.

Not only grief comes of Mom's stay, though. The home brightens around her, and she works hard to gather the others there into a community around her, never discouraged by its constant shifting and losses. They all need this, Sheryl and Mahfouz especially. While we lounge in the grass or in chairs or under the trees, Mom almost never stops revisiting old stories, and she welcomes everyone to listen.

Since Mom is a well of endless tales of our childhood, she can't help but tell Sheryl and Mahfouz and the other residents about Michael and his adventures of the past decade, which she faithfully exaggerates without second thought. She even believes her own exaggerations so much that no one can accuse her of lying, and the nurses never stop asking after Michael until he finally shows up.

Mahfouz approaches Michael and I from the hallway that leads to the wing where Mom and other residents stay. His stride is purposeful and quick. The confidence and comfort in the way he moves through this space give the hospice a sense of sanctuary. As his powerful legs guide him through the halls and the common areas, his eyes wander intently across the rooms, and both Michael and I feel tangibly how his presence is so much more than routine. He occupies the room, lives in it. The effect of his demeanor emanates throughout the building, and a living breath follows with it.

"Not to paint your mother as a stereotype," Mahfouz says, standing before us, "but Bianca is still in front of the mirror and isn't quite ready for you yet. I imagine it's because she heard you'd be here." He gestures to Michael, then holds out his hand. Michael stands

up, and they shake hands, Mahfouz putting both his hands around my brother's. "I don't even have to ask. The resemblance is clear." Michael lacks a couple inches to match Mahfouz's drawn, impressive stature. Releasing Michael from his grip, Mahfouz runs his hand through the dark hair that he keeps cut close to his skin, and he smiles, beginning to chatter. "How long has it been since you let the poor woman see your face, man? It's like she's meeting you for the first time, the way she's acting."

At this, Michael looks at me, worried. His eyes are propped open wide, and the muscles of his jaw tremor in surprise and concern. "I don't think that's what he means," I say. Mahfouz jolts with the realization of what possibilities Michael's mind must be churning.

"No, not at all," he says. "No faces have appeared yet, so far as we've noticed. That usually comes near the end. She's still very sharp, but the smaller things elude her on occasion."

"And nothing consistent appears every day," I chime in. "Most days you can barely tell anything is wrong." What I don't say to Michael is how much harder this makes each afternoon spent at St. Vitus. How can I justify keeping my own mother locked up here? As attentive and caring as the staff are, and as happy as Mom is in these early days of her stay, it never feels right for her to be here, confined to a two-acre campus when for so much of her life she has the family farm at her fingertips and so much more beyond that. It never feels right. Not when she's so lucid that I so easily forget her disease, even when looking into her eyes.

"You have loads of catching up to do," Mahfouz says to Michael while he leads us from the waiting room into one of the common spaces, where we sit again, now in larger

chairs whose billowing cushions threaten to keep us confined here, too. We aren't alone in the room. A couple residents whose faces I can't see sit on a couch together and gossip while a talk show host on the TV drones at them nearly silently. "Your sister is here damn near every day, Michael."

"Every day," I say.

"Seriously? All of them?" Mahfouz doesn't believe it, but the lines in his squint say he's struggling to remember a day he hasn't seen me. He stands beside us, still, and between the chairs Michael and I are seated in rests a wooden table with a chessboard inlaid on the surface. "Well, she continually charms the whole population here," he continues. "Even Shear, the quietest man I've ever met will greet Ecaterina when he sees her. She's proven herself a star. You, though. Nothing can stop Bianca from running stories about you, day and night. Michael is a name of fables around here. You have a lot to live up to."

"Mahfouz, would you leave the poor young man alone."

"I'm not quite as young as I look, Mom," Michael says and stands up. And there she is, my mother, as put together as she is at any time in her life. Seeing my brother see my slowly, subtly dying mom for the first time in over a year—for the first time since her diagnosis is confirmed—upsets me more than I expect. My brother beams and hugs her, reminds her that he's never been an adept communicator and that money is always a concern, and in the happy lilt of his words I understand how quickly he dispels any true belief in her condition. She shows no aberrations on her skin, and he thinks there's nothing to worry about.

He still thinks she'll be here forever.

Her grin offers the full set of her teeth to the room. Her hair is dyed nearly black, with a streak of blue on each side of her face—I take her to get it colored just a week before Michael announces he’s coming to visit—and she wears tight green pants, a purple competition shirt the neck of which she cuts wide years before, and a light, black sweater. The ensemble is so different from what one expects to see inside these walls that she glows. She doesn’t look like a woman dying. She looks like our mother, and that is enough to convince Michael that nothing happens in his absence, an assumption he loyally makes every time he comes home, from the first moment he leaves for college. I find that I resent Michael for the times I watch Mom struggle and for the worry I see creep across her face when she perceives tendrils from a memory that she can’t find but knows should be housed inside her once-reliable head. His smile alone denies each of those experiences. And each unbelieving word from his mouth stamps out the days I spend with her in this last year, one by one. But I close my eyes hard, still sitting in my chair, and I listen to their happiness, letting it inhabit me too. At least he is here, I tell myself. At least he is seeing her finally. At least you are seeing him. Finally.

“Now, yours is the last face I *ever* expected to see.” Mom’s tone tells me she is no longer talking to Michael, but there’s no one else in the room she might be talking to. I open my eyes, and she looms over me, still grinning. I spring out of my seat to hug her, and she pulls me in before I’m even fully upright. “Tired?” she asks.

“You know how exhausting Michael can be,” I joke. I bury my face in her shoulder. Her hair almost smells still of the products used to dye it, a scent I’m familiar with from the depths of childhood. I don’t remember a time her hair isn’t a new shade every few weeks, and the familiarity of that change now is comforting. At least something about her stays

consistent. “Plus, these seats are like cushion paradise. I have to fight to stay awake even on good days.”

“Maybe let’s avoid the chairs, then,” she says, holding me by the arm once I eventually release her from my grasp. “Why don’t we go outside?” She looks to Mahfouz, who bows his head ever so slightly and smiles, telling us we’re free to go out on the patio, where just months before Mom and I spend nearly every day in continuous, fluid conversation. I dress in shorts each of those days, but Mom never fails to wear long pants, I remember, even on the hottest days.

Even though it’s December already, the air outside is as mild as winter here ever is. It’s over forty degrees, and the wind is only a whisper against what little skin isn’t covered. Our hands, our necks, our faces. The grass hasn’t yet had a chance to die and wilt, having not yet seen snow this season, and it carpets the small plot of land surrounding the building as if it is summer still. As if nothing has changed. Beyond the limits of this paddock, the tall grasses and sparse trees closely resemble what Michael and I see on the day we discover this place. So little of the area around us has been altered. Now, unlike then, though, the sky is clear of all obstruction. No clouds gather and dance, painting pictures on the blue canvas of atmosphere. Now, just like then, Mom’s skin is clear, too. No ink swirls anywhere that I can see. Her exposed skin is not a canvas for us. But what might she be hiding on her arms or legs or down her back or beneath the dark dye that still stains her scalp? I don’t want to be privy to these illustrations.

I prefer to believe my mother harbors no tattoos on her skin today.

West over the edge of the fenceline enclosing the property of the generous St. Vitus, the sun begins to set, like Michael and I know it always will, eventually. Its perfect disk

hovers at the curved lip of the earth, silhouetting each structure between us in its night-ready light. We find ourselves tightly wrapped in a world of cobalt wind. One by one, the stars spark to life among the last of the evening birds, and the newly waning moon looks down to us.

“When I left, I didn’t imagine I would never see the farm again,” Michael says. I avoid catching my brother’s eye and let his words linger and evaporate on the air. Even Mom doesn’t speak, though the way she shifts her body away from him says everything for her. “How did you let her sell it?” he says to me, and he’s not accusing me, not yet. He truly can’t parse how we have become untethered from the 160 acres we grow up on. Since he graduates high school, not only his years are transient. Where he lives, who he is, what he wants, they all ebb and change, and he indulges in this itinerancy, feeling finally free, I imagine. But what allows this liberty of his has always been the constancy of a home that he eschews, my mother’s home. Now he’s in turmoil.

“It was time for us to leave,” Mom says. “I wish you would’ve been there to see the place off, but, well, it’s not like you did any of the planting or growing—that was the farmers—or mending and tending—that was me.” She gazes around the area of the darkening patio and takes in a long breath of dry night air. “I was getting sick of being alone in such a big house on so much land anyway.” Mom chuckles to herself and sits on the bench of the picnic table near us, facing out from it and leaning back against the table to look at the sky.

“And I didn’t have the money or the knowledge to maintain a place like the farm,” I say. “Mom, how did you manage it for so long?”

“When things need doing, you do them. That’s the only secret.” This isn’t the first time that she imparts to me this guiding mantra, or the last, but no matter how many times I

hear it, and no matter how hard I push myself, I can never seem to embody this ideal the way she always has.

“You could’ve done it, Michael,” I say. “And I would’ve helped. But we didn’t hear from you.”

“I wanted to. But you know that I—,” Michael says, but Mom cuts him off.

“Don’t blame your brother for something he can’t change.” She turns back to look at Michael and smirks, both mocking and accepting of his failures. “I never taught him to think of others first, and that’s on me.”

She’s still watching the stars growing brighter and ever more numerous in the clear air. Michael is watching, too, but I can’t manage to tear my eyes away from the moonlight that glows on my family’s skin. They might be ghosts for these moments, or they might be portraits. I’m sure the stars are as beautifully unsettling as ever, but this stretch of seconds may never be replicated again, and I savor it.

“Still,” Michael says. “I want to make one last walk around the perimeter and along the edge of the crick. And through the patch of willows, through the old horse pasture. I want to trace the foundation of the old barn and peek inside the crumbling silo. I’m not gonna swim in the pond, but maybe I’ll dip a toe in. If the new owners will let me visit in the spring.”

“I definitely don’t recommend swimming in the pond,” I say. “There’s no way they’ve been able to clean it up either. It wouldn’t have been that hard to do all this before we sold it.”

Michael casts his eyes down to the table and to where his hands fidget in his lap, and he nods his head. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here for the beginning of this,” he says.

“I’m not sorry,” says Mom. “And I wish your sister hadn’t been there either.”

“How did you find out?” he asks.

“It was her ferret,” I say. “The one that snuck into Debbie Marcos’s room.” Michael laughs, remembering the story of how, one fall, while our mom is in college, the ferret that she hides in her room against all University policy escapes and tears into Mom’s floormate’s groceries and clothes. Mom laughs, too. She always loves to tell this story and loves even more to hear it told back to her.

“Ferret Fawcett,” she says. “That’s what we called her.” This name never fails to make me laugh. Michael chuckles, too, but he looks guilty for doing so. “But usually just Farrah. Looking back on it, Ferret was maybe not the best first name for . . . a ferret.” Mom peels back the cuff of her sweater on her left wrist, just enough so that she can see the skin and we can’t. She must have no markings on the skin she looks at, certainly not her code-violating college pet. That wrist is Farrah’s favorite spot to linger, and no other memory dares inhabit the real estate just below her hand.

“Why don’t you tell how it happened, Ecaterina?” Mom says. She isn’t one to pass up the chance to tell a story, so I worry that she asks me to recount a moment so crucial to her own narrative. But memories escape Mom more and more during her time at St. Vitus, and eventually I learn to see when she is unclear on details or whole events. By this time, though, I haven’t learned that skill, and I hesitate.

In the moments that I tarry, waiting to pull my thoughts together, Mom slips off her sweater and sets it on the table. I have never seen her quite like this. Even in the low light, the myriad scenes are clear.

Between her shoulder and elbow gallops Grey, the quarter horse we rescue when I'm ten. Grass blooms beneath his feet with each stride. A thin canoe skirts the crest of her collarbones under her skin, floating back and forth unendingly. A sleeping dog lies in the crook of one elbow, and in the other is the smiling face of a woman I don't recognize—occasionally she blinks at me. There are pairs of shoes and camera flashes and suburban landscapes scrawled on every inch of her. A man in a Maytag uniform. A young boy with a scowl in snow pants, not Michael. A night sky with a faint aurora borealis suspended over a wide lake. A plain white plate with half of an order of French fries scattered over the surface.

Her body is a shifting, writhing canvas of her living memories wrought in dancing ink. Each image is her mind's desperate attempt to illustrate what it can't always retain anymore. Ephemeral images of ephemeral memories. Tomorrow the scenes are different. Maybe tomorrow there is almost nothing, maybe her busy flesh is empty.

Normally, Mom hides these depictions beneath many layers of cloth. They distress her. She always knows why the images are there. She knows they are moments lost—perhaps forever, though not always—and not remembering what each means drives her to panic.

This is the first time Michael sees the physical evidence of Mom's disease. She has always been an actor, and she can fake her way through a conversation, even with her own son, pretending everything is as right as ever it has been, but she doesn't want to deceive him anymore. She wants him to bear witness to the truth laid bare on her body, to see plainly the reason she has made herself a resident of St. Vitus. He can't take his eyes off her, and for many seconds he doesn't breathe.

The first time I see these tattoos is nearly a year before, when Mom and I are preparing to leave the dance studio after a full Saturday of classes. Both of us doubt what we

see. It's just a glimpse, a fleeting blur across Mom's shoulders and arms, and then it's gone, and neither of us can even say for sure what it is. A shadow, I declare. Maybe just a strange trick of the light in the mirrors against the studio wall stretched in front of us, she thinks. But it comes back, the moving figure, after we wash the chalk from our hands, remove the wraps from our joints, change from our shorts and tanks. What finally moves slow enough for us to see is Farrah—in miniature, represented colorlessly by the black ink—slinking her way down Mom's inner arm, and finally resting in the creased skin under her wrist.

Twelve chrome poles become twenty-four in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors that make up the wall across the wooden floor of the studio, and they now divide my reflection from my mother's like the bars of a prison cell. She stands four inches taller than me, her hair is dyed blue like enchanted waters, and she holds the wrist where Farrah now rests in her other, unblemished hand. The veins of her wrist and palm bulge, still surging with the lifeblood that all day we wind in fast circles around the studio's poles. She can't take her eyes off the ferret, and I can't take my eyes off her reflection or move closer to her. The bars separating us in the mirror are impossible to traverse in this moment.

"It looks familiar," she says.

"What do you mean?"

"This," she points to Farrah. "For a second I thought I'd seen it before." I watch her in the mirror as she runs her finger over the form, brow furrowed. When she looks at me, I still haven't found the words to respond to her and her eyes aren't so full of light as they are a minute before.

"It's cute," she says, confusion nipping at the back of her tongue but held back by her intrigue.

I remember my grandmother's tattoos, which come to her just after I graduate high school, and I remember the way she keeps them secret from my mother and my aunts until they are brimming under her collar and scaling her neck, crawling out from under her hairline to greet us. I remember how disgusted she is with her own skin, her tattoos an affront to every belief she ever holds dear. The tattoos desecrate her skin, a sacred and pure gift from God. She is ashamed. There is no shame on my mother's face, only the look of someone caught off guard.

"Her name was Farrah," I say. "You'll remember soon, I'm sure."

"Farrah. Rings a bell." I hurry down the stairs of the studio, car keys in hand, and at the bottom I open the glass door wide. My heart is wound tight in my chest, threatening to run at its own pace, like a steam engine off its rails. "She shouldn't be here," she says more to the room than to me. At the threshold of the studio's ground floor entrance, the heat accumulated from hours of bodies in motion and the heat issuing forth from the pewter veins of duct lining the ceiling both rush out the door into the night, and the cool air of late winter rushes in. Together the currents bind me in the moment, and I drag both airs from the bottom of my lungs up until my chest is filled and the bitter fingers wrapped around my heart begin to unreel.

"Farrah came to you," I say. "To avoid being forgotten."

Mom is silent, still rubbing the creature on her skin. For a second, the muscles of her shoulders release, and her whole body loosens, her face included. "So," she says, "this is what Grandma felt."

"Let's go," I say. "Do you mind if I drive with the window down?"

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With the window down, coming each minute closer to the first anniversary of the night Mom and I discover Farrah on her wrist, I drive Michael away from St. Vitus for the first time. I turn off of Herald Road, and my mind drifts along with the curves of the blacktop. Our headlights cut through the dark of the early December night almost as incidentally as Michael and I have cut our paths through time to this moment. Is there anything between our reunion today and our lives as children that isn't determined by our trajectory at the outset, like the line of our headlights through the roads and fields? I don't drive the same low Buick anymore, but sitting in the car with Michael feels so familiar. The pavement beneath us has changed so little in this time. The winter now is almost indistinguishable from the springs of then. But now we are driving away from our mother, not toward her, and now we both understand again—more fully this time, it feels—that the setting of the sun isn't the only inevitability before us.

Tracts of leafless oaks and elms and box elders, maples and walnuts and birch pass us by in the night. We ride through rural lanes canopied by the skeletons of the dormant trees, and their interwoven branches meld into a tunnel ceiling to shelter us passersby from the endless depth of the star-ridden sky. I can't help but slow down as we pass through these areas. Like I do when Michael and I are younger, I roll my arm like a wave out the window, feeling the cool air crawl up my arm under my sleeves. The heat blowing from the dash of the car swallows my hand wrapped around the steering wheel, and between the two forces I don't have to think about Mom or Michael or anything.

“You live out this way still?” Michael says, and I don’t know what he means at first. “I thought Mom said you,” but he doesn’t finish his thought. We’re miles away from where I live, and in the opposite direction, but the path to this spot is worn into the folds of my memory more than any other.

“I was just sort of driving,” I say. “You never gave me the chance to pay you back all those miles we logged before you left.” We turn left at a small, T-shaped intersection onto the road Michael and I grow up on. A half-mile down the road is the home Mom no longer owns on the land she never visits again. “Last time we drove home together, this is where we were headed. Do you wanna see it from the driveway? The new owners probably have the house lit up.”

They do. Michael and I pull off into the quarter-mile-long driveway, and we step out of the car and lean against the hood to look out over the property. The house looks no different than either of us remember it, and the lights spill out of the large kitchen windows and the living room, illuminating the century-old oak tree we play under as children and the path out to the fields we rent out to local farmers for feed corn and soy. One summer, I spend days sitting beneath that oak tree in meditation, convinced it helps me channel the power of the wind. The tree, far older than anyone remembers, has a canopy so thick with dense, dark leaves that almost no sun can reach the trunk. When Mom asks me what I’m doing spending so much time beneath the tree, I lie quickly. I tell her I’m just thinking, but I suspect now that she sees the signals I make with my hands, trying to capture the magic of the wind, that from a hiding spot in the yard she hears the words I whisper to the currents.

Michael and I rest at the head of the winding gravel lane. It leads through twists, turns, and impressive earthen divots to the house where Michael and I rest our heads every

day for nearly twenty years before leaving, the fields where we run barefoot through summer and tromp carefully over the frozen creek in winter, where we learn how to experience the world around us and begin to understand how it experiences us in return.

“We wanted you to be here with us last summer. We wanted you to say goodbye to the farm with us,” I say. I try to stay even-tempered, but I feel the tightness growing in my chest, the words I’ve needed to say to my brother for months twisting amongst my lungs. “But how were we supposed to tell you what was happening? You didn’t say a word to us the whole time.”

“I got your letters,” Michael says.

“Letters, Michael? It hurt Mom so much to send a letter, knowing that in the year since she’d spoken to you, you could’ve moved anywhere.”

“Maybe the letters did hurt,” he says. “But I’m standing here looking at the place I grew up, and it’s no longer mine. Every connection to the farm is severed, except what I can remember, and in our family, you can’t trust that long. Tell me about hurting.”

Surrounding us on one side is a long stretch of grass where at one time we raise meadows of alfalfa, and on the other is a strip of pine trees that Michael and I plant with Dad when we’re in elementary school. Those times pass before my eyes here in the dark night. The alfalfa grows in cycles, rising from the field until it towers over the other grasses and browns, then it’s harvested into bales and the process starts again. A phantom of a classic, glossy green tractor inches through the field, culling the grasses. All the while, the pines on the other side widen and grow in imperceptible intervals. I shake my head at Michael and sit in the driver’s seat.

Michael doesn't say anything more out loud. I imagine he's saying silent goodbyes to the all the edges and crevices of the farm, but he doesn't voice them, and he doesn't defend his many absences over the last seven years. I'm glad. I've already argued with him about each of the possible excuses in my head. It's hard for him, he's not sure what to do, he means to respond but can't find the time—whatever he might say, it doesn't matter.

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When finally we arrive at my house, in town, Michael walks a lap around the perimeter, taking in the building, the property. We've both cooled down on the drive back. It's nowhere near the first nor the worst spat we've ever had. The two-story home looms over him in the low light of the streetlamps, and occasionally the wind whips up just enough that the house issues a low creak, like it's one of the many lurching trees on the block. After making it all the way around the house, we end up on the porch at the front, leaning on the peeling, white railing, and Michael says to me, "You own this?"

"More like I'm in the process of starting to own it, but yes."

"I always knew you'd be the first to get yourself together and buy a house." His laugh sounds like well-aged acceptance, but he can't hide the air of derisive disappointment in himself that tinges his breath. I want to flinch away from him and his laugh, but I don't.

"So did I," I say. "We don't need to be clairvoyant to have known that much about ourselves." I don't remind him that he never wanted this anyway, because I can see the way that's changed for him now. I can see the way he covets the wooden slats of the porch floor and the cold, tarnished knocker on the door. The ambient scent of the air when we walk

inside and how that transforms the space into more than just a place to sleep, but a small, self-contained world all its own. And as we walk inside and I flip on the light of the living room just inside the door, I think of how these are the same things I covet of others when I am a child. But in this moment especially, these desires do more to unsettle me than welcome me. I no longer feel their necessity the way I do in childhood, and sometimes I'm overcome with the urge to turn around and never return. A feeling Michael knows well.

While I'm kicking off my shoes, Michael passes through the doorless, mahogany-stained frame into the living room and splays on the couch. He always feels at home in a place he's never been, and that it's my home only makes it easier for him. I lean on the frame, watching his body unwind one muscle at a time with each breath. "Somya is asleep already," I say. "But she knows you're staying with us, so she won't be shocked if she sees some weird vagrant on the couch in the morning."

"I'll do my best to be decent in my sleep."

"Don't say anything gross to her while you're sleeptalking, either."

"I've told you, that went away when I started college." He laughs, and I remember the nights he appears in my doorway, waking me to warn me that the whole farm is burning down in purple flame, or the snow is reaching the windows and *something* is out there, coming for us. "I swear I don't tell weird stories in my sleep. And I won't be a thorn in Somya's side even if I'm awake."

"Well, if she hassles you anyway, you probably had it coming. Some unreturned prank from somewhere along the line."

"You know Somya never hassles me. Or at least she didn't last time I was home, for the wedding." Michael pulls himself up on the couch and gestures for me to sit down. The

first thing I do once I sink into the chair is put my feet up on the coffee table and throw my head back. Nothing has felt so good.

Two years. The last time I see my brother is two years before, the weekend of my wedding. It's a springtime wedding, and, though the weather is starting its unusual series of shifts already, the trees bloom all at once that weekend, just like the springs of my childhood. Somya meets Michael a few times previously, when he's passing through more frequently, but it's not until the night of our reception that the two find the space to experience one another. It's a small gathering, so Somya and I take turns braving the crowd, and while I'm talking and dancing, she and Michael sit together and make jabs at one another and the people in the crowd. They share that sense of humor, which I know Michael inherits from Dad. At the end of the night—once only Michael and Mom remain and we wander around the farm cleaning up after the party—I'm sitting on the porch, exhausted, when a pair of light footsteps approaches me. "Ecaterina," he says and puts his hands on my shoulders. The rattle of the voice, the grip, they're so familiar but don't belong to Michael. I close my eyes and sink into the feeling of comfort I haven't felt in fifteen years. This ghost only lasts until I turn to face Michael and he becomes himself again. "Dad would love her so much."

That is two years ago, though, and I haven't heard his voice or the voice that borrows his tongue from time to time even once since that night. The night that I ask Mom if she remembers the timbre of Dad's voice and she says, "I will never forget."

"You've really been visiting Mom there every day?" Michael, spread out on my couch, asks me.

"Every single day. I haven't missed one yet," I say.

“I guess I have some catching up to do, then.” Under the cover of my closed eyes, I see the slipping and stirring images of the tapestry of Mom’s skin anew. Her memories glide over her muscles and bones, searching for something. A route back to her mind, maybe. Or a permanent spot to rest and be remembered. Their colors are even more vivid with my eyes closed, so much so that many of the ones that I recognize begin to coalesce into my own memories of the same days and events.

“If you’re only here two weeks, you’ll have to sleep in bed beside Mom to even get close,” I tell Michael.

“Maybe I’ll stay longer than two weeks,” he says. “I can’t have you outshine me uncontested any longer. This perpetual disappointment of a child is making a comeback! And there’s not much tying me down any place anyway, so I might as well.”

“No, I can’t imagine anything tying you down anywhere. If you couldn’t even be tied down here.” Without looking at me, Michael peels himself from the couch and walks over to the front wall of the room, where the window meets my bookshelf. He doesn’t shake his head or sigh or look harshly at me, but I’ve upset him. “So long as you don’t piss off Somya too much, you’re welcome to stay as long as you’re around. But if by some miracle you stay longer than a month, I’m gonna start charging rent.”

“Once I’ve worn out my welcome here, rubbed Somya’s nerves raw, maybe I’ll get my own place. Find work and stay awhile. Mom won’t have to worry about where to send letters if I have a house in town,” Michael says. He runs his hands along the spines of the books on each row, all the way to the bottom where he stoops and examines the titles more closely.

I shake my head, unbelieving. “How can Mom see through you even from so far away?” I ask, more of the air around me than of Michael, who doesn’t hear me anyway. A pair of pastel-hued pink and purple books catch his attention, and he lifts them out. His face is light, remembering.

“I can’t believe you kept these,” he says.

“I never worked up the courage to throw Grandma’s gifts away after she died,” I say, taking the pink book in my hand. “And when Farrah showed up on Mom’s wrist, I knew I had to keep this one.”

The pages, once gray and slick, are yellowed now after more than a decade of inattentive care. I never expect to crack the spines or read a single page until the day that Michael and I first find St. Vitus during our drive, where it waits for us isolated among the snowy fields of early spring. The name haunts us both from the moment we see it, and I only know one way to research a saint.

“I’m sure the name’s in one of the books of patron saints Grandma got us this year,” I tell Michael that day.

“Or the ones from last year. Or maybe the year before that,” he suggests.

“I didn’t think I’d ever even consider touching them.” Every year, like she’s losing her mind, until to the Christmas she actually does, Grandma waits restlessly while we unwrap the book-shaped gifts she gets us, always an iteration of who to pray to on what day and what color rosary to use. Or, one winter it’s *Left Behind*. Michael and I promise her each time that we’ll read them cover to cover. I store them on the bottom shelf. The only time I do pick them up is to read about Saint Vitus, our mother’s eventual savior, though we can’t know then what he will mean to our family.

After Mom's tattoos come and she begins at St. Vitus, I return daily to the half page in this small pink book dedicated to her patron. I run my fingers over the lines until, over the years, the ink begins to fade. The words paint a picture of my mother that isn't familiar to me the first time I read them, but it's there, she's there, described by the domain he presides over. I wonder if there's anything I miss the night Michael and I arrive home and head straight to our bookshelves to seek this out and satisfy our inexplicable curiosity, anything that might allow us to know ahead of time what Mom will go through and what we can do to prepare for it.

Michael and I can't agree on exactly when Mom enters into the patronage of St. Vitus. Does he preside over her when she is a child, or is it only later, when she completes her first revolution around a glimmering pole, that she finds herself in his territory? Mom is a dancer at heart all through her life, but her slide into Vitus' care, her full transformation, starts in Michael's first year at college—before she owns the studio, before she even knows it herself—when she sees her first show or when she first wraps her strong fingers around chrome.

CHAPTER 2. WAITING

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“You wouldn’t believe the lights,” Mom says. “Katie walked me toward the looming, warehouse-like bar just off the corner, and I swear I saw the lights shining out from under the foundation, breaking through hairline gaps in the brick. The building had been there for decades. I’d walked by it who knows how many times and somehow never seen it. But—this is the strangest part, I still don’t know how to explain it—the place felt familiar, intimately so. Or like it would be familiar. As we walked toward the bouncer stationed at the door, my body told me, as if it were already written, that I’d pass through that door countless times. I just knew.” Michael faces Mom across the box of pizza left open before them in the grass. He bats away a bug and reaches for another slice while Mom weaves the tale of her first time at a pole performance, a local amateur show hosted once a month or so. I’ve been waiting for her to retell this story for weeks. I don’t want to miss this one.

Beside the well-kept brick path leading out from the extra wide doors of the back exit of St. Vitus, our three pairs of shoes lie half in the grass, resting in a haphazard pile. We all like to kick our shoes off before walking in the grass, even now when, in early spring, the afternoons can still be cold enough to nip maliciously at the tips of our toes. The abandoned shoes remind me of the landing inside the garage at the farm, where Michael and I rush to remove our shoes and leave them scattered across the concrete. I suspect Michael sees the same memory when he looks at the pile.

Mom has stopped her narration, and I have a chance to rest my wrist, flex my fingers, put the pen down for a moment. A question lingers in Mom’s eyes, begging a response from

Michael that he hasn't yet realized he needs to proffer. On the wooden picnic table where I sit, the pages of my notebook flap lightly from the passage of the wind. Blown cloudward, the sharp page corners look like lost sunflowers that have bloomed too early. In these pages I record, as accurately as possible, Mom's myriad stories as she tells them to us. Except for skipping vowels and leaving mistakes for later correction, I have no shorthand for collecting her words as quickly as she tells them, making this an exercise in rote, instantaneous memory as much as in transcription. The process is tiring but helps me find a common moment in time with Mom. It's impossible for my mind to wander while I write her stories, and I can never go anywhere she doesn't. The stories bind us. Many of them I can relate nearly verbatim just from years of listening to her tell a constant string of stories of her life, but this book guarantees their preservation. Even if she can't always remember them all. Even if I can't.

Before the day her stories end, I fill five books with my scrawlings, most of them of unique stories, though I am always happy to retrace old favorites or stories that feel truest in their particular moments of retelling. I don't know why I never think to collect Mom's words, enshrine them between the covers of unmatching leather-bound volumes. But the first time I feel the page brush against the meat of my palm and make Mom's words physical, I know it's the best way I can pass my time with her. Mahfouz is the source of the idea. A few days before her second Christmas at St. Vitus, as I put on my coat to leave for the evening, Mahfouz quips to me, "I can't believe Bianca hasn't put all of this in a book." Like a human advent calendar, she's been recounting one wintertime story a day during December for the nurses, residents, and visiting families. She calls them her "Winter Tales." She tells of fighting over stocking candy with her siblings, of running after rabbits barefoot in the snow,

of her first Christmas as a mother, of a bet on a tense game of Uno with the whole family that ends in Dad in the snow doing pushups in his underwear, of her first winter widowed, of watching deer run across the empty fields and enjoying a scalding cup of coffee waiting for Michael and I to come home together at the end of my first fall semester away. “If for no other reason, just to document her family history,” Mahfouz says. I tell him her art has always been more visual, but she should try anyway.

“You know how your mother can ask questions just with her eyes?” he says.

“I’ve never mastered it. Been trying my whole life.”

“She’s been asking you to record them for days.” He hands me a brown paper-wrapped package with the first book inside, a simple brown volume with lined pages and no margins. A journal that wears no markings on its leather skin.

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Leaning forward and digging her hands into the cool grass beside the pizza box, Mom speaks again finally, not patient enough to wait for Michael to make eye contact with her.

“Have you ever experienced anything like that?” she says. “It’s impossible to describe. But I *knew* that building would be important in my life.”

Of all the times I’ve heard Mom tell this story since—the very next morning when she can talk about nothing else, every time she meets a new student at the studio, every time we pass near the bar where it happens—it’s never struck me the way it does now. Usually, I dismiss this idea of hers, her premonition felt throughout the body, as another in an endless list of experiences she swears are supernatural. When she asks Michael this question, though,

my breath catches in my chest. All I can think about is the day Michael and I stumble upon St. Vitus on our drive and how I, too, feel in the reaches of my body that I am connected with that place. Until Mom names it—in this moment and in this place, both are essential—the feeling is ethereal and distant, and now I am face-to-face with it.

“Can’t say that I have, Ma,” says Michael. “So you and Katie. She’s the one who—”

“The one who lives in Nashville now. We had dinner with her once while you were home.”

“Right. With the loud laugh.”

“The loudest laugh. That’s her default, and it only gets louder.” Since Mom is sidetracked from the story I’m trying to capture, my pen is still, but I keep it ready to whirl into action again the moment she picks back up on her main thread. We meet eyes, and she’s grinning wildly. I know exactly what she’s going to tell Michael. “Once, probably a year before you graduated college, we held an event at another bar, and one of the women there evidently had no idea what was going to happen. This lady was so offended by Katie’s routine that afterward, while Katie and I were chatting over a drink, the woman came up to us, called Katie a whore, and dumped her ice into Katie’s lap. I’d never heard Katie laugh louder than when she stood up and swept the woman to the floor with her heels still on.”

“I’m so, so glad I wasn’t there, Mom.” Even hearing the story makes me nervous, still. The first time I hear the story, I feel my hands starting to shake at the same time that I fantasize about being Katie myself, having that brazen audacity of hers.

“She really did that?” Michael says. “Damn. Nice.”

“That type of person always was drawn to Katie, for some reason. They came after her anywhere we were, no matter how tame the routine. They left me alone. The people who

targeted me about the studio only ever did so in daylight. In restaurants, near churches, at the library. But I don't want to tell you about that side of my experience right now." My hand tenses, ready to write. "I want to tell you about the good, about the wondrous. About how the moment we paid the cover and the bouncer let us in, Katie grabbed my arm and all her energy radiated through me. I was nervous and embarrassed. I'd never seen anything like this, and everything I knew told me it was wrong, dirty, exploitative. But the twisting in my stomach was also excitement."

The bar is an impossible space. Mom never budes on this assertion. What she sees shouldn't fit within the building as it appears on the outside: the back wall of the bar leads to an alcove that, under just the right lighting, reveals itself to be a narrow hallway that winds past uncountable barely-lighted, densely populated taprooms until eventually it widening out into a massive open room. Like a gymnasium or a ballroom. A wall of sound and heat meets them as they pass through the threshold, and, if Mom is to be believed, almost leaves her faint. Permeating the haze of the dark, humid space lacerated by lights beaming variously blues, greens, reds, and purples to the walls, waves of a song call out, rebound off the extremities of the room. The air is saturated with the voice of a man pleading for revolution over the croon of a guitar played only on offbeats in upstrokes. The crowd—some seated, some milling and grabbing drinks—chatters, but they are caught fast in the swells of Bob Marley. Mom and Katie weave between tables strewn across the cement floor in a polka dot array until, almost all the way to the front, they find two seats Katie's friends have saved. The improvised stage looks like it should never hold even the half-weight of a child, but it manages to faithfully support the performers the entire night. Beyond all of this, a body

warps itself into unimaginable shapes and spins around the focal chrome pole so freely that it might as well be animated, and Mom feels herself become rewritten.

But as soon as Katie sits down, the music stops and everything inside Mom stands still. “Where are we?” Mom asks Katie, unable to take her eyes from the shoddy and flaking wooden risers and the retreating, no-longer-dancing body. When she’s gone, another woman walks out to the mic in heels as high as the length of a hand, the echo of each step resounding throughout the room from the floors to the dizzyingly high ceilings and from corner to corner. Katie only smirks, and the woman welcomes the crowd, calls for another round of applause for the first routine, and introduces the next performers. A set of glowing pink silk sheets unfurl from the rafters. It feels like they fall for minutes, slowly winding their way down through the dense atmosphere of the room and reveling in every moment of their long-awaited reveal.

Music strikes up again, but it’s nothing Mom recognizes. While two additional poles are rolled onto the stage and placed on either side of the original, a stringed instrument Mom never can name lays out a melody that speaks to her of hopeful agitation, desire. Two women emerge from offstage and climb the silks in a synchronized syncopation that can no longer be separated from the thread and wave of the music in the air. Spinning, twisting, they wrap themselves in the leaves of fabric, and together they let go. Rotating slowly, they are suspended there for a measure, maybe two before they’re joined by three more women who dash out toward the poles. In deft unison, the women on the silks turn and remove a knot from one of the twists in the fabric Mom can’t see, and they begin a freefall toward the stage that stops only when another—nearly imperceptible—knot they’ve both woven catches.

Mom, whose one great fear is of falling, feels her heart in her throat and her ribcage constrict in thrill.

In these moments, the stories of her life reforge themselves, document themselves in new ink. The haunted melody drives the three women onto the poles: spinning from the moment they touch chrome, each ascends to the top in rotating waves, feet locked against metal, until they reach the tops and lean out with arms held straight and level, widening their revolutions. The portable platforms tilt a degree or two off center under the weight, just enough to make Mom grip the edges of the table like a vise, but the women are anchored, stable. Their oscillations—from reaching out to pulling in close and spinning rapidly while climbing and dropping—form part of a complicated ritual that Mom feels she can't properly interpret. What she thinks of, seeing their bodies dipping and whirling about a singular fixed cylinder, is a carpenter's delicate hands working a cherished hardwood stock on a lathe, moment by moment pulling the wood's true, pure form out of its cylindrical shell by the careful pressure of the chisel. She sees the shifting contours in their arcs as curves etched carefully from an unnecessary, wasteful whole.

The dancers are both artist and art.

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She tells us, "Of all the countless hours in my life spent waiting, those between that night and the next performance Katie took me to a few days later were perhaps the most tense. The most fraught with anticipation. And I had as much fun at the next show and the

next and the next, and before I knew it, Katie had enrolled me in a weekly class that I was nearly too nervous to show up to.”

Satisfied and with the last words of the story recorded, I close the book and stow my pen. “That class was at the same time as my pointe class that year, too. It was the first time in years you didn’t consistently drive me to a ballet class and spend your entire evening watching me struggle to perfect whatever routine we were practicing. I was livid.”

“You were old enough to drive yourself by then,” Mom says. “And I knew you didn’t need me there anymore. I’d been at every practice since you were, what, three?”

It’s true. She sits patiently, intently through the hour-long fiasco of flailing arms and legs, tumbling bodies, and Ms. Schumacher’s raised but encouraging voice that comprises my first lesson in ballet at age three. I take to the motions of the dance, and she brings me back dutifully week after week. She sits on that wooden bench and absorbs as much as I do, possibly more, then we spend the intervening days practicing the positions from her memory. “First position,” she says as we make breakfast, and I bring my heels together to form a perfect line. And when we’re putting dishes away, “Third position,” and I do. When we return to Ms. Schumacher’s house on Saturday mornings and shuffle down the carpeted stairs to her basement, Mom’s brimming to whisk me into my leotard, and I’m brimming to slip on my shoes and glissade into the room for my teacher to see how far I’ve come since our last meeting.

From the moment I’m born, Mom wants this for me. To dance is a knowledge that is forbidden her in her youth, and I’m to fill that void. The way she relates it to me, I am just as enthusiastic about the prospect of ballet as she is from the outset. The truth is, I can’t discern my memories of that time from her rehashings of it, and I wonder if I have any genuine

memories of these years at all. The question never worries me though, because I don't recall a time I'm not deep in love with the act of dancing. For fourteen years, Mom puts me through dance lessons. Ballet, tap, jazz, the standard canon. Even after Dad's death, she finds the time and the resources for me to continue my studies, and that's when it's most crucial for us both.

By the time I'm in my teens, I spend summers at all the ballet camps in the surrounding cities. I no longer dance with Ms. Schumacher, who only teaches children up to middle school and has decided to retire, besides. Instead I study with the Dejope Ballet Company. Neither Mom nor I ever have aspirations for me to become a professional, but I crave the way it pushes my body and mind and the way the self-synchronicity I find in it extends to the edges of my skin. When I dance, the trouble and uncertainty of school or friends or memory melts away. As I age, after I'm married, after Somya and I adopt Clara, after Mom is gone, the motions of a dance still help ground me in moments of tension, when I feel the tightening throughout my body that's so familiar in childhood—the feeling I learn to fight back against, though I can never fully vanquish it. With the ballet company, I strive to know myself beyond singular conceptions of body and mind, to learn their relationships more intimately, to learn myself in the same way.

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Mom stays through each of my practices. She brings me to dress rehearsals early and watches every step we take. She comes to every recital, watches every show. She sits with me while I cry from the pain in my feet, from the mistakes I make on stage, from the exhaustion at the end of weeks of camp. Sometimes on the weekends, I wake up to the

rhythm of her feet passing through the house in fits and starts rather than her typical even, slow steps. She's practicing my routine, which she always memorizes before I can. And even while I'm at the highest levels, she always finds a way to know the routine and its intricacies more entirely than I do. I never sneak out of bed to watch the display, though. I don't want to disrupt her solitary revel. Who would I be to cast my gaze on her, pass judgment, when all she wants is to reclaim a practice she has been denied since her own youth?

"Where was I when you met Katie?" Michael asks.

"Must've been your first or second year away, because Ecaterina was still in high school."

"I'd barely left the house and things were already falling apart? Maybe you two really did need a man in the house to hold things together." Michael grins the way he does when he knows he's pressing buttons.

"That's not funny," Mom says. "You said those same words to me then, but you meant them. Deeply. Those words still drip with hate when I hear them, so please."

"Not even as a joke," he promises. He lets his head bow just barely to tell her he's serious.

"I can't believe you don't remember when it was, Mom. That was the first spring," I shift my posture on the floor and run my hand over my right knee, feeling for ghosts of pain. "Only a few weeks after you started taking classes is when I had to stop."

"Right!" Michael nearly laughs but manages to hold it in, not wanting to offend a second time so quickly. But he can't help himself. "Your, uh, accident. What were you doing again, racing Brenna Thomas down the easiest slope at the Basin? The first time you'd ever been skiing?"

“The second time I’d ever been skiing, thank you.” Luckily for all of us, I’m not as sore about this event ten years on, and Michael’s proddings make me feel nostalgic rather than anxious. “And I would’ve won if she hadn’t tried to push me! She’s the one who crossed her skis over mine and pushed my tip into the snow.”

“And that was that, huh? ACL tore like paper confetti?”

“That was *not* that,” Mom says. “Your sister, Michael, didn’t even tell me until the next afternoon, and wouldn’t let me take her to the hospital for almost a week.”

“My poor, poor ligament. Maybe we could’ve saved it, had I been less stubborn.”

Mom folds her hands in her lap, a memory I can’t discern wrapping up the length of her right ring finger like a helix, and she clears her throat. “My theory,” she says, “is that you knew you’d have to stop dancing if anyone found out how badly you were hurt. And somehow you convinced yourself it would go away if no one figured it out. Hate to break it to you, Ecaterina, but bodies don’t usually work like that.”

*

I don’t know if Mom’s right that I hide the injury because I know it is the end of what, until then, I assume are endless lessons and endless rehearsals for endless seasonal performances, but it is the end. I undergo a surgery that takes half a year to recover from, and every day my legs itch to feel my weight shifting with the rhythm of some routine other than the physical therapy. But my knee can’t handle that kind of strain. This is when Mom convinces me to attend my first pole class with her, and we have to drive over an hour to the closest town with a studio.

It's a tucked away place. Thin but extending from one façade of the building to the other. Barely visible from the street. At the top of three tight flights of stairs.

Everything I know tells me I shouldn't be here, shouldn't see my mother moving like this, shouldn't let her engage in this immoral act, a desecration of the art of dance. I slouch against the wall for the whole class, silently refusing to participate, but nonetheless watching, unintentionally rapt. I don't see the human lathe Mom does at her first performance, though. Instead, I see water: animate water, taking whatever shape it desires, free of restriction. After the class is over and the women file out, sweat cooling each of their hairlines and laughter bubbling on their tongues, Mom approaches the instructor, asks if we can tarry before they close, asks for the woman's help introducing me to the dance.

"I can't, and you know that." I point to the brace that runs down my thigh and encapsulates my knee, but beneath the pain and discomfort of my healing flesh, my legs burn, too, for the motions of a dance to relieve the weeks of tension built up since I crash on the ski hill. The instructor—a woman named Dani who I eventually come to know well—assures me that the strain is all in the core and the arms and that we'll do nothing intense and I can always let myself down on my good leg. Dani locks a dynamic pole in place, so it won't spin under the twist of my momentum. She asks me to extend one hand upward and grab the pole as high as I can comfortably while standing just a few inches from the chrome disk anchoring us both to the floor. Mom looks on impassively as Dani adjusts my hand just barely—a twisted grip—then positions herself at the pole next to me. By instinct, my body pivots to mirror her posture and orientation. Placement and spacing of the fingers, distance between the feet and direction, arch of the back, bend of the elbows, facial expression, timing

of the breath, all of these matter minutely to me. When I look to Mom for reassurance, she nods once and closes her eyes.

The motion Dani executes, she calls a pirouette, and she completes it in a medley of angles and circular movement incomparable to what I know as a pirouette. Yet I find it pretty anyway—her slow speed, her precision, her confidence. And when she asks me to mimic it, my mind tells me I can't, I don't know how, and my body disagrees, sends me twirling once about the pole in a moment-for-moment, muscle-for-muscle carbon copy of Dani's brief performance.

The move only requires me to put weight on my bad knee for a portion of a second before bringing both feet back to the floor, so I perform the spin once more. And again. It's all in the arms and the core, like Dani promises. My hand doesn't wrap around the full circumference of the pole and meet itself on the other side, but the metal succumbs to my will anyway and supports my weight and my inertia. It courses with a vital energy that tells me to keep going, to learn more. To dance. Every doubt I have while watching the class, every worry about what other people will say blinks away. I ask Dani to teach me, in our short thirty-minute window this week, every move she possibly can that doesn't rely on my legs.

*

Because I'm stubborn and starved, I push myself to the edge. I use my wounded leg more than I ought to, and it aches for days after. The physical therapist I see notices how I favor the leg more than I should after so many weeks of recovery, and she scolds me, though

when I describe the exercise to her, she says it's probably safe if I take it easier next time. She says she prefers I take up swimming, but I've already followed Mom too far down the rabbit hole.

By the time I've recovered enough to return to the ballet company, my body knows that the form is behind me. My shoulders and arms aren't those of a ballerina anymore, and they don't want to give up this firmness and surety that they've gained. I want to dive fully into this new dance, and I do, without looking back.

Mom debates when the right time is to tell Michael. To introduce him to this new, vulnerably personal realm so strongly taboo frightens her. "For so many years," she confides in me, "I taught him how wrong what we're doing is. But what did I know? I feel like I've spent my whole life being lied to about what's right and what's wrong. And I know now he'll feel he's spent his whole life being lied to about who I really am." She worries he won't understand.

He doesn't. At first he refuses, vehemently, to hear us out, and his words cut straight to my bones. Mom doesn't make things easier by keeping it a secret up until she's already financed her purchase of the new studio. Michael hears this news and tells Mom that he hates her for bringing this humiliation upon him. Even ten years later, he doesn't understand—though the dissonance he must feel is less likely to manifest as anger as he gets older. This gap in our individual understanding of our worlds is the first time I feel a palpable distance from my brother. If we don't broach the topic, if we ignore this uncommon ground between us, it almost feels like there is nothing drawing us apart. But by the time I graduate high school and join Michael at the University, I'm so entrenched in my love for pole dancing and all its associated acrobatic arts that I can't ignore it. All I want is to share what I love with

my best friend, and Michael can't see it as anything other than "despoiled morality," as he once names it during an argument.

I never do think up an appropriate response to that obnoxious phrase he sticks me with.

So when his graduation comes, he does what he has promised to do for years, what I always expect to be boasting rather than planning: he takes flight.

*

He leaves.

He's always wanted to travel like Dad, whose company sends him on frequent trips until eventually he goes on a trip he doesn't return from, and so Michael sets off with a backpack, a fresh degree, and whatever savings he manages to collect. Once he starts moving, he doesn't seem to stop, and if he does find his way home, it's never longer than a reticent month. He makes it first to New Mexico and stays for a number of months. Then to Colorado, working odd jobs and eking by. To Mexico, to Belize, to Vancouver, Seattle, Seville, Auckland, Cebu, Chiba, Moloka'i, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and on, in no particular order. A few months in each place on average, never much longer than a year. Just after my wedding, he spends a number of months along the Cannonball River in North Dakota, dedicated to the defense of the water and the land. He lends his hands to the construction of temporary shelters, the repair of vehicles sent on direct actions, the preparation of mess hall meals for the thousands gathered with him.

This is a Michael I don't know and don't see coming. Before moving away, he never shows any interest in handiwork or manual labor. He chooses his majors based on no practical application but instead based on what interests him intellectually, an approach to his future I struggle to fathom at the time—the anxiety of indistinct prospects overwhelms me, and I always want to be a teacher. But once he leaves, and with so much unspoken or unresolved, he refuses to let failure drive him back, so he learns what he needs in order to get by. Turns out that no matter where you live, people need someone who can service a car, install a fence, or paint a wall.

When Michael once again follows through on a promise that feels more speculative than possible and decides to stay in town to be around Mom and I, this is the kind of work he procures. He passes no more than three weeks sleeping on my couch and needling Somya over her morning rituals before he announces he's going to find his own place. He connects with Justin Johnson, an old high school friend and local mechanic, who gets him a gig in the garage changing tires and checking oil. This is enough to make Michael happy.

His unit hosts barren walls but for a solitary, well-used tapestry he's carried with him through at least three moves, and for over a year he refuses to decorate the floor with any furniture but a dilapidated mattress he calls a bed. Remnants of a changeable, inconstant lifestyle, I suppose. For his second Christmas back, I gift him a stained oak coffee table that begs for chairs to compliment it, and finally he succumbs to my and Mom's social pressuring and furnishes his home.

After he moves in, I hardly have time to realize it before he's accompanying me almost every afternoon to St. Vitus on my habitual visit. Once laconic about the details of his half-decade series of jaunts, the more time he spends near Mom and her wellspring of stories,

the more he loosens his tongue and lets us in. We hear about spotting his first sea turtle, bike commuting over cobbled streets, his few months of ecological restoration work, his time on a cargo boat. He even admits—with a guilty look across his face reminiscent of his childhood countenance after forgetting homework or a bad report card—to devouring an entire Danielle Steel novel on a particularly arduous, rainy train ride a couple years before. He finds it stowed between his seat and the cold metal wall of the cabin and can't help himself. When he recalls the title, Mom stays silent a moment before reciting the publication year and brief synopsis. Over a year later and she still remembers that list of books, making a glance at her skin and at the scores of uncollected moments and thoughts all the more bitter tasting.

“I'm impressed you still have that whole list locked away up there, Mom,” I say.

“This thing was an old steel trap once,” she says, tapping her temple. “I haven't lost everything yet.” It's true, she hasn't. She hasn't lost a list of books she's never read, but she has lost birthdays and Halloweens. She's lost moments precious to me, but not that meaningless list.

The impulse to assign rhyme and reason to each experience drawn over the landscape of her skin eats away at me, no matter how firmly I assure myself that value means nothing to this disease. I'm conditioned to understand memories as the luminous instances in our lives, so the fact that Mom can remember on the spot the names of over a hundred books she never plans to read while on her neck and across her fingers and out from under the cuffs of her pants bleed shared and precious days of her life and mine and Michael's and Dad's just kills my spirit.

Michael's array of stories finally spoken helps revive me. Somehow, his spell of years following in the wind's direction turns him into a storyteller of Mom's caliber, and he

weaves his own tales into moving epics. His wave of stories starts slowly, one every couple of days if we manage to trick him into it, and builds up over time until a one anecdote begs an association to another and another, and all of a sudden his words morph into the intricate blueprint of his life since leaving, a web of who he meets and who he becomes and how. The real mastery, though, speaks in how he ultimately connects every string of stories back to home, not as a construct or an idea but specifically the farm. Someone reminds him of a man who once works the fields, a party he stumbles upon makes him think of the party he throws before his first year of high school for all the boys in his class, a stream he leaps over off-trail on a trip through the rainforest moves water as clear as the spring the feeds the creek. I'm not sure if he realizes what he's projecting, or if he intentionally points to the farm and how much he misses it to be passive aggressive.

As wonderful as his stories are, as ecstatic as I am to finally hear in full what I've only gotten glimpses of previously, they ignite a different fire in me too. After all this time and so much silence, he's back and clearly, whether he admits it or not, feels entitled to the land our parents rear him on. That home can change and that it doesn't wait for him never crosses his mind. He's finally looking for a place to moor his restless boat. But nothing is where he left it, and he doesn't know what to do.

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Throughout the summer, Michael and I spend as much of each day as we can at Mom's side. At the beginning of the season we both notice that she slows down. She takes more time to think about her next steps and her responses than we're used to, but she tries to

hide it. Before I have to return to school, I want to be with Mom for as much of each day as she can stand to see my face.

By this time, I've already crammed the first leather-bound book from Mahfouz full with her words, and my heavy, purple scrawlings pack half the pages of a second book, one Somya gives me that spring. Because her stories come slower in these days, too, and she spends more time in silence and more time listening to Michael, I also start bringing some work with me. A planner for my lessons in the latter part of the second semester, a textbook to skim and refresh myself on, a student list to start learning names early.

On August 8th, just before the nights begin slowly losing their summer heat to the cooling fall air and as the school year looms only a couple weeks away, I plan to visit Mom first thing in the morning, and Michael intends to meet me there in a couple hours. Mom waits for me in the lobby, motoring back and forth from wall to wall. Sheryl is nowhere to be seen, but I know she's got Thursday morning duty, and I can find her if we need anything. I lean in to hug Mom and notice how exhausted she looks. The tail of some unseen creature, hidden among the strands of her dark purple hair, unravels from her scalp and tacks back and forth over her eye, the tip hovering just over the apex of her cheekbone at the end of each pendulum swing. The coloring of the tail highlights the extra depth of the bags under her eyes.

"Mom," I say, and my concern must reach the surface, because she sighs.

"Haven't been sleeping well, E." Her embrace is as firm as ever. "Dreams like a hack 'em up horror flick had me turning all night. I'd prefer not to go into details. Wouldn't go away no matter how many times I got out of bed."

Her dreams are always so much more intricate and vivid than mine. While I'm in college, she calls me every Saturday morning to recite the night before's dream in precise, cinematic detail from colors and scents to minor appearances by old acquaintances and underlying themes and implications. She often laments to me that she doesn't have the vocabulary she wishes, that she never has the right words to describe a situation, but I never hear her falter when she describes her dreams, like she enters into a trance where language is all that matters and all she knows.

"Come to my room," she says. "It'll be so much brighter with you there." The room, despite all its sunlight, does feel gloomy when I walk in. The strain of a long night hangs in the air.

She's too tired to talk much, so I sit in the armchair near her bed and sift through papers and old lesson plans while she reads by the window. The sunlight falling through the glass blankets half her face and casts shadows like a dynamic, shifting mountain range over the sides of her folded, fidgety body. Today she wears only a t-shirt and pants, letting the tattoos on her arms flow out in the open with a lack of concern unusual for her. She reads intently and silently, pausing only to turn pages, rather than following her standard approach involving frequent stops to inform me of what the pages make her think about, and I imagine that she's spurring herself to take advantage of the good light while it lasts. Only a few weeks from now, as fall deepens into winter, the bounty of daily light she receives feels like an age long lost and unrecoverable. Right now, though, she is so entrenched between the covers of the volume that I can't help but lay my work on my lap and absorb her image and her stillness.

Her placidity doesn't even err when the chime of the double-wide front door sounds and those heavy footfalls signature to Michael echo down the corridor toward us. "Must be him, finally" I say. She draws back in her chair like a startled snake and snaps her book shut. The noise of her recoil nearly causes me to launch all the materials from my lap as I stand up in surprise and only barely grab my things. Is she hurt? Did she almost fall? Did she just nod off for a second? Stock still, she stares at me.

"Oh," she says. "You were awfully quiet." The intensity and focus in her eyes as she reads are gone now. The scrutiny in her stare can't mask the empty, lost look behind her eyes.

"Sorry, just doing work. You looked like you were pretty into that book, so I didn't want to bother you." Like I'm a character in one of Mom's horror dreams, my heart beats out of my chest and my skin tightens in fear. I take a step toward her, but she sinks just slightly further into her seat by the window, the shadowed half of her body now so much less innocent looking and instead murky and uncertain. She looks at me without recognition.

"Is there. . ." she starts. "Can I—" I want to run at her and scour every crease in her skin for the single square inch that I know depicts my face, and I want to remove it from her, cover it up forever. Does she show me as a child? Has she forgotten every instance of my face? Or is it just the one I wear now, at this age, that she struggles to recall? Instead of approaching her, I walk to the threshold, always a safe place. In this case, the liminal space between an occupied room and an open hallway. Here I'm farther from Mom and farther from her mind and closer to Michael and his encroaching footsteps. While Mom still watches me, I lean just my head outside the room and call for Sheryl. I ought to use the room phone to call for a nurse, but that would mean stepping closer to Mom.

“Sheryl! I could use your help with Bianca.” Michael quickens when he hears me yell.

“Shit.” He rushes to meet me at the door. “Is she okay?”

“Just come in, but try not to startle her.”

As soon as Mom sees Michael cross the doorway, she beams and stands up to hug him. Her smiles is so wide, her skin looks ready to rip. When she turns her excited eyes from my brother to myself, she blinks twice and stops in her tracks. She grimaces but tries to hide it, and I see behind her eyes that she’s back, she’s here again. My image vanishes like a trickster who sows her mischief and retreats. Mom brushes the disarrayed hair out of my face like I’m in grade school, and she runs her hand along my cheek. “I don’t know where I was, honey.”

She says something more to me—an apology, maybe?—but I’m not inhabiting a moment in a world that makes sound or makes sense, and I hear nothing but the rhythm of my frantic heartbeat. For a second, I feel like I might be floating or like I’m viewing the scene from a third-person camera mounted just over my shoulder. Then Michael puts his hand on my wrist.

“You good?” The words break through to me sound-by-sound, letter-by-letter.

“I think I’ll put some music on,” says Mom. She skirts over to the corner of the room where her stereo lies and fiddles with the CDs she keeps stacked on the floor. In the asthenic shake of her hands as she moves to turn something on, I see how she is just as perturbed as I am, probably more. If this leaves me weak, how much more does the event drain from her?

I tell Michael I’m going to be fine, and he asks what exactly has happened. She doesn’t see me, doesn’t know me. That’s what happens. She shies from me, intimidated and

scared. That's what happens. Despite seeing my face every single days for years, she forgets it. Yet somehow the face she does remember is Michael's. He brings her back to us, and all I am is a helpless onlooker, an intruder. "I need a second to breathe," I tell my brother and head for the door. Sheryl meets me there and asks what's going on. After all the time I pass here and all the patients I see come through these doors, I know that her expression is as close as a well-trained nurse gets to looking worried. Mom's been here so long that it must be impossible to stay completely unattached.

Before I can tell Sheryl that Mom has advanced to temporarily forgetting loved ones, an important landmark in the disease's progression, I hear a school bell ring excitedly and the ambient hum of voices. A man asks students to please respond when he calls their name, and the music, Lauryn Hill, unlocks an overwhelming wave of past and present. It's too late for breathing. My chest heaves, and two years of tears breach the surface. Sheryl nods and enters the room, and I walk into the hallway to feel, just for a second, that I'm alone.

In all the time Mom has been here, I don't cry. I don't cry because it's so much work. I don't cry because I don't give myself the time, passing nearly every minute of every day with Mom, at the school, running classes at Mom's studio, or at home where I barely have the energy to eat and get into bed. I don't cry because, like Michael, maybe I too am pretending that none of this is real and Mom isn't dying and she can stay with us forever. I don't cry because Mom, when she decides to check in to St. Vitus, begs me to promise not to lament the disease that draws her slowly away from us, and I try my best to honor her wish no matter how much it eats all my energy to do so.

But now, as the sounds of Lauryn Hill ebb out of the room and reach me, for the first time I consider in full what losing Mom means, and what we will lose—what she will lose—along the way, before she’s even gone.

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Like we often do after he moves back, even after Mom’s passing, Somya and I have Michael over for dinner that night. I leave St. Vitus early, just after the incident, telling Mom I need to get some rest but that she can expect me back the next day, and I try not to look Michael in the eye as I go. “See you tonight?” he says, confirming. I nod at him and wave. I drive myself home with the windows down and try not to blame Michael for his presence—for the thin, unbreakable thread that tethers him to Mom, enables him to pull her back to his reality when she drifts so far away as to forget me.

The summer is verdant and so is what binds them. Row after row of identical, flourishing cornstalks line the roads toward home, and both Michael and Mom find the uniformity of the distribution spellbinding and beautiful. To them, the rows are a unity, the dark, hardy green an unchallenged richness. It’s the stray patches of grasses and alfalfa, though, that draw my attention as I drive home. Already those acres have been harvested twice, and the sparser third growth stands resilient and blows malleable in the lightest of wind. Already it’s yellowing beneath the heat of the sun and is soon ready to be wound into bales again.

The grasses in our small yard grow just longer than the town likes them to, but Somya and I share this infatuation with grasses and watching them grow and seed and form

ephemeral patterns under the weight of the wind, so we always wait as long as we can before mowing. I walk through the grasses toward the porch and feel them brush against my ankles and calves.

When Somya gets home I tell her about Mom's episode. "Ecaterina," she says and brushes the hair from my face the same way Mom does. "So Michael just struts up, pokes his head in, and all of a sudden everything is cool and good?" Somya's voice calms me down by virtue of its very presence in the air between us. She always has this soothing effect on me, from the day we meet and every day after.

"That's about how it went."

"Weird." She moves around the kitchen putting together a plate to snack on, gliding from cabinet to cupboard to island as if she dons rollerblades. "I mean, your brother's cute, but not 'pull me back from the deepest recesses of my withering mind' cute. Must've been a fluke."

"I *know* there's nothing to read into it. Her tattoos couldn't care less about who's in the room and who's being hurt. But how can I help it? When I've been with her every day for over two years, how can I not be suspicious?"

"Your pissed off-ness is totally justified." Somya laughs shamelessly at her own phrasing. Another thing I love about her. And somehow she talks while chewing and doesn't lose any of the fidelity of the contrasting tones of her voice, another. "Recognizing that there's no blame to place for this is hard, but it's crucial. You have to let the feeling run its course and pass."

She's right. I know she's right, but once Michael walks through the door that evening, my shoulders, my arms, my stomach, my neck all are going to tighten up again. My body is angry, even if I don't want to be.

"Som," I say. "Would you come to visit her with me this weekend? I know how you feel about being there, but I need you. Going back is going to suck." She stands up from her seat at the table and wraps me in her arms. I let my face rest atop her shoulder and sigh.

"Of course I will." She breathes deeply as she says it, resolving. I know this isn't easy for her, isn't something she wants or is comfortable with. "It's been too long since I've seen Bianca anyway. Maybe we could take her out and visit the studio, if she feels up to it."

For the second time of the day, I break Mom's rule and cry. This time it's brief, in the comfort of Somya's embrace, but it feels like a necessary closure to the hours I spend at St. Vitus in the morning. When I'm done, she kisses me and suggests we start preparing for dinner with Michael.

We keep the windows open to let out some of the house's excess heat and for the gentle cross breeze the transit evokes. And because the ambient noise of the outdoors helps me focus on something other than the events of the morning. The soundscape of the house and its surroundings mixes with the rote, repetitive motion of chopping vegetables, and soon my mind is empty. All I know is the scents on the table before me and Somya's light humming throughout the kitchen.

This illusion crumbles when finally Michael arrives, looking exhausted, just an hour before sunset. Somya lets him in, and they both make quick jabs at one another at the door. She says he has looked better, but only barely. He claims he can't always find the house through the jungle-like mess of the unmown lawn, and he's bedraggled after breaking a new

path through the yard. As I lean over the table to set a glass full of tap water in front of each plate—neither Somya or I ever drink anything but water with dinner, and Michael never asks for anything special—Michael’s hand finds itself resting on my shoulder squeezing gently in acknowledgment. Can he feel how tense the muscles beneath my skin are and how they shake under his touch?

“Could’ve used your help today, Ecaterina.” If his tone is accusatory, wistful, or just sincere, I can’t tell. Doesn’t matter.

“Is she okay?” I bite back the words that want to jump out at my brother.

“She’s upset. Frazzled. But how could she not be? Sheryl said that this is—”

“The next big stage in Mom’s progression. I know. I’ve done my research plenty thoroughly.”

Michael narrows his eyes at me like whatever he plans to say next, he’s not holding back. But without either of us noticing, Somya has finished setting the table and is standing directly behind us, leaning in with a smirk on her face. Michael looks like he’s been snapped out of a spell, and his smile returns to his face as he moves to pull out a chair and sit. I just feel exhausted.

In all his time away and his time scraping by, one thing Michael’s learned is to always compliment food given in good will. He flourishes his fork with a monster-sized chunk of eggplant on the end and devours it, not stopping to swallow it before he reaches for another scoop of marinara sauce from the pan. And as he utters a profusion of approvals for the eggplant parmesan, he begins scooping a hefty serving of the salad I’ve made onto his plain, ceramic plate. And again he says thanks.

Even the flavors of the meal can't penetrate the haze I'm in and break me out just temporarily, but they seem to have made Michael fully chipper. There's rarely much for guests to eat at St. Vitus other than snacks, and Michael never wants to order food for delivery. He drags his fork through the salad, separating its contents just to see what's there, a habit he displays ever since I can remember. Once he has pulled apart the ingredients and organized them into vague strata, he usually mixes it all back together and eats, but this time he pokes his utensil into a thick portion of a diced tomato. "This," he says, turning to Somya, "is a vegetable sliced by my sister if I've ever seen one."

"How can you tell?" Somya always humors him.

"It's just one of those familial connections," he says, boasting playfully. He waves the slice at Somya, then directs it at me. "I always know Ecaterina's handiwork when it's in front of me. It's something in the angle. And it's especially easy to recognize her tomatoes."

"Kinda like how it's especially easy for Mom to recognize your face?" I feel Somya sit back deep into her chair, but I can't see it because my heart is pounding in my ears and my vision seems to shrink and narrow in acutely on Michael, sitting across from me and looking caught off guard.

"What do you mean?" he says, and he looks like he really doesn't already know, his face scrunched up and sour.

"I'm just saying that if she were only ever going to remember one of us, of course it would be you."

"I have been around the longest." He shrugs and beams at Somya like it's the funniest joke he has ever told. Maybe it is.

“You have. You’re the one she set eyes on first. No surprise, then, that you’re the favorite. The one she’s always looking for.”

“Hold up, E,” Michael says. “No way. Mom has never been one to play favorites. Never.” I barely stop to hear him. The flow of words from my mouth can’t be impeded even if I want to stop.

“Never mind that all you know how to do is leave. Leave her and leave me and leave your friends, leave the state, leave us all wondering where you could possibly be or if you were even alive at all. No word from you for months at a time. Do you know how much that hurt her?” Michael leans forward, mouth dropping open to respond, but I’m not ready to hear his excuses yet. “No. And when her tattoos came to claim her, I was with her at every juncture. I went to her first appointments. I was there for the diagnosis. I sat with her, and, because she begged me, I tried not to cry for days when all I wanted to do was cry. Every day I tried to get ahold of you and not a word. For weeks. And all those weeks I was at Mom’s side, and we moved her in to Room 8 at St. Vitus and still no word from you. Every day—every single day since the ferret crawled down her wrist, I’ve done everything in my power to guarantee that mine is the first face she sees when she wakes up and the last she sees before she sleeps. But still she forgot my face while I sat next to her, then she lit up like sunrise when you walked through the door.”

My hands feel weak, shaky, and I almost can’t draw breath from the rigidity running through my entire body. When I finally feel the calm of oxygen pumped back into my system, I say:

“So tell me again that you’re not the favorite child.”

Michael has kept the fork raised in his hand the whole time—perhaps too caught off guard to consider what to do with it—but now he sticks it back into his salad, pulls it back out with a few more morsels impaled on the tines, and he goes back to eating.

“I get it,” he says between bites. “You’re upset.” He goes back for the eggplant, and despite how upset I am, for a second I worry that it’s too cold and I should warm it up for him. “And Mom is upset, too. She’s horrified about what happened today. Distraught. But you’re still wrong. I’ve never been the favorite.”

He can warm up his own eggplant.

“Mom never stops talking about you.”

He chuckles and gathers more food into his mouth. “Mom never stops talking, period. That’s what she has always done best.”

Somya puts her hand on my knee under the table and gives a supportive squeeze. Her grip is warm against my bare skin, and I grab the glass of water in front of me to absorb its coolness. I take a long drink from the glass, trying to swallow my words with the water. Or at least cool them down.

“If you really want to talk favorites, though, let’s. Imagine that it’s true, that I was Mom’s favorite kid,” Michael says “She wouldn’t have sold the farm and the only connection I have to our childhood. No mother would do that to her favorite kid. If I was the favorite, the farm would be mine, and we’d be there arguing about this over the table we ate dinner at every night as a family, instead of over this hunk.” He slaps the table. “And maybe then I’d consider admitting that you’re right, but none of that has happened. Our mom’s memories are practically eating her alive, and somehow you let her sell the family farm and pretend that not only was that a totally reasonable decision, but she also loves you less than

me? Don't act like Mom was thinking about me when she did that. And don't try telling me either that you showed any concern for what I wanted."

"What exactly were we supposed to do, Michael? How was Mom going to afford years of care at St. Vitus? Do you really think she would've sold it if she knew how much you apparently cared about it? You never expressed any interest in keeping your life tied to the farm, then one day, without hardly a word, you were gone, and you stayed gone." I know what his response is without hearing it: he sees all our communications—whatever the form they arrive in—but he's always just too strapped to respond. That's precisely what he says.

"If you'd contacted me about something so important, I would've responded," he adds.

"Weeks, Michael, weeks. It took you weeks to get in touch with me after the tattoos came. But it shouldn't take a major life change to open a line of communication between any of us! I don't know why that's always so hard for you to understand. In all the time you were away, doing your own thing, seeing the world and working on yourself and *living*, what I wanted most was just to hear from you. A phone call or an email every few days, that's all. Because while you were roaming, I was here, and I couldn't turn around and disappear into my own world—my own, separate life—the way you could. You were my only tie to something beyond home."

"You could've left at any point, Ecaterina. I'd have let you stay with me."

Before now, he never makes this offer directly, but Michael only ever reaches out wordlessly, in tacit and veiled implications—he always believes that everyone else is on the same page as he is, that nothing meaningful needs to be spoken.

“I didn’t know how,” I admit. Next to me, Somya has done her best to stay unseen and uninvolved, and I can’t tell if she’s tense or if she’s just playing quiet. We’ve talked about this. she knows about how long I have felt cooped up and constrained by Michael’s constant absence, but I worry that she feels responsible for it too. If anything, she has been the biggest anchor in my happiness here. “I didn’t know how to take the first steps, and even if I’d figured that out, leaving Mom wasn’t an option.”

“You don’t give her enough credit,” he says. “It’s harder now, but Mom would’ve gotten by just fine without either of us then.”

“Maybe.” He doesn’t realize that the woman we know as our mother has mostly shown us different sides of her face. “But I saw what your leaving did to Mom. I saw how she longed for you to be within reach or just to hear your voice. And I couldn’t do that to her again, knowing full well how much she was hurting and would hurt. So while Mom tried to make peace with your absence and you paid her no mind, I was stuck in the middle. I couldn’t leave without feeling like I’d betrayed Mom, but staying here ate at me every day, too. And I couldn’t even live through you, because you wouldn’t give me the time of day. You got to leave and never look back, and I had to stay here.”

Michael is silent for a moment, contemplative. He twirls his fork through what’s left of his food and stares at the table.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I had no clue you felt that way.”

“That’s honestly the worst part. That you were clueless. No matter how many times I told you, you refused to see how I felt and how much I wanted what you took for granted.”

Neither of us speak, but I don’t break eye contact with Michael. I’ve wanted to say this to him for so long, I can’t pull back now. I can’t lose his gaze and risk him not fully

understanding how important this is to me. In the silence, a chair slides across the floor and Somya stands up. She grabs Michael's plate and makes to grab mine, but, seeing that I've almost not touched it at all, she leaves the plate in front of me. "Well, that was juicy," she says. "But I have dishes to do."

Michael turns to her. "Let me do them. Please." This is another habit he's picked up while away, because, before he leaves, he is never interested in offering help with clean up. I suspect it's an offer few hosts ever take him up on.

"I'll help," I say, then I push Michael my plate. "Finish that, will you? You can bring it to the kitchen when you're done." He leans back in his chair and sighs, not in exasperation so much as in the beginnings of relief. He sounds the same every time we finish a fight. "Sure thing," he says.

Normally, between Somya and I, whoever cooks is free from dishes duty for the night, but when we cook together, we clean together. Tonight, it helps me dwell less on all the things I still want to say to my brother. Somya looks at me with familiar concern growing across her face. "No," I say, and I can't help but crack a smile. It's hard to keep stoic under the gaze of someone who cares so intensely for you. "I'm not hungry." I nudge her away only slightly before dipping my hands into the sink's warm water and reaching for a plate or a pan or whatever waits for me under the suds. "You know how my stomach gets all twisted when I get upset."

"I do," she says. "And you know how that has never stopped me anyway." While I wash, I hear her rifling through the cabinets.

"Are you going to help me? Or are you going to break our rules and make me do all this cleaning by myself?" I mock. When I turn around to spy on her, she's already crept up

behind me, and she pops a gummy bear into my mouth. I laugh and she manages to sneak another one in. Reluctantly, I chew the sweet figures. “When did we even get gummy bears?” I ask. I can’t remember the last time I’ve had one.

“I have a secret addiction.” Somya’s words are muddled, and she grins guiltily, showing her clenched teeth and the handful of dismembered, multicolored candy bears stuck between them.

When she kisses me, the sugar of the candy is all the sweeter, and the day melts away around us. For a few moments, it’s just us, completely immersed. Only when I turn fully into her—to let her body rest in parallel against mine—do I notice that we aren’t in a vacuum and that the hands I’ve just set on her waist are sopping wet and dripping with soap. But she doesn’t even flinch, and I wonder if her plan all along is to see if she can distract me enough to make a mess of the dishes. It’s working. It always does.

“Oh, gross,” Michael says, rounding the corner with my now-empty plate in hand. I flick my soaked hand at him, and he recoils away from the lukewarm water that launches off my fingertips. I break away from Somya and she dons an exaggerated frown. We both roll our eyes as we turn toward him.

“How do you think I felt every time you made me ride in the back while you drove Kayla home?” I prod.

“Fair,” he says. Tough, but fair. Are you sure you don’t want me on dish duty? It looks like you’re not making too much progress.”

“Progress is no fun,” Somya jokes. Michael doesn’t disagree, and he shrugs to show it. “You headed out for the night?”

“I’ve got some thinking to do,” he says. “Rather than take up residence on your couch again, I figure that’s something I can do in my own space.” He sets the plate on the countertop and leans in to hug Somya goodbye.

“Smart move,” she says. “Get home for the night before your sister decides she has another bone to pick over dessert.”

Michael blinks at me in acknowledgment of our spat, and I wrap my arms around him. It’s not the first time we fight and not the last. And, while everything is far from fixed, I feel so much lighter having spoken my fears and my ired that there’s nothing to gain from being anything but affectionate. “Love you, brother,” I say, and Michael blinks again when I release him from my grip, but he doesn’t say anything. The unspoken is Michael’s forte.

At the door, he slips his shoes on with the practiced effortlessness of someone who is always coming and going. He pauses before opening the door to wrap his sweater around his waist. He hopes it’s a clear night—he always does—so he can count the stars and find the constellations hidden by the town’s minimal light pollution.

“Good night, Michael,” I say from the kitchen, expecting only a mutter and a wave before the door swings shut behind him. But instead he’s standing in the threshold facing me. I rub my still damp hands against my shirt.

“Thanks, Ecaterina. For being honest with me. I won’t forget what we talked about.”

“Maybe one day I will.”

Before the words have breached the space between my lips, I know how much they promise to undo, and I wonder how I can even let them escape from my thoughts. But they force their way out and float freely to Michael, standing in the doorway looking as hurt as I must look confused. He turns without a word and walks away, and I don’t blame him.

Somya pretends not to have heard. She lets me wade through the guilt that my words invite without consulting me. As an adolescent, I lose more than one friend this way, through the uncensorable bitterness that on occasion boils over without warning. The feeling that says only what it wants to say, never what I want to say. Irrationally, I fear I might also lose my brother—who's not only my mother's anchor—to whatever part of my subconscious allows words so hurtful to pass by unladen.

I know I won't, but that doesn't stop the thought from turning over endlessly in my head: What if those are the last words I say to my brother? Who do I become if I use the potential for my own demise as a weapon? And can I ever forgive myself if I never have the opportunity to rescind my own threat? What if those are the last words I say to my brother?

They aren't, a fact that I never stop being grateful for. I am grateful for what those eventually are. Our final exchange is much more balanced, much more peaceful—the only conflict being that Michael is ready and I am not.

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For the rest of the night, my words echo through my thoughts. I've spent every day since Mom's diagnosis trying not to dread the possibility that my own tattoos are sitting just over the horizon of years, waiting for me to find them and welcome them onto my skin. But I can't stop that worry from mounting in my unconscious, and now that's clear. Michael has seen it. Somya has seen it. The anxiety of not knowing how my mind might age and how my memories might find their way to the surface is no longer solely internal. Like the paint on the outer walls of St. Vitus years after it closes, my unfearing, unflappable façade has crumbled. Now they know that I'm scared too.

Somya doesn't say much after Michael leaves. She knows how I use silence to find balance when I lose it, and she respects that distance. She does say, though, "He knows. He knows, and I know, that you didn't say it to hurt him."

It's late by the time Michael leaves. In the summer, when the sky stays clear and bright long past what seems possible, we always eat late. It's the way we like to honor the extra moments of daylight. To show the gift of extra time isn't something we take for granted. So I'm exhausted even before Somya and I finish cleaning the table and rinsing all the dishes, and I'm ready to sleep for days and forget about everything—forget about forgetting, especially—once I finally ease myself into bed alongside Somya.

For uncountable moments, we lie in silence and I take in her warmth and her presence, her breathing and her heartbeat. I hold her like she's a memory that might wander away. "I did," I tell her eventually.

"What?" She's not quite sleeping, but she's not fully present in the waking world either. I envy the way she relaxes so quickly into slumber. "You did what?"

"I did say it to hurt him."

"Do you think it worked?" she asks.

"He never stays hurt for long." She sighs, and I don't know if she's sleeping again already or if she means to challenge me with only a rush of air from her nose. "And I said it to hurt myself," I admit.

Somya wriggles out of my grasp, rolling over to face me. As she does, the breeze from our open window passes over her and brings the calm of night with it. "Do you think it worked?" she repeats. The citrus of her facewash floats on the air, too, after she turns over.

It's my turn to sigh. "It always does. And it feels like I'm never done hurting." She runs her finger below my ear and along my chin. "It's just that . . . we don't know, Som. We don't know what's going to happen. We don't know when. Something might be working its way down my spine right now, and I'd never know what if we don't see it. Wouldn't even know it's there."

"Or maybe they never come," she says, "and you spend your life stressing about something that will never be a problem. But we can't know, you're right."

"And in the meantime, there's nothing we can do except wait and watch while Mom dies."

"And hopefully learn how to manage it if does one day happen to you?" She says this confidently because we've had this conversation uncountable times. The first day Mom's tattoos appear, I try my hardest not to say what's on my mind, to manifest the future with my worries. I tell Somya what has happened, but I can't tell her what's on my mind. Instead, I lie awake for hours while she lightly snores next to me until eventually I stir her awake to get the weight off my chest.

Every few weeks since then, we've had the same discussion, coming to the same conclusion: we can only wait.

All I know is I don't want to forget. I don't want to forget the day or the month, forget where I am, forget who is with me, forget where I'm parked. I don't want to forget old pets, and I don't want to forget old friends. I don't want to forget Somya. I don't want to forget Mom. I don't want to forget Michael. I don't want to look in the mirror and not recognize my own face, like Mom does this morning.

But this morning, Michael is there to pull Mom back. Will Michael be there to pull me back, too, once I need it?

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After Mom forgets my face once, visiting St. Vitus is never as comfortable or as natural as I'm used to it being. This toll doesn't seem to weigh as heavily on Michael, who stops by every couple days now. More often now, I ask Somya to come with—only a couple of times a week at most—and she never denies me her company, despite the anxiety and fear that initially keep her away from the place when Mom is admitted. Her presence there is stabilizing for me, and Mom loves to see her, too, but I worry that asking her to be there too often may make her uncomfortable or drive her away.

At the very beginning, Somya doesn't help us move Mom's things into St. Vitus, doesn't drop me off for a visit, doesn't visit Mom herself there, and I don't ask her to do any of this. As long as I've known her, she's avoided dwelling too long on death, refused to attend funerals, spoken of her fear almost never, except one night a couple months after we start dating and after a night of wine, talk, and too little food. When she lays out for me her paralyzing fear of her own death, she jokes that she must be immortal otherwise life makes no sense, and I laugh with her. She describes the way her stomach twists and the immutable sense of falling, of acceleration, that she feels on the nights she doesn't fall asleep soon enough to avoid the questions that she never can solve. I comfort her, I listen, I wait for her to fall asleep peacefully, but I don't tell her that I feel the same sensations and have no more answers than she ever will.

Though I try to respect her time and her comfort by only asking her to come with occasionally, I keep waiting for the day Somya refuses to accompany me and the day that Mom fails to know me again. Every day, my first thought is that today could be the last day that Mom remembers any of us, and Somya might not be with me when it is.

By November, I've become so anxious about what must inevitably happen that I dawdle in my classroom every day after school is out. I finish up grading, I talk with stragglers asking about high school or late grades or upcoming projects, I read over passages of the notebooks of Mom's stories and relive them or make edits and clarifications. Sometimes I sit and look at my fingers. At first, I'm ten minutes later than normal to my evening meetings with Mom, but I loiter longer and longer until I'm spending over an hour more than usual at school. The days of November shorten in great leaps until, on cloudy days especially, it seems like the sun never fully rises, and by the time I leave school the sky is usually as dark as I've ever seen it.

One night I dream that Mom has forgotten me entirely and permanently and Michael and Somya and Dad and her parents and siblings, and we all sit in her room begging her to remember. So heavy with tattoos of lost people is the skin of her face that she appears to us formless, entirely absent. Even the whites of her eyes are darkened with thin lines of the past. In the way that only a dream can, this encounter leaves me drained and deflated even after I wake up. I carry it with me throughout an arduous day of teaching, and when it comes time to leave and meet Michael at St. Vitus—tonight we want to plan for Thanksgiving—I physically can't. My hands shake at the thought of getting any closer to the irreality of the dream.

I get in the car anyway and drive off. The stars are so bright tonight that I feel ashamed at turning on my headlights and drowning out their ageless shine. When I reach Herald Road and see the halo of St. Vitus in the distance, my fingers don't slip down the wheel to flip the turn signal, my ankle doesn't stretch to let up on the gas pedal, my hands don't twist to change the car's bearing, and my gaze doesn't shift from the road ahead of me. I drive and drive through the hilly county roads, and the darkness of the night presses in on me the farther I go. I need to reach a place where the dark isn't so oppressive.

I head south.

An hour I drive. An hour and a half. The light on my phone illuminates and upsets the quiet peace of the drive—incoming call—but I throw it face down on the passenger seat and forget about it in an instant. Then I turn onto the interstate where the unending, blinding streetlights guide me in solitude for just as long. In the distance, the outer reaches and the tallest buildings of Chicago rise out of the dark like a beacon. The city whispers to me, welcomes me back. When is the last time I am so far from home? I don't remember.

For another hour I drive north and south, east and west along the city's grid with my window down and the heat in the car at full, marveling at the scale of the structure and infrastructure all around me. When I can find an open and easily accessible parking space, I stop the car for just long enough to stand on the sidewalk and run my eyes up the length of each building around me and take in their light. I do this as often as I can in as many different parts of the metropolis as I can. The scale of the city is so different from home that I marvel even at the buildings just a few stories high. The top floors of each building remind me of Dad and how he loves towering buildings everywhere for all they hide from the ground and

reveal from the topmost levels. It's one of the reasons he loves traveling for work. Each city offers something novel, and he wants to know them all by their light and their mass.

I visit a couple of the brightest shops in each sector I visit—a café, a comic book store, a steakhouse, a cornerstore, a drugstore, the lobby of an office building—until I've drunk my fill of the inescapable electricity of the place. I drive back toward home along the lake to the northernmost reaches of the light, where I find a cold beach beside a complex of luxury apartment units. After five hours of dedicated motoring, I finally give the car respite, shut the lights off, and walk out toward the water. Not a single light disturbs the surface except those of the buildings along the shore. For as far as I can see, the lake is lightless and restless, and I know that long beyond the point where my eyesight tapers off, the lake extends, deeper and darker the further you go until Michigan. What it must look like from the lake's perspective.

I remember Michael's vivid descriptions of flying into Chicago at night from the east and the vast black blanket of Lake Michigan and how the city shears it abruptly, rises out of the water like a horde of brilliant specters. The cold wind off the water leaves my fingers stiff and lifeless, and I have sand in my shoes, so I return to the car, start it, and hope it's still warm enough to blow heat through the vents. The LED on my phone blinks an alert of unattended to notifications, and I flip it over. A string of text messages and missed calls and voicemails bloats my screen. The first from Michael, five hours ago: "Are we still meeting to talk plans tonight?" A call from Mom, four and a half hours ago: "Hey Ecaterina, when you come by, could you bring . . ." Michael again, three hours ago: "Where are you?" Somya asking what on Earth is going on, Michael won't stop calling her. Mom again, ninety minutes ago: "I'd hoped to see you tonight, but I understand if you are busy. Please call." The

messages become more frequent and more frantic, and I realize it's nearly midnight and I haven't told anyone where I am. In the last message I listen to, Mom has called and is crying uncontrollably. Michael, in the background, consoles her, and she asks over and over where I am, why I won't call her, am I safe, why would I do this to her.

For the first time in all my life, I am happy that Mom will forget everything before this is over. For the first time, the loss she is to experience doesn't scare me, but comforts me. In two years, when she forgets for good that I leave her without explanation, when she forgets how I show no regard for her or her health or her despair, I finally feel the relief of knowing I'm, in some interpretation of events, forgiven.

On the drive home, the phone rings again. Michael. When I answer, he holds his breath in disbelief. "What?" I say.

"What do you mean 'what?' What the hell, Ecaterina! Where have you been?" I don't blame him for being upset. If I imagine this same situation in reverse, with Michael in the driver's seat and me at St. Vitus, it ends with me never speaking to him again.

"I'm safe, Michael. I'm fine. You should understand this: I just had to leave. I needed to be somewhere else, and I couldn't bring myself to go back there." The line is silent, but he's still there. "I won't be back in town for another couple hours. Is Mom still awake? Tell her I'll see her in the morning."

"She's sleeping. Don't you have school tomorrow?"

"I'm calling in sick right now. Tomorrow is entirely dedicated to Mom. And to you. Thank you for being with her."

"It's the first day since I've lived here that you haven't seen her," he says. "I don't know why you think you can't take a day off, but you have more than earned a break. Mom

isn't your charge or your responsibility. She has me and she has the nurses on the days you can't be here."

"I—"

"Did you think I would blame you? You said it yourself. All I know how to do is leave. Trust me, I know the impulse to run. Just be considerate enough to tell us if something's wrong."

He's right, and I tell him so. That seems to content him for now, and his voice eases.

"Maybe you picked the right day to miss, though," he says. "This pair of tattoos showed up just below her elbow on each arm, and I have no idea what they are. I swear I've never heard her mention this place. I know it would've burned at you all night to not be able to ask her about them."

"Describe them to me." I doubt it's a place I can't identify of the top of my head. And if I can't, it's definitely described somewhere in one of the stories I've recorded.

What my brother describes to me—in nearly complete wonder himself—is a complex, diverse garden of trees, bushes, flowers, vines, ferns, and fruits from all across the world, all depicted about the circumference of the widest part of her forearm in minute detail, down to the last vein. I have no idea where it's from.

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The gardens below my mother's elbow on each arm are unique among all the tattoos that cross over the threshold from mind to body. Each leaf on each tree rustles in an unseen wind, and stamen protrude visibly and impossibly from even the smallest of flowers. The

colors are rendered in crisp but fluid contrast, but unlike the rest of Mom's tattoos, which always mirror a realistic representation of the memories, the gardens appear abstracted and exaggerated, almost like an artist's interpretation. Over the couple of years remaining to Mom, the plants respond to the seasons, experiencing budding and fruiting and withering and dormancy depending on the time of the year. Even plants from parts of the world that don't experience seasons the same way that the Midwest does follow the pattern in eerie cycles. All I want is the chance to ask Mom about them, to record her untold story in a new notebook and immortalize her more completely. I am burning for this place my mom has never invited me to. I don't get the chance. The gardens never leave Mom's skin—not until the rest of her tattoos leave her too.

For the entire first day after they arrive, Mom can't stop poring over the gardens. She spends hours that day rotating her arms over and over, straining to see the back side of her arms, making sure she's seen every inch of skin covered in the greenery and examining the details repeatedly. This is the only time a new image on her skin doesn't distress her, doesn't make her eventually feel like she's lost something. If anything, the gardens lift a weight from her spirit and spunk that I'd barely noticed missing. Sometimes when she runs two fingers along the circumference of the new tattoos, she even smiles.

"I'm sad I didn't get the tattoo done professionally years ago," she says, only half joking.

"It would've been a real pain to get touched up," I respond. "At least this way the color never fades." I take one of Mom's arms into my hands and peruse the image for myself. "I can't help but love it, either. I probably would've cried when you came home with an unexpected tattoo so out in the open, but I think I would've grown to like it."

“You always do grow when pushed to, Ecaterina. I never underestimate your capacity for adapting.”

“You always pushed me. I had to learn. Thanks for that.”

“Well,” she says, and she looks at me guiltily. “You always pushed me back. I didn’t always react gracefully.”

“Grace takes time, every time.” Mom sighs in agreement and falls back to looking at the gardens. Calm passes visibly over her body. She’s so intent that I feel I’m outside her world and her perception entirely, and I watch and revel in her focus and her attention to herself. When I feel that I’m no longer just watching but prying into something certainly not meant for me, I reach for my bag and pull out my book. I’m lost in the world immediately. Like Mom becoming lost in her skin, I fall prey to the texture of the page, the alluring serif of the print, and the mind running parallel to my own on the page. All the noise of the surrounding walls falls away, and when I look up again, I’m wholly unaware of how much time has passed.

It’s Mom’s turn to watch me, and she’s smiling. “What are you doing here, Ecaterina?” she asks, and she sounds so sincere that I know she’s not forgetting something. She really wants to know. “I love you. I love your companionship. But why are you here? Every day.”

“Where else would I be?”

“I can think of a thousand places I’d rather be, were I in your position. On some level at least, deep down, it must be miserable to sit here every day and see me slowly wither. When was the last time you did something for yourself? Something just for the sake of having fun? Something that wasn’t driving all the way to another state amid a panic attack.”

Concern lines her face, but also peace, passivity. She is assured of every word that passes over her tongue.

“Do you think I don’t like being here?” I ask, struggling to see what she’s trying to get out of me.

“Don’t play that game on me. Of course I don’t think that. How many hours do you think we’ve spent together during your life? I know how to see when you’re miserable in my company and when you’re not. But what do you gain from all this time spent here doing nothing? All I do is tell you the same stories over and over. And now more and more, the stories are harder to conjure.” She scoots closer to me and puts her hands on my leg. Every week they look more wrinkled, less capable of confidently holding a chrome pole and supporting her fluid movement.

I can’t look her in the eye, so I keep my head turned down, gazing at the fingers spread across my pants. “I only have so much time left with you,” I admit. I look back at her, and she’s still smiling, a sight that feels irreconcilable with the weight throughout my body, the weight that pulls the muscles of my mouth and chin ever tighter as I hold back the flow of fear and anxiety that thinking too long about her demise brings.

“Ecaterina,” Mom says, still smiling, or at least not looking broken like I must look. “Darling. Please. Do something for yourself. You can stop waiting for me to die.”

This is the moment that I break Mom’s no-cry rule in front of her. The very moment she utters the words, they wrench from me the tears that have so long been pent up, that I’ve only let myself release in private. It’s as if her own breath syphons every last mote of my own from my unprepared lungs, as if I’ve been held together by a carefully tied knot whose only extrication is through those words in that order in that tone with that look on this day.

“Every day,” I say, and I’m glad Somya isn’t around to hear this. “Every day since I learned what it meant to die, I’ve been waiting for yours and for Michael’s and for mine. And I have no idea how to face it head on, even though I didn’t have to wait long for Dad’s turn. Even though I consider it every single day I walk this earth, I have no more solace than I did at the very start.”

“I’m not afraid to die,” Mom says. “Only afraid of how much I’ll miss you two.”

CHAPTER 3. LOST

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This is the moment just before Dad is lost to us forever. The last memory I have of concentration on his face, of the bend of his hands, of his sure posture and vivid, clear movement. He's dressed in the gray suit he always wears to the airport for business trips, and he flips doughy pancakes on the griddle while I sit at the kitchen table wagging my feet under the wood slats of the chair. The way his body inhabits the fabric makes me wonder how strange the same clothes would look on anyone else. Each individual thread must be woven solely for him: it stretches across his breast and shoulders, hugs his sides, creates the length of his legs, and moves as him—not with him—while he navigates the kitchen, spatula never leaving his hand.

Mom turns the corner and shouts up the stairs for Michael to get out of the shower or we'll be late to school. Michael can never seem to shower in a hurry, but he never quite makes us late either. He walks a thin, uncertain line in everything he does, on the border of never being on time and never quite being late. It's an apathy-like quality that I never understand. The school year's only just begun, but he's already sick of his last year of junior high, so he takes his time, unconcerned. Most days, his nonchalance frustrates me into borderline panic—worrying at the prospect of being late to school ignites my anxieties—but not this day.

In a couple weeks, I turn twelve, and that's the only thing on my mind.

“Okay,” I say to Dad, “but you'll be back in time for my birthday, right?”

“How could I miss it?”

“There’ll be a party and everything.”

“Trust me,” he says, winking. “I know all about the party. And I promise no business is exciting enough that I’d miss being here.”

“Pancakes for breakfast is awfully suspicious, though.”

“What?” he says. “I can’t treat you special before your birthday too?”

Sitting there, smiling but also suspicious in the way a curious child is, I eat my breakfast. Eventually, Michael comes downstairs just in time to scarf down a pancake or two and Mom hurries us off to the bus. There’s no ceremony because none of us reads time on the undulations of the air, we don’t cast tea leaves to divine tomorrow’s secrets, no one in the house sees the future until overtaken and overcome by it. Dad leaving for work is nothing special. And so that’s it. My last memory of my father is a promise he has no power to keep.

I watch him move back and forth through the kitchen—inching across Mom’s aged shoulder blade, up her collar, to the nape of her neck. I watch him set a finely detailed plate of food in front of this inked miniature of myself, I watch Michael rush in and eat his food, I watch Dad kiss me goodbye. All seen through Mom’s eyes, looping and truncated, feeling almost instantaneous like memories do. It’s not my memory exactly, but it is a memory. Played out as a mural on its maker’s skin. The slender strap of her sundress covers the southern window of the breakfast nook where Michael sits each time the scene cycles to his entrance. The scene could almost be of any of the hundreds of mornings we eat together before catching the bus, but so few memories of banal moments have ever appeared on her freckled, loose skin, there’s no reason to believe this is one of them. In any case, all the afternoons spent with her—often with Michael and Mahfouz and Sheryl lurking near—teach me that what shows up seldom comes free from commentary. I’ve come to read subtle shifts

of perspective, colored lines of nostalgia, inconsistencies in my own recollections, and any matter of ineffable qualities in the tattoos, obvious like a blooming garden in the desert. Rather than unfiltered, pure memory leaking out from her mind down to the reaches of her soles, each sketch retains her reflections on the moment, her interpretations of every second of her life.

In this way, I guess, Mom's tattoos and my leather-bound transcriptions of her stories aren't so different. Neither of us can help but inject our hopes for a memory into its recreation. I doubt that anyone can. I doubt that memory is ever exactly true. And what would be the point of an experience sanitized of itself?

Our final breakfast with Dad, though, isn't a story I have in my books. It's not a story Mom tells, not one I or Michael tell either, so while I can, I revel in its unintentional retelling and check it over and over against the way I see that morning when I look back on it.

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But what is there to say about this moment that Mom doesn't already wear before me? It's a vision of mourning that she doesn't yet know she must weather, not a final memory—she steals hours with Dad that Michael and I never get to know, driving him to the airport. This is a preface. The lines look like they've been drawn and redrawn hundreds of times, like it's a tattoo that's been retouched infinitely and never by the same hand. I see in it the years she has spent in this memory, dwelling in it for answers or living in it to have just one last placid morning.

My thumbs hover over our forms. They skirt over the etched, memorial borders, barely touching her skin, and then I press deeply into her shoulder and the base of her neck. We contort and bend, the kitchen sags, and I rub. I rub and rub with my full weight bearing down through my shoulders, through my arms and hands, collecting at the terminus of each of my fingertips; the pressure of my hands reaching past skin into the structural memory of her muscles, attempting to unentwine the ghosts from the flesh and to let the memories be free of the corrosive air, let them retreat back up her spine where they come from and where they belong. Maybe I can break the bonds that hold them there, that hold Mom captive in her own body. But then again, maybe this is one of the stories Mom is better off without. She can't retrace it as an act of suffering if it stays on her skin forever.

"Ecaterina," a voice says, but all I can understand are the whispers of her tattoos and the stories they tell me about my own life.

"Ecaterina," says Dad, setting a plate before me. "Ecaterina," says a woman leaning from a Schwann's truck, sherbet in hand. "Ecaterina," says my great-aunt Evelyn with curlers in her dark hair. "Ecaterina," says a child named Ecaterina wearing her first leotard and posing in plié.

"Ecaterina, please," says Mom beneath me, her face red with stress in the sunlight, her voice rasping with the little air she can move through her throat. I pick my hands up and notice the burden of my own weight in my bloodless knuckles. I notice how tight my lungs feel when I attempt to draw breath. Mom's skin is red where my hands have been, as if instead of tending her muscles I've been churning soil with a worn out plow.

"Too hard," I mutter, not a question but an admission, an admonition. Because this isn't the first time this happens. More and more often I find myself incapable of staying

present with Mom at St. Vitus. The allure of the sirens impressed in her skin drags me out of my body and into hers, through decades of experiences almost all of which I've experienced either alongside her or via the stories she never stops telling, stories that I never want to stop hearing her tell. She speaks less and less during her time here. I can't even glance at her skin without getting lost on the footprints of memory that meander through the arboreal depths of her life and her subconscious. As I walk the path, the visions of her experiences and perceptions drip like vital sap from the towering pines of the last redwood forests. It's hard to navigate out of this forest once I've found it. Being there unnerves me. Every day I grow more frightened of what I'll find behind Mom's ear when I lean in to kiss her—soon it will be my own image again, I know—or what I'll say to her out of habit that will only earn me a blank stare in response. It's impossible to know when the sight of her will wrench me from this reality and set me down again on the path that winds through her deteriorating synaptic connections. The arrival of summer does nothing to assuage this anxiety, despite my hopes, and by July I still have the sick feeling of anticipating an upcoming performance every morning when I wake up.

“Even when you press too hard,” she says, “it's still helpful. But it's more helpful to breathe occasionally.” She lies there with a towel beneath her head, her hands stretched out into the grass on either side of her, and she looks peaceful despite my intrusive kneading just a moment before. I return to massaging her back and shoulders and arms, but instead of watching her skin, I fix my eyes on the flourishing, vibrant grass surrounding us in the paddock. I consider the varying shapes of each blade, the unique curve, bend, wave, and head of each piece, and I wonder how they might each move differently, individually, under the

force of a strong breeze. One thumb hops unexpectedly over a cord of muscle, and Mom gasps a release of tension then sighs.

“You’re no chiropractor, Ecaterina, but damn did that feel good.”

“Sorry I’m working you over so hard today. I can’t keep focused.”

“These muscles have been craving it. Don’t worry.” And this, somehow, is the first time I notice it. Set against the landscape of her lost memories, the other conditions of her body lose vivacity. They become intangible, despite the fact that my knuckles are still buried in her skin. “They’re not the shoulders they once were, are they?” she says. And they’re not. What I’ve failed to see is the significant atrophy throughout her frame. What, for most of my life, is a firm, muscle-riddled build seems now withered and shrunken. It yields where it should resist.

“We’ve been to the studio a few times this summer, though,” I say, perplexed. “I thought we were keeping up on your exercise.”

“You’ll know what it feels like to be in this body one day,” she says. “We always teach kids to not be surprised by how quickly and how drastically puberty changes our bodies, and that never works. But nobody warned me about this.” While Mom speaks I can’t help but wrack my brain for signs of this decay that I’ve missed in the months leading up to today.

“It’s not like Grandma and Grandpa would’ve admitted to weakness long enough to give you a heads up anyway.”

“Never in a million years would they have had the decency.” She rolls off her stomach and sits up to look me in the eyes. She rests her hands on mine. “Lucky for you, I’m not them, and I’m not holding out on you for pride’s sake. Every time I get on the pole, I can

feel it becoming more difficult. Every spin makes me dizzyier than the last. The increments are miniscule, but they add up. I finally noticed it just after you graduated college, only to realize I'd been hiding it from myself for years already, only in smaller ways. Now, if I bruise myself gripping my thighs around the pole, or if I wrap my forearm too hard in the silks, the sting lingers for days after the discolorations have gone away, which in and of itself is a whole process I know I don't have to describe to you."

She flops back onto the grass, arms thrown out to either side, and looks straight into the sky. A typical Mom move, to feign lightheartedness after opening herself up to me. I remember this response from when I'm nine or ten, the first time she tries and fails to deliver her sex talk to both me and Michael. Unsure of the details but quite positive we don't want to hear them from her, we spend nearly a month afterwards avoiding her gaze and being paid back with her nervous giggles—later I realize that what I know without knowing, that instinct that makes me resist learning these things from my family, is that by virtue of proximity and intimacy my body is weighed and judged almost by instinct, and I don't want to add more fuel to that unconscious gaze. Now here Mom is before me, and I've acquired that gaze and turned it back on her so I can search her for secrets she might not yet know, remember, or realize, hints of the nature and progression of her condition. The clouds of afternoon are rolling in above Mom as I contemplate her, splayed in the grass and grinning. A shadow treads its long journey overhead, indiscriminately blanketing the features of the landscape—the fields, the trees, the weathered fence—and its minor details, its secondary characters—us. The near daily rain isn't here yet, but it's approaching. Mom rolls onto her stomach again and taps two fingers on a shoulder, indicating that my hands have had a long enough rest and need to get back to work.

“And that’s just how I feel getting old,” she resumes her last thought. “That part happens to everybody who gets to my age, even without the added confusion of . . .” As she trails off, she lifts and shrugs her shoulders, rolling the wall of tattoos closer to me before setting them down again.

“Not me, Mom,” I say in my most innocent, childish voice. “I’ll stay young forever, won’t I?” She promises me I’ll be just how I am forever and ever.

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As my fingers roll through her skin and muscle, as they work and wear her vivid tattoos dull, I begin to doubt her confidence that this atrophy is unrelated to the disease. I remember now what Mahfouz tells me the first time I ask him for permission to take Mom out of the facility to go to the studio. Mom jokes that if he complies, she can get him a great deal on a class bundle because she’s in tight with the owner. “Actually,” he says, “I heard about your place a couple years back, and I’ve been meaning to take a class with my sister ever since.” Mom tells him he has the perfect body for the silks, that he needs to take a class as soon as he can, and Mahfouz blushes like a schoolboy. “One of these days,” he swears. “But it’s hard to tear myself away from here. There’s a lot to do, and I’m good at doing it.”

Despite the amiability of the exchange, Mahfouz doesn’t let us leave with Mom quite yet. He says he and Sheryl want Mom to stay put a couple days to get acclimated, to suss out the routine, and so they can observe her. After that, she’s free to come and go and she pleases until they determine otherwise. In private, after the conversation, Mahfouz asks me if I’m familiar with Mom’s condition and what it means, especially at her age, as young as she is.

Her condition is early onset, he says, and only a small percentage of cases occur as early as hers. He tells me that the tattoos and the memory loss are the first stages but that the disease becomes increasingly physical as it progresses. Normally, by the time people gain their tattoos they are already beginning to see significant bodily deterioration. The breakdown of Mom's body, he says emphasizing his hushed and breathy words, will be more rapid and more unexpected. At her age, it is an experience she may not be prepared for.

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His words echo between my ears, colliding with Mom's confidence that this is how her aging would progress even absent her tattoos. I have no energy left to massage her, so instead I lift myself off her back and sit beside her, gazing once again at the scene of Dad, Michael, and I in the kitchen. I trace my fingers along the frame of the image. The disease is already stealing such fundamental memories from her. It rips them from deep within the axon webbing of her consciousness and plasters the visions across her skin like it's tormenting her, tormenting us. The doctors have all said that a tattooed person rarely can stand under the weight of the bleeding memories for more than a decade, but if already she's losing her hold on Dad, her oldest companion, what can she possibly continue losing for the rest of the allotted maximum of ten years.

And at the same time, I see every day she's been here pass before me like a sentimental slideshow. Hundreds and hundreds of afternoons I've spent here with her. And yet this is only the third summer. The start of her third year here.

"Can you believe that?" I ask her.

“Believe what?”

“That it’s almost September,” I say. “That you’re starting your third year here. We didn’t even celebrate your two-year anniversary with Mahfouz and Sheryl.”

“I had a one-woman dance party in my room to celebrate. Just because you missed it doesn’t mean I did.” Mom stands up and beckons me to walk with her. At the fence, the edge of the St. Vitus property, she folds her hands over the treated, smooth pickets and takes a moment to breathe deeply. Her chest swells slowly until her shoulders lift and she holds herself at her fullest height, lungs full. Maybe she’s attempting to hoard the light breeze on the air, or maybe she’s winded just from this short walk. We look out over the swaying, dry summer grasses and the tall stalks of sturdy prairie flowers that the red-winged blackbirds use like pulpits to preach their woods song from. “Summer is coming to an end,” Mom says. “I hadn’t looked at the world outside the fence long enough to realize it. I’d forgotten how freeing it is, though, to lose track of the name of the day and the time of the month. Almost September. That means school starts soon.”

“True,” I say. “September means a lot more than that, though.”

“Of course it does.” She’s slow to respond, first letting my words linger in the atmosphere between us, then dripping her words out one by one. Full of intent. Full of distance. She doesn’t meet my eye as she says so. I trace my finger along her shoulder, where the frame holds a clone of myself perpetually in the act of breaking fast, perpetually giddy about an upcoming birthday.

“This is September,” I tell her. In the tattoo, behind the kitchen table and out the window, at the edge of the property, the image of the sun rising over the neighboring farm is diluted ever so slightly by the outlines of a thin string of clouds. At the edge of the property

adjacent to St. Vitus, another set of clouds approaches, threatening to dampen the light of the afternoon sun. These clouds are so different from those depicted on my mom. These clouds, dark gray and bulbous, roll across the horizon rather than rest along it. However ominous they seem, they bring the comfort and reliability of the afternoon rain, unlike the forms on Mom's skin, bringing back only rushes of absence and disorientation.

"I'm trying to recall," Mom says, "the last time you would've seen him. I drove him to the airport that morning, but before that . . ."

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What I experience here is not unique. I'm not the only one who loses a parent on this day, in this way. Despite that, no matter how many times someone says, "I'm so sorry. How did your father die?"—a question it's hard to believe people ask as brazenly as they do—answering never becomes less uncomfortable. I find it impossible to say "Dad died in New York City, a few days before my birthday, on September 11th" without feeling like I'm coopting the pain of the thousands of concurrent final moments and the pain of those who mourn them still. And the effusive, enthusiastic condolences of those who ask only make me more unsettled. Even twenty years later, I'm still not used to it.

The fact of the matter is that I know nothing. Unlike Mom's death, which I dramatize in my head every day, which only has so many outcomes and causes at this point in her progression, Dad's is a mystery. Probably, he sits at a conference table on one of the highest of the innumerable stories, his brief case held firmly between his feet like he does to give himself something to fidget with while fixing his hawk-like attention on whatever business is

at hand. Probably he is in the bathroom washing his hands and stops to adjust his tie. Probably he is walking outside, performing his familiar meditation on a city, craning his neck to see the apex of the goliaths surrounding him, weighing down the island. Probably another man is propped on his shoulder and they struggle to breathe. Probably.

I have dreamed it 2,996 different ways.

The lone peace in watching my own mother die is just that. I have the gift of watching and being and knowing. There is a story to tell, there is an answer to the question. My mom dies enveloped in her own memories, wrapped in them like a blanket and reveling in their proximity, and she passes as she wants to pass, on her terms rather than mine or Michael's. She chooses her own music, and she dances along to it into the next.

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While the seconds of our final morning with Dad play unendingly across Mom's shoulder and while she looks out over the field, changing in increments with the season, I scan the images present on the rest of her body. This is the first time this last meal with Dad appears visibly on her body, but many of the tattoos are familiar: memories that are now more forgotten than remembered, memories that have been ejected and rejected, memories that—like the image of Farrah the ferret—have taken up permanent residence on their favorite corner of her skin. When I take in her arms, the gardens catch me off guard, as they always do. No other depiction on Mom's body is ever so hard to adjust to, none is so distinct from the tapestry around it. And for as full as Mom's skin looks daily at this point, the gardens deign to inhabit as much space as they possibly can, much more than most do.

I still haven't had a chance to learn more about them. From their first appearance, the gardens are omnipresent, and as they gradually become as much an unchallenged part of the environment of her body as the other tattoos naturally are, it starts to look like everything else has grown out of that fertile stretch of skin. The band on each arm asserts itself as the sole progenitor of the whole tapestry. Perhaps even her body is an illusion that grows out of the tracts of fertile, fecund soil.

Over a year lies between today and the day Mom forgets me for the first time. Until that moment, her mood rarely dips below unflappably positive, but since then her days have become waves. She's wont to spend more time in silence than I've ever known her to, and—always a morning person—she's less enthusiastic to rise out of her bed and begin her rounds around the facilities, checking on the nursing schedule and hoping it's Sheryl or Mahfouz, greeting the other patients and family, patrolling the perimeter of the campus to stretch her legs.

Without her realizing it, the end of summer has brought her down lower than I've seen her in years. She, of course, refuses to admit it or even reflect on it if I ask her. Even when Michael leaves for college, she bounces back quickly. Whatever's changed, its roots reach deep into her. She seems smothered. Luckily, I have something I've been waiting to tell her. Something she's waited a long time to hear. I drape my hand across hers, held longingly across the top of the fence marking the extremities of St. Vitus. It's hard to see when she's resting and still, but her hands are much less stable than they are even just months previously, and I feel the tension in her as she tries consciously to keep them still.

“Mom.” For months, Somya and I have been planning and visiting, talking and retalking, applying and waiting and waiting and waiting. “We’ve been approved to adopt.” Mom turns toward me, the look on her face nearly absent, but her eyes are shining.

“One more time?” she says, blinking. Before I’ve started speaking again, a grin spreads across her face, and I can for the first time truly see her as a grandmother, something I know she has wanted since having her own children. I’m wrapped in her arms, her face pressed into my sternum by the time I can confirm. “We’re going to have a baby girl,” I say. Of all the ways I make Mom cry in my life, this one has to be the best.

“You don’t know how long I’ve waited for this,” she says. I have some idea, but now’s not the time to sass. “Have you told Michael yet?”

“We’d mentioned our plans to him, kvetched about it probably enough to drive him up a wall. But we only just gotten confirmation. You’re the first person I’ve told.”

“I can’t believe you,” she says and lands a light punch on my bicep. “I can’t believe you kept this secret from me. The process isn’t short. How did you keep quiet that long? I know Michael is capable of hiding his dealings from me, but I expected more from you, Ecaterina.”

I love to see her playful like this again.

“It was hard, but I know how much you like surprises. Plus, there’s a lot of machinery, a lot of bureaucracy, and Somya thought it was best to wait until we were sure. We didn’t want—” I stop myself from saying it. Once Somya and I finally decide to take this step and welcome a new life into our family, it’s impossible to tell how much time it will take to complete the process and make it official. But really, it’s impossible to tell how much time Mom has left. If Mom is to take an unexpected turn for the worse, I don’t want to pass

the rest of my life knowing that I've failed to deliver on the promise of introducing her to her first grandchild. "It was all so uncertain," I say.

"A baby girl. You're sure?"

"It's our first time doing this. We thought it would be best to start from the beginning."

"That's the way I did it," she jokes. She's silent a moment, reveling. "I really don't know how to express what this means to me."

"Her name is Clara." Mom closes her eyes and takes in a deep breath of the autumn air.

"Clara," she says, eyes still closed. "That was my grandmother's name. My dad would be so happy to know this. I wish he were here. I wish he could meet baby Clara, too."

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The death of my grandfather—years after the scene now reiterating itself endlessly on my mother's shoulder—comes while I'm in college. The first year I live in an apartment of my own. He passes in the deep of winter while I'm away from home, visiting my housemate Elena's family in Virginia over the break.

On our drive back home, crossing half the country in her mother's new car, Elena takes the night shift. We've decided to make the trip in one sprint and Elena knows I struggle to keep awake much after midnight. Once I doze off, I fall quickly into a bizarre mélange of dreams ranging from the typical, absurd oneiric fair to frightening near-memories, twisted interpretations of the mundane, all of which cycle before me as if I'm watching them pass by

on a carousel. A dream of calm half seen gives way to a frantic brawl which, almost before it even starts, melts into a single still image of a field of grass and wildflowers, and so on, until the repertoire is exhausted and the order repeats. I watch each of these dreams a handful of times, searing them into my memory, before somewhere in my mind I realize that no representation of myself appears in any of them. And once I come to that conclusion, they all slip away into darkness. I sleep in peace until I find myself hunched before a diminutive figure lying in a hospital bed.

“Ecaterina.” My grandfather’s voice fills the room until it becomes the stale air around us, pervading every corner of the space containing us. I take in the contour and color of his skin, the ridges rippling in his hospital robe, the creaking in his ribs with each breath, the scent, somehow, of cinnamon rather than sterilization in the atmosphere he inhabits—reminding me of his morning coffee. The room, neither familiar nor novel and rendered in minute detail, hums with all the sounds of a busy hospital, from droning vitals machines to the clack of heels down a linoleum hallway beyond sight—past the door half-opened at the corner of the room, nothing else is discernable. I even hear the wind shifting against the windows and the scrape of a pen against a clipboard just over my shoulder. It’s real.

I expect what I should feel is panic, but I can’t find the stirrings of it. If the reaction is hiding, then it’s nowhere within my body, like it’s been forbidden from me. Over the faucet facing the bed is a mirror, but when I approach it to examine myself, to search for the familiar sense of uncertainty and worry that sets me off, I find I leave no reflection in the glass. Instead, my grandfather lies in the image of the bed, looking in my direction, patient lines strung across his gaze.

“I think I understand,” I tell him, sitting down beside him once more. “It didn’t seem right to not say goodbye,” he responds, placing his hand over both of mine on the railing. I can only nod and look into his eyes.

For the rest of the visit, he speaks to me of Mom, but he never refers to her as anything other than “Bianca.” In his own understated and frustrating way, I one day realize, he is warning me. He speaks of her with concern, like someone compelled to protect, like someone I’ve never known him to be. All he ever shows me of himself, until this point, is his hardness, his calloused and cynical dismissiveness, his dispassion. Never this candor. In these final, alien moments, he puts forth a series of promises I must make. To take care of Mom, to always be near her and there for her, to take up her charges when she no longer can. To guide her. To tell her, one day, not yet, of this meeting. He makes me promise, too, that I will keep dancing. Every day. That I will never let the urge to use my motion to create art and light pass from my life. I want to hesitate before I answer him, I want to wonder if I should ever swear a duty to the dead, but I’m in his world and he compels my tongue to seal his promises before I can question myself.

“Now,” he says, “there’s one promise you made to me before you left that I’d like you to make good on.” He smiles a thin but sprawling grin and clasps his hands over his lap. When I leave on this cross-country trip, my first time so far from home without family, he’s just been admitted to the hospital, and I promise to tell him all about it when I’m back. “I just couldn’t wait,” he says to me in the dream. And so I recount to him every last moment of my trip with Elena to Virginia, my first time near the East Coast. The closest I’ve ever yet come to the soil where my father dies.

All I feel as I talk is a lightness of spirit, a sense of comfort that lasts beyond the moment I tell him goodbye and he fades away. But when I wake in the car opposite Elena, tired but focused behind the wheel, eighty miles from home, the first thing I recognize is the dampness of my cheeks. Then I feel the mound of stones settled atop my breast and my heart. The despair that wracks my body overwhelms me to the point that I can't heave my diaphragm to breathe. I can only barely lift my hand to roll down the window and lean my head out. Judging by the engulfing dark, it must be 6am or earlier still, and only intermittent streetlamps or house lights illuminate the backroads outside of town. The air bites against my cheeks and my forehead and quickly freezes the thin layer of teary moisture at the corners of my eyes.

"You okay, dude?" Elena asks me, hunched over the wheel. In the aftermath, there are no words that can represent what I've experienced, and I only sigh dismissively in answer. I roll the window back up and lean my head against it, trying to take in the cold of the window to cool my thoughts. Instead of dozing off, as I hope to, I see the scene over, I try to grasp at the echoes of my grandfather's visit, searching for an interpretation beyond the obvious.

Later in the morning I phone Michael from the comfort of my room. He doesn't pick up, so I leave a voicemail. "Michael," I say. "Michael, I was wondering... Last night, did you... No, never mind. Forget it." Not knowing what's happened, questioning my own perception frustrates me, and I don't yet have the space to verbalize what I've seen or what I feel. Mom doesn't confirm her father's passing to me until that afternoon, and, remembering the promises he has compelled me to make, I keep the story of our conversation to myself.

One day, I do tell her, when it finally feels right, but not yet, and by the time I do, I worry that the meaning of it all is too far gone.

We bury him only a mile from the farm in a cemetery maintained in equal parts by township volunteers and dedicated mourners who only want their loved ones' final resting spots to remain stark and vivid, distinguished amid the undistinguished earth around it. His plot, modest as per his disposition and his request, takes up so little space in the already small acre contained within the three sides of cast iron fence, but I find myself almost laughing at the thought that the small patch of earth is now singularly his, as impossible as it is to own something in life. Though the two never exactly get along in life, Grandpa's headstone rises up next to Dad's, equal in height, like they are mirrors.

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The morning before the Twin Towers fall, Dad pays me no such visit, and I wonder if what I feel upon reflecting on my grandfather's unexpected appearance is indeed relief that I never have to make that final meeting with my father. By this time, the years have eroded my anger and envy into innocuous irregularities in the topography of my emotions, leaving nothing to feel but relief that there is nothing else to be said.

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Clara comes home with us in December, and we sign Mom out of St. Vitus so she can be with us for the day, during most of which we're all oscillating between hysterical laughter,

intense doting, and sudden—though not necessarily unexpected—bursts of tears. The moments not fully eclipsed by the heights of surprise and shock at how fully altered and fundamentally new our lives are, Somya and I are primarily terrified of this greatest possible responsibility. We've prepared ourselves as well as possible, but everything is still scary. The first diaper change is a terrifying experience—one that frustrates Mom so much that, despite her years as a teacher with unending patience at the studio, she pushes both of us aside and does it herself. Michael is here with us, too, but he does his best to avoid the dirty parts of the day and only reluctantly agrees to hold Clara and burp her.

It is futile to describe her pleasant weight in my arms or draped over my chest. It is futile to describe the surprising pressure of her minuscule fist around my fingers. It is futile to describe how any of this feels, but I have to try anyway. I eventually learn that parenting is little if not futile—an act of love that can never be reciprocated, only passed on.

Holding her is like breathing. Hearing her own breathing is impossible to believe, like seeing an ancient tree alongside the road. Brushing her impressively thick, black hair out of her face is like waking up in the sunlit living room after a much needed nap. Feeding her is like feeding an entire town. Hearing her cry is like crying for the first time.

Watching her grow up is suddenly my greatest fear and my only dream.

But today and for the first few weeks of leave that Somya and I have wrangled, we don't have to watch Clara grow up. We only have to be here with her and show her how we love her, how we love each other.

As excited as Mom is, as long as she has waited for this day, she's exhausted by the early afternoon. She sneaks off after demonstrating the ever-intimidating diaper change once more, reassuring us that the practice quickly becomes second nature, and lays down for a nap

upstairs. Michael has also passed out on the couch, just like the first days he's back and staying with us. Somya sits in her large chair, feet up on an ottoman, and watches the baby until they both drift off, too. I'm not sure which one knocks out first.

Silence at its most reassuring fills the house. Only occasionally the furnace hums, vibrating the walls of the house and somehow deepening the depth of the quiet. I stand up from my seat and pass through each room, listening to its particular interpretation of lack of sound and absence of movement, taking in the still images of all those I love most in the world in their most peaceful rest. I walk up the stairs lightly, stepping at the edge of the planks and hoping they don't creak and stir anyone.

I find Mom sprawled out in my bed, smiling in her sleep and her tattoos crawling across most of her body. The process has been gradual, but her skin is almost saturated now. She can't possibly fit any more memories than she's already displaying. I wonder how much she really knows at any given time, how much she understands. And how much, perhaps, she's determined to hide her disorientation, her lack of context of her own life, and get by just on improvising and guessing. She's always been a chameleon in her social world, adapting herself instantaneously to whichever role she needs to fill in whatever group she's in. But I've never considered that she's been pulling that on us too. Or maybe I'm being extreme. Maybe Mom isn't just the sum of her memories, and maybe she doesn't need that which appears on her skin to feel totally comfortable around us.

I slip into the bed beside her and curl up for my own spell of peaceful sleep. For a while, I stare out the window, knowing it's the middle of the afternoon and trying to guess how low the sun must already be hanging in the winter sky. Then I roll over and curl into Mom and let myself drift off.

*

I wake up to the feeling of swift movement beside me, the sound of blankets being thrown off and the accompanying rush of air. Mom breathes in sharply through her mouth. I roll over and struggle to shake off the lethargy of sleep enough to understand what's happening. When I see how Mom stares at me through wide eyes, I too jolt upright. She's tense and breathing quickly, the blanket gripped so violently in her fists that her knuckles turn solid white.

"Where are we?" she demands. She scans the room frantically, saccading over every exposed surface in my bedroom. The light from outside has dimmed drastically and casts shadows at awkward angles across everything she sees. It almost seems disorienting even to me. "Ecatarina, where the hell did you take me?"

I should react immediately and attempt to calm her down. I should ask her a question about what our dinner plans are. Anything to distract her from her distress. But I don't. I just sit next to her in my own bed and watch her. I feel detached from my own senses and detached from my own experience, almost like I'm watching myself watch her, an observer of an observer. Instead of feeling the deep ache of knowing my mother has climbed one rung higher on the ladder to her complete absence, I feel more like a doctor must, inspecting a patient and noting telltale symptoms alongside new variations of what's expected.

Disorientation occurs more frequently as a patient progresses. About twenty to forty percent of patients experience enhanced disorientation accompanied by strong mood swings within an hour or so of sunset. Spells may last only a few moments or may last for hours, disrupting

normal sleep and exacerbating disorientation on subsequent nights. Because of its proximity to the waning daylight, the condition is called sundowning. Because it interferes with sleep, a crucial tool in maintaining effective memory recall, it often leads to an increased rate of mental decay. The syndrome demarcates the final throes of the middle stages of a tattooed person's affliction. Symptoms reliably subside as memory loss becomes more severe.

Mom's shouting and discomfort increase progressively, but I still can't bring myself to exert enough influence over my body to react and to calm her. She gets louder and louder until Michael bursts into the room in a flurry of footfalls, throwing the door open and upsetting Mom further.

"What are you doing!" Michael seethes to me before he realizes I can't be reached. "Mom," he says, "shhhh, we're at Ecaterina and Somya's still. In their bedroom." He approaches her and asks her to quiet down, but she lashes out and hits him in the chest.

As Mom shouts at Michael, another cry rings out from downstairs, the high wail of a wakened baby. Clara screams and screams, but even this doesn't rouse me. I can't feel enough of myself to even feel the instinct of a parent's responsibility. Mom yells again, this time at Clara.

"Would somebody shut that thing up? What is with you?"

"Mom," Michael says. "Mom, that's Clara. Baby Clara. We don't talk about her that way. Even when we're frustrated. Okay?" I look on, rigid and cold, while he wraps her in his arms and coos to her. "We're all here, we're all at home. You were just sleeping. Were you having a bad dream? It's getting dark, but it's still day. Maybe we'll eat dinner soon." He caresses her head and pulls her in toward his breast. "What do you think you want for dinner? I was just about to go out for groceries."

I lay back down in the bed and sigh while Michael holds our lost mother.

“Why don’t I remember?” she sobs into his shirt. “I wish I did. Are you sure we’re home?”

“I was thinking about making pasta. Any preferences?” Michael has been studying too, it seems. He knows exactly what’s happening to her, but where I can barely lift a finger to help her snap out of her state of dread, Michael is ready with a head full of reassurances and a hundred questions to distract her from what she doesn’t know and can’t see. Whenever she starts falling toward panic again, he has another query to redirect her focus. Slowly, slowly, he calms her despite all her resistance and all her uncharacteristic sneering. She agrees to dinner, she agrees to eating at home, she agrees to pasta, she agrees to come downstairs with him and check on Clara and Somya. They leave the room, Mom under Michael’s arm and Michael’s temperament as even and untroubled as ever.

I stay behind in the bed, watching the light shift across the ceiling as the sun finishes setting until Somya shows up with Clara cooing on her shoulder. “Your brother took Bianca to the store with him. He promised she was stable enough to go.” I can barely blink in response. I’ve known this additional side effect of her tattoos might be coming for years, but knowing something and living it are as separate as night and day. Sometimes watching Mom progress through her disease makes me feel like I’ve living my entire life in daylight where night is a legend I never believe will really arrive. But now the world is dimming and I don’t know what comes next.

Despite the growing density of her tattoos, Mom seems so healthy through these past few years. She has held out as long as she can, she has kept the worst parts of her

deterioration at bay through physical and mental exercise and, I have to assume, sheer force of will. But in the months after today, it all catches up with her.

“Can we lay down with you?” Somya asks.

“Please.” I curl into Somya, careful to mind where the baby is, and she kisses me on the forehead, rubbing down my hair like Michael does to Mom. Clara watches us both with curious, probing eyes. I run my finger down her forehead, over her nose, lips, chin, neck, across her tummy to her navel. She squirms and tries to giggle but can only manage a gurgle and some spit. “Did you feed her?” I ask.

“Sure did. She woke me up with a few strong tugs on my shirt to let me know she wasn’t gonna wait any longer. Does it scare you how strong she is?”

“Everything about her scares me,” I say. “Even how cute she is. And especially how cute she is when you’re both asleep in the chair.”

“Do you think we should feed her again? She’s like a machine. Maybe she’ll be a wrestler.”

I can’t help but laugh, exactly the reaction Somya wants, I expect. “Maybe let’s wait. We don’t want her to get gassy or start fussing.”

“Look who’s a natural,” Somya says. “How about we get a little more sleep, then? I hear these things keep poor unsuspecting new parents like us awake at the worst hours.”

“Sleep while we can?” I ask, like we’re making a deal.

“Sleep while we can,” Somya affirms, signing the pact with a nod and a final peck on both me and the baby before we all drift off at the same time, losing ourselves in pleasant dreams and warm company.

CHAPTER 4. FALLEN

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For a few months, every time the sun sets and the blanket of dark slips slowly over the horizon, Mom loses her sense of orientation, loses any comfort she has. With the waning daylight, her spirits dwindle too. The distress makes her restless, so she sleeps less and, upon waking, remembers less. She tries to hide it, but remembering so much less than she is accustomed to takes its own toll on her, and the cycle continues. Her skin darkens with the density of tattoos vying for display upon her exhausted body.

For the weeks that Somya and I both have off to take care of Clara, I spend my mornings at St. Vitus, and often Clara comes with me. Somya has earned a few mornings of sleeping in, and Mom loves seeing the baby. That much is always clear, even from behind her sunken eyes and the startling, defeated look spread across her jaw. At the beginning, I spend all day with her, hoping my presence can help stabilize her emotions once the nighttime confusion sets in, but I think it hurts her more for me to see her so troubled than it hurts her to be alone with the nurses. I try to calm her down the way I've seen Michael do, to distract her with questions about the studio or about how best to feed Clara and when and where—comfortable questions, ones I know she can answer almost out of instinct—but she sees through me every time. She even begins to resist Michael's assuaging tone after a few days. Sheryl is the first one to suggest that Michael and I leave Mom on her own in the evenings. It breaks my heart to know that I can't offer my own mother any comfort on rough nights. It's a respite she has offered me on so many occasions throughout my life—nights of anxiety from school or from trying to be social as a child, nights of mourning after Dad is

gone, nights of inexplicable despondence—but this is an act of love I can't repay her. Not right now, not in the way I hope.

During this period of the disease, her symptoms progress rapidly. The feedback loop of sleeplessness and stress is so thorough, it almost seems designed, like the tattoos themselves have begun acting together against Mom, impatient to escape from her head. For the first time in my life, I come to know Mom as a quiet person, very nearly timid. Day by day, her chatter becomes less enthusiastic and less energetic. I'm accustomed to the way she speaks every idea that comes to her head and to the verve in her words that hooks even strangers into the most mundane of stories, so finding the woman I know beneath the tattoos and the silence is all the more tiresome. I miss the intensity of detail in her recollection, which so often feels unfamiliar and unparalleled in my own life. I don't remember the same way she does, and I always admire this about her.

Whatever tributaries feed the flow of her constant thoughts have begun to dry out. After her desire to divulge every daily detail recedes, eventually her stories slow down, too. During these months of increased wariness and her ephemeral fear of night, I only manage to collect just a few pages of her tales. Maybe she's just becoming more introspective and inward, but I worry that she's silent because she's afraid of what she might find she no longer knows.

In a way distinct from before, I hoard the stories she tells now. I've never heard her tell them this way before. A tired anxiety runs through what she tells me, not a paranoid tone but not a sure, trusting tone either. She sees and remembers herself differently under the weight of her exhaustion.

“Even when I do finally sleep,” she tells me, “there’s no rest to be had.” She fidgets in her chair while admitting this, wrapping her legs under her then swinging them out again then folding them back into the chair but in the opposite direction. “It feels like as soon as I nod off, the dreams start. It’s the strangest thing. I haven’t had these dreams since I was a child, but they’re coming back now.”

“Which dreams?” I ask. Even though this isn’t the first time, I’m still momentarily surprised that she has waited for any prompt to continue. I can’t get used to it. When she loses momentum like this, if I wait too long to bring her back to her own train of thought, she gets shy, too nervous to finish her thought. When I’m growing up, Mom tells stories about how she is a meek child who never speaks up, who’s so nervous around strangers that she can barely speak. I never believe her, always positive that she’s lying to boost my confidence. Only in these months do I ever see that era of her personality as possible. I see the bashful child come back.

“Always about falling,” she says, distant, lost in the vision. “In the dream, I wake up early in the morning, always feeling rested and energetic. When I see the patterns on my pajamas, I remember that I’m a child. As exciting as that is for an old woman like me—no, don’t interrupt to tell me I’m not that old—as exciting as it is, what’s most thrilling is the prospect of sneaking downstairs to see what’s on TV. Maybe sneak a glass of chocolate milk if we have any.”

“What do you like to watch?”

“I couldn’t say. It’s never specific in the dream. But I know I want to be alone in the house, so I sneak out of my room and close the door gently behind me. The painted, peeling metal door knob is cold to the touch, a feeling I’m not used to anymore, but it feels so

natural.” She runs a finger over the palm of her left hand, maybe the hand she opens the door with. She scrutinizes it, and when she looks back up at me, she’s not sure what follows next.

“After you close the door,” I say. “What then?”

“Oh. The door. Well, I sneak down the stairs, of course. The first few are easy. There is a landing four stairs down, where the staircase turns to the left and where I prepare for the next few stairs before there’s one more landing. Halfway down that part of the stairs, everything is going fine, but I stop and put my hands on the railings to peak over, make sure no one is already downstairs to spot me sneaking. The way I fall is impossible. My head barely reaches above the height of the banister, but I topple over anyway. And I fall. Sometimes there’s nothing below, no bottom floor to the house and I fall and fall and fall until I wake up. Sometimes on the other side of the staircase is a blazing heat register, and I land on it face first and burn. Sometimes . . .” But she’s done with the variations and with the feeling of falling replaying in her stomach, and she shakes them all off. “I just wake up so tired, and I don’t always know where I am or what I’ve done recently, and I’m not used to that. I don’t think I can ever be used to that.”

I kneel by her chair and let her wrap her arms around me. I want to ask her so many questions about the dream, but she doesn’t have the energy and she isn’t in the headspace to investigate if this dream is the root of all her fears of heights and of falling. Or is the dream a symptom of her fears, even as a child? She doesn’t need to think about it all now, and probably she doesn’t remember enough to know. Resting her head against my chest, Mom lets herself weep, just a bit. Finally. This isn’t the very first time since she arrives here that she cries just for herself, but she doesn’t do it enough in her tenure here. Or not as much as I might, in her position. I run my hands over her hair and down the curve of her head to her

neck and shoulders. Even against the rest of her image, Mom's hair seems dim. We haven't taken her to dye it in a couple of months, and the gray that she likes so much to conceal creeps out at the roots like the first ice across the surface of a pond. The last color, a beautiful dark purple, is faded now, but I like the mutedness of it even better than its original vibrancy. Still, I know that she prefers to keep it sharp and bright, and this deep lilac shade and the gray extending from her scalp, while low on her list of priorities, might just be an extra stressor that she doesn't need.

"Mom," I say, not taking my hand off her head and trying to sound as excited as I can manage. "When was the last time you went pink? A while ago, right?"

She snuffles quickly before responding. "At least a year and a half. Maybe two? I don't know. Before this, it was the blue tips, wasn't it? And before that . . ." She sits up and leans back into her chair again, so much energy restored to her features. Her eyes look bright, though a little red, and her smile nearly sparkles.

"What do you say we take you out this weekend for a new color?"

"It's been too long since I've gotten out of the building," she says. "And too long since this purple started to fade." She kneads her biceps and triceps with a thumb, poking around like she's searching for something. "I want to go to the studio, too. I haven't exercised since who knows when. Not since you brought home Clara, at least. I want to get my strength back up."

Mom and I haven't danced together in so long. Really *danced*. Maybe it's her second year, the last time we take to the studio and spend our entire afternoon wearing ourselves out in turns and dancing to the point that our hands and forearms and cores feel impossibly weak. The days for that punishing a performance are past us, which makes me heartsore, but that

doesn't mean I can't enjoy something less strenuous and slower with Mom. The stretching, the grip work, the atmosphere, they're all just as important. Seeing Mom on the pole again, especially now, is enlivening all the more.

"Maybe we can even get Michael to go with us," Mom says, hopeful as ever.

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On Saturday, we decide to start early and hit the studio first. Mom always likes to take the rest of the day off after getting her hair done. For once, Mom seems rested, and somehow, she has indeed convinced Michael to tag along too. We don't have any classes scheduled until noon, so we have the space to ourselves for a couple hours. Not that Mom would mind getting to teach another class, show another brand new, still shy student how exactly to hold the pole, how to swing, how to admire herself and her motion in the mirror. She has always loved that part most, loved guiding a new friend through the first steps. She loves the work she does at the studio because she sees the way people walk out changed from when they come in. Maybe it's just a slightly wider smile for the day, maybe it's a new way of understanding themselves, maybe it's an unfamiliar or forgotten consequence.

The steep, narrow stairs up to the studio space are hard on Mom, so we take them slowly, one of her hands always on the railing, one firmly in my grasp as I lead her up. I'm used to the image of Mom's entrance into the studio being a strut, something she does with intent and a dash of ceremony every time. She owns the place and looks the part. Today, though, she looks so much smaller passing through the threshold. She hunches her shoulders and glances around uncertainly. It has been a long time, too long. She takes a step back.

“You know,” she says, “I don’t even know for sure I can do it anymore.” There’s no way I can let her give up today. Even the thought overwhelms me. I know what it means at this stage.

“And since when have you ever said no to something just because it was challenging?” Michael says. He’s beat me to it. It’s probably better that the favorite says it anyway. Mom grunts in agreement, brightens just barely, and walks to the bathroom to change. When she comes out, she’s in a tight pair of neon green shorts and a pink sports bra. I haven’t seen her show this much skin in so long that for a moment I’m speechless. Michael too.

“How do I look?” she says, and she turns to admire her reflection. The question has infinite answers. Amazing. Shocking. Different. So different. Her tattoos warp the dimensions of her body with their varying patterns and densities. Her legs look impossibly elongated, her arms thick in parts and nearly diminutive in others. The gardens still shine at the cusp of her forearms, posed like the gateway all the tattoos must flow through to move. But beneath that, under the skin, I can see all the places she’s lost muscle. Not just the loss of definition and carefully practiced strength, what’s gone is deeper than that. Like she’s been eaten away in parts.

Her shoulders and chest heave as she takes in a deep breath in the mirror. I know she doesn’t like staring at her tattoos, but she can’t help it. Who can? The memories can only disorient and upset her. I wonder if she longs to know what each image means or if any of them feel nearly-remembered, even as they rest healthily on her skin. She doesn’t look away from the mirror for so long that I almost worry, but her face is hardened in concentration.

She's examining every inch of her covered body, learning what it looks like now, in this context that is no longer as familiar as she wants it to be, in these clothes and in this space.

The tattoos scare her, but being intimidated and fearful of her own body isn't new terrain. Today, I can see, she wants to learn herself, know herself, love herself, in a way that the tattoos have kept her from remembering—not because these ways of understanding herself can be forgotten like a memory, but because they must be renewed, revised, and reimagined constantly in her ever-shifting body.

“Hot,” she says finally. A smirk grows across her lips. “I look hot. These tattoos rock.” Once she's taken herself in a moment longer and is satisfied, she bends down to the boombox in the corner and cranks up her favorite song to dance to. For these moments, she's back. Before Clara, before Michael moves to town, before St. Vitus, before Farrah crawls down her arm, she's that Mom now, again, and she loves it even more than I do.

No, her moves aren't as complex and as practiced as before. In fact, she doesn't ever dare to invert or to climb to the top of the pole. She doesn't stretch herself to her limits, and she doesn't move too fast, but she dances almost until she can't dance anymore, until her forearms and fingers feel too weak to even turn a key or hold a cup. That is the feeling I love the most after dancing. The first time I experience it, it's a soreness so unfamiliar and surprising that I almost swear to never pole dance again, but I come to know it as one of the unique outcomes of the hard work I put in at the studio. No other exercise does that exactly to my body. It's like a trophy every time. Mom and I discuss the feeling so many times throughout our years of weekend dances, but what must it mean to her now that weakness wracking her body isn't a sign of hard work but a consequence of living?

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Michael, as usual, watches us dance from just about as far away as possible, back to the far wall, careful not to face himself too directly in the mirrors. His posture and his disposition, though, are distinct from his usual. Somehow, he looks so much less discomfited, less skeptical and less opposed. Mom senses this too—reads the laxing of his reluctance—and she takes her opportunity to coax him. She gets winded quickly today, so she dances for a few minutes and rests for a few minutes in cycles for the whole morning. Nothing more than a few jumps and a few spins at a time, but I know that it will take days for her to recover. And every chance she gets to rest, she sits down by Michael and chats.

“Who knows the next time we’ll both be in here?” she says. “After today, I expect to be sore for about a year.” He laughs with her but makes no move to stand from his nest. “It’d just be a shame, wouldn’t it, to waste this opportunity to show me what you’re working with?” She tries to grab his hand and pull him to his feet, but he hedges and waves her away saying maybe, maybe later, maybe after he watches some more and gets the idea down, studies the motions.

Despite how many times he turns her down, she still sits down beside him at every break she takes and tries to talk him into it. I’ve never seen anyone fail so many times and keep trying, I think, but then I realize that he’s facing us a little more directly now, and then he’s standing and watching, then watching intently, and then Mom has him right beside her as she explains the simple spins she performs. Just twenty or thirty minutes before we have to leave to make Mom’s hair appointment, she guides his hand as steadily as she can toward the gleaming chrome and she shows him how to wrap his hand around it. “Just like that,” she

says. “And when you turn, you hold all your weight here.” She runs her hands across his deltoid and down to his lats. “Just take care not to turn at any funny angles or you might . . .” She struggles to find the words to describe what it’s like to pull that muscle, but she eventually settles on, “Well, you know.”

For a whole minute, or maybe just more, Michael keeps his hand glued to the pole and submits to Mom walking him around it like a show horse, demonstrating how his weight feels differently with an extended arm or a tensed one. Mom’s anticipation is palpable, but she tries to hide it. She doesn’t want her enthusiasm to scare him off. How many times has she daydreamed about this moment? How many times has she hoped to get him just to this point? I still see the tension in his muscles, I see his hesitation, but that doesn’t change the fact of what he’s doing, what I expect until now he might never do.

“Want to try to climb it? It’s just like climbing rope in gym class except that you’ll be better at it now that you’ve developed more of that muscle. Wait, you never did climb the rope in class all the way, did you?”

“I did not,” he says, falling for a moment back into a day of middle school physical education with Ms. Klein, who never believes him when Michael swears that, try as he might, he honestly can’t touch his toes.

“Think of it like something else, then!” Mom says, not missing a beat. “Something I promise you’ll love. I’ve never let you down before, have I?”

“I’m sure I could think of a time or two, but let’s not go there.” Mom casts a dirty look his direction, but he shrugs it off and asks her to watch and tell him if he does it right. He gathers his momentum with short strides then jumps and glides just for the second that it takes him to complete his 360 degree revolution. When his landing begins, one of his feet

doesn't catch and he ends up skidding down the pole with the sharp sounds of skin reluctantly pulling down against metal. On the floor, collapsed and heaving with laughter, he's nearly in the splits, another first for the day, and probably a painful one. Mom laughs and laughs at his pose, but she's has never been so ecstatic to see someone trip. She topples down onto him and pulls him into an unending hug.

“Pretty good, brother. Pretty good. But, oh, how far you have fallen. You'll be performing professionally in no time.” When he stands up and brushes himself off, I have to take my opportunity to hug him too. But no matter how proud of him I am, my competitive side has flared up, and I can't let him leave the studio without showing him that, despite Mom's excitement, there's so much more to poling—so much more to learn that I can teach him. “I can show you how it's really done,” I say. “But I'll make it a little fancier.”

I mimic his first movements around the pole, stepping short and choppily, but the motion is uncomfortable to maintain, even as a joke, so I let myself shift into long steps around the pole, pulled along by my own momentum. Each motion is as much a step as it is a leap, and soon I'm speeding around the pole in an endless sine wave. When I jump to do a full spin, I center myself around the pole and bring my legs out in front of me, arms straight, stiff, and perfectly perpendicular to the pole. My reflection distorts in the metallic curvature, and she smiles back at me. I spin once, twice, around like that before I pull my chest tight against the chrome and pick up speed. I decide that, spinning this quickly, everything looks better upside down anyway, so I twist at the core and twirl my legs above me, inverting in an unbroken motion amid the constant turning. Michael loses a sarcastic but encouraging low whistle, and I hear Mom yell my name, urging me to go, go, go.

As much as I want to go and go and go and never stop turning, my hands—slick with sweat and unchalked—have other plans. Like they have a collective mind of their own, my hands, already weak from all their work leading up to this, decide that traction and stability are overrated. By the time I sense myself slip once just barely, it's too late to right myself and land safely. I lose whatever remnants of a grip on the pole I've been holding onto, and I crash to the floor, left shoulder first. With what little momentum still afforded me, I slide across the slick wood panels of the studio floor. Over the sound of my body collapsing on the floor and crumpling into itself, I'm sure even the owners of the record store downstairs hear the snap that resounds from my shoulder.

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Pain is never the first feeling to greet me after an accident. Usually shock precedes all else, regulating my breathing so I can focus conscious attention on anything but the injury. This time, though, embarrassment clings to me like humidity. It distracts me enough that I can stand, and before I can joke about how typical it is of me to choke in front of family, Michael is on me, running his fingers along my collarbone and shoulders. "Stand still," he says. "And try not to move your arms too much." When I see the worry on Mom's face is when I gather my wits enough to feel the growing discomfort on my left side. I do my best to swallow it down.

"Been a while since," I start, but Michael's probing produces a surge of sharpness like electricity. I gasp and bite back the feeling. "Been a while since I took a spill like that," I force out. The adrenaline-aided numbness fades away, leaving my body screaming, especially under the pressure of Michael's fingers across my skin.

“Mom,” Michael says. “Can you turn off all the lights and lock up while I take E downstairs to the car?” She stares at him, not blankly but certainly frozen. For all of my life, Mom is the action taker, the perpetual first responder. She always has a plan, always has something to do next, even if just to keep us busy. But now, when I instinct and experience tell me she should be at her best, she can barely move. “We’re going to take her to the emergency room. Something definitely broke, so they’ll need to set it and get her a sling. I need you to close up shop, okay?”

“Of course,” she says, no fire behind her voice.

“Broken?” I say. “You sure? Doesn’t feel broken.” But when I lift my arms to demonstrate that everything really is functional, my left arm catches about halfway up, and I can’t will myself to make it rise any further. The feeling is so unexpected that I feel the tendrils of panic creeping in. Michael asks me to keep the arm by my side and holds my firmly on my right shoulder.

“Let’s get going,” he says.

Everything seems so bright outside, the sun nearly directly above us and glinting off what little snow has stuck around for the day. I can’t help but think of Professor Osmund my first semester away from home, explaining saturation and exposure in digital photographs to a room full of freshmen who don’t know what classes to take and end up in hers. The edges of the buildings blend with the hue of the sky between them. Michael lowers me into the front seat, and I barely notice. When Mom shuffles out of the studio, knuckles probably still white from gripping the railing, I watch her through the glass. The dim, transparent reflection of my face imposes itself over her form. Her slightness, her timidity, the deliberation of her motion all seem so exaggerated from inside the car, where I can’t discern the tattoos across

her skin but only the shadows they leave across her. The gray at the roots of her hair gleams in the rays of the sun.

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A break straight through the collarbone, the doctors say officially. Because of where it is on the body, a broken collarbone isn't the type of injury that can be protected within a cast and left to heal without second thought. It must be set for regrowth and tended mindfully for the months necessary for recovery. Too much activity shifts the bone, prolonging the mending process. Because it isn't a particularly painful injury, the doctors warn me that it is easy to forget about, easy to overlook and overwork, and that the pain is all the more startling when it is provoked.

They also ask when the last time I experience an injury of this scale. Not since childhood. They caution that my body can't fix itself as quickly anymore, so I shouldn't be discouraged by a slow recovery.

When we arrive back at St. Vitus, Mahfouz greets us first with excitement, then quickly concern, but eventually he laughs with me. It's all I can do, I realize. I can let what's happened—a combination of my actions and happenstance—weigh on me and sour my time with Mom and Michael, or I can laugh with those around me and let come what may. I admit as much to Michael when he questions my demeanor. "I thought you'd be a bit more broken up about this, panicky," he says. "Laughing a problem away is more my style. Are you copying me? Do I have to tattle on you?"

“There’s just too much,” I tell him. “Too much else to spend my energy on with Mom getting worse by the week and with Clara’s tiny hands twisting my world to her needs and with both Somya and I running out of leave time. One of us is going to have to take more time off. There’s no space to dwell on a broken bone.”

“Luckily it’s your left,” Michael ponders. “Your grading hand is still in action. But if you need help transcribing any of Mom’s stories, just call me in. My handwriting is terrible, but I know how slow writing in a journal with only one hand is. I’ll be your assistant until the arm heals enough to be functional again.” But Mom has been telling and retelling her stories less and less over the past few months.

“I’m not sure how many stories she has left in her, Michael.” For the first few days, Clara’s new presence brings fire back to her eyes and her typical crispness back to her mind. With this, her stories come flooding back, mostly about her own childrearing—about the differences between her pregnancies and about our dispositions and disobediences as children and about all the barely believable people she encounters. This clarity quickly fades again, though, and the bubbling spring of her stories returns to a trickle. Both Michael and I try our best to stay positive around her, to engage her the way we always have, to never treat her as less because of this disease, but some days it seems like she’s barely inside her own body. Some days, it’s hard to see that she is my blood.

“Mahfouz and Sheryl don’t seem to think it’ll be long. You can see it in the way they interact with her. That’s why I think maybe it’s not such a bad thing you’re partially out of commission. We need to be with Mom as much as possible, and you have the perfect excuse to ask for time off.”

“I want to, but I can’t. I’ve already been gone so long—”

“So they already have someone subbing your classes, someone long-term who’s developed a rapport with the children. They’re as prepared as possible to give you another few weeks to recover.”

As much as I long to be back in the classroom, as excited as I am to see my students again and hear about their holidays and what they’ve been learning, Michael convinces me. They’re probably already used to their long-term substitute. The kids won’t miss me unreasonably more in the couple extra weeks I need to recover, and it gives me more time to plan something special for when we’re reunited.

In a couple weeks, when I see that I truly need the time to recover, I contact the principal and explain to him my situation. All I ask for is three extra weeks of leave to get the strength back in my arm so I can be at top form when I return. Somya is confident that the school is going to be sympathetic, and she tells me she’s ready to get back to work anyway. It’s a weight off her shoulders that we know, at least for a couple weeks, who will be home to take care of the baby, even if it is more difficult—though not impossible—to care for Clara myself with a broken collarbone.

The next Tuesday, the superintendent calls, saying the principal has referred me to him and asking that I come in the following day to discuss the situation. He doesn’t sound happy, but bitter tends to be his perpetual state. Those who are in his position while I’m still a student in high school, the Arrowhead superintendent and his ilk, have the same disposition, too, I remember. Never have I wanted less to graduate from my spot in the classroom and enter the ranks of administrators.

Wednesday morning, I mill about the house with Somya and the baby, and we discuss how we’ll use the extra time if they approve more leave. “Clara can come to the hospice with

me,” I say. “And Mommy Somya can finally get out of the house again for more than a couple hours at a time.” She is more than happy to break the monotony of these walls, and I am more than ready to take up the mantle of the homebound parent, at least for now. It gives me the extra flexibility to be on call any time Mom needs me. Michael has already told his coworkers at the shop that he may have to go at any moment, that Mom’s condition is less and less predictable by the day.

I show up to the school about an hour before my afternoon appointment so I can visit my classroom, meet the sub, and show off my sling to the students in the fifth period class. “Did the baby do that to you?” one of them shouts, drawing an uproar from their classmates. Until moments like this, moments of presence, it’s easy to forget how much joy being in a classroom brings. Not every day, but enough days to make this the job I know I want to do for a long, long time. I have so much to offer them, and they frequently show me how much they have to offer each other. Nothing makes me happier than to see someone grow, and that’s exactly what I find here. It’s the same, I realize, as what Mom has always loved about the studio.

After thoroughly disrupting the lesson for the day and fielding question after question about Clara and when I’m to return and about my collarbone, after telling them that I break it dancing—the best reason for having a broken bone, I argue—I say goodbye. They hoot and holler for me to stay, all of them in an excited stir about the break from routine, and I smirk to the sub, telling her good luck with this bunch.

Dale Acker—the superintendent—and I have met a number of times, but we rarely speak outside of meetings. I spend all of my time in my classroom, and, besides, he oversees a number of schools in the area and isn’t often here. “Come in, Ecaterina,” he says, stumbling

just barely over my name and ushering me into his office. I sit down, and he indicates my arm. “How is it?”

“You ever broken your collarbone?” I ask. Without lifting his hands from his lap, he purses his lips and shakes his head. “It’s stiff. Disorienting. You never realize how much you use your arm a certain way until you physically can’t. Putting on a t-shirt is a much different experience.” I try to take the situation lightly, but he doesn’t seem amused by the image of struggling to get dressed. “Anyway, since I’ve been on leave for a few weeks already and the students are accustomed to the substitute you’ve found, I was wondering if it’d be possible for you to grant me another couple weeks to heal.”

“You explained as much in your correspondence,” he says. He blinks and nods his head. “Unfortunately, that’s not going to be possible.” He’s silent for a moment, watching me and considering his next words. I want to tell him I understand, that I see where his decision comes from and I don’t disagree, but my mouth doesn’t move and the air doesn’t rush past my vocal chords and urge them to vibrate in response. “You said this happened while dancing, correct?”

I nod.

“If I’m understanding accurately, your mother owns the establishment.”

“She does. Has for probably close to fifteen years now.” I manage to speak evenly, trying to hide my discomfort. He sounds so detached, so distant, that I begin feeling uneasy, almost nauseous.

“I think it’s clear to see,” he says, “why the rest of the administration and I find this unacceptable.”

I lean forward and rest my hand on his desk, leaving the other to rest in my lap. The firmness of the wooden slats aches against my clenched fingers. “I don’t,” I say. “I don’t see this clearly at all. What are you saying?”

“You know the district’s policy on teachers’ strict adherence to the state’s laws. And you know what kind of objectionable acts are practiced and taught, even, at that dance studio.”

“Objectionable? How can you . . . You clearly have no idea what we do.”

“I do, and frankly I’m surprised we’ve allowed you to keep your job this long. But you were quiet about your involvement there, and we didn’t see any need to take action. Now, though, with your injury, your actions are much more visible and we have decided it is time to terminate your contract on the grounds of legal violation.”

“You must be mistaken. The business operates entirely legally there, and my teaching occasional classes there doesn’t violate my contract. I made sure of that when I started.”

“I’m sure you are aware, but the state dictates that any involvement in paid, professional erotic dancing—”

“Hold on,” I yell, but he deepens his voice and speaks over me.

“Professional erotic dancing constitutes sex work, and we can’t have parents, or students for that matter, finding out that one of our teachers is involved in something as morally bankrupt as active sex work. We are asking you to resign or we must begin the process of termination.”

That is all he says. He doesn’t say he’s sorry or that it’s just the law and not his personal belief. He doesn’t offer any condolences, doesn’t express concern for my injury.

Look of satisfaction on his face tell me he's been waiting for this moment for each of the three years I've been here. He stands and indicates the door.

This is one of the few instances in my life where I don't remember what happens next. What do I say? How do I leave? Do I cry? Do I shout? Do I walk out with my best impression of placid plastered across my face? I don't know, and no one ever confirms the details to me afterward. What I do know is that I arrive home and that I can't pretend nothing is wrong. I do know that together we cry and I wonder how we can ever support ourselves and a child on just Somya's salary. But I don't know what happens before. Perhaps one day, the memory will come back, will wind its way down my spine and reveal itself to those around me.

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I call Michael that day. As much as I may want to will what's happened out of existence by never speaking of it again, by ignoring it until time reverses, this isn't something I can hide from him. Mom, though. I can never tell her that they've fired me, even if I want to. I don't want to be the one to shatter her. I don't want to burden her dwindling months with the thought that I lose my job because of her, because of what and how she teaches me to love.

That blame never manifests—not even as a fleeting, intrusive whisper in my thoughts—but I know that if she finds out, and every time she finds out anew, the guilt will consume her. I don't ever tell her the truth about why I no longer teach for Brandville. It's a lie, I decide, that I can live with telling every day.

When I tell him, Michael asks if he can come over, and within twenty minutes, he's at the door. In the short time it's taken him to hang up and get here, he's already worked out a plan for moving forward. "I have a friend who's a local lawyer," he says. "He doesn't specialize in this type of case, but he can help us set the groundwork and while we find someone more qualified to sue for wrongful termination." He goes on and on explaining his idea, as if the pieces are already set and the clock already ticking.

Michael's reaction galvanizes my disbelief, molding it gently into anger and then into resolve. All the times my brother scoffs at pole dancing, all the times he turns away from it and us, all the times he pretends not to listen, all the times discomfort and disdain roil behind his gaze, they can't be forgotten, I know, but the sting of each memory dulls permanently when I see how determined he is to fight back. He's prepared to pull out all the stops.

But in doing so, he helps me realize that it isn't necessary. I love my students, and what the school does it wrong in all ways, but I don't have the energy to fight.

"As important as that job was to me, as valuable as I believe my presence in that classroom was, I can't go back there, Michael. I can't go back to a school where I know I'm not welcome, where I know I won't have a mote of respect. No matter how much I want it. If I'm going to take action, I'm not doing so looking to the past."

"What are you thinking," he asks.

"The last few months, managing the studio's schedule and the daily operation has become impossible for Mom," I say. "She did it for a couple years reliably after moving to St. Vitus, but I started helping her eventually. I've been doing most of it myself since we brought Clara home, anyway. I can still be valuable outside a public school. I can still teach

outside a classroom. Somebody needs to be tending to the studio. And we always need more instructors. Why not me?"

The prospect of taking over the studio never crosses my mind until the words stumble out of my mouth. But as soon as I say it, bring it into existence, it's as if I've turned to the drawing board only to realize the sketches are long since finished and the plan already in motion. After Mom is gone, I have always imagined us finding someone else to run it. I can help transition, I can still come take classes and offer advice, but I never see myself sitting in that office in the window-side corner of the space, checking the books and organizing teachers, just like Mom has spent so many thousand hours doing since the space opens to the public. But Mom, sly as she is, has been preparing me to succeed her, probably from even before she finds her first tattoo. My heart aches for what I've lost, but the feeling of having gained something unexpected is almost enough to outweigh it.

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"How is she today?" I ask when I arrive at St. Vitus in the evening. Sheryl, bent over the desk at the nurses' station, signs an unseen form and raises a hand in greeting. Her back is straight as a board. I'm almost not able to make it tonight, the hurt of being forced out is still so raw. But when I realize that I'm to take over the studio, it feels like news I have to share with Mom immediately.

"About the same, Ecaterina," Sheryl says without lifting her head. "About the same." Her work here is endless, I don't blame her for being pithy. Today, she says in a lowered voice: "From this point on, I don't expect we'll see better days than these very often." This

isn't the first time Sheryl is so blunt with me, but it is the first time it feels so raw. Maybe all this time, I've been doing exactly what I blame Michael of when he comes back. Maybe I've been ignoring all the other signs of Mom's decline, and now that they're finally impossible to overlook—now that she frequently struggles to break to the surface of her own mind—the reality of her death weighs even more in the air around me. This isn't just physical. I don't just lose my mother's body in this process.

"Thank you," I tell her. The words contain more than just thanks for the isolated moment, they are for years of her input and her time. But today I don't know how to say all that. There's only the space along my tongue and in my breath for "thank you."

Mom sits with her back to the door, gazing out the window at the sheen of dusk across the damp grass. "You've never been very sneaky, Ecaterina," she says without turning from the window.

"No, I never have. Sneaking is more Michael's specialty. Even his college friends used to call him elusive. Did I ever tell you that?" I take her hair with my fully mobile hand and sift through it, comb it out. A few times, out of instinct, I reach out with my left hand before feeling the limiting stiffness of my sling. I try to obey the doctor and use it as little as I feasibly can. "I'm really sorry we never got around to your coloring appointment, Mom. Sorry to steal your thunder like that."

"My coloring?" She searches for it, for the memory that now is only a vague inkling of familiarity. She has to pull that weekend's plan back from somewhere unseen. "Oh. No, don't you worry about it. All the colors I would've chosen will still be there next time." We pass the space of a few deep breaths in silence, taking in the chill of the air and contemplating the fallowness beyond the fences encompassing St. Vitus. I can't find the right

moment, the right mindset, or the right words to tell Mom that I've decided to take up her mantle at the studio rather than return to teaching. Not a whole truth, no, but as whole a truth as I feel comfortable giving her.

Outside, night marches toward the horizon and the endless cloud cover surely rolls along with it. The darkening casts shadows over the fields and inside Mom's room. Somewhere, the sun sits at the cusp of Earth's curvature and begins its descent out of sight.

"How are you feeling, Mom?" I don't sense any tension in her tonight, but I can't know what's lurking, waiting to spring out.

"Surprisingly relaxed," she says gradually. "I've spent most of the day just thinking. I don't do that so often."

"That's something I always tell my students to do!" I blurt. "Or, I used to. I asked them to spend some time every day just with themselves and with their surroundings and their thoughts. It's not always strictly pleasant, but there's always something that we haven't given ourselves the space to think about. A question maybe, or an admission."

"There will be plenty of time for reflecting," she says, her words distant and nearly whispered. I don't know if she's being ominous or if it's just a non-sequitur, one of those leaps her mind makes these days that I never learn to follow closely. I can't learn fast enough how to read her mental tracks.

I let her fading hair drop from my fingertips and reach for one of the other chairs in the room, a few feet away. Its legs scrape dissonantly against the slats of the floor as I reel it closer to Mom and sit down. She turns away from the window finally, and her gaze glows with ire and irritation. "Do you always have to be so loud?" she growls. I shy away from her,

into the back of my seat. This isn't her. This isn't a form of my mother I have ever known.
"Always making so much noise when it's quiet. Who do you think you are?"

"Do you want some water? I can fill your cup with ice if you want." I want to cringe at my own non-sequitur, but if Michael has taught me anything recently, it's that distracting Mom is the best way to help her sometimes. I stand to fetch her a drink before she can respond, hoping a few seconds is enough to let this wave of anger fade. Sheryl and Mahfouz have noted her moods swinging more and more recently. They pass quickly, Mahfouz promises. I hand her the cup and watch the tremors ripple through her hands as she grabs it.

"I've made a big decision, Mom."

She beholds her cup like it's unfamiliar or wondrous before turning her eyes up to me. "What's that?" she asks. "It must be very serious."

"It is. It's very serious. These past fifteen years, you've put in so much time at the studio," I begin. But Mom interrupts.

"The studio. It's been so long since we've visited. Will you take me soon? I haven't exercised since who knows when. These old bones barely stick together anymore. I want my strength back."

"We were at the studio, Mom. Just a couple weeks ago."

"We were?"

"Yes, we were. The day we wanted to color your hair, remember?"

"I . . . I don't know. My hair. We didn't get my hair dyed."

"No, we didn't get your hair dyed because I fell." I wave my slung arm at her and regret it as the pain glides through my arm and down my chest.

“Michael was dancing, wasn’t he? We finally got him to do it!” Seeing the unfettered pride in her eyes, I hope that moment, of all moments, stays with her until the end and beyond. Of course I’m jealous, just a touch, but what I see working its way through her body now is a feeling I never want to strip her of.

“We finally did.” I take both her hands in mine. “You did, actually. Your guidance and your support are what helped him do it, Mom. And he’s far from the first person you’ve helped achieve that freedom and happiness.”

“He didn’t want to be, but he was happy, wasn’t he?”

“He hates being proven wrong. Do you remember all the stories you used to tell him about all the people you’d helped? How many women did you help lift up? How many people, day after day, left the studio feeling better about themselves than when they came in?”

“I lived for that feeling,” she says.

It’s impossible for me to know how much she knows in any given moment, but I can’t stop myself from reminiscing. About Lisa, who has been told her whole life she can never be a beautiful dancer. About Sharese, who just wants an excuse to get out of the house a couple hours a week but ends up competing semi-professionally for nearly a decade. About Carolyn, whose husband tells her she isn’t allowed to pole no matter what and who moves out one weekend while he’s away, leaving divorce papers on the kitchen table. About Rayna, who a couple years on meets her husband at a burlesque show and never stops traveling and performing with him. About Jordan, who only comes to class once a month and is the only person I know who consistently outtalks Mom. About Heidi and Isa and Kara and Tonya, Trini, Trish, Rawan, Sarah, Alex, Kim, Lingran, Jade, Vera, Sasha, and Ellie.

Fifteen years of Mom's students of all genders pour forth from my vocal chords until I'm ready to burst. One by one I recount each story, and for the first time in a long time, I'm not preoccupying myself with questions of whether or not she remembers. I tell for the sake of telling.

"Ecaterina," Mom says, cutting me off mid-sentence. "Has something happened?" Since my childhood, she claims she's prescient, and I always almost believe her.

"No," I lie. "Only that I realized how much it would hurt me to see the studio disappear just because you aren't running it. It's all been fine while you've been here, and the girls have done more than their share maintaining the schedule and keeping the books. But . . . That can't keep on anymore. And I can't help and stay at Brandville at the same time. There aren't the hours in the day for that. As much as I love it and as much as I'll miss it, the middle school isn't as important to me as your studio is."

"No," Mom says. The word peels off her tongue with lethargy. "You've worked so hard to be a teacher."

"I'll still be one, Mom. You've proven that much."

She acts begrudging, telling me how difficult it is, how little glory there is in running the place, how little respect the community has for the work—nothing I haven't seen firsthand. But beneath that, I find her relief. Like I'm oblivious to the way she asks me to keep her stories for her, it seems I've been oblivious to how much she really wants the studio to carry on with me. Maybe it's the tattoos or maybe it's the emotional cost of the conversation—little is as tiring as catharsis—but she's soon too exhausted to continue speaking. When Sheryl comes to offer her dinner, Mom waves her away and mutters that

she's not hungry tonight. I help Mom prepare for bed, and then she asks me to leave. "Not that I don't love you," she says. "But I think I want to be alone tonight."

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After that night, I plan to wait a few months before asking Mom to go through the legal rigors of transferring the studio to my name. We can start in June, I tell myself. After school has let out, so as not to arouse Mom's suspicion. In her eyes, I imagine, there's no reason for me to leave my job in the middle of the academic year.

Mom's condition doesn't afford us the luxury of months. Soon after I'm fired for my involvement at the studio, she takes a turn for the worse, and I have never been happier to be the subject of someone's prejudice. These are weeks I can't live with missing. I know that it is, ultimately, for the best that I'm not in school and that I can be with Mom whenever she needs me or whenever I need her.

The signs of this approaching downfall mount for months, but at this stage there is no predicting when things will become worse or if they'll be permanent, there is only waiting. "We knew it was coming," Mahfouz says. "And we knew it was coming soon. But your mother's condition doesn't care a lick about consistency. Every case I've seen is different. Every case is its own beast." What he doesn't say, I'm sure, is that each case ends the same way. Instead, he tells both Michael and I that he's sorry, that Bianca has been a font of life for these years in his care, and that what the next few weeks bring may well be much more difficult than we are used to.

Mahfouz's most helpful counsel, though, is that if there are any legal matters we need to see to regarding Mom, it's easiest if we do them now.

With Mom's unhindered and proud permission, we transfer ownership of the studio to my name on the first day of April. April Fools—a fitting coincidence, and one that Mom is cogent enough to appreciate without my goading.

Days that Mom is so alert and so aware quickly become rarer and rarer. First, she tries to sleep day in, day out, tired of being awake only to forget, tired of being tired. But even sleep eludes her at this stage, and in her exhaustion she loses the desire to speak, an act that only saps her energies further. This is perhaps what most disturbs us during her progression. As strange and bewildering and confusing as her tattoos can be, they remain familiar. With the exception of the gardens wrapped around her arms, we know almost everything we see on her skin. This woman before us, refusing to speak but through sighs and murmurs, though, is impossibly unknowable.

For days and days, I carry the fifth leather-bound journal to St. Vitus every morning, and each day the book returns home untouched. No matter how hard I hope that maybe today is the day she conjures one more story for us, that landmark moment doesn't come. Eventually, I retire this three-quarters-filled journal to its spot on my bookshelf next to the others she has filled. This is the only one not to reach the last page, the only one with any space left unaltered by my unruly script. Beside it rests the book of patron saints where Michael and I first learn of St. Vitus. While Mom is alive, I never crack open a sixth journal and feel its fresh paper crawl over my fingertips.

In lieu of hearing Mom's stories in her own voice—now wavering more than I've ever hoped to know—and rather than reading them from the books, I resolve to live the

stories firsthand, to forge my own tales in Mom's wake. Every moment I'm not with her at St. Vitus or at home with Somya and Clara and often Michael, too, I dedicate to the studio—to the space, to the teachers, to the students.

Only after entering the studio as a proprietor do I notice fully how much care the place has craved during the years Mom's attention has been trained on surviving in a home she knows she ultimately won't leave alive. Everything functions—the classes run and the floors get swept—but, still, to sit at the desk for a time and focus on the bookkeeping feels long overdue. It feels good to organize a new schedule and plan a new event. I can't dance yet, but I can make sure the studio runs as smoothly as it does under Mom's direction. I can make sure I'm enabling the best opportunities possible for this community. Each day I sense a little of the strain lifting off the space, and gradually its ambient gravity returns.

So while Mom falls ever more silent, I learn to speak: I co-teach classes, welcome new students, adjust postures, offer suggestions and new choreography. I tell my own stories, ones that well up from somewhere I've always struggled to find. While Mom's appetite grows scarcer, my offerings flourish into a bountiful harvest. While Mom's moods worsen and vacillate, I develop a new sense of patience from working with students who have chosen to learn but have forgotten how.

While Mom's breathing grows heavy, my laugh grows deep and tumbles up from my stomach. The women who come to dance also come to talk and to be heard. Unable to dance myself, all I can do is listen, and the women's stories teach me again that happiness isn't always a labor. Their individual histories each deserve volumes and volumes of their own.

I find myself deeply reimmersed in a life I've never expected to live, and all the while Mom's tattoos creep toward obfuscating every last edge of her body and repressing the remainder of her mind, viciously eager to snuff out her light and take her from us.

I have longed for this distraction. I never lose sight of Mom and the little time we all have left with her, but I still manage to occupy my own space in a way that is impossible for the past four years. Mom is rarely lucid enough these days to see the difference, but I know this is what she has hoped for me to find from the very beginning.

*

The storm lasts all day. From first light, a vast cloud cover lumbers toward town like a wandering leviathan. The first patters of heavy rain against our windows and roof rouse me gently from my sleep, just enough that I take note of the sounds of the storm and reside in the comfort of its enormity for a few fleeting seconds before drifting back to sleep. I never feel more peaceful than when asleep amid clamoring rain and rushing winds. The pervasiveness and ubiquity of a storm's soundscape is a blanket of its own, hefty and familiar. What I love most about this rain is how its thunder rolls through the room and washes out any anxieties clinging to the air. Thunder is a salve.

The thunder is also what urges Clara awake this morning and sends her into a terror. Somya turns over and stifles groan. She handles mornings differently than I do, though we both love the storms. "Sh," I say. "Keep sleeping. I'll take care of her." Even in her sopor, Somya manages to quip at me sarcastically. I don't remember the words she uses that are so

faithfully hers and in her manner. I would like to remember them, but I can only recall the tone of her voice and her intent, not her words.

Clara wails, begging instinctually for salvation from the unknown, a safety no parent can ultimately provide. I lift her up out of her bed with my right arm, leaving her blankets behind, and I pat down her wild, straying hair. “You must’ve been sleeping good, Clara,” I whisper. She’s already so much heavier than when we bring her home, a good sign for all of us, except for that my left arm still aches if I hold her too long in it. She buries her face into my collar, muffling her cries. In hushed tones I promise her that she’s okay and warn her against riling a sleepy Somya, and together we walk downstairs to look out the window. As I pass over each stair, I remember Mom’s dreams of falling, and I hope she isn’t dreaming them right now.

“See, Clara. Look how calm it is. Despite the motion, despite the speed, it’s consistent.” We stand in the living room window looking out at the yard lightening gradually by what little sun penetrates the clouds. I rock the baby gently on my arm and explain to her why I love the rain so much. When the thunder cracks again and she winces, I hold her tight, relish experiencing it with her, and tell her why of all that I love about rain, I love the thunder most. A storm like this one always has the capacity to surprise, to be unexpected. Be it the strength of the wind, the brilliance of the lightning, the weight of the rainfall itself, it doesn’t matter. Each storm is new and thrilling, and I hope that one day Clara comes to understand this too. I have confidence. That she falls back asleep against me gives me all the reassurance I need.

I don’t know how long I stand in the window with my child sleeping on my shoulder, irrevocably entranced by the rain. Only when the phone rings do I stir from the emptiness of

my head. “Michael? Isn’t this storm beautiful?” He’s quiet on the other end until he emits an agreement. “Clara couldn’t handle it. Did it wake you up too?”

“Poor thing. She’ll get used to it, and one day she won’t even realize the comfort she finds in a good rain.” He trails off, his momentum dispersed. “I woke up once, maybe, heard the rain and was out again in a second. I never sleep better. But, Ecaterina, this isn’t about the storm.”

“Tell me.”

“Just come see Mom with me. Leave the baby and Somya to sleep.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Mahfouz called me a few minutes ago. He thinks we should be there.”

If it’s to happen, let it be a day like this, I think. In the downpour, I can’t find the space in my heart to be frantic or to be scared. How long do I anticipate Mahfouz’s final call? “Wait. Why did he call you and not me?”

“Um.” Michael pauses, and I can see from across town his eyes scanning from one side to the other. “What does that have to do with anything. Come on. He doesn’t know how long she has. I’ll pick you up.”

Once I’ve put Clara back in her bed, I kneel beside Somya. “I’m going to be gone all day,” I say. “Today might be the day. Do you need anything before I leave?”

“Do I need anything?” She wakes more quickly now to my voice. “No, honey, I don’t. Do you? Do you want me to come with?”

I tell her to stay, that nothing’s certain and maybe nothing is even happening. In the air, though, I taste how untrue those words are. Like it is preordained. I kiss Somya goodbye and kiss Clara once more too before dashing outside. I’m soaked by the time I reach the

sidewalk and slide into Michael's car. He's biting his nails and flicking the chunks out the barely cracked window—water rushing inside and down the glass despite how thin the sliver to the outside is—and when I slam into my seat in a rush, before I see his hand manipulating the dials, I hear the volume of the music jump down like it's programmed to my presence.

The Electric Lady cascades from the speakers and melds to the mood of the water.

Michael pulls away from the curb and drives through the empty streets with his wipers dashing back and forth at the highest setting. The last time Michael and I are in a car together at this hour, in this morning haze, seems impossibly far away, but every second that we drive, it feels closer and realer. Michael reaches to the dash to flick on the heat, and I turn it up further and press my head against the window. Once Michael and I have established a routine of afternoon drives in high school, we wait and wait and wait for a day like this. We both love this rain, and we itch to experience it for ourselves, to make it real by driving through it together. It's another May storm when we finally get the chance, one of the last weeks of school. We spend all day inside the school building, cooped up and driven mad with desire for the rain that pounds against the windows in each classroom all day. We run out of school shouting, hooping at our friends, and laughing incredulously at how drenched we get within an instant.

I think Michael is nervous his first time behind the wheel in these conditions, but it's impossible to tell. We leave the parking lot and wander, as is our wont. No music plays through the speakers, instead we listen to the rain and the way it clinks on the metal roof and slaps against the windshield. Michael drives slow, winding his way through road after county road, and soon we realize we've strayed farther from home than intended. We're just a couple miles from a road that's rumored to be haunted. Michael and I have been there a few

times, but never in the daylight, so we decide to investigate. Visibility is so low and the road so narrow that we drive at a crawl. The pavement rests under a canopy of towering oak trees on either side of the avenue. I'm craning toward the peak of the window, searching for the tops of the trees, when Michael slams the breaks and I nearly hurtle into the windshield.

Before I have the chance to scold him for driving like a jerk, I see the rotted hulk of a fallen tree lying in repose across the road. The rain pours over it in torrents, running in transient streams across the ground and into the ditches. In the absence of the tree, an unfamiliar and odd hole mars the otherwise unbroken lane of branches, revealing the sky where it shouldn't be. It feels wrong that the paved understory is now exposed like this. But what strikes me most is the feeling of iniquity that such an imposing and ancient body can fall so unceremoniously and without witness or mourner.

"So Mahfouz called you, huh?" I say to Michael and stare him down smirking. The haunted road yields to the grid of town. "Even though I'm definitely listed as first contact?" He doesn't look away from the road, fixated on each of the individual droplets before us. "No need to say anything," I tell him.

"Is this really the time?" he says, as amused as he is annoyed.

"It's absolutely not, but there's also no better time. You know?" He does, I know, even though he says nothing.

Mahfouz has the early shift today, and it's the night shift nurse who tells him that Mom seems to be worsening. "Did you call her family?" Mahfouz asks. In the middle of the night? Of course not. It's not their policy, but Mahfouz has known us long enough to know that the hour is irrelevant. Michael and I both want to be here, we both want her to know she is cared for, even if the expression of knowing is difficult for her. Even if, like how to

breathe, she doesn't always know how to recognize us by our faces or our voices. Mahfouz ushers us into Mom's room and closes the door.

"Maybe you should announce yourself first, favorite," I goad Michael. He rolls his eyes at me, but he complies.

"Mom. Mom, it's us, Michael and Ecaterina. We're here with you." He puts his hand in hers and pulls a chair to her bedside. The density of her tattoos is so great that I worry they want to spill over onto Michael's skin and infect him too. Mom scans the room motionlessly before landing on her hand and following Michael's arm up to his face. Her breaths are short, and her hands are cold at the extremities. "Do you need anything?" She shakes her head with a frightening lethargy and then turns to me.

"Did the rain wake you?" I ask without expecting a response. It beats against her windows, and the air in the room feels colder for it. "I know how much you've always liked resting to the crashing and humming of a storm. And you know how Michael loves it and I love it? And Somya too? I thought maybe it was a requirement of being part of the family. Well, guess who woke up to the thunder scared and crying this morning? Clara is the first member of the family who hates the rain."

A croak escapes from Mom, barely audible and dry as the floor outside is wet. "Clara," she says in slow syllables.

"Don't worry, I'm teaching her. I gave her my first lesson in rain appreciation and lulled her back to sleep. I wonder how many of those words she knows already. Definitely a few, don't you think?"

The morning passes so, with Michael and I recounting stories back and forth while Mom listens. We don't know how often she is fully conscious or how much she recognizes,

but it's the only appropriate way to honor Mom in her presence. I've spent years in constant, reverent listening, never sure that I have stories of my own, but now that my time has come to speak, I feel like an uncovered spring, unable to control what words bubble out of my mouth, but positive that they deserve saying.

*

Mahfouz pops by every thirty minutes to check in on us as much as to check in on Mom. He sees if she needs food or if she needs more water, but her appetite has left her, and she turns away from him when he enters to show that she doesn't want his help. Sometimes it's nearly impossible to find a Mom I recognize behind the ways that the disease alters her moods and disposition, and sometimes she's right there on the surface. Eventually, Michael and I come to a natural resting point in our storytalking, late in the afternoon, and we decide that it's time to give Mom a break from our ceaseless chatter and to get some food for ourselves. Michael takes first shift staying alone with Mom, so I visit the lobby to say thank you again to Mahfouz for warning us. His shift ends in just a couple hours, and I might not get the chance to tell him before he leaves. Maybe this is the last time I see him, I think. Though I doubt that immediately.

I sneak a couple snacks from the hospitality table, fill my water, and exchange a few questions with the volunteer at the front desk. She's been here once or twice a week for at least half a year, and I wonder if Mom's departure from St. Vitus will have any effect on this woman who barely knows my mother but has seen her face weekly for months. What does this volunteer feel when a patient finally passes? Is it different than what the nurses feel? It

must be. I don't feel bad for interrupting her reading today to ask her a couple questions. I crave the distraction, even if it means interrupting her solitude. She fields my questions without a hitch, tells me that she comes from just along the Mississippi, that she's only been in town just over a year, that she's moved after retiring from her own nursing career.

After I let her back to her book, I sit down in one of the lobby chairs to slow the whirring of my thoughts before relieving Michael to make his own trip to the snack table. Without realizing, I drift off to the sounds of the rain and come to with a snap when my head lolls over. Even more groggy than when I leave Mom's room, I will myself to stand up. If I want to sleep, I can do it there, near her. No need to let the whole world see me passed out in a waiting room chair.

The door is just slightly ajar, so I ease it the rest of the way open and see Michael slumped in his own chair dozing. Neither quite sleeping nor quite awake, Mom seems to float somewhere between consciousness and respite. She rotates her head to watch me approach. Her eyes flutter, passing her world in and out of existence, and as they do, her tattoos flutter, too. For the brief instances that her eyes are fully closed, I swear that her tattoos disappear completely, but when I examine her form, she's as inked as ever. The way the images fuzz at the edges and seem to fade away must be in my eyes. I'm tired.

Then Mom sighs and closes her eyes tight, discomfort wracking across her face—dying has never been peaceful—and it happens. One by one, each tattoo on her skin recedes back up toward her hairline and disappears at her scalp, like a solemn processional. It's the first time I see those strange gardens flee from her skin. "Mom," I exhort. I can't help it. She tilts her sightless gaze toward the sound of my voice. "Ecate—," she starts, but as she opens her eyes, my name dissipates from her tongue, and she looks confused. The tattoos begin to

churn again beneath her hair and descend. “Keep your eyes closed, Mom. It’s okay. Keep them closed and talk to me like that.” She labors to close her eyes all the way, fighting back the advance of the tattoos.

“Mom.”

“Ecaterina. It’s raining.”

Decisive and clear, there is no tension in her voice. As gently and subtly as I can manage, I nudge Michael awake, gesturing for him to be quiet, then indicating Mom. It takes him a second to remember that the woman he’s looking at shouldn’t have skin so unburdened.

“I love you, Mom. How do you feel?”

“I love you, too, dear. Michael is here, isn’t he? Can he hear me?”

“He can.”

“I love you, too, Michael. I feel strange. I feel . . . light. I feel like I’ve been gone so long.”

“You’ve been here, even if you can’t always reach us, we know that.” I peruse her skin in all its clarity. I can’t miss this opportunity. Her aging displays so differently on this unblemished flesh. I have never seen my mother until now. I look to Michael and sign for paper, for something to write with, but he’s got nothing. Those leather bound books are in my home right now, content with their thousands upon thousands of words of retelling and content with being inaccessible, replete but not whole. But maybe this moment is a telling, not a retelling, and has no place in the books anyway. “Mom, I’m going to describe something, okay? I want to know if it’s familiar.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll call it a garden. Think of any kind of tree you’ve ever seen, they’re all there. Banana trees next to sycamores and spruce. Bushes of mulberry and juniper grow into one another like hedges next to a patch of crocus, goldenrod, and purple coneflower.” She smiles while I describe this odd medley, and gradually she starts to laugh. No, she’s giggling, like a child. “Mom?”

“Yes, Ecaterina. I see it.”

“What is it? It showed up among your tattoos, but I’ve never heard you talk about it. Michael neither. Can you tell us the story?”

“The story?” She continues giggling, absolutely unconcerned. “Not every story is meant to be told.” Today is the only time I hear her say those words. I don’t expect that she tells me every singular detail of her life, but I’ve always known that no story is off limits. Why now? Why close this door to me?

“But where is this garden? Can you tell me that? I’ve been waiting so long to ask you.” All the clothes I’m wearing suddenly become far too warm and far too heavy for the day. I feel sweat beading across my body at the same time that the cold of the air bites at my exposed skin.

“Some stories must be lived. I can’t do that for you.” She squeezes my hand once then lets her grip slacken. She looks like she’s wandering, searching aimlessly with her closed eyes, until concentration passes over her face. Whatever she’s found, she follows, and soon her concentration gives way to awe. “You’ll never believe this, Ecaterina. You neither, Michael. Oh,” and she loses herself momentarily in a fit of laughter. “You’ll never believe who’s here.”

Michael holds my arm just below the elbow, where the gardens usually lie, and chimes in. “Mom, Ecaterina wants to know about this garden.”

“Oh hush,” she chides. “Your father is trying to tell me something. He’s standing right beside the lilac bush, and he looks so happy there.”

“Are you . . .” But I choke on whatever is rising in my throat. I put my hand on top of Michael’s and squeeze. It’s all I can do.

“I’m too scared.”

“Dying has never scared you,” I say. “And we’re here with you.”

“He barely knows me anymore. What if we’ve grown apart?”

I shake my head to tell Michael I can’t speak anymore, and he blinks in affirmation. It’s impossible to take a full breath against the tightness wrapped around my chest, heaving my body every time I try. “Just think of all the stories you’ll have to tell him. How many years?”

“Twenty-two years of stories,” she answers without a beat.

“He gets to learn who you are all over again. You get to show him. And maybe you’ll learn something about him, too. You’ve waited long enough, Mom.”

Her eyes flutter again, and I fear she’ll open her them and lose everything she has in this moment. “Just keep your eyes closed, okay?” I force myself to speak. She takes a deep breath and chuckles once more, just as Mahfouz slips into the room. I turn to him, tears breaking at my eyelids, and Michael turns to see him too. It’s clear enough from the way his shoulders tighten and how he recoils that Mahfouz has never seen what Mom is now experiencing.

“I’d recognize those footsteps anywhere,” Mom says. “My terrible children have asked me to keep my eyes closed, like some kind of game, but please come in, Mahfouz.” He does so sheepishly, uncharacteristically timid, but he approaches the bedside.

“I’m here,” he says. Michael and I don’t know it yet, and I wonder if Mahfouz is privy to it, but we are about to witness the final performance of Mom’s long career. “Can I do anything for you?”

“Would you sit?” He does. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen my husband, Mahfouz.”

“I know this is hard to hear,” he says. “But it’s okay to let go. You’ve earned it.” Since Mom’s first days at St. Vitus, Mahfouz must guide hundreds of people through this conversation. He is practiced, and I hear the confidence of someone who knows what his words mean.

“I’m not quite ready yet,” she says. “That’s why I need you here. My kids would never leave my side if you weren’t here, but I need them to go get something for me. Then I’ll be ready. And I know they’ll trust you to watch over me until they’re back.”

“Are you sure, Mom?” Michael says. He is as skeptical as I am, as reluctant to step out of this room even for a second.

“I want you to bring back the notebooks for one last story. I can tell you about the garden if you really want, Ecaterina. Just not right now, not without the notebook.”

As much as my every muscle and my every impulse implores me to stay exactly where I am, I can’t deny Mom this request. But Michael doesn’t have to come with me. I can drive myself, and he can stay with her just in case. Mom knows me too well.

“Michael, will you drive your sister? The rain isn’t letting up, and you know how nervous she gets driving alone in this weather.”

He stands up next to me and shrugs, outwilled by Mom once more. “Let’s go,” he says, and he kisses Mom on the forehead, caressing her still undyed hair with his right hand. I lean in, too, and do my best not to smother her or fall over her, unable to balance easily with my recovering arm. “I’ll see you soon, Mom,” I say.

“I can’t wait.”

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Though it feels like our clothes have only just dried through, Michael and I dash out to the car through the unyielding rain. My hair sticks to the sides of my face as I pull the door closed, and a vein of water runs down the length of my arm, splattering against the paneling. Michael is as cautious as ever behind the wheel, an instinct so strong that even our mom’s looming last breaths can’t shake him into speeding. At first, I tap my foot endlessly against the soaked carpet, urging us to go faster and trying to sift through the frantic menagerie of questions surfacing. I want to know what Mom plans to tell us. I want to hear her story, and I want to know why she’s only telling it now.

Five miles from St. Vitus, I can’t stomach staring at the road anymore, so I shift to stare out my window, but that’s not right either. I swivel around toward the back seat and catch the line of clouds breaking impossibly far away on the horizon. The storm is ending, and beyond that, I see in the bend and hue of the light that the sun has begun to dip below the horizon. In the splendor of this post-storm sundown, I see what Mom has done. Though it’s

still an hour before we return to find a sullen Mahfouz—remaining long after the end of his shift, eyes red from exhaustion and from tears—I know that Mom has passed. And she leaves exactly as she wants to, on her terms. I wonder if Michael knows yet.

For a second, an anger burns up through me. Anger that she has lied to us—a white lie, she calls it. Anger that she rips from me these last precious seconds together. Anger that all the time I dedicate to her means nothing if I miss the very end. Anger that I don't get the final story. But she doesn't lie, I realize, not really. Michael and I, afraid of speaking finality into existence, fill in the uncomfortable blanks with what we want to hear and accept vagaries as promises. My anger decays, and now I can only wonder frustratedly at how she justifies holding something so important in front of me like bait. That's not fair. None of this is. That Mom is gone so soon isn't fair, that she loses so much of her identity isn't fair, and that she won't confide in me this one last story isn't fair. Not after all the work I've done to document everything I can about her experiences through her stories.

Is it even fair that she experiences her final moments with such lucidity? That only seems like an extra, extraneous cruelty stacked atop the others. How much easier is her death if she can't even be fully aware of it? The return of her clarity is just one more cruel joke her tattoos play.

I want to let this resentment fester and boil over so that I can separate myself from the hurt, but it just doesn't happen. I can't stay mad at Mom for asking Michael and I to leave, because dying is a story Mom can't share with us, even if she wants to. I don't blame her for wanting to be alone for the story of death to be told to her, despite the frustration that wells up in the car. I live plenty of stories with Mom. Michael does too. I know that the injustice I

feel about her asking us to leave is rooted in an unjustifiable sense of possession of Mom's time, life, and tales. But my life consists of nothing if not those gifts.

Why foul her generosity with my greed?

When we reach the house, the rain is letting up, and I step outside for the first time today without any hurry. Somya and Clara aren't home. Shadows cling to every corner of the house, propelled around the rooms by the waning light. I retrieve the fifth journal, and I take a moment to think about every inch of the house that Mom has occupied. I see her in the living room and in the hallways and leaning against the walls. I see her on each of the stairs and staring at herself in the bathroom mirror. I see her and I cooking in the kitchen on a night that Somya is away. I can memorize her in all of these spots, in all of these times. Michael doesn't ask what takes so long. He sits with both hands on the wheel seemingly the whole time I'm in the house, without even turning on the stereo. The tension throughout his body shows just how little he has moved.

Mahfouz, wearied and saddened, greets us when we return. He leads us to her room to say our final goodbyes and tells us that Mom says we should understand, that after we leave she requests to be left alone. She passes out of sight, just as the sun falls below the clouds and spreads its nightly oranges on the last stretches of the sky. As he leaves her room and pulls the door shut, Mahfouz swears he sees Mom grin contentedly and hears her whisper, "What an experience."

These are the last words I know Mom to have spoken. They are familiar. She says them at Michael's graduation, at Dad's funeral, after her first pole competition, when she sells the farm, when Clara clings to her on the baby's first day home. They are a mantra of hers, invoked at the end of anything done for the first time.

THE END