Lullabies and Sleepless Nights

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“That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you’re not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.”

-F. Scott Fitzgerald
Abstract

In this collection of short stories, the universal questions of what the passing of time does to human beings, what human beings do to one another, and why we do what we do to one another, are raised. In order to raise these questions as well as attempt to provide some kind of answer (although sometimes the answer may be that there is not one), I include an array of stories from varied characters’ points of view. In this collection, I experimented with point of view by using characters of different genders, different age groups, and even diverse religious and racial identities. Each character in this collection struggles with loss of some kind, be it of a part of their own identity, a beloved person, or even a memory that he/she desperately wants to hold onto. This collection is an attempt to examine human nature on the every day level, to make sense of the way that something that used to provide comfort (a lover’s voice, the smell of tulips, that song that you used to love) can turn into something that keeps us up at night, and, how time can alter us in the opposite way, turning things we once loved into things we are all out of passion for.
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Explanation of Thesis Project

*The Evolution Into A Writer*

In order to be a (good) writer, one must first be a reader. And that’s where this project began; way back when I couldn’t read but pretended that I could. Becoming a writer began the first time I picked up a book and created my own story to go along with the illustrations. It began when my parents videotaped me and laughed at me for holding a book upside down. I came to writing a short story collection as a twenty-two year old because of my admiration of books as a three year old.

The world(s) that opened up to me after I learned how to read are impossible to put into words, despite how ironic that sounds. I read through my elementary school’s AR book library quickly and looked forward to every Scholastic book fair. I loved reading. It gave me an escape from the realities of home, of family, of growing up. And in high school reading was the same thing: an innocent escape from the daily plagues of adolescent life. I turned to books because they were and had always been more reliable than most of the people around me. Certain books got me through the tough days, the days I questioned things like family, love, lust, God, and everything in between. I read classics- *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Great Gatsby* carried me through my seventeenth birthday- and I read young adult novels. I read anything I could get my hands on because I enjoyed it. The satisfaction of reading came through learning that my fears, my anxieties, my weaknesses, were all universal. Reading taught me that my cynical mind and romantic heart were not alone in the world, that other people could see the beauty and the dread in any symbol, word, action.

I never understood what specifically comforted me about books until I asked myself that question my senior year of high school. My parents were uneasy about my desire to major in
English in college and I was attempting to thwart their uneasiness by giving them reasons for why I *needed* this major. I was searching for what it was about literature that was so necessary to my life, and I realized that the connection I made to the books I was reading was a connection to the writer(s). The characters were all interesting and oftentimes I thought of myself as certain admirable characters (I’ve always thought a little part of me takes after Alaska Young- thank you, John Green). And the plot-lines were always intriguing, as were the settings, the symbols… But what I was connecting to was something deeper than all that. I identified with whoever was writing, creating, the stories I was reading, because he/she was seeking and attempting to find a truth about humanity that I had been searching for for what seemed like my entire life.

It was then that I realized that I was more than a reader. I was always slightly disappointed after a book was over; the revelations and epiphanies I experienced while reading all seemed to evaporate after the book was finished. Each little truth about the human experience that a writer helped me to discover in his/her book rang so true and so dominant in my mind, but the truths eventually went away, or at least lessened infinite degrees. I wanted more than what I was getting out of reading, but I did not know how to get it. I couldn’t think of myself as a writer for a very long time. I admired the realm of literature so much that I couldn’t imagine categorizing myself with the people I had read so much that it felt like I’d known them forever (Hawthorne, Plath, Woolf).

But an itch had been in place for a very long time to create, to discover truths about humanity and to share them, despite how romantic and/or depressing those truths were/are. I wanted to create a story that rang true to the human experience, to everyday life, that people could relate to. I wanted to create a story that could comfort my teenage self, to cradle a younger
me into self-confidence and happiness despite all of the horrible and undeniable truths of existence. I just didn’t know how to.

But I’d been a writer all along. I’d written in a journal for years, giving the paper all of the details of my day: an argument between my parents, a friend that made fun of me at school, a line from a book that I desperately wanted to hold onto. That was my becoming.

Eventually I convinced my parents that English was the only major for me (it was, I can confidently tell them now) and ended up at Ashland for really no reason at all except that it just seemed to fit. I signed up for a Creative Writing major too because it meant more English classes and it also meant that I would finally have to do what I didn’t think I could do: write and create.

Dr. Joe Mackall has done wonders for me (and for so many other people too). My first class with him was a blur- a lot of laughs and some experimental bits of writing, but nothing substantial. I was still too insecure with my writing abilities to put forth any actual effort. Luckily, Joe recognized something within me that I couldn’t yet see: talent. His belief in my abilities and me pushed me to sit down and write; to experiment with all genres, to let classmates read my work and allow them to give me feedback. He introduced me to the world of creative nonfiction, a world I adore and live in as a writer oftentimes (although this collection is strictly fiction). He gave me books. He showed me the interconnections of all the genres, of the importance of reading poetry in order to create good fiction. He taught me to be confident enough to write. So I wrote and I read more than ever and I came out with some half-decent short stories, many of which were rewritten time and time again in order to find their way into this collection and many of which just didn’t make the cut. My desire to tell a story unfolded into a wish to tell multiple stories.
Finally, after I began to see myself as someone with the potential to create art, I met Cheryl Strayed, the wonderful and talented author of *Wild*, one of my favorite memoirs, and *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar*, one of my favorite books of all time. I worked for Ashland University’s Master in Fine Arts Creative Writing program over the summer of 2013 and spent most of those two weeks driving visiting writers, students, and professors back and forth from airports. Those drives are some of the most important hours of my life thus far, especially the hour I shared in a mini-van with Cheryl Strayed. She complimented my dress and casually used the f word as if we were long-time friends (I hope we are), and I knew that what she wrote in her books was the truth: that she truly believed what she was writing, that she lived those truths every day and was not just writing for the masses. She was writing because truths were bubbling up inside of her and she had to share them. She thrived on telling stories. “It needed to get out,” she told me in regards to her first novel. And the stories I wanted to tell were doing the same things to me; just waiting for me to give them the attention they needed to come alive.

Cheryl Strayed signed books for an hour after her reading. I sat next to her. She called me a rock star afterwards. The memory will never lessen in greatness for me. Nor will what she told me about being a writer: she said that all writers should be writing to tell a universal truth that only he/she can write. Whatever is being written should be universal but through the specific creative lens of whomever is doing the writing. *I believe you have a truth or two to get out there, Erika*, she told me before she left. And I did. I still do.

So, with the help of some very important mentors, my love for reading and appreciation for the creation of literature, and my own desire to discover the truths about human nature, I came to writing this collection, this collection which I am so proud of because I never thought it
would exist, this collection I love because it gave me the insights I have always wanted, although
sometimes those insights were not as pretty and/or black and white as I wanted/expected them to
be. I can identify myself as a writer now. Despite what I will do for a career, despite my
relationship status, despite any other identity that will be put on me, I will always be a writer.
Because I see and care about the human experience, the day-to-day interactions between people,
nature, God, and everything in between. I’m a writer because I have stories to tell. And I’m
finally able to share them.
Preface

This collection encompasses a few stories I’ve written- it does not encompass the many other creative pieces I’ve written, the late night blog posts I write regularly, or the journal entries I’ve been writing daily for years. It doesn’t reveal how much time I spend rereading my work thinking of ways to revise and nor does it encompass the hours I’ve spent agonizing over whether or not a story is finished (it never quite is). Lullabies and Sleepless Nights is a work of fiction- all created stories that sprouted from my mind. Although each story is a work of fiction, however, the themes and characters I write originate in reality. For me, good fiction reflects reality: dialogue, character quirks, and everything else depicted in a story are always better when they are rooted in realness. A work of fiction amazes us because it illustrates the reality we know in a way we perhaps have not thought about.

I read and continue to read for that reason: to understand myself and the world around me in a purer, truer way. A love of stories, of well-written stories, brought me to my favorite authors: Virginia Woolf, Raymond Carver, Jhumpa Lahiri, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and so many others. After reading Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies, a passion for the short story awoke inside of me. Until then, I’d always read novels, but reading a collection that included so many different points of view, characters, settings, and plots, combined to somehow cohere into an amazing work that totally made sense stuck heavily in my mind. And then I read Carver’s Where I’m Calling From collection and felt even more tied to the medium; Carver’s ability to illustrate a single hour of a single day and make it meaningful inspired me in ways I hadn’t been inspired yet. And since I’d been trying (unsuccessfully) to write a novel, the thought crossed my mind that maybe I was supposed to write stories instead.
Dr. Joe Mackall had recommended that I write a short story after I brought in a draft of what I thought would be a full-length novel. I remember him telling me “what you have here is a story, not a novel,” and I disagreed, ignorantly. I didn’t know what a short story was and how that differed from a novel; how did you begin a work of fiction knowing that it’d be one or the other? And the answer, at least for me, is that you don’t. You write and you spend time with the main character and eventually it dawns on you: this is a story, this is a novel.

A short story is different from a novel because it (generally) encompasses less time than a novel does. Stories reveal one epiphany that a main character has whereas novels can hold multiple epiphanies. The writer of a short story must focus on reaching this single epiphany throughout the entire writing process- as Poe once said, “a short story must have a single mood and every sentence must build towards it.” Every piece of dialogue, every characterization, every piece of symbolism, all of it must be in unison with the epiphany that will be waiting at the end of the story, the one that is believable but still flooring to the reader. A short story, as Joe Mackall told me after encouraging me to think of writing short stories, is about the day that’s different. And that advice has stayed at the forefront of my creative mind, always reminding me of what exactly a short story should be. The trick then of creating a successful short story, is understanding your main character well enough to know who they were before the specific day you are writing about. In order to write a believable epiphany, you have to know why that character needs that epiphany in the first place: what did all of the days before this day look like? The bond with your main character is probably the most important thing, in my opinion, for writing a good short story. Without the bond, the character’s epiphany seems weak, mediocre or far too predictable. To avoid that fate, I spent time absorbed into the above-mentioned short story
collections: *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *Where Are You Calling From* by Raymond Carver.

Lahiri is a master of the short story because of her incredible ability to make ordinary, domestic stories so interesting. My personal favorite short story of Lahiri’s, “A Temporary Matter,” tells the story of a couple, Shoba and Shukumar, who are experiencing five days’ worth of one hour without electricity. During this hour without power every night, the two tell one another things they have never told one another before, thus reconnecting within their otherwise troubled marriage. Lahiri effortlessly explains the events of the five days while also perfectly inserting the information the reader needs that has transpired before the present action of the story: the failing career of Shukumar, the pregnancy of Shoba, and the relational issues that the two have been experiencing for six months because of the still-birth of their child. The story is told from third-person limited point of view of Shukumar, but Lahiri shows that she knows both of the characters extremely well. Throughout the story, Shukumar reveals intimate details about his wife, small and yet significant details about her character that show Lahiri put a great deal of effort into knowing who both Shukumar and Shoba were. Lahiri’s closeness to Shoba, the secondary character of this story, is illustrated in sentences like this one: “He knew she curled her fingers tightly when she slept, that her body twitched during bad dreams. He knew it was honeydew she favored over cantaloupe” (16). In sentences like this, Lahiri reveals small yet huge character details that make the ending of the story fulfilling, believable, and inevitable. Lahiri’s intimacy with both of her characters allows the reader to feel a closeness with each of them throughout the story and when Lahiri begins to conclude her story, telling us the events of the last day of the power outages, we want to see where the two of them end up. Lahiri creates honest characters that are both flawed and ideal in “A Temporary Matter.”
At the end of the story, Shukumar and Shoba reveal heart-breaking secrets to one another. These revelations, while earth shattering and emotionally exhausting, reconnect the two who have not connected for months. Because Lahiri developed both characters into being life-like everyday people, both of their emotions are felt by readers: our hearts drop when Shoba tells Shukumar she is moving out, our eyes tear up when Shukumar tells Shoba “Our baby was a boy. His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night” (22). Readers get to know these characters through their quirks; the details that are so original that it is evident Lahiri spent a lot of time figuring out who each character really was. By the end of the story, because we feel as if we truly know who these people are and believe that they could (and perhaps do) exist in our world, we buy their heartache; we accept without a doubt that the two of them sit and cry together. And without readers even realizing it, the epiphany has happened, the change in the characters has occurred. That’s the kind of epiphany I love, the subtle ones that seem inevitable, that after you’re done reading the story you think “of course- how else could this have ended?” but one that is also a kind of mystery throughout, one that the writer really has to work to achieve, to get readers to buy. Lahiri’s collection, specifically “A Temporary Matter,” taught me the necessity of truly knowing your character(s), of describing them in a new, original, and creative way, and to make sure they’re human enough to be relatable.

Aside from character development, Lahiri’s ability to end a story also taught me loads. As mentioned previously, the epiphany that happens in “A Temporary Matter” is quiet; it is not in the reader’s face begging for attention. Lahiri (and Carver as well) showed me that a story’s epiphany, although crucial, does not have to be huge. It is enough for a character to learn something new about his/her self, about the person he/she loves, about the world around him/her;
it is enough to illustrate one step in a character’s journey to becoming who he/she is, to learning what they he/she needs to learn. The beauty of the short story is that the writer doesn’t have to fix every problem happening in a character’s life. A short story can make a character aware of something he/she wasn’t aware of before and that is enough. The endings of the story, then, do not have to be definite. The lives of the characters go on after the short story is finished and thus the things they learn go on as well. Every problem does not have to be fixed; in fact, some endings can be ambiguous as to whether or not something is resolved and work perfectly well, as is the case in “A Temporary Matter.” Shukumar and Shoba, who have electricity again, sit instead in the darkness because it has become easier for them to talk without the lights on. Although Shoba has just revealed she is moving out, the story ends with the two of them weeping together, “… for the things they now knew” (22). Lahiri does not give readers a definite answer as to whether or not Shukumar and Shoba will stay together and repair their damaged relationship but instead finishes the story on a touching moment between the two, one that will last despite their fate as a couple. This ending is satisfying although it doesn’t seem complete because we understand the difficulties the two characters have gone through within the story as well as the realities of love. Lahiri does not idealize Shukumar and Shoba’s situation but instead introduces readers to a very real relationship and the real problems they face together and apart on a day-to-day basis, thus creating a believable and honest story that is relatable despite its status as fiction. Lahiri’s ending to this story taught me that it is okay and oftentimes better to end a story in a place where the character(s) are beginning a new journey. The writer is not responsible for fixing every problem in a character’s life because the writer is supposed to make the world of the story believable, and in reality, problems do not end cleanly and definitely. The writer is responsible instead for writing about characters they know well, for writing an epiphany
that is enlightening, and for making readers believe in the message of the story as well as the plot itself.

Raymond Carver’s short stories are incredible because of his minimalism. Carver is not known for spending time on lengthy descriptions or fluffy literary devices throughout his stories; rather, he is known for his short sentences and staccato words. In one of Carver’s most well known stories titled “Cathedral,” Carver’s minimalist style stands out. Rarely does the dialogue extend over a line long, and besides the opening few paragraphs, Carver’s paragraphs last only a few sentences in length. This story is told through first-person point of view through the eyes of a slightly rude narrator who tells the story of the night that the narrator’s wife brings home her old friend to visit, a blind man his wife used to take care of as a job. The narrator feels threatened by the relationship between the blind man and his wife and therefore writes the man off as pathetic. After the narrator’s wife goes to bed, the narrator and the blind man are left alone watching television and since nothing is on the late-night TV programs, the two watch a documentary about the building of cathedrals. The end of the story involves the narrator attempting to describe what a cathedral is to the blind man which leads to the two of them drawing a cathedral together, the narrator with his eyes closed. In this story, Carver, like Lahiri, does an excellent job of describing his main character. Although the narrator is dislikeable, readers buy him as a human being; he is flawed enough to be human.

What really sticks out in “Cathedral” is the powerful ending. With few words, Carver writes an ending that is breath taking and life changing, showing writers that a moment can speak for itself. The last few lines of the story read: “My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything. ‘It’s really something,’ I said” (375). The power in this ending comes not in the beautiful language Carver uses but instead in
the moment, in the simple fact that the narrator chooses to keep his eyes closed; this moment is the epiphany of the story, it’s what changes the narrator’s frame of mind from being closed off to the blind man to putting himself in the blind man’s position. Carver’s minimalist style allows us to experience the moment independent of description, thus encouraging our imaginations to paint this picture in our own minds, asking us to open ourselves up to different walks of life the same way the narrator is in this story.

“Cathedral” and Carver’s other stories encouraged me to do something I dreaded: delete. Short stories promote over-writing- it is easy to spend too much time describing a setting or a character because you want to make sure the reader is connecting enough with the story you are creating. My original drafts of these stories in this collection are much longer and very different than they are now, but they were packed with unnecessary information that simply did not benefit my story. Carver’s minimalism showed me the importance of every word in a short story— that each word must work towards the eventual epiphany at the end. So, although it was difficult, I cut in the revision stage. I sometimes took out entire paragraphs that included some of the sentences I loved the most simply because they did not belong in that specific story. I admire Carver greatly for his ability to deliver a message in so few words and therefore value cutting my stories down in order to discover the true message I am trying to send to my readers.

*Lullabies and Sleepless Nights* is a collection of stories that encompass the every day: the interactions from person to person (both fleeting and lasting), the relation of humans to nature and God, and the domineering inevitable force of fate that impacts lives every day. In the collection I wanted to divulge truths, truths about the human experience, truths that connect human beings despite their undeniable differences. And although these stories were all created
from my imagination, they were inspired by reality: a piece of conversation I overheard in the hallway, the face of a woman I studied on the New York subway, a relationship I wish would have lasted a bit longer. All of my stories are rooted in the every day things I notice.

The three best tips I have discovered from my writing career thus far are simple. The first, to always pay attention; eavesdropping gives a writer prime, original, and beloved material to create. Paying attention and listening lend way to so many ideas for stories. Even by overhearing the beginning of someone’s conversation, you can create what happens next. Paying attention and speaking to people you normally wouldn’t speak to is also incredibly helpful for a writer because those people have memories in their mind you haven’t even thought to imagine. Striking up a conversation with a stranger always leads me to wonder what I could find in them to write about. We are all so unique, lending us so many different stories; and yet, we’re all the same, in the universal truths I strive to learn and expose. I pay attention in order to discover just what these truths are.

The second tip is to travel, travel, travel. Seeing new places and exploring cities are invigorating for the soul and nutritious for the creative mind. It excites and inspires us. My trip abroad to Greece and Turkey changed me forever by exposing me to other parts of the world, by showing me that there is more than what lies outside of my bedroom window. Being abroad introduced me to new walks of life and further promoted me to find universal truths, truths that spoke to people from different religions, ethnicities, and geographical locations… It encouraged me to think and then write from different perspectives. I try to visit somewhere new as much as I can, even if it’s only a thirty-minute drive to a flower garden or a ten-hour drive to Boston. Traveling gives me ideas for writing from different settings- by visiting a specific place, I can
feel confident writing a story that occurs there. Traveling clears your mind, allowing for new ideas, thoughts, beliefs, to take root.

Lastly, the third tip that has benefitted me is to read and write every day. Writers, especially student writers, can get so caught up in the day-to-day pull of classes, work, and having a social life that they forget to pay attention to what they love most: their own craft and the craft of others. I learned, especially my senior year at Ashland, that snuggling up with a book of Mary Oliver’s poetry is sometimes the best way to spend a Friday night. It’s key to surround yourself with the subject you love the most so as never to allow you to forget why you began writing in the first place: because you adore it. Because literature comforts you in ways nothing else can. Because you have something inside of you that not many people have: an ability and a desire to create.

Throughout drafting Lullabies and Sleepless Nights, innumerable difficulties came up. One of the most difficult things for me was to find the time to rewrite and edit the drafts of stories I already had. A lot of writers will claim their biggest fear is a blank page, but I’ve always been much more comfortable beginning a new story instead of going back to an old one. The rewriting process always makes me feel insecure and doubtful of my story’s worth. Getting over my anxieties about rewriting was a struggle for this collection. To get over this anxiety (as much as I can, anyway), I began sticking to an informal schedule. I decided that with every story I wrote, I’d let it rest for two weeks before even looking at it again, that way I’d be able to see the story with new eyes and be able to more easily see the things that were not working within it. During the two weeks of break from a specific story, I’d write another story so that my creative
mind was not ever at rest. This schedule allowed me to draft all of the stories in this collection and then revise them each multiple times.

As an English major as well as a Creative Writing major, I have had weeks in which four papers are due. Those busy weeks were more obstacles in my writing process because they halted my creative writing. I oftentimes was too focused and busy writing analytical papers for literature courses that I simply did not have time to dedicate to my creative writing. There were times too where my brain was so trained to writing analytically that it was difficult switching out of that mindset into writing creatively. Again, time management became my solution. I really had to make time to write creatively even if that meant dedicating certain Saturdays specifically to writing a story.

On the technical side of things, I had issues with credibility. One of the things I really wanted to do in this collection was write from different perspectives: a different gender than my own, different ages, a different religion, in order to expose the similarities in human beings across the board. When I wrote in these perspectives though, I oftentimes felt as if I was merely acting and I did not truly know what I was writing. That insecurity was so irksome throughout the writing process because it made me doubt everything I thought belonged in a certain story. This issue came up with settings as well; I oftentimes found myself asking the question how can I write about this place when I have never been there? I felt like a poser at times. Time management could not fix this difficulty so instead I had to keep telling myself over and over again that what I was writing was valid even if it was not 100% accurate because what I was writing was fiction. As long as the setting made sense and as long as the characters seemed alive, the story worked.
I have grown so much as a writer and a human being from writing this collection. My mind has opened up to far corners of the world and to the dark corners of my subconscious. There are things I need to spend an infinite time working on as a writer: the time I spend writing, my rewriting habits, my writing across all genres (I need to spend more time in poetry), among other things. But my growth over these past four years inspires me to believe that I will continue to grow as a writer despite wherever I may go in my career.

The stories that follow are attempts to understand life and the condition of being human. They are shots into the void, attempts to connect us all with universal truths about the human condition. I hope one or all of them resonate with you as they have so boldly resonated within me.
“What is the meaning of life? That was all- a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years... The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead, there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one.”

-Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse
The Years In-Between

She could feel Logan in the doorway, could hear the silent movement of his hands running through his dark hair the same way he’d done the first night they met, nearly five years ago now. Jaida squinted her already-closed eyes, hoping the action would prompt Logan to leave, to let her lie alone, once again, in this room that was once readied to be a nursery. But still he stood there.

“Jaid.”

“I’m fine,” Jaida whispered. She wanted to say other things. She wanted to sigh and tell her husband: Three years, can you believe it’s been that long? Doesn’t it feel like time has stopped my love, left us behind?

But instead, Jaida opened her eyes, stood up, touched Logan’s cheek with the back of her palm, and exited the room, the room that had too many layers of white paint covering up what was once painted green.

Oftentimes she believed she was the one to blame. If perhaps her body would have just been more patient and waited until five, the hour that the baby normally pounded for her attention, maybe the outcome would have been better. After all, the two of them had adopted a nearly foolproof routine; at ten PM when exhaustion depleted her, the baby acquiesced, and when he stroked her stomach with his feet at five AM she willingly begun their day. It’d been an easy pregnancy and the two had worked like a perfectly timed machine, she learning what foods he accepted, what foods made him sick, and eating accordingly. It took her only a few weeks to know pickles and bacon were the two foods that made him flip in her stomach. It’d made her sick the few times she’d experimented with the two foods, but she still smiled, wondering aloud
to her husband if the child would grow up to still hate pickles and bacon. He didn’t bother her unless she strayed from their schedule, and when she did, he’d kick the wall of her stomach rather than gently pat it to communicate his impatience.

There was something wrong when her water broke at one AM. She sometimes dreamt about that night omnisciently, seeing herself furiously shake her head, seeing Logan scrambling to get the camera, the cell phone, the car keys, the clothes… She heard herself tell him that the baby didn’t like this time of the day, that he’d be unhappy with her breaking their routine, to just wait a couple of hours before she felt the alarm clock inside of her stomach. She could feel Logan’s fingers pulling her own, could hear him panting out of panic, could hear him say “Jaida, please.” She watched herself doe-eyed and stubborn-limbed look down at the wet sheets of their king-sized bed, still shaking her head…

Logan had said her name so many times that night in attempts to relieve her worries, but Jaida had known something was wrong, could feel it instinctually the way robins know to take flight because of the impending winter. Her impressively rounded stomach felt deflated as she made her way to the hospital. Their routine had been broken, but his impatient kick never came.

Jaida hated that the baby’s birthday would have been on leap year. It wasn’t right that the child would only have a true birthday every four years, that technically he would have only been one year old next year instead of four. It just made him even more mythical, more out of reach. Less real.

*Three years,* Jaida thought again as she walked away from the would-have-been nursery. The event had changed her, of course, but she surprised herself. After two days of being home from the hospital, Jaida had covered their green-walled soon-to-be nursery in a blinding shade of
white paint. She’d finished without crying and laid down on the hard wood-floor, imagining a sky that was white instead of blue, imagining a summer day as white as the room.

The room was still bare, nothing but a hard-wood floor and whiteness; it comforted her to think that this was the same shade of on-fire-white the child must be seeing.

Jaida found comfort lying by herself in the bare white room. She spent a good amount of time in there, especially when Logan wasn’t around because of poorly-scheduled construction or demolition jobs. After her work days, spent in an office at the University of Virginia, Jaida was exhausted by color; her marketing ads and photos, the printing paper, even the painted nails and chunky jewelry worn by her coworkers. It was too much. The whiteness felt right.

Jaida was in the bedroom after leaving Logan in the doorway, picking out clothes that she’d wear to the gym with him after they ate dinner. The two of them had never stopped running together on Wednesday mornings before work, had rarely missed their Monday, Thursday, Saturday workout days together. Fitness helped cure Jaida’s irrepressible thought that there was still an empty, lifeless thing stuck inside of her. In front of the mirror, Jaida took off her shirt, her bra, her jeans, her underwear. Naked, she stared at her body. Her tight-again stomach and lean legs told her that she was indeed empty. Even her face looked empty. Better to be empty than half-full, Jaida thought.

Logan entered the bedroom, coming up behind Jaida and rubbing her stomach as his nose brushed against her neck. Jaida inhaled, sucking in his scent, a scent that still hadn’t gotten old to her. She responded to his touch, lifting her head so that his mouth was on her neck. She was still staring at herself in the mirror, eyes fixed on her naval.

“Why don’t we head out this weekend, you know, take the tent like we used to do? Pick a place we haven’t been before, maybe a place that we’d need a road-trip to get to. You love that,”
Logan said, reaching to tuck her long dark hair behind her ear. Jaida sighed and smiled, tight-lipped, at her reflection.

“Maybe next weekend,” Jaida offered, turning towards her husband and touching his cheek with her palm.

Jaida watched Logan smile at her, felt his lips press against her forehead; she instinctively reached for his hand, pulling him before he or she could walk away.

Guiding him to their bed, Jaida contemplated the trips Logan had offered her these past few years. Logan was right, she had loved them. But that love evaporated over these past three years. She couldn’t help it; those trips, that she did once love, felt kidlike to her now. That spontaneity was no longer part of her life at thirty two, not because of the absence of their third family member, she told herself, she promised herself, but because of age. Jaida wouldn’t attribute anything to their loss, afraid it would make her weak, incapable of living. She was changed, perhaps somewhat, but she wasn’t pitiful. She wasn’t needful of Logan’s pity, his offers of renewal. She was fine.

Jaida flipped over, getting on top of Logan. She pulled his long dark hair, heard his laughter underneath of her muffled in-between pillows. I’m okay, she wanted to whisper into his ear, we’re okay. Instead, she kissed his mouth until they were both exhausted.

She was in the kitchen later. Jaida scrubbed the counter tops of the kitchen, scrubbing them a second time to ensure their sparkle. She used to be somewhat messy, leaving her dirty laundry in wrinkled heaps on their bedroom floor, letting the dishes pile up until there was no more room left in the sink. Even during the last months of her pregnancy, when she was supposed to be learning how to properly clean to ready herself for the mess of a child, she and
Logan would only clean every other Sunday, neither of them having to work, devoting themselves entirely to cleaning the whole house. They would clean together, first their bedroom, then the kitchen, then the living room, then the bathroom, and then the basement. The only room that never needed a biweekly Sunday cleaning was the nursery, the always spotless and perfect and impatiently waiting room. Jaida felt too afraid to touch the furniture or toys or onesies that were displayed like foreign crafts, too beautiful and impeccable and unbelievable to ruin.

Outside of that room, Jaida would dance with the broom, Logan would sing out loud over the kitchen sink, The Strokes coming through speakers that had been perfectly perched on the coffee table, making the music audible from every inch of the house. They’d splash each other with water from the faucet, throw pillows at one another; they’d slide around the hardwood floor in their socks, singing and dancing and falling down in laughter with the realization that it was nearly four PM. When they finished, and the house smelled like lemons and cotton, Logan would complain of being tired, and Jaida, full of energy, would crawl on top of him. Those Sundays ended with the two of them, one exhausted, one exhilarated, making love in the basement on the cold cement floor, falling asleep naked atop a make-shift bed of layered blankets and comforters, similar to the beds they used to make as seventeen year olds after high school dances, nights spent up all night with the thrill of sharing 3 AM together.

Sunday cleanings weren’t tradition anymore. Now, Jaida cleaned when it was necessary, washing dishes after every meal, putting away clothes that were still warm out of the dryer. Again, Jaida attributed the change to her age. That playfulness of course had to stop sometime in their marriage, Jaida reasoned with her subconscious: when the idea that the change was due to what happened appeared in her mind, Jaida fought against it. *I’m almost thirty years old,* she
reasoned, attempting to stretch far away from the vortex of guilt and loss and irrevocable change that if she fell into she’d never get out of.

In the kitchen, lemon-scented dish soap covered her hands. Jaida stretched to dry her hands, her eyes exploring upward, upward to the calendar, full of black X’s of Logan’s, how he kept track of jobs and the time it took him to complete them. She flushed instantly as she realized today was a Sunday, and debated with herself if it would have been a cleaning Sunday had they kept their schedule. Jaida wondered at the responsibility she acquired within the past three years, and why; it was as if she was mothering something despite.

Jaida opened the freezer, searching for something to make for dinner. She thought perhaps she should ask Logan what he was hungry for, but decided on making pasta, the wheat pasta that they both appreciated, topped with a sauce packed with peppers from the Whole Foods store Jaida loved walking through by herself. The meal was comfortable for her, something she could cook without thinking, feeling confident as the peppers erupted into wisps of spice-scented steam.

“What’s for dinner? Need me to do anything?” Logan asked as he shut the bathroom door behind him, freshly showered, his long hair half-wet and the ends of his hair curling upwards.

“Our fav,” Jaida looked over her shoulder.

Logan smiled at her and said, “You know, I’ve really been craving some of that weird shit you used to make. You know, some French recipe or some kind of stuffed enchilada. Where’s that box with the recipes?”

“I don’t do that anymore,” Jaida laughed, shaking her head at her husband. “Got tired of undercooked meats.”
Logan’s long stride got him behind Jaida in almost three steps. He moved towards the countertop quickly. Before Jaida could tell him not to, he climbed on top of the counter. He stood upright, wobbling on his right foot so not to smack his head on the ceiling, his 6’3 body too tall for the habits of a child.

“Logan, stop,” Jaida said, too afraid that he would hurt himself.

“I know you used to hide that box in one of these cabinets, but I could never find where it was. I’d always try and find it to throw away the recipes I hated. It’s in here some-“

“I threw it out. It’s gone,” Jaida said, laughing to alleviate her anxiety that he’d fall, that he’d get hurt, all for something she once again had grown out of.

Logan just looked at her, his face frozen in some kind of half smile, still atop the counter. He ran his fingers through his hair, a nervous habit he’d picked up during Jaida’s pregnancy.

“Our favorite it is, then,” he said, moving from a standing position to a sitting, and finally bouncing onto the floor, dismissing himself from the kitchen.

Jaida stirred the pasta. Logan hadn’t liked those meals she used to try and recreate from books or online recipes, and most of the time, neither did she. She’d attempt to make meals that looked beautiful in their pictures, but which ended up being burnt or uncomfortably chewy, too much salt or too little cheese. *It was never worth it*, Jaida justified to her subconscious again, her subconscious that was always threatening to bring her back to that vortex of extreme uncertainty and guilt, guilt, guilt. She and Logan would oftentimes throw the meals away after trying to convince themselves it was edible, even tasty. Those nights usually led to pizza and the baby didn’t hesitate to show his displeasure. She wasn’t young anymore. The thought plagued her and comforted her, simultaneously. Failures were no longer something she could dismiss with fits of laughter and a food fight.
“Logan, bring another bottle of wine please,” Jaida called over her shoulder.

Jaida set their dishes on the table, poured herself a full glass of wine from what was left of the bottle on the counter, and reached to get a second glass for Logan when he abruptly told her: “I’m good,” nonchalantly sipping on a beer, a bottle of a seasonal Sam Adams that Jaida had never seen in their kitchen before.

“You’re joking,” Jaida laughed. Logan had never been a beer drinker; when they were young, in college especially, the two preferred taking shots, getting drunk fast, not having to suffer the taste of cheap beer. And when they drank now, it was always wine or some kind of mixed drinks, usually mojitos, only for dinner or for getting drunk after especially long weeks, never for an ordinary beverage, never for something to sip as if it were water.

For the rest of the dinner, Jaida stared at the beer bottle, an alien-like dirt on her clean wine-topped table. She kept waiting for Logan to explain it to her: to tell her exactly when he started liking the taste of beer, to assure her it wasn’t that normal of a thing, that Nick introduced him to it after work a couple of weeks ago. He’d never brought it to dinner before, but he was acting as if Sam Adams frequented their table often.

She wondered what else she didn’t know, what else she hadn’t noticed. Have I changed, too? The vortex inside of Jaida’s subconscious opened up, guilt swirling inside of her head, orbiting behind her eyes like Mars in the milky way.

Those camping trips. Those Sunday cleanings. Those spontaneous dinners and recipes. Yes, Jaida had changed, and yes Logan had changed. Just because I’ve aged, she screamed into her subconscious again.

Jaida watched Logan finish his beer, watched his pronounced jaw line that she had fallen in love with so many years ago take in the beer almost effortlessly. She wondered if he thought
that they, he and Jaida, were damaged. And, if he did, just how damaged did he think their marriage was? Were they a dent in metal that could be fixed? Or were they rusted out, completely lost? Because despite her best arguments against her subconscious, the differences in Jaida, in Jaida and Logan, dominated; the daily differences were colored a spontaneous shade of red, impossible to ignore.

The pasta was delicious, perfected by Jaida to the point of no mistakes. And yet she couldn’t eat it. Spaghetti noodles twirled themselves around her fork and her mind wandered to the details of her return from the hospital: the way it felt when she got home that night, as if the house were too eerily empty. How disappointed she’d become when she placed her palms flat against her stomach that first morning afterwards and felt no feet kicking up to her, telling her to get out of bed. So she’d stayed in bed that day. And when nothing prompted her to get up the next day, she stayed in bed again.

They were changed; it had changed them. Jaida swallowed the realization instead of battling against it. With her last gulp of wine, she told Logan “Let’s go camping.”

Jaida could see Logan’s surprise; she could tell he didn’t quite believe her until the trunk was packed, full of hiking gear, coolers of hamburger meat and veggies to grill. It was a Thursday when they left: she only had to take a sick day on Friday and the rest of the weekend was theirs. Within an hour, the two of them were in Logan’s SUV, The Kooks drumming and singing through the speakers, Jaida’s hair everywhere flying everywhere out of the open windows, energetically exploring the way it hadn’t been able to for four years.

The campground was one they were familiar with. They’d been there often, especially in the first year of the marriage when the two had settled down in the house they still lived in.
They’d been there so much that Jaida thought they’d camped in nearly all of the plots. Within the first half hour of arriving, their tent was set up, dinner was on the grill, and nostalgia was pulsing through her quicker than her heartbeat. She’d thought that part of her, the spontaneity, the playfulness, the youth, had fallen away from her. That’s what she’d been trying to convince her subconscious, to push away the guilt. She’d convinced herself she was older so she was different. She didn’t expect her youth to be alive, still kicking somewhere inside of her, something like her child’s impatient kicks, begging for attention that she just couldn’t give because it felt selfish to give to herself when she’d never been able to give to the leap-year baby.

She woke up the first morning at six thirty, watched the sunrise from a cliff ledge a mile away from the tent her and Logan had slept in so many times before. Jaida recognized the cliff ledge even after she’d ignored it for years; she’d come here the day she first questioned whether or not she was pregnant. It was an instinctual question, one Jaida seemed to already know the answer to. She’d sat on the cliff edge then, her tan legs dangling in front of her, her body twitching still from the four-mile run and the bout of morning sickness she’d experienced not soon after. She was scared, then. She was now too.

Jaida sat on the cliff edge, legs dangling again. Around her, cardinals and robins called to one another, their flights tampered by the gusts of wind surfing through the air, forcing leaves and branches to rub against one another, creating a whisper that beckoned, that renewed. Mornings like this were her favorite: the wind made the heat bearable to run in. Wind rushing through her hair reminded her of childhood and it always made her smile, an innocent smile that hurt after awhile because it wouldn’t go away. With an inhale, one that let her ingest the sunset, Jaida stretched her legs outward, flexing as if it would allow her to hold it all, the lush treetops, the rocky cliffs, the stream she could hear but couldn’t see. She wanted it all; everything she
could see from her position atop the cliff. She wanted to store it for her, to transplant it from here to the white-walled nursery.

Stretching in order to crack her back, Jaida’s gaze went to the green tent that Logan was still asleep in. A smile came to her then, thinking of the night before. She was sore for all of the right reasons.

Turning forward, her eyes closed into the wind. Here I am, she told her subconscious, the part of her that always knew there was something else behind all of those changes. I’m where I used to be. I’m fine.

That morning felt natural, as did the afternoon spent fishing and hiking and swimming, the evening spent making food over an old and rusted grill nearly a mile and a half away from their tent, the night spent too close to the bonfire to avoid shivering, elbows instead of fingers pointing to stars in the sky in order to stay bundled within the sleeping bag. Jaida couldn’t feel the radiation of pity coming from Logan on the camp ground, couldn’t hear concern polluting his voice, couldn’t see the mutation of his pupils as he stood watching her lie alone in her white room. Logan had called it an escape, but Jaida wasn’t escaping anything; instead, she was fitting herself back into the familiar shape of who she was.

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The next morning, Jaida woke Logan up at five with the ambition to run. Instead, Logan pulled her on top of him, and the run didn’t happen until eight.

Jaida began a stride ahead of Logan. She laughed as he attempted to maneuver around her.

“You’re going to make me fall!” Logan breathed through the accelerated heart-beat due to running and laughter.
“Keep up!” Jaida screamed, smiling so hard that the cold morning wind rushed in between her teeth, creating a chill down her throat.

Jaida led the two of them through the still morning forest, up and down a steep and graveled hill path, finally ending far away from their tent, near the campsite’s recreation center and RV area.

“I’m going inside for water,” Logan said to Jaida, still trying to regulate his breathing, “you need anything?”

“You owe me something,” Jaida told him, her hand putting his hair behind his ear the way he always wore it.

“Wasn’t aware it was a race, Jaid,” Logan laughed, letting himself into the recreational center.

Jaida walked herself around the campsite’s center. There was an array of people: an older couple eating their breakfast on a bench outside, a new mother and father pushing their infant in a stroller, children laughing and screaming at one another on the playground. Jaida walked towards the playground where picnic tables were decorated with paisley tablecloths. She smiled, unlacing her running shoes, looking towards the swing set because of the creaking noises coming from it. One child was using it, the other children more interested in the newer set of swings or the all-in-one play set that was ideal for a game of tag. The child, a girl, had hair down her back framed by bangs that dangled too far into her eyes. Jaida was struck by the darkness of her hair, made darker by the morning sunlight. As Jaida observed, she realized that the girl flexed her leg as the swing came forward, attempting to reach her leg towards something, towards some kind of finish line. Jaida laughed and walked over to the swing-set, choosing a swing three away from the girl, one that was purple and sat a little taller than the rest.
Jaida began swinging, her momentum easily and rapidly reaching the momentum of the girl three swings away. Her swing creaked even louder than the girl’s, but Jaida kept pushing, her own dark hair falling away from her, lost in the laws of gravity. She fixed her speed when she caught up to the girl, moving in harmony with her, feeling the rush forward and the suction backward at the same time as the child. Simultaneously, they began slowing down; the girl’s swing instantly going crooked as she attempted to stop herself while Jaida’s remained straight.

“Why doesn’t yours do that?” The girl asked, her voice innocent yet inquisitive, a tone that was curious yet determined.

“Years of practice,” Jaida answered.

The girl didn’t say anything for a moment and appeared to be writing something with her bare foot in the dirt beneath her swing. Her feet were bare, her shoes thrown off carelessly to the girl’s left.

“Can you touch the branch?” she whispered, her small eyes opening wider as she looked towards Jaida.

Jaida smiled at the girl, but she didn’t smile back. Her face was set in a scowl, but her eyes didn’t frown. They were wide-open, begging Jaida to do what she couldn’t do.

Jaida began to pump her legs again, breathing heavily as if it could get her to the branch quicker. The girl was staring at her, waiting with such silence that it felt as if Jaida was alone, just her and the branch that seemed to retract itself every time Jaida swung forward. She willed herself to pump more, her leg muscles tired after her run, swelling as she pumped again and again. The moment became an eternity, one of those moments that one seems to experience mystically, out-of-bodily, one that can’t possibly be real but somehow is. She lost her peripheral vision, and then lost sense of what she was doing, and finally lost all sense of herself. There was
only the branch, only the goal, the goal that was reachable. It beckoned to her, as if promising that if she could touch it, if she could just reach it, her sense of self would come back to her magnetized; she’d have a purpose again, if only she could reach it.

Finally, with a long exhale, Jaida’s right foot kicked the branch. The kick sent bark and a few leaves twirling towards the swing set. She stopped pumping her legs, the moment still lingering but her consciousness pulling her out of it, the feeling much like being drunk and alone in a room and conversation full of people. It was an awareness she wasn’t ready to come into.

The girl was on her feet, clapping, her black bangs swaying side to side, her bare feet tinted green due to the morning spent barefoot on the playground.

“I knew it! I knew when I saw you that you could do it!” Her smile ended at two deep dimples. Jaida, still foggy, smiled back, slightly uncomfortable with the praise she was receiving, wondering if this was the beginning of her changed life that had been promised to her as she raced towards the branch.

“I wish I had your legs. I’d win all of the swing races at school! How long do you think it’ll be until I have them?” The girl was still gushing, vicariously thrilled that the branch had been reached.

“It all depends,” Jaida said, “how old are you?”

“My name is Sydney and I am going to be six years old next year!” The girl said almost formally, as if she’d practiced.

Jaida looked the girl over, and nearly choked when Jaida’s eyes connected with Sydney’s. She hadn’t realized it at first, hadn’t gotten a good look at them since they had hid behind the girl’s dark bangs. Now, Jaida could see them: they weren’t Jaida’s own eye color, neither were they Logan’s. The eyes were a dark gray, a greenish gray that looked like fog rising
over grass. The color was a perfect mixture of Jaida’s bright green eyes and Logan’s dark blue. It was the exact eye color the baby would have had. Jaida knew it.

*I’m looking into the eyes of the child I would have had*, Jaida realized. She breathed hard, harder than when she’d been running because this was working her heart more, this was thinning her blood more than anything had in quite some time. *So much color here*, Jaida thought, longing for the whiteness of the nursery.

Sydney threw herself onto the swing awkwardly, her stomach pressed against the swing, her arms and legs dragging through the dirt, her eyes no longer connected with Jaida’s but still burning into Jaida’s subconscious, the eyes adding themselves to the long list of details that were already swirling, orbiting one another: dislike of pickles, preference to go to bed early, a love for vanilla ice cream only when it’s topped with caramel, green-grey eyes. Every thing Jaida knew about the life that still lived so violently around her thrashed inside of her mind so hard that Jaida fell to the ground, overcome by dizziness, by sadness, by loss.

Sydney’s voice was muffled. She was saying something along the lines of asking if Jaida was alright. Jaida didn’t know the answer to that. This trip, it was to fix what was broken, to get her back to the spontaneous and confident woman she’d been back then, back when she sat on her cliff silently praying that it wasn’t true, that she wasn’t pregnant. *I’m not ready, not yet*, Jaida recalled herself thinking; *give us another year to get settled into this married life*. How many nights she spent wishing she could take that prayer back.

On the ground, Jaida let herself think of the child that she wasn’t sure how to mourn because it had never really existed. The child whose silence was deafening followed her every step she took. He had no name, no existence, and no birth date to call his own, just a date of
death, February 29th, 2008, a death before a breath. *I fucked it up,* Jaida thought, *I ruined it and now I don’t know how to fix it-*

Jaida felt her fingers being pulled, the same pull as that night. Logan. He had her on her feet again. Her head was throbbing. Jaida walked backwards, looking one last time towards Sydney, imagining how different this moment would be had the baby’s kicks not stopped. A boy, named, three but technically still age zero, meeting a girl, six years old with the same eye color as his. Maybe he would have watched Jaida reach the branch, clapped in uneven rhythm, smiled at her with new stubby teeth. He’d be looking forward to age one, but instead he was forever lost in the never-ending circle of zero. Perhaps Jaida was in that circle too.

“You have beautiful eyes,” Jaida said, quietly, too quiet for Sydney to hear. Jaida couldn’t stop looking over her shoulder to watch her; she yearned for the girl. Jaida had been waiting for three years now to watch this youth, this unbiased and transcendent gift of innocence, to see it in the form of a dark haired boy whose cheeks turned red easily just the way Logan’s always had. She’d turned into a mother, but a mother of what she didn’t know. She wasn’t parenting a ghost, a shadow of a child she had known and lost, but was instead parenting nothing, nothing but the empty space in which a kick used to be felt or a white room that waited for an occupant that would never come.

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Jaida once again led herself and Logan in a run, a run that led them past their tent and to Jaida’s cliff edge. Logan maneuvered around her once, and Jaida only smiled a sad smile, letting him. He fell back, and things were quiet.

“Jaid,” Logan huffed the word, exhausted by the sun and by their run. Jaida could hear it then: the pity, the tone in his voice that clouded over her when he caught her lying down by
herself in the nursery. It was back. The trip hadn’t fixed it, hadn’t deterred the changes, and hadn’t made her who she used to be, who they used to be, together.

“Jaid,” Logan paused, sounding unsure of what to say, muttering her name again before Jaida sat on the hard and worn ground, tearing at her shoe strings, desperately wanting them off, wanting everything off.

Logan walked closer to her, slowly. He picked up a rock, tilted it, and spoke again.

“What happened back there? That girl…”

“She had his eye color,” Jaida said, finally freeing her bare feet.

“Whose?”

Jaida just looked at him, into his eyes. He was once her husband; now, he was the father of her dead child. I’ll never just be his wife again either, Jaida thought. She wondered what he saw when he looked at her. How different she must look.

The rock Logan threw went sailing through the air, out of sight, only seen by Jaida after its descent into the water. It made echoes of sound, echoes of rings in the water many feet below the cliff. She wondered if the rock hit anything, caused an untimely death, a death of some creature that didn’t matter in the grand scheme of things but mattered nonetheless. Maybe it killed an egg. Death before life.

“What are you doing?” Logan asked, pausing from collecting rocks.

Jaida had stripped down to her sports bra and shorts. She stood barefoot in the dirt of crushed rocks, reminding herself of Sydney and of the youths that had been taken away when the kicking stopped: not only her child’s, but hers as well, her own youth, her own spontaneity, her own confidence. She didn’t answer Logan, but instead looked back at him, silently asking him to
join her. He stepped forward and reached for Jaida’s hand, but Jaida didn’t want to feel that
tugging on her fingers that she dreamed of so very often. She jumped.

She hadn’t dived in years, but she had it perfected. Her ledge was familiar, jutting out far
enough to land her in 12 foot water, and the dive was familiar too. Only seconds, but this dive
had always been another one of those moments, those moments that last and keep on lasting. It
was an eternity punctuated by nothing but one single heartbeat.

The water felt familiar. Cold, somewhat dirty, but clean. Jaida stayed under the water,
deafening herself with its silence. Her hair wrapped around her in slow circles, her limbs stayed
suspended at awkward angles. It was so quiet underneath of the water’s surface, quiet enough to
not hear the splash that came after her own.

Jaida broke the surface, eyes closed. Logan broke the surface not too long after, and when
he didn’t reach for her, Jaida opened her eyes.

He was looking at her, and she looked back. *We’re okay,* she wanted to tell him. *I still
love you.* Instead, Jaida smiled: she smiled at the piece of hair that jutted out from behind
Logan’s left ear, at the leaf that was pasted to his chest by the water, at how much things had
changed and how much they had remained the same. She smiled at their unspoken conversations,
how he always knew what she needed, what she wanted to say but couldn’t. *We still have this,*
she told her subconscious. He splashed her then, and they went up the mountain countless more
times, diving and splashing and playing. Each laugh found it’s way to the swirling mass of
details that were orbiting Jaida’s mind, each laugh filling what was empty: not the spots that
were left behind, but new spots, new areas of love and life and adventure that Jaida hadn’t
known she had.

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After every dive, while suspended underwater, Jaida could hear the strong beat of her heart, could feel the power of her legs as they kicked her upwards. Underwater it was so quiet, and her sounds were so solitary; she was alone. But then she heard Logan drop into the water behind her, and she could feel the wake that his kick stirred. Two kicks, always defying the vacancy.
It’s Easter Sunday and he’s called to carve the ham. Otherwise, he stays out of the kitchen, out of the way of his wife and her sister and her mother who are busy cooking noodles, preparing drinks, setting the table, and complaining about the cold weather.

“Scott, do this ham please,” Amy calls for him again, impatient.

Scott, alone in the living room right beside the kitchen, sighs and heaves his body upwards out of the lazy-boy recliner he got as a gift two Christmases ago from “the kids.” To the left of the recliner is a cedar chest, one which Amy keeps Kaleigh and Bryce’s (“the kids”) mementos in: their first drawings, their birth certificates, and their baby books. On top of all of the memories there lies divorce papers. He hasn’t signed them yet, but Amy has.

He walks into the kitchen, veers in-between Amy’s brother-in-law and Amy’s father who are deep in conversation about NASCAR, a conversation Scott feels inept and uninterested to participate in. Scott feels a hard pat on his back, a pat belonging to the six foot tall brother-in-law, Tony, with the obnoxiously loud and impossible-to-ignore voice. Scott laughs and smiles towards Tony as Scott reaches his wife who has the carving knife waiting ready for Scott to use.

“Where’s the wishbone?” Scott’s son, Bryce, asks with a deep voice coming somewhere behind too much facial hair. It was a joke, a running one year-to-year; when Bryce was seven, he asked if he and his sister could tear apart the ham’s wishbone the way they’d always done the turkey’s on Thanksgiving. Then, Scott could tell Bryce was embarrassed; his son thought himself too old to make such silly mistakes, to be laughed at the way his sister, older and always with an air of intelligence about her, had never really been laughed at. Now, though, Bryce accepted the joke, encouraged the laughter. He enjoyed being the one to make the family laugh, Scott could
tell. Bryce was the family’s lightness and laziness, a break from his high-strung sister who had come four years before him.

The family, small and all fitting into the kitchen, laughs at Bryce. Sue, Amy’s mother, Mo, Amy’s father, Jen, Amy’s sister, Tony, Amy, Bryce, and Kaleigh are all assembled in the kitchen, waiting to take their place in the same spots they’ve sat in nearly every Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. Scott watches Kaleigh laugh, watches her face twitch into a smile when Sue asks her what she’s currently reading. No one in the family knows who Paul Auster or Joan Didion are, but the family smiles and asks questions anyway; what do they write about, Jen asks, a question, Scott can tell, that makes Kaleigh uncomfortable. Scott imagines that such basic questions are difficult for law students to answer. It must be tough, Scott thinks, to be smarter than the rest of them and to pretend that you’re not. Her hair is different, Scott realizes. Shorter, he guesses, but maybe darker too. It’s been this way since the last time Scott saw Kaleigh, over Christmas break when she was home for two weeks, swamped and stressed over classes she wasn’t enjoying as much as she had enjoyed her literature classes in undergrad. But Scott only notices her hair now because he likes to imagine things always being the same, always static and predictable. Like Easter dinner.

“Ham’s done,” Scott announces, prompting a clap from Tony and a sigh of relief from Bryce, exaggerated and sarcastic.

Scott takes his place at the head of the table. He watches the family eat and interact throughout the scoops of mashed potatoes and helpings of ham, watches Sue and Amy fight over the last piece of pineapple straddled over what’s left of the meat. Directly in front of him and at the other end of the table is Amy, who is wearing dark denim jeans that could possibly fit Kaleigh. *She’s losing weight,* Scott notices. And the notification prompts a flash of bitterness that
Scott doesn’t want to deal with, a fear and a jealousy that his wife of twenty-seven years is losing weight for someone else or if not for someone else, in preparation for the option of someone else. The divorce papers, after all, are waiting only for his signature. Hers is black and undeniably there already.

The family makes the usual remarks about how delicious this dish is and how that recipe never gets old. Scott laughs at the appropriate times. Good people, he thinks. I am surrounded by good people. Good people who laugh together and share memories of when Kaleigh was six and Bryce was three and when he and Amy were in love and always saving money for that trip to Europe they’d never gotten around to. He’d been thinking about that trip lately, the one they’d never gone on, especially when the divorce papers were in front of him. Maybe if they’d gone, their marriage could fall back on that: well yes it’s troubled now, they could tell one another, but remember that night in Morocco? Instead, the marriage went on being troubled, stretched so thin that Scott swore it would snap before long.

Good people, his family, and yet he was on the outside, as if his chair wasn’t at the head of the table but rather out of the front door, far away, where Scott couldn’t see his wife’s dimples or his son’s birthmark on the right side of his face. Scott loved these people, had loved them for the majority of his life, but found that as the years went on, he knew less of them, and they less of him. It was Amy’s family, after all, always Amy’s family; Scott’s parents moved to Florida and his brother had passed away years ago. Kids are usually closer to the mom’s side anyway, Scott resolved to himself when he felt bothered. But this Easter dinner is making him feel more than bothered: it is allowing loneliness to creep into his mind as a form of asphyxiation. It’s Easter, again, the same holiday as all of the years before. But this is different. Because there are divorce papers now and soon they will be signed, two black signatures, both sure. Scott wonders
if anyone else can feel the heaviness that clouds the table like an uninvited guest. He guesses probably not.

Scott ventures to smile at Amy, his anxiety searching for some kind of comfort. She smiles back enough to allow Scott to see the shadow of her dimples, the ones she’d use to flash to him in their bed before she’d reach atop him to turn the bedside lamp out. After twenty-five years, Scott knows her less than he ever has. And he doesn’t know how or why it is that way. But it is that way that is exponentially sure. They are no longer in love. He knows that. And the papers wait for him as a reminder in case he forgets.

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After dinner is over, Scott watches from his recliner. He watches the women clear the table, watches them shoo Mo and Tony out of the kitchen, watches Bryce wander into his room, watches Kaleigh’s face and phone light up at the same time with the name of Connor. Scott wonders if this is Kaleigh’s boyfriend, how long they’ve been together, if he should have asked her about him before. He hopes that maybe Connor is in med school, that he has a golden retriever that they walk across campus together, that he grabs Kaleigh’s hand and walks her to every class, even if it’s across campus. But Scott doesn’t know Connor, and he can’t remember if Kaleigh will be twenty-two or twenty-three this May.

He’d known how to talk to a ten-year-old daughter, but a twenty-something year old was more confusing to him than anything he’d ever tried to understand. They’d fought so much through her high school career, fought the same way most teenage girls fought with her parents. But after that stage was over, Scott wasn’t sure how to repair what had never been broken. And she always seemed too busy anyway. It’s fine, Scott told himself whenever she walked in the front door after months of being away. She and I are fine. The thought burns now as he swallows
a long sip of water, the cold ice carrying the on-fire worries through Scott’s system, hot and cold at the same time because, and Scott was coming to realize this, two opposites aren’t as far apart as they sometimes seem to be.

“Bryce, let me kick your ass in a game of around the world,” Tony yells and pounds on Bryce’s door a few paces down the hallway.

Scott smiles, silently reminiscing on the summer days when he’d wear black high top converse and teach Bryce how to shoot a basketball. That Chicago Bulls hat used to fall over Bryce’s eyes and Amy used to giggle uncontrollably every time. The hat’s been thrown out since then and now Bryce knows how to shoot a basketball without his father’s help.

“You coming, Dad?” Bryce smacks Scott on the back of the head, already anticipating Scott to say no. Tony and Bryce make heavy noise down the stairs and out the door, and Scott and Mo are left to wander into the living room where the two of them will most likely fall asleep until Sue readies the pies. It’s the same routine as last year and the year before. But Scott feels different. It’s Easter, again, but Scott can’t remember what they’re celebrating.

The couch, which has also become Scott’s bed since he and Amy stopped sleeping together two years ago, smells like the dog. It’s comfortable though; more comfortable than the right side of the bed he used to lie awake in, silent, except when Amy had asked him that one night if he thought they should get a divorce. No, he’d told her then, one solitary word, heavy, making the darkness around them somehow darker, heavier. The next day he and Amy ate breakfast together. They even made love a night or two later. But now, here they were, Scott afraid to inhabit his own kitchen, Scott so far out of love and out of sync with fatherhood that he wasn’t sure how to get back to it, waiting to sign divorce papers he knew needed signed… But it all made his head hurt. Thinking of making changes in his relationships just sounded so
exhausting; he was retired and he just wanted to relax, to fall into a routine of napping and
golfing. Putting in effort was just too much. *Things aren’t that bad anyway,* he reasoned.

Scott settles in to the couch, letting March Madness announcers argue loudly while Mo
begins to snore on the couch across from him. Minutes go by; Scott hears Jen’s laugh upstairs
followed by Amy’s and finally Sue’s. Scott wonders what they’re laughing at; he imagines the
women telling stories that took place before Scott, when Amy was prom queen and Jen smoked
pot. He used to know those stories. Maybe somewhere in his memory they were still there, still
stored in the spots of his memory that were inhabited by the stories Amy had told him that time
they road-tripped through the Pacific Coastline. But those memories were hazy and it was too
tiring to remember. It was all just so much effort and Scott couldn’t find it within himself to
push, to exert, to care. Outside, the basketball bounces hard against the concrete as Tony pounds
the ball into the ground. Scott can hear it, a rhythmic and faint drumming that lust to long him to
sleep.

He closes his eyes, exhausted by the thought of making an effort. But sleep won’t come
and the thoughts won’t stop troubling him. Flashes of his daily routine, of the part-time job he’d
picked up this past year in order to appease Amy, of 4AM wake-ups in which he’d flip through
the TV channels, all of it ran through his mind.

While he worked during the day, Amy slept, and when Scott slept, Amy worked. With
her on midnights at the hospital and he on (some) days, the two hardly saw each other. The
closest thing Scott had to Amy was her notes that she sometimes left on their kitchen table:
*Going out for lunch with Theresa after work,* or *Kaleigh’s going to call you today, make sure you
pick up.* Vague notes, mandatory but vacant. Sometimes, after he read the note, he’d press the
white paper with the star border to his nose and inhale, hoping to catch a sniff of the perfume
she’d worn since he’d known her, hoping her looping g’s and her un-dotted i’s contained that smell he used to know so well. It wasn’t because he longed to smell her or that he missed something that represented her; he just wanted to remember, to prove that he could remember. But the notes left no trace of her.

There were times when he caught the scent when she’d leave around 11:00 PM. He’d wake up to hear her closing the door and the gust of air from outside delivered it to him, honeysuckle and nighttime. When he did smell it, however brief the sensation lasted, Scott fell asleep imagining the way he used to have Amy’s face memorized; he’d try to draw her face behind his eyelids, one beauty mark below her left eyebrow, one scar close to her right ear, and finally the dimples, their odd position too high up on her cheeks, which he just couldn’t get right anymore, no matter how hard he’d squint to remember her face that used to be etched behind his eyelids. He didn’t do it because he missed her. He didn’t do it because he still loved her. He did it because at one point he did miss her, at one point he did love her. And he had to remember because missing her and loving her had to be worth something.

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The women are playing cards now, as always. Sue likes to gamble, so they play, just the girls, because Tony thinks that Sue cheats and Mo’s eyes are too bad and Bryce isn’t interested enough and inviting Scott would make it not a girl thing. Mo’s still asleep, and the basketball has stopped bouncing. Scott gets up off of the couch, walking towards the entertainment center. He’s bored of ESPN, bored of TV in general, so he’s looking for a movie, something given to him at Christmas or a birthday that he’d thrown in the movie drawer without intentions of watching it. Maybe a western, that’s what he wants, but he can’t seem to get past all of Kaleigh’s romantic comedies and Harry Potter movies or Amy’s collection of Pilates workout tapes. And the
workout tapes are making him anxious again. For someone else, his mind lights up like it’s been electrocuted.

He frenziedly searches, shoves stacks of things out of the way, causing a VHS to fall and hit his foot. It’s a black tape with a white tag pasted on it’s side that reads: “Christmas-Summer 1994” in Amy’s large and curvy script. The i in Christmas isn’t dotted and the mountains of the m’s seem to repeat themselves for far too long.

It makes him think of how often the two catalogued their days from the lens of their video camera. All of the tapes they enjoyed wasting, spent on zooming in on Bryce as he ate a hotdog, mustard somehow on his forehead, spent questioning Kaleigh what she was doing as she looked at a book that she couldn’t read but tried to anyway. Normal days were what they used to enjoy. Normal days used to be special.

The VHS player growls and seems to churn out of lack of use, but eventually the fuzzy screen switches to a scene of Bryce attempting to walk in cowboy boots, a gift from Sue’s brother who has been dead for five years now. On screen, Bryce stumbles awkwardly until he finally gets his balance, and begins to walk like Shaggy from Scooby-Doo, picking up and swinging his feet at a ridiculous height. Scott is taping, Sue has no gray hair, Jen isn’t married to Tony yet, Kaleigh is sitting on Mo’s lap putting a puzzle together on the table behind them, and Amy is in front of the camera, telling Bryce to walk to Daddy. Jen takes the camera, and Scott sees himself twenty years younger, more fit with more hair and a bigger smile. His younger self laughs as he catches a falling Bryce. Scott smiles at the memory.

“What’s this?” Mo’s awake now, and Scott hears a door shut with the entrance of Bryce and Tony.
“Nice shorts, Dad,” Bryce laughs as he gazes at a memory he probably doesn’t remember.

Bryce sits down on the couch with Scott, Mo sits up in the couch opposite of them, and Tony takes his place in the recliner. They’re all intrigued, making jokes about Scott’s moustache or short shorts and Sue’s ridiculously long, red nails.

“Christ, look at your aunt’s hair,” Tony laughs.

“What about his aunt!?” Jen’s walking down the stairs, followed by Sue.

“Oh my God, look at Mo without a gut,” Sue says, eyes intent on the television as she sits next to Mo. Scott feels anxious again as if the walls are getting closer together causing the air in the room to be stifled, lesser, contaminated.

Jen sits atop the stairs, watching the video play, calling Amy and Kaleigh to come watch. Eventually, they do, Amy sitting on the carpet in between Bryce’s legs and Kaleigh folding herself cross-legged on Scott’s couch in between him and Bryce. The whole family is here now, admiring the shocking whiteness of Kaleigh’s hair, discussing how different Scott and Amy’s living room looks now compared to then. And it’s different, its all different, the kind of different that will never revert back to sameness, even with a signature or the absence of one.

“Let’s watch Easter,” Kaleigh suggests. Bryce fast-forwards the video, and suddenly there they are, just the four of them, Scott, Amy, Kaleigh, and Bryce, hunting for brightly colored Easter eggs and surprise Easter baskets. Here was Easter when it was Easter, Scott thinks, when Amy’s dimples were impossibly deep from the mass amount of smiling she did and her honeysuckle perfume was almost something he didn’t even smell because it was so natural to him. Here was when we had reason to celebrate, he thinks.
“Oh my God, you two did not dress me in those pants!” Kaleigh shrieks, pointing towards the purple sweatpants that are too short on her in the video.

“You loved them!” Amy protests.

“You wouldn’t take them off,” Scott agrees.

“Except that one time,” Amy begins.

Scott’s laugh tickles his throat as it emerges from a deep part of his stomach, as if it’s been churning there, unsure of how to get out. “I held you down,”

“And I pulled them off of you,” Amy says, shaking her head as she lets out a small laugh.

“Your brother thought we were hurting you,” Scott continues, “he was in your doorway just crying and telling us to stop.”

“Heartless parents,” Kaleigh laughs and shakes her head. Bryce shakes his in unison.

Scott laughs again, a real laugh that isn’t obligatory like the comments he made about Easter dinner. His laugh sounds like Bryce’s laugh, and Scott hears the similarity, realizing that Bryce too is getting older. Scott looks around the room: Amy’s still smiling, as is Kaleigh. Jen’s now sitting on Tony’s lap, and Sue and Mo are holding hands. Scott wishes he had a camera and more film to waste. If he had the video camera now, he’d film this part of Easter, the part that was true and real, the part that he wanted to belong to.

And he’d film normal days like he and Amy used to do. He’d zoom in on Bryce as he slept and prove to him that he does indeed snore. He’d film Amy holding her daughter down and Bryce tickling Kaleigh in her armpits until she cries. They still played the way they did when they were children, Bryce always asserting himself dominant over his older sister. The status quo, that’s what Scott would try to get on tape if he could. To prove that not much has entirely changed. It makes Scott wish that his son still needed him to help him walk, or that he could
reteach Kaleigh what words like beautiful meant. Beautiful is your mom when she tries to hold back a smile.

On screen, Scott is taping again, switching the camera from the two kids wobbling after the same orange colored egg to Amy who is in short shorts and a floral shirt.

“Look at those legs!” the thirty one year old Scott yells, causing Amy to run towards the camera, her hair falling out of her braid as she runs, her dimples plainly visible from yards away.

“Give me that!” Amy urges, chuckling as she and Scott fight for the camera. Eventually, it’s in her hands, and Scott is walking towards the kids. Amy slaps his butt and Scott laughs, shaking his head.

The video plays on, documenting Kaleigh crying because Bryce found two pink eggs and she had only found green and blue ones, Kaleigh skipping hand-in-hand with Amy, and Bryce poking his thumb through the shell of an egg. The video chronicles Amy’s ongoing laughter and Kaleigh’s innocent voice that used to read to Scott every night until she turned thirteen and it became “weird” to spend time with your dad.

Scott averts his eyes from the screen; Mo’s fallen back asleep, lightly snoring, with Sue rubbing his back and looking lovingly at the video. Jen and Tony have left the room, maybe to round up the leftovers they’ll be taking home. And his wife and his children are smiling nostalgic smiles; smiles that Scott wishes weren’t nostalgic but real because nothing had changed.

The way Amy winks towards the young Scott behind the camera, Kaleigh’s loud and innocent laugh that is unburdened by heartbreak, Bryce’s admiration and desire to be exactly like his father: those things are gone, somehow out of Scott’s life forever. Now, there are only moments these things are visible, as rare as the wisps of Amy’s perfume that Scott smells.
They’re unreachable, even if Scott were to thrust his arms outward, trying to obtain the way things used to be.

But there is this: Bryce allowing Kaleigh to lean her head against his shoulder as he holds his mother’s hand. Kaleigh unfolding from her sitting position and putting her feet onto Scott’s lap, shuffling them the way she used to do when she wanted her father to rub her feet. And there is Amy, both young and old, turning to Scott, and giving him a smile with those dimples. The papers are waiting within the cedar chest but right now it’s Easter again. He closes his eyes, and tries to etch it all in, the way Bryce’s hands are shaped, Kaleigh’s toenail color, Amy’s dimples. When he opens his eyes again, the video has moved on, onto Bryce’s birthday party, and his family has moved on too, to the rest of their day. He picks up the pen on the coffee table in front of him, grips it in hopes of finding an answer within it. But it makes no difference if Scott holds the pen or not. He’ll open the cedar chest tonight, grip the pen. He’ll hover his hand over the dotted line, as if it matters.
Just Visiting

11:45AM on a Thursday morning and I’m late for class. Dr. Tharp has been discussing BioEthics for over an hour now and I’m still so tired, the kind of tired that nine full hours of sleep just refuses to fix. I hoped when I went to sleep last night that today would be different, the different I’ve been expecting for a while now.

But with no one around it was easy to make mistakes. It was easy to sink into loneliness; it felt habitual, like the way animals sink into sleep in the winter. I’ve been waiting for the loneliness and the sadness to pass but it’s just gotten so oddly comfortable that I’m not sure if I’ll ever want to shrug myself out of it.

It’s almost noon on a Thursday morning and I should go to class because I want to graduate next semester and I want to get into med school too but I’m busy running my fingers over a piece of fabric that was given to me to use as a bookmark. I didn’t have one in sixth grade so she cut the bottom of her favorite t-shirt to give to me. I slept with it under my pillow again last night. Because I miss her and because it’s the only thing that ties me to the life I used to know. One piece of fabric, tie-dyed, worn thin by years of my touch: that was what remained to connect me to whom I used to be. Well, that and the prayer rug in the back of my closet, the one that hasn’t felt my knees or my forehead since I’ve been in this apartment. My faith and her… they waltzed together out of my life inconspicuously, slowly, so I wouldn’t know until they were totally gone.

I can’t get out of bed. “I’m trying to,” I say, attempting to convince these four walls that have been coddling me these past few weeks. Speaking the words aloud make them seem more real even if they are perhaps not entirely true. I’ve been feeling so defensive lately but there’s no one really to defend myself against; Charlie and James (my two best friends here in the city), my
parents, my younger brother, the five or six girls I kept around for when I needed something, they all had backed off, left me to the demise I was somehow reveling in. I’m trying, you see, but it’s a haze, a dark room and a perpetual soberness that has just become so comfortable. I’m trying, I tell myself for the third Thursday morning in a row, but I’m not sure if I want to be trying. I’m not sure how to get out of this. I’m not sure if I want to get out of this. Because the life I’ve been living- spending my father’s money greedily and unnecessarily, partying nonstop with friends and strangers, sleeping with women whom I wouldn’t remember their names, breezing through my classes with charisma and a quick mind- it all seems so vulgar, so uninteresting. I don’t want to get out of my bed to get back to that. It’s 12:05 and I’m going to lie down again.

New York City hadn’t been home to me for years. My mother, father, and I lived in an apartment on the east side of Central Park until I was ten years old, a ritzy area full of lawyers and business owners, models, people who were rich without any reason to be. My father, 6’2 and skinny, walked through the apartment building without making many friends. He was intimidating for his physical demeanor, but even more so for his status: a brain surgeon at Lenox Hill.

The city had been different then. The people were ruder, but somehow sweeter, filled with an ignorance of death and destruction that left them uncaring towards strangers but harmonious towards their own. Now, the city was so full, bigger somehow. The buildings looked taller, larger, at age 22 than they did when I was 10. Perhaps I was more intimidated by it now. When you’re born in the city, the city is home; when you come back to it, after years spent in the suburbs, the city is chaos. *How was I ever used to this*, you think.
But it’d almost been a year now since I relocated to the city again. And I was starting to fit in, starting to accept the abrupt noises and never ending sirens. The city seemed to welcome me; I took to its streets and its bars and its people almost immediately. I felt like I belonged in the city. It gave me the easy and dirty and attractive outlets I’d been yearning for quickly after completing my suburban adolescence. The city, lustful and greedy for the eager and the youthful, opened itself up to me as if it didn’t have a spine. And we were so compatible, at least until recently.

I can’t help but think of the ease of fitting back into the city life as ironic. Perhaps it had me marked, red-flagged; perhaps it knew I had squirmed my way out of the city’s tragedy and had then left it instead of nursing it back to health; perhaps the easy entrance back into New York City was the city beginning to swallow me whole. Maybe it was spitting me out now.

When I was ten, my parents took me overseas for the first time. They were from Turkey and wanted to show me Istanbul, to walk me through mosques and to take photos of me playing in the gardens of the Topkapi Palace. We were buying things in the Grand Bazaar when the second plane struck the towers in New York.

I’ve thought back on that day so many times. The day was significant anyway because I was overseas and I was speaking Arabic and people actually understood it (in NYC, we rarely spoke Arabic in public- it caused stares). I had prayed in the Blue Mosque that morning, had prayed instead of merely uttering the same words and kneeling when required. It was the first time I felt shaken by prayer, influenced by religion, impacted by faith. My prayer released a happiness inside of myself I hadn’t known before, and I remember thinking nothing could ever crumble it. But it only took a couple hours for me to forget that happiness completely, the way
we forget there was ever an autumn once the first snow lands. That happiness, that absolute certainty in prayer, crumbled and its dust combined with the ash of New York City on September 11, 2001.

Our hotel television revealed the truth. My father’s face told me more. I remember the next week, confused and young, somehow knowing my life was forever altered. The first few days I felt the weight of things we didn’t know: if our apartment building had been affected, if anyone we knew had perished. Even at ten years old, I felt the gratitude and the guilt of life. I dreamt, night and day, of the same questions: why I had been saved, why time and circumstance made it so I’d be an ocean away from a horrific reality I could not and still cannot comprehend. And I’ve been trying to answer that question ever since: why I had learned the truth within prayer the same day I learned to question the goodness of the world. I carried it with me on board the 14-hour flight back to the States, carried it with all of my belongings when we moved states away, still carry it with me as I board the NYC subway or get into the backseat of a taxi. It stays within me, a haunt that will not lessen, a haunt that I am as grateful for as I am irritated by.

The city was scary to her. Don’t you feel like you’re in a giant cage she’d ask me regularly? And the city, always seemingly aware of what its visitors felt, didn’t open itself up to her the way it did for me. It coughed on her, rain hitting her curly and frizzy hair relentlessly. It hissed at her, the rude cab driver cursing at her in another language for crossing the street in front of him. The city didn’t want her there. But I did. I always wanted Casey near.

She was here only two weeks ago, the first visit she’s ever paid to my NYC apartment. We hadn’t spoken much since I’d moved, only some texts or emails or late night phone calls in
which she or I or the two of us were drunk and/or high, one of us but really both of us wanting to
know exactly what was happening in one another’s lives. I called her my friend but I wasn’t sure
what she was, what she possibly could be.

When she was here, it took her two hours, a bottle of her favorite red wine, and a long-
awaited kiss, one that lasted too long, one that was impossibly short, for her to tell me that she
was engaged. His name was Marc, the guy from Canada she’d met at her yoga class in
downtown Indy. She’d told me about him on a Wednesday night, the night of the week that she
and her friends went out to the dueling piano bar, the nights when she most likely would call.
Tell me everything, she’d say, 2:30AM, me falling asleep on the other end of the receiver, what
have I missed? That Wednesday after she’d met Marc, she hadn’t asked me to tell her anything
on the phone in the strange AM hours. It was her voice, slurred and soft, subtle and sharp,
spilling out into my ear, wanting to know nothing, telling everything. I met someone, she said
only four minutes into the conversation. I tried laughing it off, the way we both did when either
of us “met someone,” both of us confident that this person was quite insignificant compared to
the incredible and unrequited and abstract love that was ours. But then she’d told me not to laugh
and she didn’t say she missed me and I knew, could feel the realization throbbing inside of me
like a busted blood vessel. I was rubbing the bookmark, holding it during our phone call, trying
to ignore my heart breaking again. Because I liked her where she’d been for the past year, her
abstractions so perfect and so uncomplicated that it made me fall more in love with her than ever.
I loved her through those drunk and sparse phone calls, through the uncertainties of our
friendship, through imagining the position of her cheekbones as I stared at her cursive
handwriting on the bookmark that slept with me underneath my pillow.
It was a short three months later when her aforementioned trip happened. I hadn’t gotten any drunken phone calls but I’d made a few, longing for the irresponsible and careless kind of connection again. Some of them went unanswered. When she arrived, I wasn’t sure if she and Marc were still together (I hadn’t heard about him much- I hadn’t asked). So I’d made an effort, showed her my favorite places in the city, pointed out the apartment I lived in until I was ten, took her to ground zero, explained to her the concept of the memorial, took her into my favorite place to study, a back room in the university’s library. Her eyes, always so large and green, looked wider than normal, taking the city in for the first time behind black-rimmed glasses. Blonde curls flew across her face because of the wind and we laughed about it until we got back into my apartment, already half-drunk on the anticipation of what was to come.

*I’m going to marry him*, she breathed against my mouth as I leaned in for the second kiss. The words tasted like red wine and poison, poison and red wine. I knew her once, when we were kids, when we were teenagers, the years that seemed as if they were planets ago now. I knew her so fully, so totally then. And when I stopped knowing her so intimately, stopped because it was too complicated, I learned to love her in the abstract, in the not-quite-real way, the way that was easier and at times more fulfilling. The way that was always less disappointing. And with those words, the ones she breathed onto me knowing we’d just had our final kiss, both versions of her were shattered. I no longer knew her the way I used to and her in the abstract was now ruined too, plagued by a reality I couldn’t deny any longer.

The visit must have been a goodbye of sorts, a final one to link together the hands of all of the other goodbyes we had shared over the years, the ones that weren’t serious because we were still able to toy with one another at odd times of the night, confessing our love or our regrets in ways that debunked any goodbye we had given.
And the goodbye brought me back to the beginning, when my father was prejudiced out of his job and my mother scared out of the city and me confused into a too-early-knowledge of race, of difference. The last kiss I shared with Casey brought me back to her red front door where it all began.

In my apartment, I couldn’t go back to sleep when I lied down. The routine I’ve gotten accustomed to allows me to walk around the apartment: make food, put a record on, leave the building for a bagel or a coffee, only in places not haunted by the life that was once mine.

I’m doing that now, putting on a jacket to walk to my new favorite bagel shop outside of the loft. A blueberry bagel with cream cheese, a black coffee, the seat by the window that has a leak- it’s all become a new comfort to me, replacing the late night pizza and cheap booze and queen-sized beds. I now prefer the afternoons instead of the nights, the middle hours that seem to be less busy than all the others. And the bagel shop has a red door that reminds me of hers, allowing me to reminisce, to bask in the sadness of her and us and my confusion in another location. A new red door summons me like hers used to.

Their front door was painted red. It had a gold knocker and was framed by white siding, a welcome mat at the bottom that was a faded brown color. It looked out of place with the house’s outer color scheme, which was only white for the siding, black for the shutters, and red for the door.

“Do you think this used to be black? Or white?” I asked my mother, still staring at the faded fabric my feet were resting on.

“Don’t be rude, Ali,” my father responded, sighing as he used the gold knocker.
It seemed like it took Elizabeth, the mother of the house, our new next-door neighbor, a lot of minutes to open the door. But I was only ten and I was bothered by the color scheme and I was bothered that we were here and the three-story house felt less homey than our two-bedroom apartment in the city and-

“Mr. and Mrs. Nader, please, come in,” the woman who answered the door looked too young to be a mother. Her yellow hair was tied up and curled into itself, the only pieces falling from it perfectly placed to accentuate her cheekbones. Her smile was open-mouthed, her eyes large and pale blue. She wore a sundress, a floral one, and I could see the bottom of her legs. They were tan, colored by the sun.

Every house looked similar in our new neighborhood, especially according to size. The Carlson’s, whose house we were entering into, looked almost identical to ours, at least in build. Elizabeth walked us into the dining room, offering us all lemonade.

She walked into the next room, through opened white-windowed doors, to an open kitchen with dark hardwood floors. As she made our lemonade, my parents sat stiffly, unsure of where to put their hands or what was appropriate to ask our new neighbors, the people who weren’t as comfortable remaining strangers as our neighbors in the city had been. It’d taken two invites before my parents accepted Elizabeth Carlson’s invitation to her home, one by way of a card in the mailbox, another by way of a flower arrangement that we put in the extra room that we were using for storage. I gazed at the walls.

Our apartment had been decorated with things from all over the world: ceramic plates from Greece, quilts from South Africa. My parents had traveled, especially my father, for his career. And everywhere there were tapestries, lamps, intricately jeweled storage containers, all of the trinkets from the bazaars of my parent’s home country. Our new house in the suburb of
Indiana was beginning to look the same, although it proved to be more difficult to successfully decorate. The house was so large. The trinkets, which used to flood every shelf, windowsill, any free space we could find in the apartment, now seemed sparse, stretched thin. The Carlson’s house, however, didn’t look to be in need of any more decoration. The walls were splashed with art pieces, strange things I stretched my neck trying to decipher what exactly they were. They looked like simple shapes of color, some with messy lines or blurred pigments. I didn’t understand, especially then, why such things should be hung on a wall.

“Stop staring,” my mother chastised me when she caught me moving my head as far left as I could in order to see the painting in the dining room. The Carlson’s also weren’t afraid of wall-paper or bright paints: from my seat in the dining room, I could see a bright yellow backsplash underneath of the cabinets, and the wall behind me, the one opposite of the strange painting, was patterned with what looked like brown and tan waves. I’d never been in a home like this before.

“Ali, stop that-“ my father began, echoing my mother, but he was interrupted by Elizabeth’s return to the dining room, more of her yellow hair falling into her face, her hands holding firmly onto a tray that carried our lemonades.

“John’s at work, else he’d be here,” Elizabeth explained, “perhaps you’ll meet him at work soon?”

“Maybe,” my father began in response, “but the hospital is a large place, and I work midnights.”

“Of course,” Elizabeth responded, “stupid me. You two will have to meet another time. John works until 6 every day but Saturday. He’s an ENT doctor.”
Her words and her yellow hair and her calves made me want to say something intelligent to her. I wanted to impress her, to show that I was more than a ten-year-old boy who moved next door. Father took this job because the city became too mean to him after-

But I didn’t say a word. I sipped my lemonade quickly and listened to my mother get advice from Elizabeth that she may or may not use, tips on when its best to go grocery shopping, the best hairstylist in town…

The sound of running came thundering into where I was sitting. I don’t know where she came from, but suddenly, there was a miniature Elizabeth, a girl who was out of breath and impatient.

“Casey!” Her mother exclaimed, looking to my parents and me, embarrassed.

The girl turned towards us then, her eyes large underneath black-rimmed glasses. They were more green then her mother’s, I realized, less pretty but still so full.

“You’re my age!” Casey walked quickly towards me, not showing any signs of stopping. Her eyes got larger as she walked on.

“Casey, hang on,” her mother warned her.

“Mom, you know there’s no one my age around here. The babies two houses over cry too much and the boys up the street stopped hanging out with me.” Casey stopped once she got close enough to me, our legs almost touching. “I’m Casey,” she said, half-smiling, her eyes examining me the way I examined the strange things on her walls.

I thought her mother was beautiful, and in my first meeting with Casey, trying not to stare directly into her eyes in fear of her hypnotizing me, I thought she was frightening. Her mother reminded me of the women that walked the streets of New York City, beautiful enough to blend in with Fifth Avenue, sleek enough to fit perfectly in lines to get a latte, a macaroon. I’d seen
women like her there, my classmates’ mothers waiting for them in cars after school, yellow hair painted back. But Casey’s was an appearance I had never seen before. Her eyes were ironically large, menacing, sweet. There were freckles on her face, but only around her nose, framing it the way parentheses framed a fact.

“Who are you?” Casey asked, her face coming nearer to mine. I was looking down, feeling scared, wondering why her shoes were swirled and tye-dyed.

“Casey, leave him alone,” Elizabeth pulled her daughter by the hand.

“No, Mrs. Carlson, it’s alright. Ali, introduce yourself,” my mother instructed.

Slowly, I raised my eyes from her shoes, the ones I can see so vividly in memory, the shoes that I can recall sometimes easier than I can my brother’s laughter.

“I’m Ali,” I told her, still afraid of looking into her eyes.

“Do you like my shoes?” She asked.

Nervous that she had seen me staring, I prepared to answer yes even though I wasn’t sure that was honest. But Casey apparently hadn’t wanted a reply. She was walking away from me, bouncing off the front of her strange shoes, skipping as she got closer to the back door. I remember thinking her so strange, uncomfortable even.

“It’d be nice for Casey to have a friend so close by,” Elizabeth said, smiling towards me.

I would have guessed then that Casey Carlson and I would not be friends, that I’d see her at school and outside on hot summer days, that I would say hello whenever she walked too closely next to me and try to excuse myself from her as quickly as possible.

I was wrong.
She always made me uncomfortable, unsettled, unraveled, even after I knew her. But it was a good undoing, the way a storm undoes a drought.

A week or so after our first encounter, I was told by my parents that I should go play outside. There was a basketball hoop in the driveway, a treehouse in the backyard, both from the family that lived in the house previously, and there were other children outdoors, boys a year or two older than I was, a family with toddlers two houses down. And there was Casey.

The basketball hoop bored me and I wasn’t curious enough to explore the treehouse. The older boys were playing a game of street hockey, something I never knew anything about, and the toddlers were in their swimming pool with their parents. The art of playing outside was unknown to me then; in the city, our recesses were on a rooftop, a small playground with one slide and one set of swings. New York wasn’t made for the outdoor activities suburbs exercised.

I saw her across from me, lying on her stomach, facing her house, doodling on her cement driveway with chalk. Her tennis shoes weren’t on, but I could see them, in the grass, abandoned, lying in a way that suggested she had flipped them off of her feet. The bottoms of her feet were dirty, tinted green from the grass. I walked towards her, still scared of her, but bored enough and desperate enough to talk to her again.

“What are you drawing?” I asked at the end of her driveway.

“You can’t see it!” She said, not looking over her shoulder at me. I heard her start laughing then.

“What’s funny?” I asked.

“Nothing is funny, I’m gonna sneeze,” she said, her voice in a higher pitch, her mouth opening, nostrils twitching, all in preparation for the sneeze. It didn’t come. “Chalk makes me sneeze, doesn’t it you?”
I was closer to her, but I still couldn’t see what she was drawing. It was incomplete, barely started, in fact. I told her then that I’d never drawn with chalk: they didn’t give it to us at recess and there was nowhere in our private sphere in the city that allotted a child’s artwork.

She stared blankly at me then, unconcerned about protecting her artwork. Her glasses were almost falling off of her, and her eyes, the ones that looked so huge in the frames of her glasses, were still so large, so full of questions she’d eventually ask. Blonde hair, like her mother’s, erupted from her scalp, falling in curls past her shoulders, untamed, falling wherever it pleased, like her eyes, like her.

“Here,” she motioned me to sit down next to her with a piece of orange chalk, drawing a star onto the cement. “Draw something next to me.”

We didn’t speak for what seemed like hours. She worked on her chalk drawing, something she rotated her body to complete, sometimes even moving positions completely. I tried my best, but had no vision, no idea of what to draw. New York was in my mind, so I drew a park, one that I pictured as Central Park, one I wasn’t sure looked the way I wanted it to. I looked at her more often then I drew: I watched her tongue poke gently out of the left side of her mouth as she colored in a sun in the sky, watched her yellow curls bounce as she scribbled. I could tell then that she was an artist. That the process of creating was sacred to her, hence the quietness, the protectiveness over her piece. And she had invited me into it nonetheless, had given me entrance into her vision, ones I didn’t understand but wanted to.

Eventually her mother called her in for dinner. We stood up, chalk dust covering our hands and some parts of our clothing. Casey was staring at what I had drawn: flowers, trees, park benches, birds… and she was smiling as if she were proud. I looked to her drawing, confused and interested all at once. Colors swirled together effortlessly; the sun I thought I had watched
her draw now looked only like orange and yellow and red together. It looked like an explosion of color, gears of color that were rotating and moving together in a brilliantly fantastic way. I didn’t know it then, but by looking at that piece of cement, I was looking into Casey’s mind.

“Coming Mom!” She called back to Elizabeth, sprinting towards the side of her garage. She came back to our spot in the driveway with a hose dripping a steady stream of water, splashing her dirty feet in it along the way.

“What are you doing?!” I asked, frantic and angry that she was going to destroy her work, disinterested in the fact that she’d wipe mine away too.

She raised the hose to me then, soaking my chest before turning the hose back to our chalk drawings. I expected her to laugh, but she only smiled, eyes rounding as her smile formed.

“If it’s nice tomorrow, we can draw again,” she said, aware of the unpredictability of an Indiana June.

I walked away from her then, back into my own driveway. Lying in the grass, trying to dry from her hose, I watched her walk through her garage and into her house, questioning how a girl with big eyes could make me wonder so much.

Before I moved back to New York, before I transferred to NYU my second year of college, there were times I’d watch her the same way I did then. It was the same pattern: her car would be parked for five minutes before she finally got out, her exhaustion evident in her untucked waitress shirt and her hair that was bursting from her pony tail. Her exhaustion didn’t matter most of the time, though. Her childhood energy followed her into adulthood. Her skips still carried her into the garage the way they carried her away from me the first day I met her. The garage door would be lowering, and I’d be watching from my window, lowering my face,
straining to get a last look, hoping to find those tye-dyed shoes that had mesmerized me so long ago.

There weren’t many garages in the city though. And still no Caseys.

In the bagel shop, I think about that first year in our new home. I watch people come in, too busy to watch one another, hustling out of the shop as if they’re without an imagination. It depresses me watching them because I was them. The city makes you feel busy even when you’re not. But now I am comfortable sitting alone in my seat next to the window, watching the raindrops pile into a puddle on the windowsill. The city beat on outside of the window, impatient, hungry, always so hungry.

In Indiana, life was different. The calmness of the traffic, the clearness of the night sky, the laziness of suburban evenings, it all brought my family and me into a kind of haze, one we hadn’t been familiar with in the city. It was go go go then: to school or to work or to the grocery store two blocks down, to dinner, to study, to pray. The city’s song of hustle and impatience formed us into a tight schedule, one we rarely broke, one that felt natural. Prayer five times a day was only another part of the schedule; necessary and doable because we moved along through our days like the walkers on the sidewalk. But in Indiana, relaxing overpowered doing. Praying five times a day didn’t seem doable or necessary anymore. Somehow, with a less busy life, we couldn’t find the time to pray five times a day. More than usual it was a once-a-day deal, the four of us praying together before bed, all of us whispering the same mantra together.

The city had altered my parents’ religion. America had, I guess. Mother stopped wearing her hijab long before I was born, started getting her hair done so she could wear it long, curled, black against her back. Father rarely spoke in Arabic, only using it to teach me. They were never
strict parents in a religious sense; they had taught me the language, had read me passages from
the Qur’an as bedtime stories, had taken me overseas. We typically went to Friday prayer at the
mosque in New York, but mosques were more difficult to find in Indiana, thus the Friday prayer
also staggered out of our schedules.

Religion was, I feel oddly guilty to say, not a large part of my or our lives. It was there, I
believed that. But my family’s minority of a religion in the suburbs of Indiana didn’t affect me as
much as one might assume. It didn’t rub uncomfortably close to me the way it did my father after
9/11. The second time I’d ever seen him cry was after his last shift at the hospital, the one in
which he was “let go” because employees and patients alike were uncomfortable. “He said it’d
just be for the time being,” I’d heard my father tell my mother, tears falling silently down his
cheek nonetheless. And there was an opening for him in Indiana, away from the city, away from
the reminder of guilt my father was forced to feel for something he too felt angry over.

The coffee is extra black-tasting today. That’s good, I think. Nothing else can really
shock me the way the first sip of black coffee can. Maybe it’s the blackness of the liquid instead
of the taste; extreme color always makes me alert.

Her lightness surprised me no matter how often I saw her: the golden tones of her hair
bouncing in the sunlight, her pale flesh reddening so quickly, the almost-translucent green of her
irises that I once swore glowed in the dark… all of it served to cut a severe division between us,
the whiteness of her versus the darkness of me. It wasn’t an envy or a want to be like her, just an
awareness that I’d known but hadn’t gotten accustomed to yet.

As we got older, we remained friends. We never went through a stage that included
separating. Surprisingly, though, she stayed just a friend. No thoughts of liking her entered my
thoughts the way thoughts of other girls in middle school did. But when we entered high school, that all changed.

I can remember one day in particular that I can recognize as the change, the transition from her and I being innocent childhood friends to something else. We were fifteen, almost ready to finish our freshman year together, when Casey agreed to go to prom with the senior from her art class- her chalk pieces from childhood prepared her for an early and heavy amount of AP art classes. The senior, who I’d seen in hallways and in my math class (he was in the dumb math for his grade, I was in the smart math for mine), seemed nice enough. He had no terrible reputation, didn’t smell like the drugs most of the other art students did. And he’s white. I remember the thought hitting me like a fast ball- I hadn’t expected it and didn’t go back to it after the thought flashed through my mind. We were just friends, after all, and the color of our skin didn’t matter so long as that was the case; she could go to church on the Sundays she got up early enough and I could pray one to five times a day whenever I felt like it without it causing tension because we were friends and friends had no threats to their relationship.

On prom night, Casey called me before she left. “Ali,” she said, crying, “why am I so nervous?” I remember laughing at her on the phone- the sound of her voice when she was crying always made me laugh. And I didn’t fix anything, not really, but when we hung up her eyes were dry and her voice was back to normal. I sat on my bed half-studying for a history exam, trying not to look at the clock, trying not to decipher how many minutes it’d take for her to be home. I wasn’t tired, not at all that night. I kept wondering how Casey did her hair and hoped that she hadn’t just worn it down naturally because that was our thing, Casey’s and mine; it dated back to when I first moved in and her curls bounced into my face that first day. But we didn’t have an our- that’s what I had to keep telling myself that night she was at prom.
I called her cell phone at midnight. When she didn’t answer, I called again. Outside of my window I could see her window- it was still dark, the curtains billowing from the fan she kept on 24/7. Fear that I had lost her crept into my mind as I sat back on my bed. It seemed to go on for forever, but eventually there came a knock at my first-floor bedroom window that I knew belonged to her small hand because of all of the other times she’d knocked on the same window, asking me to come out and play. Instead of me sneaking out of the window, though, she snuck in.

“I’ve been calling you,” I told her, hoping she couldn’t see the tye-dye fabric bookmark that was lying on my bed. “How was it?”

Her hair was in a state of disarray, her curls tangled within themselves. She was in a tshirt and jeans, no signs of a dance having ever occurred. Her eyes were as big as the moon in my backyard. I knew those eyes- they were the eyes of someone about to say something bold and unchecked, the eyes of the six-year-old Casey behind her red door waiting to meet me.

“Do you want me?” She was breathing hard, her body rigid and upright. Her neck was long as if it were stretching away from the answer I was going to give her.

It felt like hours before I could answer. I felt sweaty and ambushed and too awake. No question like this had ever been asked between the two of us; sure, mutual friends or peers we didn’t really know would ask in the hallways or at sporting events if the two of us were dating yet. But those comments were insignificant, ones we could easily laugh off. When it came from Casey, though, it was actually real. I thought maybe I’d try and say no, to tell her to go back to wherever she’d left Aaron- but the lie felt too deceitful, too untrue. I yearned for her, and the differences in our skin color only made the desire more prominent.
“Of course I do,” I told her. She let out a sigh that looked as if it deflated her. In only
seconds her body lunged onto my bed and we were kissing, touching, all with the grace of
ballerinas.

“Hayati,” she breathed into my mouth. She’d remembered the Arabic word I’d taught her.
We made love for the first time that night. It began the relationship we’d have for the next three
years, on and off.

We’d never called one another boyfriend or girlfriend. Despite my family’s lack of
prayer, there were elements of our religion I knew that still remained obstinate. The problem of
dating, of wanting to be with someone who didn’t understand what being a Muslim meant,
would be an issue that did not bend with time. It didn’t seem to matter; we needed no label, only
needed the time we’d been spending together for years.

I’m back in the apartment now, trying to read a book. It’s a collection of Hawthorne
stories, the collection that Casey struggled through during high school but adored despite. But
my mind can’t focus on Rappucini or his daughter because it’s thinking of Casey and the day we
“ended it.” I was moving to the city a month later.

“I like to believe I was walking through Hagia Sophia when the planes hit the towers,” I
told her, “I know it’s not true. But it helps to comfort me.”

“Why?” She’d asked, never feigning her interest in my religion or language or anything
else about me.

“I don’t know. I guess I like to imagine myself learning what tolerance looked like at the
moment the world changed. I like to think it prepared me for the intolerance we got when we got
back to the city.”
She was rubbing my hand. “Is it still important to you?”

“What?”

“Your religion,” she said shyly.

It was a subject we rarely discussed in our years of falling into friendship and falling into something like love. But I was leaving soon, and it felt like both of us knew the truth the move would bring.

“Yeah,” I said, “it matters.” I said it with an aggressive tone, not because I was offended but because I knew I should have been. I didn’t know that my prayer rug would be in the back of my closet unused a year later. But we couldn’t be together. Playing at being together had been fun but neither of us were blind; the skin colors, the religions, the differences, they’d keep us apart, make us only half together. Faith was something I wasn’t willing to battle, not even for her.

“Casey,” I began.

“I know,” she said in response. She was crying, silently. Beside her on my bedside table laid the collection of Hawthorne stories, the one I hadn’t gotten around to reading until I was alone and depressed in the city. Atop the book was the bookmark, the symbol of our love that existed long before either of us realized it did. She touched the piece of fabric as if trying to rub out of it some kind of hope, a possible reality that she hadn’t yet thought of. But we’d both exhausted ourselves trying to find a way out of the undeniable truth of us: we were together in ways that were never going to be total. And that was okay for me then because it didn’t mean she’d love someone else, just that she’d be free from the sadness of our reality.

“I can’t date,” I told her although she already knew. It wasn’t acceptable. We’d have to be too serious too quickly in order for us to have a shot- discuss marriage and the future of our
children before we even told one another I love you. Because I was me and she was her and we were born different.

She’d left that night after five more goodbye kisses. We didn’t speak much during the month I waited to move and I rarely saw her except for the quick glimpse I’d get of her getting into or out of her car. Being done with school, there was nothing that forced us into noticing each other daily. It was amazing how easily it could all be avoided.

I moved here to get a fresh start; to go to school, to live on my own, to meet new people (perhaps a girl that was of my religion, one that understood the confines of love it put me under). But now I’m alone in my dark loft with no one like me around. I’ve been sad, so sad, since Casey left for the last time. Something about solidifying the fact that there could never be anything between us again hit me hard. I haven’t been able to pick myself back up.

I walk to my closet looking for a rain jacket to wear out for dinner later. I’m thinking maybe Chinese takeout. Maybe I’ll call Mom and Dad tonight and tell them about Casey. Mom would say she’s sorry in a sad voice that really meant at least you’re not trying to be with her. I pull the rain jacket off of the hanger and the hanger twirls itself around the rod, falling to the right corner of my closet. Sighing, I bend to retrieve it, my hand blindly patting the dark corner of my closet as my face turns to avoid the clothes hanging at my eye-level. I don’t find the hanger but I do find my prayer rug. I can feel the softness of it, can feel the sewing lines of detail, despite how long it’s been neglected.

Out of the closet, the prayer rug is different than I remember. The green is a brighter color than I’d thought: it reminds me of the treetops I used to look up to when walking through the forest in Casey’s backyard. I’m looking at the rug, trying to get all four corners to stay pinned
to the ground the way I want them to, and I think maybe I’ll pray. It used to mean something to me. It used to mean enough to let Casey go. It used to tell me being in Turkey instead of NYC saved me.

I clear a radius for the rug and me and notice the bookmark; the piece of tye-dyed fabric Casey gave me, hiding underneath my queen-sized bed. I’m surprised I haven’t noticed its absence. A ray of sunshine that sneaks in through closed blinds hits me as I bend down to pick up the bookmark. Its as if something is telling me not to, to just let the fabric lie there, abandoned. But I pick it up because I know if I don’t, if I don’t give this attention first, I won’t be able to pray properly.

I walk towards the window, to the source of light that temporarily blinded me a few moments ago. Pulling up the blind, I’m energized by the light. The rain has gone as if it never existed before. I can still see dark clouds to the East but as far as I can see in front of me is light, overpowering light.

It’s as if the piece of fabric is a letter that’s been passed back and forth between her and I since we met. But I have nothing else to write to her anymore. It’s a symbol of Casey and her difference from me and her sneeze I love to hear and her appreciation of color. It’s all of the what ifs and could have been’s that have defined our relationship more than anything rooted in reality. It can’t be and loving isn’t enough.

The fabric flies out of my hand willingly, almost like the lightning bugs I used to catch with Casey in our street, the ones that weren’t happy to be caught, the ones that flew immediately away as soon as I unclenched my hand. I watched the fabric float through the air, buoying up and down with the air. It was going towards the light, ignoring the darkness in the distance.
June, July, August

Summer’s hair was dark. It wasn’t light like July sun, wasn’t golden like the burnt grass of August. Perhaps at times a red color would shine in the light, but it wasn’t the red of a sunset. She didn’t look like the daisies skipping across yards when children had Wednesday afternoons to themselves. Maybe she resembled twilight in the fall, but Summer did not look like the season she was named after.

But she and the season did have things in common: a usual laziness interrupted by spurts of impossible energy, and an awareness of the temporary. The months of June, July, and August were unique for their boldness, the way they let the sun shine hard and long despite the oncoming and inarguable autumn. The season encased three months that felt endless while splashing in a friend’s backyard pool or reading underneath the shade of a tree. But, somewhere in between the lackadaisical activities of the day to day, the season ended. Summer knew the temporary, as did the season. Those three months knew they wouldn’t last, despite the intoxication they seemed to bring to the world. When the long days stopped and school buses arrived, the world seemed to be surprised, disappointed. But the season itself simply left, vaporized into the chill of September’s wind, vanished like so many memories that were once important but vanished as if they never were.

Memory, Summer knew, was also temporary. Fleeting, always fleeting into the inaccessible spaces of the self. Although she knew the truth of this, however, knew it the way she knew the exact location of her light switch in the dark, Summer still fought against it. Because to remember, Summer knew, was important. To remember, she believed, was to relive and to live again.
“I’m so glad you’re all here with me,” Mya began. She was standing up, her orange dress blowing behind her with the wind, her light brown hair funneling backwards with it. The orange radiated in the beach light and off of the glass floor. Mya looked best at the beach, Summer always thought. And why she wasn’t getting married at the beach was a question to which any answer would never make sense, at least to Summer. Since they’d been in elementary school they’d gushed about Mya’s future wedding on the beach. Brad’s church is beautiful, she’d told Summer. But in Summer’s mind, nothing could equate to the beauty of Mya’s happiness on the beach. And no other location would do her best friend justice. She’s been annoyingly selfless since the engagement, Summer thought to herself as her best friend continued talking at the other end of the dinner table. Summer had yet to admit it to anyone but herself, but the time her best friend claimed to be the happiest had been the only time in her life in which she truly doubted her friendship with Mya. She didn’t seem like Mya anymore. The differences between the two had somehow found a way to trump all of the memories they’d shared; Summer felt herself becoming more annoyed by habits of Mya’s than adored by memories of their friendship. Summer was confident Mya hadn’t felt an interruption in their friendship. But the distance Mya usually recognized as Summer’s usual behavior was something else entirely, and Summer could feel it. It was an anger at the impending loss of intimate friendship that elevated from an innocent annoyance to a toxic exasperation, similar to the way a sickness becomes fatal.

The women were at dinner: Mya, Summer, Katie (Mya’s soon to be sister-in-law), and Leah, Mya and Summer’s friend from high school. The table they sat on was outside on a fenced balcony; the fence and floor were glass allowing for the beach and the sea to come into vision at any angle. Mya was standing at the head of her table, the glass of red wine perched in her hand
as if she didn’t know how to drink it. Summer kept drinking her glass. It was her third glass by
now.

“You all mean so much to me,” Mya continued, “Brad and I wouldn’t be where we are
now without all three of you.” Summer smiled at Mya when she looked towards Summer but
during the rest of her speech, Summer wasn’t smiling. It all seemed done before, as if Mya had
taken a “bridal party speech” page off of Pinterest and was reading it verbatim. She never had
been the creative one, Summer knew; when the two of them were in college, separated by two
states, Mya would call Summer and ask her to explain almost anything: a metaphor throughout a
poem, a symbol she hadn’t picked up on in the midst of a novel, the meaning of Van Gogh’s
heavy brush strokes. Mya wasn’t stupid. She was just literal and oftentimes too light and too
unbothered to think of all of the reminders that life was short and dull that plagued any great art.
Summer sometimes envied her for that; her own cynical mind was constantly disappointing her
because it could never hold onto the lightness some memories carried. Summer was amazed at
her best friend’s ability to never fixate on the fleeting nature of life, at how short the good
moments truly were. That’s all Summer seemed to be able to do lately- remind herself of all that
had passed, all that she couldn’t hold onto despite how hard she tried.

“Everything I’ve ever dreamed of is happening,” Mya continued to say. Summer felt
exhausted. She seemed to remember the things Mya did not; her actual “dream” being that of a
beach wedding for example, or a wedding party absent of Brad’s older sister Katie. But Mya was
giving a speech to a party that included Katie, and Mya had barely agreed to Summer’s idea of a
weekend get-a-way at the condo Mya’s parents owned on Myrtle Beach. The Mya Summer
loved never balked at the mention of the beach; the two of them, after all, had shared so much
there. Summer watched Mya’s face, searching for a physical change to coexist next to her
apparent inward change, but nothing was different: it was the same face Summer met in fourth grade when she moved to Mya’s elementary school, the one that smiled towards Summer asking her to sign her year-book despite her status as the “new kid.” Summer wondered if Mya remembered that. If she tried hard enough, Summer could still remember the color of Mya’s sweatshirt that day. It was one of those moments Summer had refused to let go of over the years.

“We love you Mya!” The third bridesmaid, Leah, called from Summer’s left, raising her half-empty glass in the form of a toast. Summer didn’t feel any of it. Leah, after all, had been their friend in high school only. In college when Mya stayed close to home to pursue a nursing degree and Summer went out of state to study film and journalism, Leah got married early and stopped talking to the two of them. When Mya and Leah began talking again, Summer asked her what the point was. She knows the stress of married life, Mya had told Summer. And you don’t know anything about it, Summer could hear behind Mya’s words. You’re nowhere close to it. And Summer knew it was true. She poured herself another full glass of wine.

“Summer,” Mya half-yelled. Summer must have missed a cue of some kind, must have missed her turn to say something that wasn’t what she actually felt. This dinner and this weekend getaway were beginning to feel like a Jane Austen novel, and Summer was disgusted by the decorum.

“I’m sorry,” Summer said, “I was just thinking.”

“I had just asked if Adam was going to make it to the wedding,” Leah said, looking towards Summer’s glass.

“He’ll be here in two weeks,” Summer responded, smiling and frowning at the same time, “just in time for it.” She wasn’t hopeful about seeing him again; they had graduated from their university, he with a Master’s in Education, she with a Journalism degree, as an
impenetrable couple and in only three months of severe absence, they had crumbled. A temporary love. Summer looked towards Mya after she responded, hoping for some kind of comfort; but Mya was oblivious. She didn’t know how messed up things had gotten between Summer and Adam; Summer felt like her relationship issues were a burden because of the lack of seriousness within them. He wasn’t her husband or even her fiancé, and that made all the difference.

Mya didn’t know the entire story. Summer hadn’t been willing to reveal it all. But it was obvious that she and Adam had suffered some kind of loss in their relationship. Summer had told Mya they weren’t the same anymore. Not much else. It was evident the day he left, “hopping back across the pond” as he had said. Summer could hear the way he said pond as if he was right next to her, pulling her onto his lap the way he’d done so many times. Her efforts to remember were making her sick. The next sip of wine made her head spin.

“It’s beautiful here,” Katie said rubbing her six-month pregnant stomach.

“My family has been coming here for ages. It’s almost as usual as home for me now,” Mya responded, smiling towards Summer.

And perhaps the smile was intended to connect the two women, but Summer was more than a little drunk and the words cut into Summer deeper than she could take without fighting back. This place wasn’t as common as home. It was a coven of the past and present and future, a protector of memories; why didn’t Mya see it that way?

“Mya and I got drunk for the first time right down there,” Summer pointed towards the swimming pool that could be seen from the balcony. It had been a pool party when the women were sixteen; Mya’s family had went on an all-day fishing trip, leaving the girls to meet two
lifeguards who were off of work with a bottle or two of rum. “Let’s not tell this story,” Mya blushed, laughing. But Summer went on.

“We passed out with our faces in the sand at 3PM,” Summer said, laughing as she took another gulp of wine. The table laughed too, but Mya only smiled, the kind of smile that didn’t mean she was pleased but that meant she was uncomfortable, one that Summer had grown accustomed to throughout the years. Summer looked at her best friend, hoping she’d be laughing out of that smug smile, knowing she wouldn’t be. Perhaps once she would have laughed it off, Summer thought, but not any longer, not since the ring was on her finger.

Summer’s smile faded with the passing of the memory. She could feel the purple tint on her lips but she continued to drink. Disappointment flooded her; she wanted to sit in that moment for just a little while longer, wanted to feel her skin burning as she awoke from her first drunken stupor, wanted to look beside her, her head so incredibly heavy, and see her best friend still asleep, her back red. Summer wanted to remember, but more than that, she wanted Mya to remember, to feel the nostalgia that haunted Summer. But as far as Summer could tell, Mya didn’t need the memory the way Summer did. Mya wasn’t grasping at the ever-fleeting coattails of time the way Summer was, the way she always had. It had something to do with the temporariness she thought she knew so much about, a knowledge she felt entitled to because of her name that stood as a symbol of the temporary. It had gotten worse, Summer’s insistence to vividly remember, after Adam had left. She wanted to remember it all and then when she did, she wanted to forget.

“Let’s eat,” Mya said. And just like that, the memory was done; the story cut short not wanting to be heard. Mya had become good at silencing her best friend, the immature one who drank too much wine as if she were an undergrad still. Summer knew that’s what the women
around her thought. She could feel it as definitely as she could feel the sun’s rays lightening her hair.

Summer watched the other women, all smiling as if their youthful happiness within their marriages or their relationships would last forever. She found herself wondering if the restaurant workers or strangers on the beach could tell that she was different from the rest of her party; did her flippant short hair or her lack of a diamond bracelet or an expensive pair of earrings give her aloneness away? They were all so warmly content, full in such a way that it showed in the women’s smiles. Summer wasn’t sure if her smile contained the same appeasing look. Perhaps the emotional isolation within her made itself physical within her half-empty smile. She wondered, after all, if being in love could be so physically expressed. How, after all, did a stranger distinguish between the beloved and the brokenhearted?

The other women ate as if such questions didn’t exist in the world. And it was finally just too much.

“Fuck this,” Summer muttered to herself. The women heard her though, all of them looking at her with large insect-like eyes, shocked again by Summer’s lack of being like them. “I can’t do this Mya,” Summer said, pushing her seat out, taking her glass of wine with her.

The noise of her high heels ricocheted across the glass floor. Summer hoped Mya could hear every step, hoped that now Mya could feel the distance Summer was putting between them.

It had been three years since Summer had last been here, but not much had changed. The condo, one of many in the 15-floored building, stretched itself enough to fit eight people if need be. Once, Summer could recall, her and Mya had managed to fit ten people into it. Most of the
time, it had been Mya and her parents, her two twin brothers, five years younger than Summer and Mya, and Summer. Mya’s parents vacationed to the condo once every June on a timeshare her father got on a deal through work. Summer had joined the Thomas’s when she was eleven years old. She and Mya had been best friends since fourth grade; Summer had awaited the day her mother ruled her old enough to accompany Mya Thomas and her family since she was six years old. The vacation was Summer’s main anticipation every year after.

The first year Summer didn’t go was because Mya was in Europe. She was studying for the entire summer in Florence, bouncing on and off of trains to Paris, Athens, Prague. Summer hadn’t gone anywhere that June, had worked as a waitress, had tried to deny the envy that was threatening to pour itself out of Summer’s pores. And then the envy was replaced by a different sort of envy, because the next June, Mya brought her boyfriend to the beach, a guy named Brad, who took Summer’s place on the vacation. And Summer worked the same job again. The next June was the same story. And suddenly the guy named Brad became commonplace in their lives.

And now, Summer was here again, the same condo she was used to. She wasn’t with the Thomas family, only Mya and two other women Summer could care less about. It wasn’t an envy Summer was feeling now although she had indeed felt some of that this past year. Mya, after all, had been proposed to a week before Summer was left. Being happy for her best friend and being miserable for herself was exhausting. Summer was tired of pretending. She just wanted to feel the loss by herself without any obligation to her best friend’s new adult life.

Adam. The name beat against her skull along with the alcohol as she walked out of the lobby onto the beach. There had been other loves, too, all of which began and ended, all of them proving to be temporary eventually. There had been her childhood friend, the one she started “dating” entirely too early, a boy she knew indefinitely who transformed into a young man, a
stranger to her. And then there was the attractive guy she met in the mall in the month of June whom she hated by the time August ended. Her sophomore year of college was full of Marcus who she fell in love with in the middle of a coffee shop while he read Pablo Neruda poetry during their lulls in conversation. She had loved him, and she had been his, but he had been galaxies away from being hers. It was as easy for him as walking out of her dorm room where he’d been sleeping with her every night for almost six months. It was a Tuesday. And that heartbreak had devastated her, left her with a grief that touched her relentlessly, even now.

In between the ones that mattered, there had been other men, flings that wouldn’t last past dinner at a chain restaurant or a few wet kisses in the dark basement of some athlete’s off-campus house. None of it had really mattered, Summer had come to realize; what began always ended. Great loves were as temporary as unimportant interactions.

Adam had introduced her to wine. Summer recalled the memory easily because she had trained herself to do so; Adam in those ugly cut-off pants, his shins bruised from soccer, the scent of his shampoo (it smelled like the color black), the n64 games they played, the feeling of his hand on hers as he tried to mess her up by hitting random buttons on her control. It was all there in her memory because she’d insisted on remembering it. But such vivid details were beginning to be more harmful than anything else It was painful to remember. He had an English wine from home that the two of them got drunk on too many times to count. It had always been red wine when they were together, something that tasted like romance and intrigue and an insatiable desire to love, to make love, to love. When she drank now, the romance and the intrigue and the desire were useless, for who did she have to love, to make love to, to love? Her glass was empty, not even droplets of wine falling onto the sand. She carried the glass at her side.
The walk was hot and windy, smelling of sea salt stained on an upper lip and the lingering fog of marijuana that had been secretly smoked in the abandoned lifeguard chairs when the sun went down. It was twilight now, nearly dark, and Summer was walking along the shoreline, her long skirt soaking itself in the tide. She was heading towards the pier, the symbol of the beach and of the transition from childhood to adulthood, because from there Summer thought she might be better able to see the years before, several dozen nights arranged before her exactly as they had happened. She didn’t want the memories of Adam right now. She wanted the memories of herself when she was her happiest: at the beach with Mya. She wanted to remember that confidence.

When she sat down near the back of the beach, she thought she saw herself, still wandering amongst the wooden poles, still walking into the ocean, as if it were a ritual, a spiritual ritual, a healing ritual. There she was at seventeen, kissing the boy she’d met that year, laughing uncomfortably and shaking away from him when he got too touchy. And to the left of that Summer there was another Summer, a twelve-year-old Summer, who was crying to Mya, uncontrollably sobbing because her own family never went on vacations together. My mom and dad don’t love each other, Summer heard herself gasp. These younger versions of her, phantoms of who she used to be, were somehow who she still was.

Summer dozed off then, a light slumber that was broken by two voices. Two girls were walking together toward the pier. Both of them were burnt, heavy-eyed, and slow moving, the physical representation of exhaustion and comfort that settled over you after a full week of the beach. The girls looked like the melancholy last day of vacation. They looked to be fifteen, maybe sixteen. The girls were close enough that Summer could hear them speaking: “I’m just excited to see Michael,” the one said, to which the other replied: “I just need a break from my
parents. Maybe I’ll come stay with you when we get back home.” The girls kept walking, uninterested in Summer or the fact that she had been listening to them.

Summer remembered her and Mya at those ages, walking and talking with the same kind of pomposity as those girls. She and Mya had acted as if the beach should wait on them, should always be there whenever boyfriends were no longer boyfriends or family seemed too distant to actually be family. Now, after not having been here for three years, Summer thought of the place differently. Never again would she be here in quite the same way, meeting boys and getting drunk and not worrying about the consequences. It was temporary, Summer accompanying Mya to the beach, to the place that had fantastically became Summer’s favorite place in the world. It would end, had perhaps already ended. The freedom of youth was dissolving in front of her. And Summer wanted to warn those two girls, to call after them to wait. To tell them they wouldn’t live forever. To tell them this was temporary, like all else. Michael will break your heart within the year, Summer wanted to say to the one, and to the other, your parents are aging just as you are. Don’t forget to love them. To the two of them, you’ll regret not trying to memorize the sounds of your best friend’s laughter as it becomes muffled by a capping wave. You’ll regret not remembering.

Summer had tried remembering so much, and some things were effortless to remember. Some memories stayed with her, tugging at her consciousness, letting her know they’d never leave her alone. And other memories, other details that she’d want to think of, they’d refuse to come to her, forever just a stretch ahead of her, taunting her. She’d lie awake at night trying to remember the scent of the candle Adam had in his apartment bedroom, the one they’d light while listening to “The Dark Side of the Moon.” But the scent wouldn’t come to her, not in the way she wanted. She’d squint her eyes hard, trying to recall the outfit she wore the first night she and
Adam climbed on top of the Arts building on campus but nothing seemed to fit. The only thing she could remember about that night on the rooftop, the night that led to so many other nights in the same place, was the color of the sky, a deep blue-black that seemed to be a completely different color than the sky she’d look up to on the ground. She could remember feeling Adam’s smile beaming itself onto her cheek as she stared up at the velvet sky. But it wasn’t enough. Summer wanted to relive, but memory cannot relive. The temporary was the temporary. Nothing lasted. He’d be back soon but it wouldn’t be the same. Summer knew it.

Summer began walking back to the condo, tired and still sort of drunk. She thought of her name, thought of it as the season instead of her name. Summer seemed to be full of immortality, a season that would last and last and last. But nothing was immortal; summer days fell to the ground with dead or dying leaves. Time washed seasons away just as it wiped memory nearly clean. Time left only faint reminiscences, allowed only for nostalgia, not for reliving. Summer wanted a kaleidoscope of memories to live in when her loneliness became too lonely, but memory refused to obey the didactic mind.

Before walking back into the condo, Summer stared up at the sky. It was the velvet color, the colored sky she thought belonged only to her memory of Adam. But despite all that had changed, all the memories that Summer couldn’t recall perfectly, the memories she recalled too perfectly to make her happy, the sky had remained the same. It still shone with the same dark color on certain nights. The waves rolling in to meet the shore, sometimes with ferocity, sometimes with gentle caresses: these things lasted, prevailed over the temporary, ignored the boundaries of time.
Mya would be married soon. She and Summer’s relationship would be incredibly altered. And nothing Summer tried to remember could prevent that alteration from taking place. She’d have to apologize to Mya soon. Hopefully Mya would apologize too. Because most things in life are temporary, like June, July, and August. But because something is temporary doesn’t mean it isn’t great or worthwhile or real.

Maybe she’d tell Adam that when he got here in a few weeks. Summer didn’t know if they were together or not, if they would be eventually or if they would remain in the past. Memory wouldn’t assure her or fix her pain of loving and losing. But perhaps she’d tell him because it was important. *Who are we to decide what lasts, what ends? Who am I to guess the length of lasting?* She thought she’d tell him, unembarrassed and unafraid of the consequences, disinterested in what would happen next. She wanted to be fearless and light despite the darkness of the temporary.

She walked into the condo then. She once had left her heart buried in the sand of the very beach she had just walked across. Another time she left it at the bottom of an English bottle of red wine. She’d left herself in memories and didn’t have much of herself left to put into the present. She hadn’t made any memories worth keeping since Adam left, since Mya got engaged. She looked out the window towards the waves, remembering.
Unappreciated Gifts

I answered my cell phone at work that Thursday morning despite my resolution to never take personal calls on the job (a resolution that was a factor in ending my six year relationship with Felicia nearly three years ago). The office was busy- there was a baseball game that needed covered; the Phillies, after all, had just won their first game of the season in two extra innings against the Tigers, and the win combined with the early on-set of spring was rejuvenating the city from a long winter. The Inquirer needed me to cover the game the next night and I was supposed to be studying the roster, supposed to be forming a prediction of how long Roy Halladay would pitch in the game the next night (they were starting him, again). But my phone’s vibration interrupted my research and my mother’s phone number bolded on my screen surprised me into answering- she usually knew better than to call me during my 7-6 shifts, knew to wait about an hour after I got off work because I was too irritable to talk to someone as soft-hearted as my mother right out of the office. It was almost instinctual the way I answered though- the phone didn’t even make it to the second ring before something prompted my blood to flow and my hand to hit “accept”.

“Yeah?” I said, turning from my desk to take the call. I tried not to sound annoyed but it was hard, as it was always hard, not to with my mother. She talked a lot and asked too many questions, a habit she hadn’t broken since my adolescence. It’d been this way forever between us: her soft and too easy to take advantage of and me hard and too busy and feeling insanely guilty for the annoyances I felt instantly from her. I’d been trying harder lately because I’d realized what every child should learn quicker than I did: your parents are mortal.

“Caleb, I know you’re at work but I just didn’t think this could wait.” My mother sounded rushed, fatigued, sad. My stomach flipped the way it did on Saturday mornings after
drinking too much the night before- the dreadful feeling of knowing what’s about to happen but being scared of it nonetheless. My father’s eminent death felt a lot like the bile that rested at the bottom of my stomach; horrible, impending, predictable and yet terrifying in its mysterious distance away from me.

“He wants to go to the cabin,” she said.

The present tense of want… that meant he was alive, that my father hadn’t left yet. The acrobats flipping at the bottom of my stomach left stage. My father was alive, alive enough to remember and desire his favorite place in the world- a small log cabin that he and my mother had bought when they were newlyweds, a sort of congratulatory present on their wedding and my father’s new position as principal of what would eventually become my alma mater high school. My father was there often, alone or with his wife, fishing or going on walks in the woods. And then when Isabella was born, the cabin was left vacant, half-forgotten in the wake of life changing. I came only two and a half years after her and by that time my father missed his cabin too much to let it go again. He was missing it now, again, after not being back there for at least five years. His bouts of chemotherapy and his weakness at all other times made it impossible for him to go back. But he was asking to go now.

“Yes,” I told my mom, a sigh of relief still pouring out of me for my father’s life, “I’ll take Dad and he and I will head out on the fishing boat and-“

“He wants all of us to go,” she responded, hesitant for her sake and persistent for his.

“What, you mean Jack and Isabelle too?”

“And Wesley.”

I could hear the wall-clock ticking with impatience but I didn’t know what to say. I hadn’t seen my sister in almost two years, had never known how to interact with her husband,
and felt inept at being around their rapidly-growing son. They lived in western Michigan now, Jack working as a pediatrician and Isabelle working in a dentist’s office. She and I spoke every now and again, more so ever since Dad got sick. But still, our relationship was not one either of us put much effort into, not one I felt comfortable enough to acknowledge needed help; and the relationship with her son, Wesley, the human being I had a title to, terrified me. With every second my mother waited for a reply, the word uncle beat in my head in rhythm with my migraine.

My mother though, was nervous. And I felt guilty for her anxieties and guilty for my own.

“Okay. The cabin then. All of us.”

The stretch of back roads that took me from the city to the cabin was punctuated by the centerlines. I stared at them on particularly long stretches of unpopulated road, watched them drift from double and bolded to single and dashed. If my mother was awake, she’d be saying *watch those eyes, Caleb,* the way she used to when I was learning how to drive. And if my father were here he’d be laughing, always making a joke out of the polar differences in my mother and me. He might have said something like *a doe could be in the middle of the road and you two would be too focused proving one another wrong you wouldn’t even see it.* That was him-smart and witty and effortlessly, always right. But my mother was asleep in the passenger seat next to me and my father had died two weeks before.

With every break in the yellow lines, I readjusted my eyes and my thoughts. My mind kept bringing me back to a guilt I couldn’t control. My father, after all, had requested this trip
more than three months ago, back in late March when Philadelphia was still too cold to even imagine summer again. The campground where the cabin was located wasn’t open until May, so half of it wasn’t really my fault but the other half was the only one that mattered: I couldn’t get a weekend off of work until mid June. All of the weekends in-between the first day of May and the middle week of June were full of me traveling to Phillies games and/or writing reports late into the night. The Inquirer was giving me more responsibility and as Felicia told me on the day she broke up with me, work responsibility was the only responsibility I wanted.

I saw my dad a week before he died and explained to him why the cabin would have to wait. His effortless demeanor of being relaxed gave way to a frustration I’ve never seen him exhibit before. I’m sorry, I told him, unsure of exactly why he was so upset. At that point the doctors expected him to make it at least another year and his contagious energy was encouraging all of us that it’d be longer than a year. It even gave me hope of a full recovery. Perhaps, I thought as the yellow paint on the road changed into a brighter and newer shade, Dad knew he’d be gone soon, perhaps sooner than the trip. It wouldn’t be unlike him at all to know something before the rest of us did and to avoid telling us to remain humble. I bit the tip of my tongue until it hurt, trying to focus on something other than the yellow lines and the gray guilt.

Mom’s cell phone rang with shrill chirpings of birds. It made me jump and made the car swerve but she remained fast asleep. Odd for her, the light sleeper who’d heard me every time I tried sneaking out of the house to meet Felicia when we were young. The birds kept chirping, getting louder and more impatient with every second that my mother didn’t pick up the phone. The noise caused my usual annoyance with my mother to creep up my neck.

“Hello,” I answered, attempting to hide my exasperation.
“Caleb!” My sister was surprised. She was also crying or getting over a bout of crying. I could never tell the difference.

“Hey,” I said, “sorry we’re a little late. Mom took awhile.”

“Shocker,” Isabelle tried to laugh. “Hey,” she said after a second, “I just wanted to give you a guys a heads-up. Jack isn’t coming. It’ll just be Wesley and me.”

“Alright, Iz,” I responded, unsure of what to say.

“Okay, so I’ll see you in a few hours then?”

Her reply was muffled by the noises of a five-year old in the background. “Is that Caleb?” I heard Wesley ask.

“Wesley wants to say hi,” Isabelle said.

“Alright,” I laughed, uncomfortable with the fact that I should want to talk to my nephew.

“Hiiiiii,” Wesley said in a singsong voice.

“Hi Wesley,” I replied, a smile creeping onto my face. Although he and I didn’t have much of a relationship, every time we spoke, my nephew took me by surprise. His intellect within his innocence was alarming and admirable.

“Remember on my birthday when I told you blue was my favorite color?” Wesley asked.

“I do. And red was your favorite the year before that.”

“It’s red again!” Wesley sang, laughing in a way that made me think of the chirps coming from my mother’s phone a few moments ago.

I laughed and the smile Wesley gave me grew a bit bigger. His flippancy was attractive only because it was a luxury I didn’t have the privilege to anymore. After telling Wesley about the latest baseball game and asking him when he was going to join me for one, Wesley hung up the phone.
My mother was still asleep in the passenger seat. She must be exhausted, I thought, for nothing else had made her sleep so soundly in years. The bags under her eyes were something I’d begun to associate with the essence of who she was, an element of her physical self that had manifested so strongly over the past couple years that they had become an integral part of her identity. This, I realized, had to be a relief for her: the end, finally, after such a battle. The thought, even if I understood it, made me itch. I found myself thinking things I knew weren’t right: how selfish it is to rest so soundly when he’s only been dead two weeks, shouldn’t you be crying if we’re on our way to his favorite place, the one he’ll never see again? All of the thoughts were incorrect, morally and logically, but they were there, as bright and hard to ignore as the yellow stripes in the middle of the road.

Wesley’s voice brought me back to the hospital room the day he was born. They’d still been living in Philadelphia then, Jack and Isabelle, so it was simple and expected for me to be there as soon as Wesley arrived. Any kind of expansion in our family was a growth spurt. I felt inadequate, though, to be an uncle. It was a growth spurt that happened overnight, one that made walking difficult the next morning. I touched Wesley’s burgundy cheek when I was permitted inside of Isabella’s hospital room, afraid to do too much else. Just hold him, Caleb, my sister laughed from her bed, still sweaty from labor, it’ll come naturally.

It didn’t come as naturally as my sister thought, but after awhile, I became sort of used to it. Jack and Isabelle stayed in Philadelphia for the first year of Wesley’s life before moving to Michigan and during that year, I saw my nephew often. The Inquirer was a new job, one that wasn’t interested in giving a twenty-two year old too much responsibility, especially an aspiring sports writer fresh out of college. Felicia, then my girlfriend of five years, babysat Wesley often since she was still a senior in college. Our apartment was practically baby-proofed for my
nephew because I was too nervous for it not to be, still too frantic about the role of responsibility to leave anything to chance. Just as I was becoming used to Wesley, just when I was discovering and memorizing which facial expression of mine granted a smile from his chubby face, just when Felicia and I were our closest because of how well we worked together with Wesley, just when everything seemed to make sense, Jack’s job took the three of them to Michigan where a new children’s hospital was opening. *It’s a lot more money*, Jack told us at dinner when they revealed the news to the family.

The discomfort I felt in the hospital room was one I hadn’t known again. A new level of discomfort replaced it, a new role I wasn’t sure how to succeed in: how to be an uncle via the phone and only a few visits per year. Quickly after they moved, our apartment went back to its bad habits: dirty laundry on the floors, dishes piled on the counter because the sink was too full, arguments and doors slamming. It only took a year after their move for Felicia and I to finally fall apart completely. *You’re working too much*, she told me when I came home one Friday evening, her bags packed and her eyes dry from a lack of tears. For a while, I thought she used that as an excuse to cover up the problem underneath: her lack of a job even after a full year of graduating from college. I still don’t think what she said was entirely true; perhaps I was working too much and not paying our relationship enough attention. But the real problem, the one that tore us limb from limb, was the undeniable fact that we were simply not in love anymore.

I lost Felicia and I lost Wesley’s smiles. Two roles, the role of a boyfriend, the role of an uncle, seemed to wash away from my life, like sidewalk chalk in the rain.
“Mom,” I said, gently touching her shoulder. I’d just pulled into the campground and I wanted her to be awake, wanted her to see as much as what Dad wanted to see as she could.

She woke up without a movement, without a word. That was also unlike her; she was a naturally frantic person and when something unexpected happened, you could count on her reaction to be startling. She’d been asleep for nearly three full hours without a word but instead of reacting with surprise, she merely opened her hazel eyes and smiled at me with the grace of a ballerina.

“We’re here,” I said, trying to sound like my father who said those words every time we pulled into the campground in a voice I didn’t hear him use anywhere else. We’d been here so much during our childhood, at least two times every summer until Isabelle went away to college in Vermont. And despite my age, those words brought a joy to my life I haven’t found since. They didn’t feel quite as good when I said them. But they felt a kind of good.

The cabin wasn’t large; Mom and Dad got their room, Isabelle and I got ours. There was a kitchen that always smelled like maple syrup, open to a living space framed by wood. We shared a small bathroom that sometimes worked and sometimes didn’t. It was small, but we were never cramped; rather, we were together. Somehow, even if Dad was fishing on the dock ten minutes from the cabin, if Isabelle was playing with the English setter outside, if Mom was reading Whitman on the porch, if I was jumping into the lake, we were together. The cabin was our dinner table, those annual trips our meals.

The cabin shared land with a campground comprised of a large pool and a packed arcade, RVs and falling down tents, other cabins separated by stretches of pines and maples, endless children, blonde-haired and freckle-cheeked from hours spent in the sun, couples silent with a peace they wouldn’t get accustomed to until the trip was about to end. We’d gone since I was
three, Isabelle six, every year for a couple of days spanning over July fourth. It was always just the four of us, except those few times Isabelle brought a friend or I brought a friend; we wouldn’t admit it then, but the cabin was warmer without those friends there. More radiant. Better.

Years passed and somehow Isabelle was nineteen and I was seventeen, the first July fourth that boomed without us on the cabin’s porch, watching. I could see fireworks in Philadelphia from Mom and Dad’s kitchen window, but they weren’t nearly as bright, not nearly as fascinating without the reflections off of the lake or the crickets humming in between their explosions. That summer, without the cabin, I knew childhood was uncomfortably complete. We hadn’t gone back, maybe because Isabelle always worked and then we had a wedding to plan and then a baby to get ready for, maybe because Dad got sick when Wesley was two and a half. Maybe because I was scared that the cabin had forgotten whom we were. Or that we had forgotten the smell of maple syrup and the feel of goose bumps on our faces in the sometimes-cold sometimes-hot shower. Maybe what really held us back was the fear that we’d forgotten more than memories- maybe we were afraid we had forgotten the togetherness we once knew so well. Maybe we were afraid it wouldn’t be the same. Maybe we were right.

Trying not to stumble because of the weight of my mother’s bag, I walked onto the porch that surrounded the front door. It was a creaky porch, one I used to swear I could hear making noises by itself in the dead of night. The campground must have recently stained the wooden porch- it looked as if it were sweating. I made it through the front door without losing control, made it into the small open-spaced living room and kitchen that was punctuated with a window nook for breakfasts, a long couch with a quilt my great-grandmother once sewed thrown over top of it, a small fireplace that we never really used, and my father’s telescope which was positioned
the way he’d left it the last time he’d been here, looking towards Mars or Orion or the vast
unknown that was to welcome him sooner than he’d probably thought.

“Caleb,” Isabelle glided out of one of the bedrooms in a floor-length skirt, her hair
twisted into a knot at the top of her head. She was smiling, but I could tell it took great effort for
her to do so. I hugged my sister and in a moment of comfort I asked her what I couldn’t on the
phone call during the drive: “What’s going on?”

She looked at me in a way she’s never looked at me before. Her eyes looked as if they
were heavy; as if she was straining herself in ways she shouldn’t to open them. Her cheeks
looked dry, bothered by the salt water that had apparently been falling down them so often. “He
had an affair,” she said without a crack in her voice.

She didn’t avert her eyes. Neither did I. I was uncomfortable, unsure of what to say or
what to do. But the way her eyes stayed open and fixed despite their heaviness made me nervous
to blink. “Where’s Wesley?” I asked at the same time as she asked, “Where’s Mom?”

The two of us laughed together, our laughs sounding similar, the same way they always
had before we reached adulthood. The cabin brought us back to childhood, to the innocent
laughter we used before we recognized death and infidelity as main characters in the story of life.
The two of us walked towards the telescope, to the large window in front of it that framed the
yard behind the cabin. Mom was chasing Wesley, both of them barefoot and laughing. I smiled.
Wesley had grown and with his growth came more freckles on his nose, browner hair sprouting
through the red, ease with running he hadn’t had before. He was wearing a white polo, and the
collar was flaring upwards as he ran, exposing a rope-like necklace… that held my father’s
whistle, the one he’d used as a lifeguard so many years ago, the one he held onto for no
particular reason, the one that was in the bedroom’s bedside table at the cabin for years. Wesley had it around his neck as if didn’t have more of a significance now that my father was gone.

I was out of the front door and into the backyard quicker than I thought possible. An urge had gripped me the moment I registered what the red around my nephew’s neck was, an urge I couldn’t quite put into words because I knew it wasn’t right. It made me angry, it made me annoyed, the emotions I’d been feeling so regularly with my mother despite the emotions being more than unwarranted. The whistle around Wesley’s neck, my mother laughing and smiling as if she didn’t know whom that whistle symbolized, the whole scene made me unjustifiably angry.

“Caleb!” Wesley yelled, breaking my steadfast walk and bold anger. His voice was so small, so unmarked of lessons learned.

I kneeled to the ground, pulling Wesley into a bear hug. I could feel the whistle creating a space between us, an undeniable presence that felt as if I was the only one acknowledging it. I wanted to ask him why he had it around his neck, why he was treating it as if it were any other whistle, to tell him not to do it again. But he was too good and too much of what I wished I still was.

“Did you bring a fishing pole?” I asked, his grip surprisingly still tight on my shoulders. He nodded his head enthusiastically, only stopping to let out a long yawn that took up half of his face.

“You need a nap,” Isabelle said, walking up from behind me. I wondered if she’d noticed the anger that prompted each step I took out of the cabin’s front door; she’d been subject to my sudden bursts of anger and annoyance for years- did she have my angry walk memorized or did she forget over the years?

“I’ll take him,” Mom said, “I think I could use some rest too.”
She said she still needed rest and I believed her but it scared me. My mother was never
tired in her life and to see her so exhausted reminded me of things I didn’t want to be reminded
of. It reminded me of the finite.

On the dock I let my feet hang into the water. Isabelle sat beside me, her feet swaying
into and out of the dirty water. It was so familiar; it was as if we’d wore the dock’s wood away
enough in these spots to make them our permanent seats, seats for spectators, watchers of Dad’s
fishing. I was trying to listen for the sound of his reel, the sound of his bobber falling into the
water, the sound of his mouth chewing the cinnamon gum he’d loved so much. I shut my eyes
but still the memories weren’t quite right- trying to remember such details were more difficult
than I wanted them to be. It was like trying to breathe underwater.

“I wish he was here,” Isabelle said beside of me. For a moment I didn’t know if she was
thinking of Dad or of Jack. Her feet dangled into the lake’s water, her brown-bunned hair found
her own shoulder to lean on. My sister looked the same as she always had: poised, bashfully
pretty, and all knowing. When she was twelve she slipped on this dock and hit her head, falling
into the water not quite conscious. It was the only time she hadn’t seen something coming.
Besides Jack’s affair.

“He was going to teach Wesley how to swim,” Isabelle said. “I didn’t have the heart to
tell him Jack and I had already started giving him lessons back in Michigan. I had this vision that
he’d be in the water with Wesley, mouth agape, screaming that I had an Olympian in the making,
Jack and I laughing from this dock.” She laughed, a piece of her hair falling out of her otherwise
tightly held hair.
“Wesley keeps asking for him,” Isabelle exhaled. “I keep telling him ‘Daddy’s with Uncle Ben in New York visiting,’ but even a five-year old knows that kind of trip doesn’t cast a paleness like this over my face.”

“What are you gonna do, Is?” I had no answers to give her. No comfort, no explanation, just a profound sympathy. A pity that rooted itself in this dock, the one she’d jumped off of as an innocent and mousy girl, the same one she sat on now, a woman alone and exhausted, just the way our mother was.

I pictured her then, imagined her the night Jack confessed. The red-faced mother that Wesley wouldn’t have recognized, the unused, warm bed and the coldness of the leather couch, the hangover the next morning despite not having been drunk in years. Her expression the next morning when Wesley asked for his father to help him brush his teeth. Her tears falling so commonly and so rapidly that it felt as if they had created permanent tear lines, a cheetah’s face. My sister, once whole and young, now broken twice over, reeling from death, from life.

“I’m sorry,” I told her, with more meaning than I’d ever known before. I’m going to be a better uncle, I wanted to tell her, a better brother, a better son. I was realizing, after all, that life could ignite those roles on fire, leaving them burning, hollow, ghostly.

“Mom!” Wesley called from atop the hill where the cabin was. “Mom, come color this!”

Isabelle laughed. “His naps don’t last long anymore.” She unfolded her legs, lifted her tall body off of the dock, and quickly jogged up the hill. In the face of caring for her son, I could tell, her grief meant little. Perhaps, I thought as she ran upwards when I knew her heart rested down here on the dock thinking of Dad and Jack, my annoyances and my anger were rooted in something I’d never thought of: envy. Mom and Isabelle’s strength, their determination to go on, to not become angry at the sight of Dad’s whistle, it was all so much compared to what I’d done:
shrunk backwards from being an uncle because it was too difficult with the distance, avoided discussing Dad with my mother because it was too uncomfortable. I’d been a coward in the face of responsibility, in the face of death.

But this place gave me courage. I could feel his presence, after all, in the whistle pressed against Wesley’s chest onto mine, in the sounds of water falling off of my feet, in the pecking of a woodpecker against a tree. Dad made me brave; at the sight of his smile I felt capable of goodness. He couldn’t be here. But I could.

Later, the four of us were outside, Wesley still splashing in the water despite the sun’s rapid departure from the sky, Isabelle lying on her back on a blanket in the grass, Mom walking across the stretch of beach and watching Wesley, me sitting on the blanket with my sister, taking it all in. The sunset reminded me of Felicia whom I hadn’t spoken to since our break up. She was right- I wasn’t responsible enough. I didn’t know I had to be. I was hoping, however, that she was wrong in thinking I didn’t have the capability to be.

“Wesley, mama’s tired. Let’s go take your bath and get to bed,” Isabelle said, now sitting up and retying her hair into the twist at the top of her head.

“I’m not tired!” Wesley called, throwing himself back under the water as if he could hide forever that way.

“You guys go ahead,” I told Isabelle, my mother already starting to walk back up to the cabin. “I’ll stay out with Wesley just for a bit longer.”

Isabelle smiled at me, her face showing a sign of her grief: wrinkles at the corners of her mouth. We were all getting older. We were all on our way to death. The woodpecker was still making noise.
“A bit longer” turned into longer than it should have been. Wesley swam for a half hour after his mother and grandmother went to bed and then came to sit with me on the blanket. It was dark when he sat down, the stars splendid in their light. I smiled to myself when Wesley lay down and positioned himself to mimic my own. It was beautiful to have someone admire you free from your mistakes and your inadequacies.

“Do you see the Big Dipper?” I asked him, nodding towards the velvet sky.

“I don’t know what it looks like,” he replied.

I zigzagged my pointer finger above my nephew’s face to outline the constellation for him the same way my father did for me in this same patch of grass, the same way I knew he would for Wesley if he were still able to. It seemed so important, this lesson of stars, that it made me have to catch my breath; why hadn’t his own father showed him this? I looked at Wesley; his red hair was growing quickly, tangled at the neck by the lake water and it made me smile. The knots in his hair and his eyes open with excitement at the finding of the Big Dipper showed me that he was still so innocent, despite the lesson he was having to learn much quicker than I did: that nothing truly lasts.

“I saw you looking at it,” Wesley said, presenting me with the red whistle that he’d been sitting on. He looked up at me with The Big Dipper in his eyes.

I wanted to take it. I was angry that he’d had it in the first place, after all. I wanted him to feel the weight I knew the whistle carried. But his eyes, further opened because of something I’d taught him, because of something my father had taught me, flooded me with a want to make this innocent and wounded child happy, if only in the form of children’s playthings.
“You have it,” I told him, closing my hand over his open palm. The whistle, like earlier, created a space between the two of us. Dad, coming through again.

Dad wasn’t the whistle he’d left at the cabin. He was more than that. The whistle was only a symbol. Dad was this place, this effortlessly magical place that brought me back to childhood with the mere smell of mosquito spray. Dad was my mother’s snort in her laugh that I’d heard that day at the cabin more than I had since he died. Dad was the perfect smile of my sister, the one that still shone brilliantly despite the wrinkles of sadness on the edges. Dad was Wesley, the small boy he never really knew but was impacting nonetheless. And Dad was I, the child and the man who valued his father’s smile so much that he didn’t quite know how to be brave without it.

I looked at Wesley, the two of us sitting up on the blanket; the only noise the slight waves of the lake water coming in to greet the shore. He’d put the whistle around his neck again. I smiled at him, not knowing if it’d inspire him to be brave, knowing it’d inspire me to.

We saw it before we heard it: a firework, red and large and slow to dissolve. Wesley’s neck snapped towards me, expectant, waiting on me to explain what the firework was doing in the sky. It wasn’t July fourth weekend like it usually was when we came to the cabin. It was the middle of June, no reason for there to be fireworks erupting over the lake. No more fireworks came, and eventually we fell asleep out there on that blanket, waiting for more. I woke up in the morning light to see the red whistle resting against Wesley’s left shoulder. In the sky I swear I could still somehow see the red shadow of that one firework from the night before, a fog that wouldn’t clear completely, a fog I’d remember always. When the woodpecker’s song began against the bark of a tree, I fell back asleep, smiling.
The hallways were carpeted with burgundy and light brown, landscape paintings greeting visitors every few feet. At my grandmother’s room, a painting of a farmhouse welcomed me. The house was blue with white shutters, tall and accented with many windows. In the distance, a silo stretched to the sky, a clear blue sky with the moon crescented in the right-hand corner. It was painted so lightly, as if the moon were only a phantom of itself; shy to make itself known during the daytime, a self-aware thief shrinking into the blueness.

I’d forgotten what I was doing. I was here to see my grandmother, not analyze a painting hung up in the hallway of a nursing home. I looked around, making sure no one had noticed my fixation on the usually overlooked painting. Nurses passed behind me, going into room 116 and 120 with food trays. “Let’s see if I can get Clyde to eat tonight,” the older nurse laughed as she pushed through 116. “Only if Rose lets me sponge her,” the younger nurse shook her head, entering room 120. I was waiting for them to mention Holly, my grandmother in room 122, to laugh together about her hatred for the butter they provided or her insistence on using nothing but Herbal Essences shampoo and Dove conditioner. Perhaps they laughed in the break-room together about my grandmother’s love of a full moon. Do you take her outside to see the full moon? I wanted to ask. Do you at least open the curtains? Do you tell her what color it is, if it’s more orange or whiter? If it’s close or staying far away? Is she really dy-

“Emma, right?”

I jumped, caught again in a reverie instead of in conversation with my grandmother. A nurse was walking towards me, dressed in yellow scrubs decorated with Easter eggs. Her smile was radiant and white and genuine, the kind of smile that begets a smile in return.

“Holly told me her granddaughter was visiting today. I’m Robin, one of Holly’s nurses.”
The questions I had wanted to ask only seconds ago vaporized into only one: “How is she?” The question of death existed somewhere within those three words.

Robin responded with a half-smile and a downward movement of her eyes, expressions that replaced the words she couldn’t say: she’s dying.

“Talking about your wedding has made her healthier, I think.” Robin walked past me to my grandmother’s door. “Congratulations, by the way.”

The door opened at Robin’s command. I smiled towards Robin, thankful for a momentary kindness in the midst of the confusion because of the unfairness of death and the bliss of matrimony.

Grandma hadn’t made it out to Portland for the wedding; she’d been too sick the weeks before. They won’t even let your mother in here, my grandma had said on the phone the night before my wedding, it’s not like I’ll die tomorrow. She could have died on that tomorrow, though. And all of the tomorrows since then. She was dying from lung cancer that was diagnosed five years ago, a cancer that had been put into remission for two years, that had come back only six months ago, stronger and more violent and less sympathetic than ever before. Thankfully, death had let me come back to her again before it took her. Back East to Ohio, to Stow where I had grown up, where Grandma had lived alone for years until dying made it impossible to live at all.

“Holly? Guess who’s here? I think she brought you your shampoo,” Robin laughed while changing my grandmother’s IV. She did it quickly and without any issues, used to the shape of my grandmother’s veins. I watched her, feeling a kind of envy. This nurse knew my grandmother more intimately than I did now. I was sure she’d be the nurse to take my grandmother outside on a full moon.
Robin closed the door on her way out. The lights were on in 122, bright and sterile, but Grandma was fast asleep. I sat down on the chair in the corner, her one piece of furniture besides her bed. The plastic bag dropped from her bedside table making an obnoxiously loud noise. Grandma didn’t budge.

“Here’s the shampoo and the conditioner, Grandma,” I told her.

It bothered me that she was asleep, that I was speaking and she couldn’t hear me. She seemed so peaceful too, as if the light above her was the night-light she used to plug into the wall, the one that casted shadows of the moon and the stars across my room. I turned the light off and watched her face. It brought me back to the bedroom I used to sleep in at her house, the small room with the twin-sized bed and the heavy fleece sheets. Home was boring as a kid, my mother always working during the day, my step-dad working midnights. And as every child eventually learns, the world outside of your home was huge. Grandma’s house became that world. It seemed like every weekend I ended up at her house, waking up to scrambled eggs and sausage in the mornings, getting tucked into bed only after the night-light was plugged in. The light was yellow and covered by a shade with holes in it, holes shaped like stars and moons. It would cast a shadow onto the nearest wall of dark moons and dark stars, the ones I used to watch until I fell asleep. My grandma used to tell me to catch her a shooting star. So I watched the wall, hoping a star would leap towards me.

I read emails, waiting for Grandma to wake up. Countless email: three about the Open House for the 4.5 acre property in West Linn, five from Tom’s cousin Michael who was wanting to begin a house-hunt for he and his new fiancé, a few email from a couple interested in looking at apartments in downtown Portland. Life hadn’t paused when I needed it to; work persisted, time passed. Days of newlywed status were passing. I wanted to call Tom, to spend the night
with him tonight. The ring still felt heavy against my finger, the new lingerie still lay tagged in
gift-bags. *Bad timing,* I thought, and then tried not to think. Bad timing perhaps, but death
wasn’t waiting. Neither was life.

I looked around her small room, hoping to find that old night-light plugged into one of
her outlets. But the outlets were all taken, crowded by medical equipment. I slipped my shoes off
and put my feet on her bed. They were cold, as if lonely since my grandmother was not rubbing
them as she had almost instinctively since I was a child. It seemed a knee-jerk reaction to her; the
charm bracelet on her wrist would jingle like wind chimes in the breeze and her hands would be
reaching for my feet, bare, cold, always waiting for her. *Grandma,* I could sometimes hear
myself laughing out still, *I’m trying to eat!* But it never mattered; breakfast time was just an
opportune time as ever for her hands to hold my feet. *You don’t eat with your feet, do you?* I
heard her laughing back towards me. I nudged my feet closer to her sleeping body, hoping she’d
wake up or maybe instinctively grab them in the dead of her sleep.

Parts of me, I realized, were already beginning to miss her. Of course I’d expected to
miss her. I’d been readying myself to say goodbye for years by memorizing her details, the ones
that were so her’s they could belong to no one else. But my feet missed her- to miss her in such
an animalistic way was something I hadn’t expected; her living now felt like such a need to me,
my pollen, my sunrays.

I wanted to pray then or do something. I wasn’t religious and neither was she but I didn’t
know what else to do. Needing her was something I didn’t know how to fix; it was a childhood
need and the person who aided my childish needs was dying on the bed in front of me. I flexed
my feet in the form of a bow, the form of a prayer. And ss if in response, Grandma’s feet
shuffled at the bottom of her bed, a shuffle that looked gentle but what was probably just weak.
Her appearance amazed me; she looked so drastically different, even from just five months ago when I visited last. I’d flown back home for a week with Tom, announcing our engagement to my parents who hadn’t seen it coming and to my grandmother who had felt its arrival years before. So much had changed within 150 days; engagement had evolved into marriage, fighting an illness had slipped into the beginning smells of death. And another transition too, an evolution I hadn’t yet vocalized to anyone but Tom. I wasn’t ready to, but I’d have to anyway. Before it was too late. *Bad timing*, I thought accidentally again.

Grandmother’s feet shuffled again but she wasn’t awake. I stretched her blanket to cover her. When I pulled the blanket down, I paused at her feet; they were my feet. They looked so similar to mine, detailed in the same ways as my own: the same toenail shape, the way the second and third toes were both longer than the big toe, the pinky toes humorously fat. Guilt fled to me then, hanging in the corner of my mind like the crescent moon in the painting outside of her room. She had always been so attentive to my feet and I had never noticed hers. A stupid reason for guilt, perhaps, but one that clouded heavily nonetheless, a guilt for the observations I had failed to make, that I wouldn’t get the chance to make again.

“Oh, Emma, I just can’t believe I missed your wedding,” Grandma was awake now, lightly crying as she and I flipped through the photos, her charm bracelet ringing as each page turned. The charms were louder than my grandmother’s voice.

“Grandma, it was just Tom,” I told her, “the same Tom you met when I was eighteen.” I didn’t like the attention at the wedding and it even made me uncomfortable now.

“Eighteen and jetting across the country for school,” she shook her head and began to cough exhaustingly.
I smiled at her, rubbing her left hand. Tom had been my boyfriend right out of high school, the one with the basketball scholarship to the University of Oregon. I secretly applied, was secretly accepted. When I announced to my family that I’d be going with Tom, a seven-hour plane ride away from the city my grandmother had never moved out of, my parents, protective and worried that I was being foolish with my heart, objected. With the help of my grandmother, I convinced my parents to let me go. *She’s got the wanderlust we never had,* Grandma had said to my mother. *And what if she gets her heart broken?* My mother had said in response. *If he’s going to break her heart, her location will not soften the blow.* Grandma’s words resonated in me since then. They sang during the middle of my favorite songs, talked during a professor’s lecture. They helped me stay confident, as confident as I was that I’d catch a shooting star when I stayed the night at Grandma’s. She helped me be vulnerable enough to love another and cautious enough to love myself.

And somehow it had worked; we had stayed together despite the amount of times each of us had broken the other’s heart. Being with another did not exempt me from being hurt, from not experiencing heartbreak. There were daily disappointments, monthly doubts… but there were infinitesimal amounts of bliss. We graduated on time, stayed in our new state and he proposed and my grandmother’s words were still there. Heartbreak could not be avoided. So I got married to the man I loved. And I guess I had gotten pregnant too, a string of events that I couldn’t exactly arrange chronologically. Only Tom and I knew; over the commotion of the wedding and the hassles of the plans for the honeymoon, I didn’t want any more attention. I wanted to observe the world for some time again, to watch the moon in the sky or the moons on the wall the way I watched the painted moon in my grandmother’s hallway.
Bad timing, I thought again. It didn’t matter what I wanted because if I didn’t tell my grandmother now, she could die without knowing. Life was just as impatient as death, always churning its same circle. I looked at my grandmother who was closing her eyes again and remembered what she looked like when she was fifty and planting too many flowers in her backyard, the one who taught me to look at the night sky even if I was indoors.

I needed a right moment to tell her. It was too important and we weren’t close enough again yet. The right moment though, when would it be? Right moments, I had realized some time ago, are rare; the time my childhood cat curled up on my lap after my first heartbreak, the time Tom wouldn’t leave my dorm room sophomore year of college despite me telling him to. Right moments, when waited on, are slow and disappointing. Being coy, being quiet, had sometimes awarded me with these perfect moments. But there are moments, much more plenty, not righted by the trajectory of the stars but by the blossoming of a smile- not by fate but by self-revelation, by a genuine and rare person-to-person connection. By effort and honesty and bravery. By a foot rub at the breakfast table.

“Gram,” I began, unsure if she was asleep or awake. My voice, attempting to be brave, still remained unsure. I was still venturing out into the Milky Way or whatever other unknowable force was responsible for fate and coincidences and all of the right moments, attempting to prompt one to occur, ignoring my self-made resolution to be brave instead of hesitant-

And somehow her hand was on my stomach. She had lifted it with such ease and grace, a frail and tight-skinned hand that was so beautifully lifted, like a ballerina’s flexed and bruised and bloodied feet. Her eyes met mine. Nothing happened, then. No magical kick coming from the stranger that was inside of me, no introduction of the two before it was too late. But her hand
was there. And the touch was heavy, more significant than the words running circles around my head, more important, so much more.

I looked up at her then, and she was awake, rolled over on her right side, a light smile on her face, eyes closed again. There were no words then either, just her charm bracelet at rest against my stomach.

“Holly,” a nurse spoke from the doorway. “Bingo in the dining room?”

My grandmother slowly opened her eyes and looked at me, her hand falling away from my stomach. She nodded then, maybe towards the nurse, maybe to me and the unspoken news she somehow already knew, and the speech I had rehearsed when she was sleeping left the moment. It was still necessary, but the touch on my stomach filled the moment. Something had been communicated, something stronger than consonants and vowels morphing into one another to become words. With her hand on my stomach and her eyes dilating as they looked into mine, my grandmother and I had reached a connection that words could not come close to. A connection that transcended life, that was unafraid of death.

“Let’s go play,” I told her. I imagined the phrase, me asking her to join me, brought scenes of the play set in her backyard to her thoughts, the cornfield further behind, the childhood version of me pulling hard on her hand, her charm bracelet ringing obsessively. I’d lead her when I was a little girl. I’d lead her now, lead her to play bingo. But her hand wouldn’t hold mine quite as tightly now as it had then. I hoped she was laughing in her deteriorating mind, imagining me preferring the dirt and mud of the cornfield to the pink play set, thinking of me being too rough with the soil to helpfully aid her in the planting of her flowers. She had let me help her anyway though.
Grandma had a lot of friends in the nursing home. And a lot of admirers. The men were mostly white-haired with confused feet, hunched over like baby birds. The women were the same except they seemed more solemn, mother birds unable to feed their young.

We sat with a woman named Shirley, a man named Victor, and Victor’s miniature schnauzer. The dog was licking the icing off of Victor’s chocolate cake and Shirley was falling asleep. They were barely participating in bingo, only nodding when Grandma Holly placed the yellow chips down on their boards for them. Despite my grandmother’s frailty, she was one of the liveliest people in the BINGO room. Her charm bracelet’s energetic chime held the energy she could no longer exhibit as much as she wanted to. Shirley seemed to be the oldest at the table- her skin looked as if it was the only remaining layer before her bones, pulled too tightly over her elbows and knuckles. Her eyes seemed to be evaporating into her skull, a yellow fog graying her irises. She didn’t talk much. She only looked at me. She coughed a lot and on her coughing towel there was a stain that was almost red. No one was there visiting her, I noticed, and even though it was a Wednesday during the afternoon, most people probably at work, Shirley being alone worried me. Death was approaching her slowly, a snake waiting to shed. I wished she had a visitor there, always there until…

Victor smiled constantly, a permanent joy fixed into his sagging cheeks. Grandma had talked about him before, on the phone. Victor, the one with Alzheimer’s, she’d tell me, the one with the dog that lives here. His hearing aids were large and I wondered how well he could hear what the nurses were telling him when they came into his room. Could a hearing aid make the
deliverance of you’re never healing from that stroke any softer? Or would he rather not hear? He smiled nonetheless, the way I did in the recovery room after getting my tonsils out at age six, oblivious to pain, knowing nothing but life and living.

“Don’t mind Jack,” Victor told me, smiling towards the dog that was still licking the cake.

“You mean Todd, Victor,” my grandmother said from across the table. “Jack is your brother.”

Victor only smiled in response, flexing his upper lip harder when turning his head to me, again unconcerned with the beginning plague of death. Grandma had told me that sometimes Victor would forget his wife’s name, the lady my grandmother had gotten to know over the last six months, who visited her husband religiously until death took her away too, a cleaner route, instant in the flash of two automobiles colliding. It was only three months ago, and Victor couldn’t remember her. What a reward a quick death was, I thought, disbelieving myself despite; with a quick death, no memories were taken from the mind or the heart, vaporized into the oxygen we inhale and the carbon dioxide we exhale. A quick death, no chemo or mistaking your pet for your twin brother- a blessing. That’s sad, I thought, because how could death be a blessing? It was a shadow, lingering within everyone’s life like the moon in the corner of that painting, but never had I thought of it as a good thing. The moon was there despite what phase it was in, despite how much of itself it showed to the human eye, the same way death was always there too, sometimes obviously, sometimes not.

“Bingo!” My grandmother broke my reverie. She was raising her hand, her arm shaking from weakness, her charm bracelet jingling the way it used to when she sautéed vegetables in her kitchen. What a comfort those charms were to me smashing into one another, ricocheting like
sound waves from a drumstick. It was another of her details, so innately woven into her that I
wasn’t sure I could remember unless the charms were in front of me, making their usual noise.
Would I forget the song they played?

My grandmother accepted her prize, a gift card to the family diner a couple of roads over
from the nursing home. “The honeymoon will just have to wait, Emma!” She smiled and lightly
hugged an unenthusiastic Shirley while Victor clapped. Remember this, I thought as my left hand
magnetically rubbed my stomach, either talking to myself or to the universe that was swirling
inside of me, forming by way of fingernails and eyelashes instead of constellations and moons.

Back in her bedroom a half hour later, my grandmother was falling asleep. The won gift
card was atop her nightstand, the charm bracelet at rest beside it. My phone was decorated with
messages from Tom: “Miss you, tell Holly hi”, “honeymoon only 24 hours away.”

She coughed then, a deep cough that threatened to wreck her skinny ribcage. “You’ll be
happy, Emma” she said. I didn’t know how to respond, so I squeezed her hand and looked into
her wavering eyes, her mind dipping back into the unconscious world of sleep.

Perhaps those had been the words she was training herself how to say the way I’d been
thinking of how to tell her my news. Maybe she needed to tell me her confidence in my
marriage, in me, as much as I needed to tell her that I was pregnant. Even if she couldn’t hear
me, I had to tell her.

She had looked at me as if she knew- I’d caught her staring at my hands as they held the
life within me, and hadn’t I noticed the way her eyes looked into my own, a knowing glance, the
kind she used to give me on Christmas when she knew I didn’t like one of her gifts? You know,
grandma, I know you do. I smiled and squeezed her almost lifeless hand—she remained asleep or half-asleep, whatever kind of hypnosis she was fixed in. I rubbed her hand the way she used to rub my feet, trying to get her pattern down just right. “I’m pregnant,” I said, barely above a whisper. And she smiled, perhaps in acknowledgment, perhaps in dreaming. Either way, she knew. There was a new life here, almost here, and the promise of life was comforting, even if death was just as present.

It was dark outside after the BINGO game and Grandma was still half-asleep. I was tired too, and soon I know I’d have to leave, to catch the flight that would take me to Tom. I needed my grandmother. But hadn’t she been trying to teach me the cycles of life, of space, of existence? She’d shown me her gardens, taken me outside to see full moons— all of it together was an arsenal to use against the pain of losing her.

Aging wasn’t pretty. It was ugly bruising and painful brittleness, the loss of precious memories. But it was forceful and unmoving. It was absolute. And it was certain, as certain as the flowers withering in the winter and the moon hiding itself after a couple days of being fully present.

“Let me see the moon,” Grandma whispered, her hand reaching for me again. I could barely hear her voice.

A thick curtain blocked her large window, nearly blocking out all of the light from the outside. I moved it to the side, uncovering the large yellow moon n the sky, not in the corner hiding shyly like in the painting, but in the middle of her window, making it known.

“Full moon,” I told her as I sat down again, inching closer to her bedside.
“New moon soon,” I heard her breathe. Grandma knew the phases of the moon, took notice of them even when the moon itself was invisible.

My grandmother was dying. I did not know how much time she had left, only that it was so sadly limited. I knew that I had already forgotten the pitch of her laughter and the shade of red she used to wear on her lips; I knew soon I’d forget even more. But there were things I wouldn’t forget, like the way her feet and my feet seemed to be born of the same human being. I wouldn’t forget the smell of her shampoo. I wouldn’t forget her glazed brown eyes opening as far as they could in order to see the moon, hung in the sky like a pumpkin carved by a child.

The moon is in orbit, as is the earth. And we’re in orbit too, my grandmother, me, my mother, my new husband, our unborn child; an orbit that circles around death, sometimes inching daringly close to the center. This old and young and weakened and strengthened woman I’d loved for all of my life was the brightest star in the same solar system I found myself orbiting, the star that was soon to fall away, to soar magnificently until it dropped out of sight.

She was asleep now, and she was smiling. Outside, the jack-o-lantern moon smiled back, knowing that soon it’s time in the sky would end. A star shot itself to the left of the moon; a dying star that had finally burnt out. Which meant somewhere in this incomprehensibly large universe, more stars were being born, more stars to salute a full or new moon when either one arrived.

I’m awaiting the new moon. My new moon.
Conclusion:

Making Sense of the Truths

As was my goal in writing this collection, I’ve been able to discover certain truths through the process of writing each story. All six of these stories are attempts at uncovering real experiences in the everyday life we live.

I begin the collection with “The Years In-Between,” one of the longest stories included. This story is the oldest one in the collection; it has existed (in a lot of different drafts) since the end of my sophomore year of college. This story gripped me into realizing that I had talent and that it was worth sharing. The reason I chose to use this story as the opening one in my collection is because I think it sets the tone for the rest of the collection; it hints to the reader that the collection will deliver a theme of the fleeting and the unforgettable both being a part of every day life. I also think I am tied strongly to the characters of this story; I think I know Jaida and Logan very well simply because I’ve spent a lot of time with them. Because of my closeness to my protagonist, I think her inner dialogue with herself is really working in this draft. I tend to write under first person quite often, but when I began this story, I knew it could not be under the first person point of view. I wanted a distance in-between Jaida and me simply because I wanted to examine her in a way she could not examine herself. This story introduced me into writing under third-person limited, and gave me an idea for what kind of stories begged to be written that way. The truth I discovered within this story was a truth about loss and grief: we cannot put a timeline or other qualifications onto grief and healing. True healing happens slowly and also suddenly and can be triggered by something that seems quiet insignificant. And, the healing can be happening without even realizing it as you are pretending to be happy day to day. Jaida has been healing day to day with the help of her tremendously kind husband Logan, and what finally
gets her to jump into the realm of true happiness free from grief is the interaction with Sydney, the girl on the swing set. This interaction, which doesn’t seem to be anything huge, jolts Jaida in a way nothing else has, and that, I think, is the true nature of the healing process from loss. There are, of course, changes I still need to make. I think I’d like to drop readers into the story at the campsite immediately and fill in how the couple got there with flashback and/or backstory. I’d also like to spend some time figuring out how much time has truly passed from the time of Jaida and Logan’s loss; I think three years, what I have now, is too much time. In prior drafts, I had it being the leap-year anniversary and think I may experiment with that idea again. I also think I want Jaida to decide at the end of the story to try having a child again. Her epiphany within the story doesn’t feel complete to me yet and I think that decision could fix it.

“Easter, Again” is what I view to be the most complete story included in this collection. It’s a story I wanted to experiment with in terms of point of view. In this story, I write under third-person limited perspective. I experiment even further into perspective by choosing a middle-aged male protagonist; as a 22-year-old female, writing as if I knew every thought and behavior of an older man was something I hadn’t done before. I wanted to try it, though, because I think writing as different identities makes you a stronger writer. It made me really get to know the story’s world in which I was writing- the characters, the setting, and especially the problems inherent within the story. Getting to know Scott was the biggest issue of the story, and to do so, I had to let the story sit before rewriting it. A lot of the work happened in my imagination. The biggest change from draft to draft was in the central issue of the story; why exactly was Scott’s marriage so estranged? Originally, I created Scott as an alcoholic. On further drafts, however, a drinking problem didn’t feel right for the story. I wanted to write a story that was real, that investigated real family problems without any outside issue like alcohol. The truth I discovered
in this story was a sad one—some things cannot be fixed no matter what—some things are irreversibly altered or broken and we don’t know why. Time changes things: relationships, desires… even an identity. I discovered by writing this story that despite the undeniable fact that time changes everything, sometimes in quite a depressing way, there are moments that remain unaffected, memories that can’t be taken away by the changes inevitably happening all around. That’s what the home video reminds Scott of in this story, and when he looks around at the present day Easter, he along with the reader realizes that although things are broken and although there are divorce papers waiting to be signed, beautiful moments that remind us of the goodness in the world can still occur. In subsequent drafts, I think I want to experiment with the ending. It feels as if the ending shouldn’t be defined totally for the reader; for example, I don’t want to for sure tell the reader the papers have been signed and Scott is now anticipating a divorce. I want to capture the idea of nothing changing despite what action takes place and although I think the present ending does that in a way, I think I want to spend more time with the conclusion to make it better.

“Just Visiting” is by far the story that gave me the most trouble in every way. I think it remains to be the story that needs the most attention and rewriting done. Originally, the story was much shorter and amazingly different; it took me long hours to turn it into this draft. The rewrite, however, exposed more issues within the story than I anticipated. This story is told in first-person point of view through the lens of a twenty-something year old Muslim living in New York City. I took a risk by writing this story because I really had to learn about that culture if I was going to write about it; writing as if I knew first-hand the actions of a Muslim man was hard to do since I’m a Christian woman. But, the story was important to me and I felt like I had to tell it. I wanted to discover something about the nature of diversity in today’s world; how in ways we
are more tolerant than we’ve ever been and how in ways not much has truly changed in that realm. I wanted to expose the hard truth some people have to face: diversity can still separate rather than join people together. As I rewrote the piece, however, it became less about the religion and ethnicity issue between the characters and became, instead, about the two characters fizzling out simply because their love was not as great as they’d originally expected. The truth I expected to discover within this story still rings true; diverse cultures and/or religions are worth learning about despite the prejudice they may still garner. I discovered something else, though, regarding my overarching theme of the entire collection: even if a relationship will end because of circumstance, it is still greatly worth it because of the lessons we learn about ourselves and about the world around us when involved with that relationship. In later drafts, I think I will spend more time in Ali’s present day world; I need to figure out how important his religion is to him, how important Casey is to him, and a lot of other things. I don’t think I know Ali well enough yet to finish this story, but I think his story is worth writing and sharing anyway, and thus want to continue trying to write it.

“June, July, August” is the other story that I think still needs quite a bit of work. I wanted to illustrate Summer’s isolation and independence within her loneliness in this story, and wanted to address just how an alienated person finds his/her way out of the aloneness. From draft to draft, I understood Summer more and more and think that she is a well-developed character in this draft. I also changed the circumstances that lead Summer to walking on the beach in the story; her mini blow up at the dinner table is something I added in order to further depict her anger regarding the fact that no one can seem to understand her emotions. I also changed the ending; rather than Mya finding Summer on the beach and the two of them reconnecting as they did in previous drafts, I decided to leave Summer alone. I wanted her to learn by herself that she
could start creating memories independent of anyone else, and don’t think she’s quite ready to be with Mya again yet. I don’t, however, think Summer’s resolution at the end of the story is yet warranted. Perhaps Summer needs to talk to Adam or see something on the beach that makes her mind shift into this new way of thinking that she can have new memories despite their inevitable changing nature. I’m not sure what needs to happen yet, but I do know further action needs to take place near the end of the story. The truth I discovered in this story was that feeling alone is a real thing that cannot be fixed by anything but being alone. It seems complicated, but Summer’s character showed me that the only escape from being alienated is to actually be alone and learn to love being alone. I want Summer to realize, as I’ve begun to realize through writing this story, that loving yourself is essential when entering a group of people who are different from you. Summer needs to get back to her true self before she can feel confident being around Mya. I think this story needs to sit alone for a while and Summer needs to exist and move around in my imagination before I rewrite again.

“Unappreciated Gifts” echoes around the central theme of my collection regarding the temporariness and worthiness of life. I write from a first-person point of view of Caleb, a mid-twenty aged man who is going to spend time at his family’s old vacation spot after the untimely death of his father. In this story, I wanted to examine loss in a multitude of ways: not only has Caleb’s father just passed, but Isabelle, Caleb’s sister, has just lost her husband due to his affair. Wesley, Caleb’s young nephew, prompts Caleb into realizing the importance of loving and giving to his remaining family (especially his nephew) rather than wallowing in his own guilt and grief. Caleb learns in this story that everything is temporary, and that it is important to be the best you can be in each role you have. I think what works really well in this story is the fact that multiple threads of loss are coming together and Caleb seems to be in the middle of all of them;
his mother’s, nephew’s, and sister’s grief all weigh on Caleb as his own grief also weighs on him. Caleb begins to feel the responsibility he will have to now live up to since the patriarch of the family has now passed away. The truth in this story that I discovered when writing is that moments of love surpass the fleetingness of a life. Caleb’s recurrent listening to the woodpecker throughout the story proves that his father lives on. In the current draft, I don’t think the responsibility idea is established enough. It is not simply that Caleb has to learn what it means to be an uncle- there has to be more of a conflict than that. I think giving Caleb an important choice to make within the confines of this story will fix the issue of conflict the current draft has. I have an idea that Caleb should be offered a dream job that would require him to move away from his grief-stricken family; a decision like this would depict Caleb in a light I think I want him to be in.

“Full Moon, New Moon” finishes this collection. I put this story last because I love the last few images the story contains and really liked the idea of wrapping the entire collection up with it. I also think it finishes the theme of the fleeting nature of life by giving readers some kind of hope that some of the other stories do not. Told in the first-person, this story revolves around Emma and her relationship with her grandmother who is dying in a nursing home. Emma, who has recently been married, struggles with telling her grandmother that she is pregnant; she knows that if she doesn’t tell her grandmother, her grandmother may very well die without ever knowing (because Emma is leaving for her honeymoon and her grandmother is close to dying), but Emma also doesn’t feel quite ready to accept the pregnancy herself. I think some of the images within this story are some of my favorite I’ve ever written, especially the images regarding the moon. The truth that revealed itself to me here was similar to the truth in “Unappreciated Gifts;” life is short, but it is a cycle. Emma feels sadness because of her
grandmother’s impending death but also feels a kind of hope by the end of the story for the life that is forming inside of her. What I still need to work on in this story are the facts of Emma’s situation; should she be unmarried and thus nervous to tell her grandmother about the pregnancy? Should the nervous part not be involved? Emma’s present situation is still one I think I need to play around with.

*Lullabies and Sleepless Nights* compiles six short pieces of fiction that all unfold into having an alike theme: the preciousness of memories and the importance of living fully despite the undeniable fact that life and everything within life is fleeting. Writing this was and still is an endeavor to further understand human nature, and although it’s stepped me in the right direction to learning those truths, I think continuing my writing will continue my learning. Human nature, after all, is way too complex and unpredictable to be understood within six short stories. But it’s a start.
Works Cited


Author Bio

Erika Gallion is from Canton, Ohio and is a graduate of Canton South High School in Canton. She attended Ashland University as an undergraduate and received a degree in English as well as a degree in Creative Writing. At Ashland, Erika was involved with the Honors Program, Sigma Tau Delta (the English honorary society), International Club, and working as a student tour guide for the office of admissions. She also participated in a study abroad trip with the Honors Program to Greece and Turkey. Erika enjoys reading and writing as well as traveling. In the fall of 2014, Erika will begin her graduate program at Kent State University where she will study Higher Education Administration in the hopes of one day working with International Student Services.