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Batter: A Creative Writing Portfolio

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MAPW Capstone Project
Batter: Creative Writing Portfolio

By Hannah Newman
Advised by Dr. Andrew Plattner and Dr. Bill Rice

To my sister, Halle.

She is a rarity, a once-in-a-lifetime soul.

If you don't know her, you're a complete loser, and I feel bad for you.

And to myself because I deserve it.

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Introduction

My capstone project, *Batter*, is a collection of creative writing pieces, consisting of short stories, flash fiction, and two creative nonfiction essays. I decided to do a portfolio because creative writing is simply what I enjoy the most and have been intrigued by since I took my first fiction writing class at Kennesaw State University. Composing stories, imagining how characters could behave believably, their problems and their solutions, all of it combined gives me a sense of creative determination that I have not found in any other area of work or craft. I believe I've been rather lucky because working on most of these stories almost felt like no work at all. When I've produced a story that I believe in, that is when I know I've composed most diligently, regardless of if it were difficult to construct or not. What I aim to portray from this portfolio is strong writing, believable characters, stories that are simple but share a large, perhaps personal truth that we can all relate to.

My advisors, Dr. Andrew Plattner and Dr. Bill Rice, steadily and patiently worked with me to revise and polish the fiction and non-fiction pieces presented in this capstone. My project was originally created to be a portfolio of my best creative work so that I may use it to apply for creative writing PhD applications. However, it is now a gentle yet nudging reminder that my writing is never actually done and never really perfect. This realization, perhaps from some literary spell or curse, I can't determine which, only pushes me to write more.

Short Story Fiction

Cuisine

Ever since I was a little girl, I could never eat enough to fill my stomach. My mother would give me industrial bags of cereal. I'd shovel bowls of crunch berries into my mouth and choke down a swallow. I would nearly devour my spoon. I'd go through gallons of milk. Eat us out of house and home, she said. Fruit was a waste. Bread didn't do anything for long. Protein, meat, beans, peanut butter in all consistencies satisfied me for an hour. In the middle of the night, I'd walk to the kitchen and rifle through cabinets in the dark. And in the dark, I'd eat all our strudels, sometimes soaking them in milk and downing the sludge like a poor man's smoothie. After a few months of that and there was a chain around the fridge door and a lock on the pantry. I consumed too much to afford. Kitchen was ravenous-proof. I wanted to eat the trash can.

In middle school, I brought quart-size containers of shredded rotisserie chicken to lunch. My locker was packed with Tupperware bins of rice, cemented refried beans, and boxes of granola bars filled with syrupy wrappers. People asked if they could buy food off me. I had so much of it. I was starving so it was always a no. My mom had to tell my teachers that I needed to eat in class. If I didn't, who knew what would happen? My backpack was filled with gushers, fruit snacks, other types of sugar that melted like magma plastic in my mouth.

When I was in my last year of middle school, I had my first crush. I saw him across the cafeteria laughing with his friends, and something in my belly quieted. Lurched. I liked him before I knew his name. This curbed the appetite for some time. And then my belly felt like it had birthed something new. I looked at him, and then she was blinking awake inside me.

One day, I was spending \$15 at the vending machine when he came up behind me and asked what my favorite Pop-Tart flavor was. All of them, I said. They all taste the same. He laughed, and my eyes widened.

Can I buy one off you? He motioned to the bundle of Pop-Tarts I had in my arms. I stared at his face and nodded. He leaned forward, and my stomach growled. She felt practically alive. His eyes inspected the small, blue packages cradled near my chest, and then something in me knew that he was hungrier than he appeared.

I'll take this one, he said, grabbing brown sugar. I'm Alex by the way.

I'm June, I said.

Thanks, June. I owe you.

He walked away without paying me. I bought extra the next day in case he asked again. Each week, I waited for him by the vending machine. My mom bought me boxes of brown sugar Pop-Tarts, and I sheltered the foiled treasure in my backpack. Those were the ones I couldn't eat.

Alex didn't really talk to me again until we started our last year of high school. I saw him at the local country buffet that my mom and I went to every Sunday. It was right next to the Kroger, only a few minutes from our house. My mom would fill me up at the buffet, and then she'd go grocery shopping for the apartment. I had to stay in the car or else I'd go on a rampage.

I ran into him at the chocolate fountain, and it was a dream for me. There were two plates in my hand, one topped with macaroni and cheese mixed with mashed potatoes, the kind with the skins still in them. Chicken and meatloaf were somewhere in there. Green beans. I drizzled it all with steak sauce. I went to set my plate down and there his hand was, asking if I needed help balancing everything. We took a quick look at each other, and I recognized him immediately

even though his appearance had changed, matured in just a few years. His arms were still lanky in a boyish way, but he was taller, and his shoulders were broader. There was a look in his eyes like he was seeing something for the first time, too, and suddenly I knew the food on my plate wouldn't be enough.

He helped me dip all the cookies I had into the fountain. Chocolate drizzled onto our fingers; it was a messy process. I wondered what it would be like to bite on a sweet knuckle. After we piled everything onto my powder blue plate, he asked me what I was doing Friday night. His parents were out of town, and he wanted a few people over.

You should come, he said.

Barbecue chicken was on his single plate. Sweet corn. Lima beans. A ball of glistening bread. Those were always rock-solid, but I saw the appeal.

I'll be there, I said, looking up at him.

We parted ways at the chocolate fountain, and I walked back to the table where my mom was sitting. She was still picking at her first plate when I sat down.

Who was that? she asked, pushing aside watery pineapple.

Alex from school, I said.

I could feel her eyes on me.

Yeah? she asked. I knew she wanted me to continue, but she would never pry.

I got you some marshmallows, I said, plopping them on her plate. She popped one in her mouth and smiled at me. Then she looked up past my shoulder.

Oh, we gotta go, she said, grabbing her purse. I shoveled coconut macaroons in my mouth and stuffed some in my jacket as I turned around. From across the restaurant, I saw the

buffet manager quickly walk across the floor to our seats, weaving through senior citizens and flailing kids. He had a stopwatch in his hand. My two hours were up.

Six days and millions of calories later, it was Friday. I had my outfit ready. My mom sat me down in her bathroom to help me with my make-up and hair. We went over the schedule for the month of June. I had a state-wide wing-eating competition in two weeks. That would make us \$7,000 and then I'd be a runner up for the national finale. In July, there was a grouper sandwich competition on the gulf. I could make us an easy three grand. In the Keys, that conch fritter one.

Are you excited? my mom asked me. She brushed my hair and sprayed it with heat protectant. I knew exactly what she meant by asking that. I didn't want her to know how hungry I was.

Yes, I said. It'll be nice to see the Keys again. She gave me a small laugh while she sectioned off my hair.

I'm talking about tonight, silly, she said. I clenched my legs together without thinking. She smiled in the mirror at me and mentioned how she was happy to see me making friends. She said I'm becoming a woman. My lower belly growled in agreement.

In just a few minutes, my hair was curled, mascara on my eyelashes. I put on my outfit and stood before her. She squealed, and her hands flew to her face with excitement.

You don't look like the Shrew, she said, nearly bursting. My stage name made us laugh. I was given the name by a Tampa journalist after I won my fourth contest: "High-school girl beats 15 men in hot dog eating competition. Don't let her small frame fool you. She eats to live. She lives to eat. She is the Shrew."

She brushed hair out of my face and turned me around proudly for the final reveal in the mirror. I looked famished, sunken within myself.

My mom dropped me off at Alex's house. She asked me several times on the way there to text her if something happened and when I was ready to leave. We pulled up to the house, and I leaned over to hug her. Her hair smelled like our apartment. Fruity cereal and bergamot. When I opened the car door to step out, she stopped me to say that there are always other ways to our hearts than through our stomachs. She grabbed my wrists with a tender grip and said to please, please be careful. She looked at me as if she knew I knew how people could be selfish with their appetites. I promised to make smart decisions. I told her I loved her, and that I'd see her soon. I stepped out and walked toward the door. When I rang the doorbell, I heard laughter and conversation mixed with music. It made me clutch my purse to my stomach.

A girl answered with a beer bottle in her hand. She looked surprised when she saw me standing there. I turned to my mom and waved. She waved back and drove off.

Hi, she said. You could have just walked in, she added. I stepped inside as she held the door open for me.

I looked around to observe a room of mingling high schoolers. I scanned the area for Alex but saw no sign of him. She offered to lead me to the kitchen.

There's cold beer in the fridge, she said. And there's food there. She pointed at a tray of untouched browning celery and chalky carrots on the kitchen counter. I frowned.

Yeah, I know, she said. Let me grab you a beer.

She walked to the fridge and opened it. I heard her moving plastic bags out of the way. The kitchen was open so I could see people in the living room. Some of them stared at me when

they brought their plastic cups to their mouth. For the most part, no one seemed to be bothered with me there. The girl came back and handed me an opened can. After a moment, she turned to me and asked, Did Alex invite you here? If you're looking for him, I think he's in his parent's room down the hall. She lifted her beer bottle to show me the way.

Thanks, I said. And she nodded. I then lifted the can to my lips and drank the entire thing. Her eyes grew large. I placed the can on the counter with a shaky hand and walked down the hallway.

In the hallway, it was a lot quieter. Still. I walked toward the only closed door down the hall. Despite the hum of the house, the murmur of the party was far enough away to where I could make out what was happening behind the door. I heard a noise that made me stop in front of the room. I pressed my ear to wood and heard sounds I've never made myself but knew well. It sounded like two people are eating, being eaten. They were being enjoyed. My stomach contorted in a way that felt like I was going to throw up the hamburger I had in the car before I got here. I stepped away with my heart beating and thought of running outside. Instead, I stumbled to the bathroom and just stood there. I waited. I didn't know why I waited. I knew I was starving. My stomach growled. She was about to scream. I unzipped my purse and opened the Pop-Tart I had brought myself. I broke one apart and stuffed it into my mouth, crumbs dusting the sink. I didn't chew. She just consumed. I wanted to eat the other half so badly, but I brought it for him. My belly wept.

After a while, I stared in the mirror and brushed crumbs off my face. I left the bathroom and looked down the hallway. A barefoot girl passed me. She smelled just like rubbing alcohol. I walked toward the room again and this time saw the door open. I placed my hands on the frame and peered inside. There, Alex was lying in a large bed against the wall, his shirt off, hair messy,

eyes closed. The room was filled with an orange glow, and the air in it felt warm. Lived in. As if he could sense a new presence, his eyes opened. He looked at me for a few minutes.

June? he asked.

I stepped over the threshold of the room. He stood up and asked how long I'd been at the party. He came up to me and smelled so much like sweat and skin. I wanted to tear him apart. I wanted to eat him whole. I wondered if he felt the same.

I brought you something, I said.

I pulled out the opened Pop-Tart package and handed it to him. He looked down at it, confused, but still took it from me.

Thanks, he said. He looked at me, and I could tell he was really looking at me.

Do you want to come in?

Without waiting for an answer, he stepped beside me and shut the door. He was fully in front of me again. We stood in silence. My belly thumped inside my body. His hand touched my arm. My belly wanted to lunge at him. She had a heartbeat of her own. He led me to the bed. I felt like I could run miles. I could rob a bank successfully.

He was gentle and tender when we kissed. I had read and seen enough to know what happens when people like each other, but I still didn't feel prepared. I didn't know if I could handle what was to come. He reached for the bottom of my shirt. I was about to unfold. Unwrap. He could take bites of me. He could be selfish. I knew what that felt like. Suddenly.

I don't know if I'm ready, I said, stepping aside.

My body didn't feel like my own. He unbuttoned his pants, and they fell to the floor. When he stepped out of them, he said to me, but you're always hungry. When he pulled me to his bed, my stomach spoke for me. I wanted to say she didn't know what the hell she wanted.

But just as she is good at eating, she is even better at being devoured. Yes, despite being eaten alive, I was still left starving afterward.

Years later, just out of high school, I was at a shrimp-eating competition near the bay. It was on some beach south of St. Pete, and I planned to win. So, I did, and I accepted the check knowing it was written in my name before the event started. The men who participated, the men who had been hunting and cooking shrimp for years, savoring their taste and the texture, looked at me disgusted. I'd been around. They knew I didn't eat for flavor. I looked at them and decided which one I'd have. They were all filled with shit anyway.

There was an after party. My mom went to the hotel because she was tired from driving, but I wanted to stay. I was outside at a tiki table eating calamari when I'm approached by a woman.

Her name was Colette. She was a culinary journalist for the local newspaper. She asked if she could sit with me for a small interview. It wouldn't take too much of my time. I nodded and watched as she sat down and pulled out a legal pad and a pen.

What's your favorite food? She began.

All of them, I said. I had been asked this question twelve times.

Why?

Because I'm just hungry.

What goes through your head when you win? I grabbed another piece of calamari while I thought.

I feel like I've conquered something.

So, a proud feeling?

You can say that.

How did you know you were starving? she asked me, not looking my way at all. I stared at her as she wrote.

I just woke up one day and couldn't stop eating, I said. I don't really try to think about it. The calamari started to feel like I was chewing on silicone straws.

Who showed you how to be this hungry? she asked me. I thought that was a weird way to ask it.

What do you mean who showed me? I showed me, I said.

A few kitchen staff walked by our table to the tiki hut bar to begin prepping for the night. Colette turned her neck to acknowledge them, and I noticed she had an upturned nose. Suddenly, a part of me imagined sliding my finger down the bridge of it as if I were swiping icing off a pastry. She returned to her legal pad and scribbled something down.

How old were you when you gained this appetite? she asked, finally returning to me.

The way she stared made me want to tell her the truth. For a second, I thought I heard her stomach growl too.

I was six, I said, and then I heard a soft gasp in the back of the open bar.

Someone dropped a stainless-steel tumbler, and it clamored against concrete. Through the noise, she studied me. Her face said she wanted to be alone with me but not in a hungry way. I got the feeling she wanted to teach me what it meant to cook a meal for fun.

That's a little too young, don't you think? she said, not really framing it as a question.

I asked if she wanted any calamari, and she politely declined but thanked me for the offer. She stood up and gathered her things. She reached out her hand to me, and I grasped it. We said goodbye.

As the night continued, I ate at the bar counter and stared at the waves. I remembered how I would come home from school asking my mom why I was so freakishly big and old—wondering if I were to close my eyes, who could see my guts during lunchtime? I blinked and realized I'm closer to 30 than pb&j, but I knew too much as a child to just be a child. At the bar, a foreign hand cupped my waist, and a porcelain cereal bowl of lightning shattered somewhere when I was six years old, when I was too good at being an incinerator because he turned it on inside me. There was a herd of thunder hushed offshore by digital steel drums, and I remembered nap times with crumbs in my hair, trying to crawl away from famished hands. We sang and drank and ate, having no idea the Australian pines beside us were infested with bats. At some point during the night, there was cake. It was covered in fondant that looked too much like my skin. I wanted to throw my face in it. I asked for a slice. Then more. I took them. With ants crawling out of my mouth, I smiled and held out my empty plate to say, may I have another? And another? When I took my last bite of cake, I couldn't remember when I stopped using the fork and when I started eating the tips of my fingers.

How to Make a Stew

With the heat of the day settling in, my mind took me to places I did not want it to go. She was a new hire at my husband's company about half a year ago, and her name was Sasha. I imagined her to be tall and thin, exceedingly intelligent. They're coworkers, John and Sasha. Whenever he works from home, they call each other to prepare for meetings and department presentations. There were a few times before I left for the day when I would hear him laugh on the phone with her. The kind he would give to me when we started dating in college. His head would tilt back, and he'd place his hands over his chest as he laughed. A week ago, she did it again. This time, I made sure to listen for her voice. It was soft. Like an unmade bed in the morning. I'll stare at him while they talk, John not noticing me at all. When I stir cream into my coffee, I wonder what could make their line of work so funny, so tender.

It's mid-July, a muggy kind of Wednesday in Tampa—an inconvenient time to find out about an affair. The air gets so hot in this season that it feels like it could suffocate you if you're careless. It feels present, thick, like it could be sliced with a knife and served on a napkin. When John proposed to me not long ago, he asked me where I could see myself in five years. I told him that I wanted to be with him. That was my plan. So, I transferred schools and moved to Florida from Albany. The moment I got here I noticed the heat. It drips down my back and makes my feet swell in my shoes. I'm not used to this, but in some weird and mutated way, I want to get used to it.

Yesterday, I told him that I was heading to work, but I had lied. And though I felt sick for doing it, it was really a delicious lie. Necessary. The ones that feel like a shot of espresso. The truth was that I had a plan. I had called out of work to wait in the parking deck of our complex, knowing I'd find her there at some point, and catch him in the act. Today, he works from home.

“Have you eaten breakfast?” John asks while pouring a cup of iced coffee for me.

“I haven’t, no,” I say. “But I’ll grab something at the office. No worries.” I give him a smile that would show anyone I’m hiding something, but I wonder what it looks like to him. When I’m at work, I rifle through the office snacks while everyone is at lunch. And then I turn down the AC. No one ever suspects it to be me.

Planting a kiss on his lips feels like a fib, but I wish him a good day of work. He says to me that he’ll have dinner ready by the time I come back. I grab my coffee on the counter and lift it to him in thanks. See you later, hun. He smiles at me, and instead of feeling disgusted by him as I have been for the past four months, I feel my chest cave in. There is a light airiness to our apartment that seems foreign. It feels like the sun has risen right there in our living room. It makes me want to put my work down, approach him as myself, ask him to tell me what’s going on. Just tell me. I won’t be mad.

“I have a few calls to make,” he says, resting against the kitchen counter. The air sucks out of the room, and I am suddenly aware of where I am—lives are being lived outside of us. It’s that time; I know when to leave.

“Right, I’ll leave you to it,” I say, not looking at him. “Don’t work too hard.” I go to leave, the door closing behind me. I see him smile as it shuts between us, and then I hear the lock. With my purse arm limp to my side, I stare at the door a bit before standing up straight and walking down the hallway to my car. It sits at the top of the deck yet far enough away so that it’s out of plain view from our apartment patio. When I get in, I place the coffee in the cupholder and carefully pull my seatbelt over. Click. Adjust the seat that is already adjusted. Look toward the back for whatever reason. Place both of my hands on the steering wheel and stare ahead. If I lean forward, practically pressed against the windshield, I can see our patio. So, I wait.

Nearly forty-five minutes later, I see a glimmering car ascend the top of the deck. As if they've visited before, the driver parks near the entrance of the building, but I've never seen a car like this here—it's sleek and white with dainty chrome details. Subtly expensive.

When the driver's door opens, I know it is Sasha before I even have to see her face. Her legs slowly swing out of the seat onto the pavement. She's dressed in denim jeans and dark wooden wedges. I watch as she steps out and shuts the door with her hips. It looks like there's a phone cradled in between her shoulder and neck, and when she laughs, her smile is wide. I almost smile along. She pushes aside honey-colored hair while fumbling with her keys to lock the door. She looks like life lives through her. Sasha looks lovely. I hate that she looks lovely. Sitting in my car, I wonder if I am ever the observed.

I know in my stomach without having to get out of my car that she is walking toward our apartment. She disappears down the hallway I just left nearly an hour ago. With an angry heart, I reach for my phone and call him. He doesn't answer. I call again. He won't answer. With it pressed to my ear, ringing, I see the patio door of our place open, and then she appears. In the Florida heat, my hands feel cold, skeletal. John walks out and hands her a coffee, closing the door behind him with his heel. She turns her head to him; he says something to her as he leans in, and they kiss. My mouth hangs open, to mimic or to react—I'm not sure why. I don't see his face when they pull away, but I see Sasha's. The sun that was in our living room before is now completely on her. For a moment, I'm the one who feels like an intruder. In the shade of my apartment building, I end the call. I turn on my car and drive away.

I'm not sure what guides me, but after some time I find myself driving toward gulf islands. I pass over a bridge connecting canals to stucco homes with large boats. The streets are covered in pastel colors; statues of stoic pelicans and grinning dolphins wearing sunglasses are on too many street corners. There is a tiki hut roof on every other building, and they all sell ice cream. Old, shirtless men who look like they've lived on the water their whole lives mill around barefoot, the bottoms of their feet now hardened lizard skin after years of walking on hot sand. Driving through these parts of Florida feels like driving through an unaware part of the universe. The water is the only thing that pulls me back to my mind. It's a color I have never seen in person before. Bright blue, almost green. The waves today are gentle; they roll over like shy giants onto the shore, and they pull away lazily. There's no rush here. It reminds me of when I'd go to Michigan as a kid with my parents, and they'd bring grocery store fried chicken with cubed watermelon. My father would cup my mother's face to kiss her, hands sticky with sugary water. When I pull over to park on the sand, I try not to let the flashing images develop in my head. I wonder what they're doing, what they've been doing, and for how long. Instead of crying, I feel like vomiting and yelling all at once. I want to unhinge my jaw and yell. I have a feeling it wouldn't even hurt.

I quickly get out of the car and slam the door. I open it again and stand back. I slam it one more time. I walk toward the trunk and fling it open, taking off my shoes and throwing them into the back, knowing I had a pair of sandy flip flops stowed here for safekeeping. I take off my work cardigan and throw it to the front. I leave my phone in there, and then I shut the trunk and breath raggedly, sharply. My armpits feel cold, but I know they're sweating. My fingers swipe tangled hair strands from my face. Backing away from the car, I can finally hear seagulls and ocean water. Just over a sandy hill, there is the beach. With the sun being directly overhead, the

surface sparkles like champagne, like someone had tossed a handful of floating diamonds. For the first time in a while, a breeze rushes past me, through me. I hate it. I want to feel miserable. The old couple sitting on the beach under the umbrella look like they don't know when they're in people's way. There is a feeling that I need to keep moving. I can't stop for a second to think about what they're doing in the apartment. An image flashes across my mind of him naked and then my hands fly up to my face as if to hide. I think for a minute that if I were to walk right into that water and just keep swimming, I would be okay with being hooked into a boat and then eaten.

There is a part of me that knows I need to cry, scream, release something of some kind. My chest feels tense, boiling with feelings. But if I let it out what would that even do? Even if I go to the water, if I move away, if I die, if I walk in on them, they continue. They continue and I can't.

The feelings subside for a bit when I smell fresh food. Just a few yards ahead and back on the street, there is a storefront with a billow of steam surrounding it. I start walking over there, and as I get closer, I see the name: "Tas Tabor: Hungarian Food" in big, green letters on a yellow background. And there, outside and near the entrance door, is a huge pot of what looks to be a stew. It's full of potatoes, meat, red sauce, and spices. The pot is placed right over a ring of fire lit by a hose snaked from a gas tank just a few feet away. It sits there completely still, hanging from a long and sturdy metal chain hooked on a wooden beam from the roof. The contents of it bubbling, softly popping steam into the hot air. It smells of a home-cooked memory. Though Florida was always hot, this pot of stew is surely heating the entire state. When I get closer, the steam nearly singes the skin on my face and the tops of my feet. It makes me gasp and step back.

Suddenly, the entrance door springs open, and it makes me jump. Out steps a large man who looks like he never stops sweating. His hair is curly, glued to his head, and he smiles at me with his entire mouth, proud of himself.

“Hi,” I say. He stands there smiling, eyes crinkled, and nods his head. I nod back.

“Hungarian goulash,” he says to me and gestures at the boiling pot with his hand.

He nods twice quickly and steps closer to the pot with his hand still stretched out toward it. There’s a large silver plate near the pot that has a ladle on it. He picks it up and holds it out to me. I quickly clasp my hands together in front of my body and stare at it, then up at him. I’m trying to figure out how to say that I am not the type of person to just do anything when the door swings open again, this time followed by a plump, short woman. Tan. Curly hair. She walks out and then stops in her tracks to assess me.

“We don’t open for another hour,” she says rather quickly and with an expectation for me to reply. She bunches her hands and places them on her hips. I look at her.

“I don’t want to eat here,” I say. “But thank you.”

The man by the goulash holds out the ladle to me again, and this time both the woman and I acknowledge it. Her eyes dart to him and then she turns to me.

“This isn’t a restaurant,” she says. “This is a cook bookstore, and we give Hungarian cooking lessons.” I blink and then my eyes peer inside the store to see a wall of spices and counters of pots and pans. I look just past her but can feel her eyes examine my face and then my body. “You are from here?” she asks me. I can tell from her question that she already knows the answer.

“New York,” I say. “I moved here for my husband.” I recite it robotically. I’m only here to list facts.

“For love!” The goulash man roars. I sigh as if I’ve been putting up with goulash man’s antics for years. The woman stares at me.

“You need to learn how to cook. You’re very tiny,” she says to me as she turns to go back inside the store. In there, I can see her gather an apron and head to the back for a few seconds. I peer at the man who is still smiling at me.

“Sebo,” he speaks. He brings his hand to his chest to introduce himself. The action reminds me of John in a way. I want to go home. After a few minutes pass, I give in.

“Claudia,” I say, placing my hand over my chest in return. I smile when he gives me a soft laugh. The woman reappears with an apron and pair of slip-free shoes.

“Put these on,” she says.

“Oh, I can’t. I’m sorry, I have—” but even against my own words, I find myself reaching out for them.

“It’s not a long lesson,” she tells me. “Come find me when you’re ready.” I don’t argue. Instead, I take off my flip-flops and place them just outside the parameter of the store and slip the other shoes on. Sebo helps me tie the apron around my waist and then waves at me when I open the door to walk in.

Inside the store, the lights are warm. The tile is a soft brown clay color, the walls covered in an orange sickle gloss tile. There are copper pans and pots hanging along one wall and suspended from the ceiling that looks worn but in a good way. Wooden accents mark the cabinets, and there are cookbooks in all languages, though mostly Hungarian, spread out along the butcher block counters. In the back, I can hear music playing, and it makes my chest feel full. It’s lively, inviting. I forget that there is a beach outside. A part of me wonders if John and Sasha would fit in here when the woman rushes out of the back of the store with a large silver bowl.

She is speaking in what I assume to be Hungarian, mumbling to herself and brushing hair out of her face.

She says over her shoulder, “I need four potatoes from the bottom there,” and points her finger behind me: “there’s a wrapped butcher package from the fridge, just at the front.” Her pointer finger moves to the stainless-steel fridge just at the back of the kitchen. She places the silver bowl on the counter and starts opening drawers, looking for something. For a few seconds, I watch her, and when she stops to look at me, I drop to look for the potatoes. I pick them quickly and then walk to the fridge to grab the brown paper package, except there are many. As if knowing I would be confused at this stage, she says aloud, “top shelf on the right.” And I immediately grab it. When I turn around, ready for more instruction, she is already out of the store, the door closing softly behind her.

Arms full, I push open the door with my body and see a very happy Sebo sitting on a crate next to the boiling pot. He is stirring the concoction with the ladle. I look over and see the woman sitting at another crate with the large silver bowl at her feet. It’s filled with vegetables.

“Sit here,” she says to me, gesturing at another crate next to her, another silver bowl in front of it with the same contents. I listen and sit down, potatoes and packaged meat still in my arms.

“Alma,” she says to me, looking me in the eyes as she grabs the potatoes from my hand and tosses two in my bowl and then in hers. “Sebo says your name is Claudia.”

“Yes.”

“Here.” Alma hands me a potato peeler. “Just peel them over that bowl there. They’ve already been washed.” I follow her lead. She doesn’t watch me while I peel, and for some reason, it puts me at ease. There is a bit of guidance, but she seems to trust me. Every few

minutes, I can hear her humming a tune that I don't know. Sebo joins her sometimes, stirring the goulash with one hand, the other propped against his knee. They speak in Hungarian as we all work together. I can still hear the waves every so often. As the sun crosses the sky, it feels a little cooler here than further on land. The steam of the meal we're working on no longer feels overwhelming. The breeze from earlier is a little stronger; sometimes I see it gently sway the bubbling pot. I wonder if it's hungry too.

When we finish the peeling, Alma reaches into her pocket and cubes the potatoes back into the steel bowl. I watch her, her hands worn and meticulous. She's done this more than I can imagine. After a few seconds, she passes it over and looks at me. I hesitate but grab it from her. She stands up and walks back inside the store. I clumsily cube and when she comes back outside, she has a smaller silver bowl filled with an array of colored spices, all of them combined in what looks to be a glittery treasure.

"Will you grab that bowl for me?" she asks, gesturing toward the bowl at my feet with her foot. I do as she asks and then we all shift toward the pot, Sebo moving his crate over to fit the two of us in. Alma hands him the brown paper package and he unravels it, revealing cubes of spiced meat that he drops into the pot. She leans over and tilts the small silver bowl over the pot, lightly dusting the spice into the mixture as Sebo stirs. Watching them makes me smile.

"What are the spices?" I ask.

"If you pay for a cooking lesson, then I'll tell you," Alma says, and then Sebo erupts in laughter. It makes her smile like she's proud to make her husband laugh. "I'm joking," she says with a smile. I'm not offended; there is no way I could be. "It's a family recipe. I'll give you the card when you must go."

She then steps away and places the bowl on the floor to the side. There, I stand with the cubed vegetables, waiting. After a few seconds, they both look at me and I at them. Sebo nods at me. I walk a bit closer and kneel, just far enough away from the fire but close enough to smell what I think to be paprika. When I'm comfortable enough, I grab my first handful and suspend my arm over the pot and drop them in. The mixture pops and spits at the tender skin under my arm, and it makes me flinch, but it feels good to let go.

"You're okay. Try a little lower," Alma says. She's close enough to help but not too close to stress me out. I can tell by how she sounds that her hands are on her hips but only to observe. My next handful is closer to the steam, and when I drop it in, the aroma somehow gets stronger. After each handful, Sebo stirs a little more, sometimes singing to himself, sometimes saying a few words in Hungarian that feel like encouragement. When I get the last few in, he whistles and laughs, making me jump as I step back from the pot. Alma proudly pats his shoulder before grabbing the bowls and supplies to bring inside. I watch them and smile.

"Is it done?" I ask Sebo. He stirs just a bit more, and then softly ladles a small amount, bringing it close to him. He doesn't even blow on it when he brings it to his mouth. The heat doesn't affect any part of him. He sips, and there on his face, I see a smile I haven't seen from him just yet. I know without having him tell me.

I go inside to help Alma wash dishes. Even though we clean in silence, it feels like we have shared many conversations. I wish I could tell her that if I could live in this kitchen, I would. It reminded me of New York—the busyness, the cramped yet efficiently used space. The amount of life living in this store could power a small city. Even though it was such a small carved out place on this planet, it felt like the universe exploded so that it could exist here and now.

When she hands me my own bowl, I want to thank her for more than just feeding me. When Sebo ladles the goulash into the dish, and I feel the warmth fill my hands, I want to kiss him on the cheek and hear him chuckle. When the three of us sit on our crates and wait for their students to arrive for the night class, they ask me what my husband is like. When I say I don't really know, they take it as that, and we move on to other conversations. I ask how to say hello in Hungarian. When I bring my spoon to my mouth, I don't blow on it. I take the steam in. I exhale. And I cry, silently. I eat while I cry, but neither of them asks me what the tears are for. They tell me the name of the spices. They tell me about the time Sebo stuck his whole arm in a pot of stew because he dropped his ring in it. They serve me seconds. I eat like I was washed up on that very shore today, woken up by the heat and with no memories of what distant, cold lands I came from.

The Visitor

Helen went to church on Sundays. She would get in her husband's patrol car with a warm casserole on her lap and leave the bumpy driveway, shoulders and knees jostling before hitting the main drag. She wore her floral dress, and he wore his uniform. And both of them would say something small before he'd turn on the radio and roll down the windows. It was all the same. The scenery, the road, the houses with the same pastures.

One Sunday, they flew past a house she had seen too many times to count, one that she had memorized, just like the others. But this time, it was not like it had been before. It now had a large, white-painted sign out front with purple lettering that read FORTUNE-TELLING BY PRAIRIE. Helen whipped her head back, sticking her neck almost entirely out of the window. Yes. It was different. Her hair flapped against her face, and her heart raced.

"Sheriff, did you see that?"

"See what?" he asked. "Get your head out that window." Helen repositioned herself, moving her hair out of her mouth and rolling her shoulders back.

"That house right there on Verna Bethany. The old one."

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Someone bought it," she said. "There was a truck out there and boxes. I think I saw Christmas lights." Helen waited for a response. "That sign said fortune-telling."

"Hmm."

"You don't think that's weird?"

Helen stared at her husband who just shrugged.

"I guess," he said.

She stared at him. "Let's go after church."

“We’re not messing with that.”

Helen leaned her body towards her husband and said, “I’m gonna go.”

Sheriff looked at his wife and then back at the road. Looking ahead where the road went on for miles, he had one arm on his steering wheel while the other rested on his car door frame. Helen thought that maybe she could do his job better than he did. She probably knew this town better than he did. He was out patrolling every day, yet he didn't notice anything new or different.

She sat back in her seat and watched the side mirror as each tree and telephone pole became nothing the further they drove away. After a while, Helen leaned forward and turned the music up only for Sheriff to reach over and turn it back down again.

The slamming of the car door snapped Helen out of her thoughts. She heard leather boots shift on the gravel as Sheriff slapped the top of his car twice. It was time to get going. The side mirror to her left displayed him walking towards an elderly couple mingling near the church doors.

Helen sighed.

She reached over and unbuckled her seatbelt, stepped outside onto the seashell gravel, and grabbed her casserole. The heat of it caused steam to dampen her dress around her stomach, but she didn't mind. Helen shut the door with the swing of her hips and walked, upright and straight, with a smile on her face.

Church went on for nearly two hours, as it did every week. And every week, Helen sat next to Sheriff and her closest friend, Birdie. Birdie was an older widow with no kids who lived quietly alone near a retention pond just a few miles down from the Winn-Dixie. She was a good friend to Helen’s parents before they passed, and now she was a close friend to their only

daughter. Helen would tell Birdie that she was as ornery as a fox squirrel, but that she loved her nonetheless. Mainly because Birdie had the guts to come to church and complain the whole time, but Helen knew that this was Birdie's only way to be around other people. Helen knew this because it was her life, too.

"Helen, dear, did you bring that same damn casserole again?" Birdie asked. "You know people here eat things other than eggs and cheese." Birdie's mouth shook a little whenever she spoke, but that didn't stop her from talking. Helen sat down on her same green-felted pew, the one not too close up to the pulpit, but not too far away from it either. She liked sitting there because the window on her left had a view of the mossy trees that shadowed the church graveyard.

"Birdie, you and I both know that you can't chew much else."

Birdie gave a laugh that showed her dentures and crinkled her already tiny eyes; it made Helen smile. They both quieted and fixed their attention on the pastor.

He spoke of acceptance that day and what it meant to love thy neighbor. It made Helen think, and her heart raced again. She wondered what kind of woman named Prairie would move into that Verna Bethany house. Who in their right mind would buy that crooked home?

Helen leaned over to her right to reach Birdie's ear.

"Birdie," she whispered.

"Helen."

"D'you see someone bought that old house there on Verna?"

"That rotten one? With the dead orange trees?"

"Yes. That one," Helen whispered. "It's a fortune-teller's now." Birdie nearly choked on a cough.

Tilting her head up a bit, Birdie said, “Must’ve paid two cents for that land.” Her lips pursed. “That there’s dead soil, though. Won’t grow them nothing, whoever it is.”

Sheriff bumped Helen with his elbow, and she turned to look at him. He had his index finger pressed up against his mouth until he slowly pointed it to the pastor. Helen turned her neck as her eyes followed Sheriff’s arm up towards the pulpit made of pine, and she fixed them there. The church trailer was filled with bright white lights that flickered when the organist performed for too long. Fake shrubbery that hadn’t been dusted in years lined the stage, and a dark grey carpet covered nearly everything. Birdie had explained once that it helps cover stains. Helen thought it looked like a mess. All of it a boring mess. She stared at the Robertsons two pews up who just brought a baby girl into this world. They showed her off any chance they could. Helen thought about raising kids in a place like this, but it made her frown. Helen grabbed her stomach. The AC whirred to life above her.

After some time, her pupils veered off to peek at the graveyard again. Helen knew every name buried there, including her parents. She had wondered for a minute if her name would be in there, too. The thought made Helen’s heart sink. The pastor spoke scripture as she snapped her eyes to him.

She didn’t look away, and she didn’t start conversation again.

After a few minutes, Birdie slowly reached down into her satchel. Her bony fingers moved aside gum and dollar bills until she pulled out a small white handkerchief. It was folded well with fine lace detailing along the edges. She shakily placed it on the part of Helen’s dress that was still damp, just near her tummy. Helen gripped it hard against her navel. Birdie’s hand patted her friend’s knee twice before she returned it to her lap to clasp her own palm.

Sheriff had to leave early from service; something important came up at the station that needed his attention, as it always did. So Birdie offered to take Helen home, which meant they could leave right when the casserole was emptied into the trash can. They were one of the few to leave church early, and it felt good. It felt freeing.

Helen relaxed her body into Birdie's passenger seat and leaned her head back.

"Dear, when is that man of yours gonna get you a car?"

"Oh, I don't know. He's a workin' man," she said. "I don't mind being home that much."

"You'll go crazy. No one should stay alone for that long anywhere."

Maybe so, Birdie, she thought.

They drove with the windows cracked and no music on, and for Helen, it was peaceful enough to close her eyes. It was now spring in Florida, which meant that the skies were nearly always blue except for when it hit early afternoon. The first thunder clouds of the season crept in from the south, and it made the air thick with thirst. A breeze cool as river water whipped through Birdie's car as she drove up near the Verna Bethany house. She slowed down.

Helen opened her eyes and blinked to see the approaching sign she saw earlier, large and painted white, out on the road. She leaned forward. In front of the sign was a woman with overalls covered in purple paint and two braids of long auburn hair slung behind her shoulders. Helen squinted her eyes to see what else was being painted. This time, in red lettering, she saw: I CAN PAINT YOUR FUTURE / \$20.

Birdie's hands gripped her steering wheel, and her back seemed to rear up like a cat's.

"Should've known some monster hippie would buy that house."

Helen was quiet and to herself.

“We should go see her,” Helen said. She didn’t look at Birdie when she spoke. Instead, she stared outside at the never-ending pastures, tomato fields, strawberry farms, and then pastures again before they pulled up to Sheriff’s house. Birdie cut the engine, and Helen turned to her friend.

“I’m not seein’ her,” Birdie said.

“Well, I am,” Helen said unbuckling. “And pastor said today that—”

“Oh, hush your mouth.” They stared at one another. “I know you wanna go. So go. I don’t care to see my future. I already know what it is,” Birdie said. “Right next to my husband at the end of it,” she softened, looking at Helen’s young eyes. “I’m okay with that.” A crack of thunder rumbled somewhere off in the distance; it made them turn toward the dashboard, out at the sky.

Birdie looked at her friend looking at the clouds.

“You go, Helen,” she said, “and tell me what you see.”

It was silent for a minute as Helen and Birdie listened to the comforting sound of approaching thunder.

“Now get out my car,” said Birdie. “You know I hate driving in the rain.”

Helen grabbed her purse and her handkerchief and opened the door, pushing it with her heel. But before she stepped out, she turned to wrap her arms around Birdie—around her forever friend. Birdie sat there for a minute before something in her spirit shimmered. She took a shaky hand off the steering wheel and gently placed it on Helen’s shoulder.

“I love you, Birdie,” Helen said into her friend’s hair. It took every ounce of Birdie’s strength to not be consumed with emotions; she wanted to tell Helen to be careful.

“Love you, Helen.”

Helen finally stepped out and shut the door. She leaned down to peek in the window so that she could tell Birdie to drive safely, and then Birdie was off. She honked twice to say goodbye.

Once it started to rain, Helen ran inside to change out of her dress. She pulled on jeans, boots, and a sweater, and when she finally reached for the umbrella by the front door, the house phone rang. She turned around to look at Sheriff's house. Sheets of rain blanketed the roof above.

Helen wrapped Birdie's handkerchief around a single twenty-dollar bill and tucked it into her jean pockets. She then watched the phone ring until the voicemail beep sounded: "It's Sheriff. Calling to let you know I won't be home toni—"

She didn't have time.

The front door slammed behind Helen, and she opened her umbrella to a downpour. Large puddles were already being formed in her driveway, but she stepped straight through them. Helen walked down the main drag until she finally stood in front of the painted white sign. The rain had watered down a few of the purple strokes, but it was still legible. This time, though, a violet paintbrush was included amongst the lettering. Helen turned her head to look at the new owner's house. It was crooked and old, but it now looked like it was glowing.

Helen gripped her umbrella and trudged slowly through the muddy driveway. The sounds of cars flying through the water were muffled as she passed through a threshold of trees. Cypress and oak giants opened their arms for their newest visitor as Helen walked towards the brick steps of the wooden porch. Small, yellow lights were woven throughout the fencing, and several plants in navy-glazed pots of various sizes were placed along the rails and just beneath the roof so that they could catch the rainwater. Her eyes followed deep, green vines that were intertwined within

the glowing yellow; it produced a type of welcoming warmth Helen had not felt in a while. She had to stay for just a moment to take everything in.

Helen held her breath as she stepped onto the wooden porch and noticed on her left a burnt orange rocking chair. In its seat were coffee containers packed with paintbrushes, and all over the porch floor were glass jars filled with murky colorful water: purples, violets, periwinkles, and lavender. Helen had to be careful where she stepped as she continued to clutch her umbrella. Then she heard music.

She nearly jumped when a window to the right of her flung open from a strong pair of hands. The music billowed out along with an inviting light; it caused something to speak inside of Helen. Instead of knocking on the door, she walked over and peeked through the now open window. Mountain music played from an old Zenith radio, similar to the one she had long ago. Fiddles and guitars and harmonicas and a woman's singing voice rough as pasture grass poured out into the open living room. Inside were canvases filled with paintings of blue mountains, of lakes, and of tall evergreens, all propped up against the cedar walls to soon be hung. There were candles lit and lamps of different heights with soft bulbs lined around the house. Helen's eyes wandered around this display of life until they fell upon the fortune-teller.

Prairie was in the kitchen, hand propped on her hip. She stirred something that smelled like hot chocolate on her iron stove. What looked to be a sleeping bloodhound lay on a rug of colors in front of the fireplace that dripped with rain. Its body was near black with ears that looked like cut leather. Altogether, what she saw was a painting, and it reminded Helen that she hadn't seen a home in some time.

This is when she heard the soft crying of a baby.

Helen's lips parted as she watched Prairie leave the kitchen. Her heart pounded hard against her rib cage as the fortune-teller returned with a bright, white blanket wrapped around a child. The rain muffled the soft hushing Helen could make out from watching Prairie's lips. The fortune-teller patted the baby's back onto her shoulder and danced in soft circles around her living room. The baby quieted, and Helen saw the fortune-teller's eyes close and her mouth soften. It was a scene Helen wanted burned inside her mind for the rest of time.

Helen felt she was peering into something too intimate and too tender for her own good. She took one last glance at Prairie's face, covered in paint and freckles, and then stood up to leave the window. But as she did, a wooden plank beneath her whined. A deep, guttural howl sounded from inside the fortune-teller's haven.

"What is it, Lady?" asked Prairie. More howling ensued and then determined footsteps. Light escaped the house as the front door opened wide. Out stepped the woman in overalls, one hand bunched on her hip, the other swaddling her child against her chest. The bloodhound appeared beside the fortune-teller, looked to her right, and ambled over to the rocking chair where she pressed her wet nose against something on its burnt orange arms. It was a white lace handkerchief, folded neatly around a single twenty-dollar bill.

Fried Pickles

Jasper did not know how to love his mother. He had been living with her for all twenty-five years of his life and each day seemed to be more unbearable than the last. His brother, Shelby, quickly moved out at the age of twenty-one and has since been living with his girlfriend, Bianca (without their mother's knowledge), and also working a very reasonable job in downtown Nashville as a hotel manager. Jasper didn't have any of this. Once Shelby moved out, their mother suggested that the three of them should meet for dinner once a month, to catch up on things. Jasper was hesitant, of course, since he already lived with her. There was enough to catch up on as it is, but he agreed, knowing it would make her happy to see her little Shelby, who had not made much time for her since he moved out.

On the way to their first dinner, Jasper received a call from Shelby saying he wouldn't be able to make it to Longhorn's and that he was sorry. Work had to keep him. Shelby said he felt bad that the night couldn't work out for the three of them, but that he was sure they could find out when to meet next. Jasper told his brother good luck and that he understood, but did not mention how *not* sorry Shelby sounded. That wasn't necessary at the moment.

Now Jasper was left sitting in his busted Civic, contemplating whether he should just leave the Longhorn's parking lot already. His mother was seventeen minutes late. When it turned to twenty minutes, he turned his engine on and was ready to reverse when he heard a car honking wildly behind him. Jasper looked out his window to see his mother peel into the empty parking spot next to his car, Civic to Civic, blasting Pat Benatar, and waving her entire arm at Jasper. She looked crazy.

His mother, Molly, left the car on as she dug through her purse and fished out her wild berry lipstick. Jasper honked his horn when she was done applying it and signaled with his hand

for her to roll down her window. The music blasted out of her car, startling a family leaving the restaurant before she could turn it down.

“Shelby can’t make it. Something with work,” Jasper said out his window. He watched his mother’s face fall.

“But we’ve been planning this for weeks!” she said. “He couldn’t just say it was an emergency?” That’s not really how life works, Jasper thought.

“He did sound pretty busy,” Jasper said. His mother’s body began to hunch behind the steering wheel. “Should we just reschedule?”

“What? No! We’re not gonna let that ruin our supper.” Jasper watched in despair as she turned off her car and wrangled her purse. She stepped out of her Civic and pointed, purse in hand, at the Chili’s next door. “We haven’t been to Chili’s in a while. Little bit cheaper than here,” she said. “Plus, I think they have one-dollar margaritas or something. It’ll be fun.” He noticed how she tried to cover up her hurt with excitement.

“Shouldn’t we move our cars or something?” Jasper called out to her, but she just waved her hand in her careless way.

Molly led them through the entrance and went straight up to the hostess, a teenage girl who did not want to be working.

“Just two,” Molly said. The hostess slid two menus from her podium. She guided them through a sea of couples, past a few families and their pink-faced kids, and then seated them at a booth close to a window.

“I don’t mean to bother you, but could you clean this up for us a bit? The table looks sticky.” He watched his mother as she sat down and put her purse in her lap. Jasper looked up at

the hostess to signal with his eyes that he had nothing to do with this, but she was already headed to the kitchen to grab a rag, her feet clopping like a horse.

“She doesn’t seem that happy,” his mother said. Jasper looked at her over his menu as she flipped through the dessert section. “If you’re gonna work in customer service, you have to be welcoming. You just have to.”

The hostess came back and quickly wiped the table with a dirty rag. It was disgusting, but Jasper wasn’t bothered at all by it. He watched with a full heart as his mother’s mouth turned into a scowl. She watched the girl’s every move and sighed to see if that would do anything.

“Your waiter will be with you shortly,” the hostess said as she flung crumbs from her rag onto the floor and walked away. The table somehow looked worse than before—almost greasier. Jasper’s mother rolled her eyes.

“Honestly.” Jasper thought to remind his mom that they were eating at a Chili’s but then decided against it as the waiter walked up to their table.

“Hi, welcome. My name’s Toby, I’ll be your waiter for the night. Can I get you guys started off with something to drink? An appetizer maybe?” Toby had a smile that looked too goofy for Jasper. He was large in height and weight but had slender arms. It made him look unnatural.

“Toby, what’s your favorite app on the menu?” Jasper’s mother asked this question to every waiter anywhere they went to eat. He believed she only did this to infuriate him.

“Why don’t you just get what you want, Mom?”

“I just want to know what Toby likes! He seems like a nice man,” she said. “Toby, do you prefer the chips and salsa or the fried pickles?”

“Well, ma’am, I’d say the chips and salsa.” He gave his smile.

“Yes, they are good, but the chips were kinda cold the last time I was here,” she said looking up at him, almost expecting an excuse. This seemed to catch him off guard.

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry about that. I’ll make sure they’re hot for you guys this time.” She sucked her teeth and waited an uncomfortable minute before giving her answer.

“We’ll take the fried pickles,” his mother finally said. Jasper wanted to kick her leg under the table.

“Great!” Toby said. “What would you guys like to drink?” He looked at Jasper.

“I’ll have a Stella, please.”

“Are you sure?” his mother asked, leaning forward. Jasper blinked.

“What do you mean *are you sure?*” he asked in disbelief. “I want a Stella.”

“I know that, but aren’t you going straight to work after this?” Toby shifted in his spot, growing more uncomfortable by the minute.

“Yes. I am,” Jasper said through gritted teeth. “One beer won’t hurt me.”

His mother looked up at Toby and gave a false smile.

“Give him a water, too,” she whispered. Jasper almost laughed at how ridiculous she was being. Toby waited on the mother as she looked at the drink menu, scanning her eyes over the margaritas before looking confused.

“What is it now?” Jasper asked.

“I thought you guys had one-dollar margaritas?” she asked Toby. He looked at her and hesitated before saying,

“Uh, I think that was a promotion at Applebee’s, ma’am.”

“So, you guys aren’t doing that here?” she asked innocently. Jasper made a noise in his throat.

“Did you not just hear what he said?” he asked his mother in disbelief. “That was a promotion at a *completely* different restaurant. Not here.” She cut her eyes at him and then looked back up at their waiter, who was now standing at their table for entirely too long a time.

“I’ll just have a water, for now, thanks.”

“Oh, come on. Do you think he cares? He doesn’t care,” Jasper said, raising his voice. Toby mumbled something about getting their drinks and that he’d check on them later.

“Look what you did,” said Jasper’s mother. “You scared him.”

“That was all you, Mother,” he said. Her eyes turned to fire.

“You know I hate when you call me that,” she spat, her head rearing over the table. Her hair seemed wilder than ever.

“And *you* know I hate when you try to order for me,” he said. They both sat back in their seats and fumed for a minute in silence. Jasper took a second to look at his mother, dressed in a white button-up with a collar that was absolutely too pronounced for her neck. Her French manicure was at the point of lifting from her cuticles entirely. She had mismatched metal bracelets on her wrist because she had said some time ago, that it added character. Jasper thought it just made her look cheap.

“What are you getting?” he muttered at his mother. She sniffled and closed her menu.

“I’m not hungry,” she said like a child.

“Oh really? You’re not hungry?” he asked. “Then why are we even here?”

Right as he asked this, Jasper noticed a man who looked very similar to Shelby walking into the restaurant. He squinted and realized that it was indeed his younger brother. Shelby must

have gotten out of work somehow to join them here and seen their cars in the parking lot over. Jasper was elated. As he was about to stand up to wave his brother over, he noticed Bianca clung to Shelby's arm. Jasper was confused.

“What's wrong? What are you looking at?” his mother asked. Jasper watched his brother signal the hostess that their party was for two. They were led to the opposite side of the restaurant, by a similar sea of families and pink-faced kids. Jasper's heart sunk. He and his mother sat completely undetected. Molly shifted in her seat to turn around and see what her eldest son was looking at.

“Wait! Wait! I was just looking at the TV!” He grabbed his mom's shoulder and forced her around, looking at her wide-eyed. She was shocked.

“Jasper, what the hell?” she scanned his eyes. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” he breathed. “I'm fine. I just thought I saw someone I recognized.” This was, to Jasper's horror, the worst thing to say because Molly then turned instantly, excited to see who he could've been talking about. She hoped to see a familiar friend of Jasper's, but to her dismay, she saw her youngest son smiling with his girlfriend in a booth that he didn't belong in. She whipped her head away as if she saw something she wasn't supposed to see—like she had been peeking and prodding as a child, as one of her own.

“Did they see me?” she asked quietly. Jasper hadn't seen despair on his mother's face in a while

“No,” he said, returning the softness of her voice. “No. They didn't.” He felt like a kid again, seeing her shoulders heavy, her face looking at the table but not really staring at anything. Her thoughts were elsewhere, not in this world, and he contemplated whether he should speak or

not. Some part of him loved seeing her hurt, but another part, a part he hadn't felt in a very long time, wanted to wrap his arms around her shoulders.

"He could've just said he was going out with Bianca," her voice broke. She cleared her throat. "I would've understood. I can understand." He stared at her for what felt like an eternity, his eyes shifting between her face and Shelby's just beyond her.

"You're right, mom. He could've at least told you." Molly was quiet. "Do you want to leave? We can get our food to go." She shook her head.

"No, no. We'd have to walk past them and that—I just don't want to bother them." Jasper's mother looked up. "We should get more fried pickles. I like them here." Her eyes were pooling with liquid.

"Let's wait until they leave," Jasper offered. She nodded, thankful for the suggestion. They waited two hours for Shelby and Bianca to stop having fun and leave. Toby barely checked on Jasper and his mother, only stopping by to ask if they wanted drink refills or something else to pick at other than their fried pickles. They weren't really that hungry for something substantial anymore. At around closing time, Jasper watched Shelby and Bianca slip out of their booth and out of the restaurant. He looked over at his mom and said it was time to go, that it was time to leave. As they were walking back to their cars, his mother checked her phone and gasped.

"Jasper, you had work! You were supposed to be at the gas station an hour ago!" He placed their third fried pickle order on top of his car.

"I texted Ben and said there was an emergency. He took my shift."

His mother's mouth opened slightly as her arms fell to her side. She didn't know what to do as her emotions consumed her, fearful of making a wrong or bothersome move, hoping that only her tears would do the talking. Jasper, also never good with his words, gathered his momma

and hugged her small shoulders hoping that this would help in some tiny way. They didn't speak. Somewhere up in the sky, God's reading lamp shone brightly over them in the Longhorn's parking lot, giving them darkness to hide in before they both parted ways to return to their home.

Flash Fiction

Contact

I was sleeping when the doorknob turned.

“Jack. Jack, wake up. Hey.” My eyes snapped open. In the dark, I heard tired legs shuffle by cardboard boxes. I blinked, and a shaky hand reached out and pushed my shoulder.

“What? What is it?” I called out to space.

“You gotta see this. Quickly. It’s another alien.”

After a moment, I turned around and sat up in bed. With faint light in the background, I squinted at the outline of him. Whoever it was, I couldn’t make out his face. My mind wanted to imagine the scariest thing possible.

“Ryan?” I said my dormmate’s name. Dormmate? I closed my eyes hard.

“What? No. It’s dad,” he said.

The room developed, and I realized I was in my childhood bed. There were Voltron and Transformer posters on the wall. The shape of a split open suitcase was on the floor. The closet was pitch black and empty. Cheap glow in the dark stars glowed on the ceiling. I’m not in college anymore. The timing caught up with me. I was in Florida, not Denver. I was 35, not 20. This was not a stranger before me. This was dad. Once I realized where I was, I stared off into space. It was too hot in this room. It was too hot in this room. I hadn’t lived in this house in years, and now I needed to unpack all these boxes. I had to be up early for this new job. Needed to change my license plate and then I—

“Hurry. Get,” he told me. His voice shook a bit when he spoke.

I placed my hand on his shoulder and allowed him to guide me out of my room. He walked me to the staircase, and as we walked down the steps, my dad told me like a kid with a dream that an alien showed up at his window again.

“This one was huge,” he said, his hands flew up for emphasis.

My arms hovered around him in case he lost his balance.

“Aren’t they all?” I asked.

We made it to the landing. In my head, I wondered how dad will describe them this time. He’s believed in them for a while now. They are tall. Lanky. Not green like they wanted you to think. They could be several shades of grey but never green. How else are they to walk in people’s yards at night? Or swim in the Pacific? Their spaceships are waterproof, you know.

“Yes! They are nearly giants,” he reminded me.

I nodded.

“Cosmic giants,” he added.

I nodded again and smiled, like a parent who can no longer win.

We slowly made our way to the back door. I unlocked it and held it open for him to pass through. He stepped down the concrete stairs and placed a slippered foot onto grass. I could barely hear it because of the crickets and frogs, but he laughed. It reminded me of wood crackling in a fire.

I walked up and stood next to him, arms crossed, and thought of asking if the alien needed a place to crash for the night. Maybe he could clean the garage tomorrow while I’m at work. Nursing homes crossed my mind. Somewhere in the distance, I heard waves land on shore.

“Did I ever tell you an alien spoke to me once?” My dad asked. I looked at him.

“What?” I said, searching his eyes.

This was news to me.

“What did he say to you?”

Before he answered, I got to look at him. Really look at him. I saw his face for what it was, and my stomach jumped to my heart. He had become an old man. A part of me wanted to race upstairs into my too tiny of a bed and worry about past math tests and heartbreaks and hockey games, and I didn't remember when even I got old. For some reason, my mind wondered when Christmas mornings stopped feeling magical.

My dad now looked too short to me, too small. With his hands still behind him and clasped together, he leaned closer to me, preparing to share a secret.

“Through the screen of my window, they said...”

I blinked at him and raised my eyebrows.

“They *said*...” I repeated.

A part of me thought if I look too intrigued. Should I be entertaining a crazy old man? With a stern face, he leaned in closer. And I mimicked him, listening.

“In a still voice, this is what they said to me...”

He raised a cupped hand to my ear. A memory of my dad on a fishing boat flashed in my mind. He was helping me reel in a snapper. He high-fived me and danced like a maniac. I was gripping my pole, smiling so hard my teeth could break. I was paying attention. I was seeing him then and seeing him now. My heart punched in my chest at the thought of all the times when I hadn't at all.

“They say beep. Beep. Boop. Beepbeepbeepboop—”

“Hilarious,” I cut him off. “You know I have to be up early, right.”

My dad then let out a roaring laugh, one that I hadn't heard in some time. He leaned back and clapped his hands together with a fit of laughter that almost makes me join him. As he struggled to calm down, I stood up straight.

“Aliens don't talk like that, but wouldn't it be funny?” He grinned up at me.

My dad chuckled as he wiped his eyes.

“Do they have to do ‘the robot’ while they talk like that or are they boring?” I asked him. I then bent over with rigid arms, twisting my head to the left and right. I was no longer 35. I was a robot alien.

“Take me to your leader: Salma Hayek,” I said robotically, knowing that he adored her. My dad laughed and said she couldn't lead a colony of aliens. Renee Zellweger, however, absolutely could and most likely already does. But what about Madonna? I asked. Oh, she *is* an actual alien. Suddenly, “Material Girl” was funnier than it had ever been in our entire lives. We sang and danced like aliens or like children, I'm not sure which. I tried my best to make him laugh so hard that he clapped his hands again.

My dad and I played outside for hours. We were Earthlings. We were astronauts. We were Madonna—adventurers at the feet of giants. When we went inside to make midnight pancakes and coffee, we were doing something extraordinary.

Lover

When my lover sleeps, I imagine how his dreams play out. After he drifts away, I turn the lamp off on my side of the bed. My eyelids feel heavy when I lie next to him; sometimes I can barely stay awake long enough to imagine us laughing again. And then I am dreaming of I'm not sure what. I think it's us, he and I, swimming in a pool that reminds me of my childhood home. It's one of those dreams where I know I'm dreaming, so I only just stand there in the pool. I can't do anything. I ask him why he's swimming. Why are we in the pool? It's cold. He swims laps around me, away from me, not ever saying a word. He turns to me after a while and splashes me. His arm slams against the water, and it falls on me, perfectly. Horribly. In my sleep, I feel my leg jolt. I hate it. He gives a laugh that makes my stomach miss us. The sky above looks like it's about to eat me whole.

When he goes to work, I wonder what will stand out to him. What will catch his eye? I went with him once, early, because I said I had a meeting in town. I never have meetings. We took the train together in silence, staring out his window seat at the violet clouds just over the city. I was thankful; he didn't ask me a word about my meeting. And then I remembered that he never really asked me anything at all.

Would you like to grab a coffee before you head in? I suggested, just as we both stepped out of the station. It was a tired I had not felt in some time. He had turned to me and smiled like I had asked if I wanted him to play with me. I frowned. People weaved around us, dressed in black and muted greys. Go without me; have fun, he said. It's no fun without you, I said. And then he leaned over and kissed my cheek without laying a hand on me. For a moment, I watched him walk away. I watched his retreating back.

After some time alone, I returned to the station and got on the train back home. There were only a few people at that time, and the sun had broken through the tunnels in a lovely way. Bright and airy. Warm. I felt like I could sleep right there if I wanted.

When the train jolted, it scraped the side of the tunnel and screeched, but I don't remember reacting in any way.

Why it Waits

Earlier this year, I bought a small cabin up north in the hopes of seeing snow in the winter. And once autumn began, I would drive up to the mountains on weekends, and I would see on my lonely forest road, a dog staring at my incoming truck. His fur was white. His body large. His limbs still as cedar.

I asked the only animal clinic in town if they knew of the mountain dog, but the answer was no. I talked to the local pharmacist, the general store owner, people from the post office. They didn't know the dog, but they knew of my cabin's previous owner. A woman named Ruth who kept to herself. She disappeared from a freak mudslide years ago, and since, her cabin sat alone on the top of the mountain and empty, save for one silver bowl of rainwater near the front door. Everyone I spoke to then told me to watch for heavy rains in the fall and heavy snowfall in the winter. They said to bolt my doors, have a weapon, and stay in at night. You're the only one on that mountain, they said. And although you are a strong woman, you don't want to be swept away, too.

Yet, every time, just before I go around the last bend of the mountain, the dog is there. And when I pass him, his head moves to follow my truck. As I make my last turn, I'll watch him in my rearview mirror get up and walk back into the woods. Am I strange for thinking that he waits for me? That he's come to recognize my pick-up. He looks like the kind of dog that guards. He looks like the type of dog who is owned by no one.

On the last weekend of October, I drive up later than usual with boxes of my clothes, blankets, a pistol, some food. It is all suburbs, and then suddenly not. It's foothill greetings and then

mountains, gigantic and terrifying. The clay road I turn on is slick with damp leaves and branches from a recent thunderstorm. The night is colder here in the mountain woods, and it is silent. There are no crickets, only screeching from the owls that live nearby. And just as I make it up the last bend, expecting to see that dog, I am met with pitch-black road, wide-open lane. Instead of feeling relieved, I am concerned. For even though I'm a strong woman, I am shaking. I shouldn't run to my front door when I get out of my car, but I do. I shouldn't hold my breath when I turn off the lights in my home, but I will. No, I shouldn't be scared when I grab my pistol, yet I am. And this is when I hear the howl.

I should know better than to push my curtains aside to peek, but he's howling, and it's getting louder, and I know to care because it looks like the kind of dog that knows when danger is nearby because it looks like the type of dog who is owned by no one. And there it is, I see it, deep in the wood, standing rigid as cedar. Its silver fur a haze, its jaw open, heaving and panting. Right when he lifts his head to give another warning call, I see something like human movement behind his tail. And I groan with fear when I see it. It is a man with a mask, a man with a sawed-off shotgun tucked under his arm, and he's approaching. There are more howls, more barks, more baring of teeth but all in vain as the man steps straight through the dog like it was never there; its image distorts, head and paws swirling before it turns into mountain mist.

Creative Nonfiction

Ring

Nearly a year ago, before the ringing in my ears began, I was awake in the middle of the night scrolling through YouTube to try and fall asleep. Instant-ramen cooking videos, drag queen makeup tutorials, parents finding out the news that they will soon be grandparents, and a sprinkle of short spurts of recommended clips all lead me to one that I remember now because I had to. I consumed so much media in a day, especially at night, so it was rare that videos of great length stuck with me; however, this one did but mainly out of a small and unnecessary fear that I would one day be in a video, talking in a video like this one.

It was just eight minutes of people sharing their journey with Tinnitus, the ringing in their ears, how long they've had it, how many different remedies they've tried, how loud it is, if it's in one ear or in both, how much it bothers them. They sat in front of a camera, and their answers were accompanied by far-off looks that said, *this is it. It's just ringing, but this is it.* Many didn't talk for long and had quick answers as if to brush it to the side, but you could tell it bothered them.

The host of the video then appeared on the other side of the camera and sat next to each person. He told them there was a cure to the ringing in their ears and proceeded to show them. It wasn't a teaspoon of medicine; it wasn't listening to music really low or cleaning out your ears well enough. He said that all you had to do was raise your arms and suction cup the palms of your hands against your ears and then drum the middle finger against the ring finger, over and over and over again, he said, fifty times. I envisioned the looks on their faces: hope, then uncertainty, then disconnection, all in a few seconds.

I remembered sitting up in my bed, in the silence of my room, trying it out with the people across from me in the video. Each person flipped across the screen, thumping their fingers against the base of their neck, their heads held safe between their hands. For nearly a minute, I sat with them and performed the cure. The drumming of my fingers felt like a bass had been turned on inside my throat, beating and beating and beating, to a rhythm that drowned out every other noise around me.

When I saw their hands lift away, mine did too, and the silence was so thick around my ears that I thought for a second I had left my palms cupped there. It was the type of silence you feel when you dive into a pool only to just sit still at the bottom of it, letting out the air bubbles as you meditate.

Every single person in the video reacted to the cure as if they had been reintroduced into the world. Their eyes darted around the studio to question the authenticity of what they were feeling; the smiles on their faces came from a place of rebirth, relief. They looked different from before some even started crying, thanking the host, exclaiming how they never thought something so simple could work for them. They had all changed except for one. It didn't work on him; he tried again. Nothing. That same look of disconnection from before turned into frustration, perhaps from trying to believe in something impossible again. He left the studio, the video, and I'm sure drove home in the car with the ringing in his ear, into his house with the ringing in his ear, and later laid in bed with the ringing in his ear.

What the people experienced in that video was temporary relief. There is no cure for Tinnitus, and there will likely never be one since there is no single, root cause of it; Tinnitus is a symptom. The ringing in my brain started just four months ago, and studies say that if it lasts six months, it

is most likely chronic. Over 45 million Americans alone have Tinnitus, most likely caused by loud noises, deteriorating eardrums, hearing loss. Ringing in the ears, ringing in the brain, the ghost sound, the phantom noise, all create a single tone within either one ear or, if someone is extremely unlucky, in both. It can be a cacophony of different noises ranging from a low, tonal ring to the crunchy static of a white-noise machine, the screeching of midnight insects, or the penetrating roar of a tea kettle whistling in a faraway room.

I like to describe mine as the hearing test you get in elementary school. My first one happened in a mobile health bus that pulled up right in front of our classroom trailer. We all had put the day on pause, scattered with excitement, and then waited in a line to hear our test.

That day, I felt nervous, anxious, test anxiety. What happened if I can't hear a thing? Could I fail that kind of quiz? I imagined the nurse scoring my ears and looking at my total in confusion, then panic, rushing out of the bus and asking my teacher to look at the results: *oh, it can't be. It just can't be.*

Yet I heard my teacher tell us to calm down, I heard my friends point at the playground and squeal, I heard the kind nurse tell me to raise my hand whenever I heard a small, tiny noise. And I did. One small *beep*. And then another, a little more volume that time. *Beep*. Again. *Beep*. Again. *Beeeee—*

“Alright. Good job,” the nurse said, waking me up from a very focused and determined trance. She wrote something on a clipboard, and I slid off the makeshift nursing table, jumping my way down the bus stairs to wait with the other students who have also passed their hearing test with flying colors.

My own ringing began on a night similar to the one in which I discovered its name. I was watching YouTube, lying in my bed, when it just suddenly turned on—like a switch had been

flipped inside me. And I noticed it immediately. I slowly put my phone down next to my body and stared at the ceiling. It got louder. My right ear flickered on and off with sound and then snuffed out. But the ringing in my left ear was persistent, nonstop, and the more I focused on it, the more its volume increased.

I thought of the video as if my brain had stored it for safekeeping as if it knew this would happen one day. But I didn't want to think it could be this—it can't be Tinnitus. I took good care of my ears. I was not a concert goer. I used Q-tips the right way (though I discovered later that I hadn't), and this just shouldn't be happening. Not to me.

My body rose in bed, and I performed the cure. Thump, thump, thump, my fingers drummed against my head while my heart pumped in my throat. For a minute I continued, until I pulled away and heard it: cotton ball silence, a muffled kind of quiet, and then the tail end of ringing. I tried to ignore it, but that only seemed to make it worse. I watched more videos, listened to music, did the cure again, all while hoping that it would drown out. But when I became exhausted, I turned my phone off and heard it wholly, without pause. *Riing*.

It kept me up the whole night, and whenever I fell in and out of sleep, it was the first thing I thought of and the first thing I noticed when I woke up. *Ringin*g.

Now, when I drive down the highway, the sounds of traffic and music tune it out, but when I turn the volume down on my radio, there it is. Like it's sitting in my backseat staring at me through the rearview mirror. *Ringin*g.

When I'm with a group of friends and we break out in loud laughter, the sound pops and fizzes in my ear. The lull of silence welcomes it, the ring, like an unwanted acquaintance. I can no longer wear headphones, I have to sleep with a white noise machine to cancel it out, and, probably the most inconvenient of all, I don't feel like I can talk about it.

Tinnitus is such a small and painless obstacle. It's not excruciating, it's nothing like an earache (although I'd rather have the days of pain than years of pin needle noise). For most hours of the day, I forget that it's there, really. I have learned that focusing on it makes it worse, louder. Talking about it makes it feel like I'm inviting something to stay and build a very loud home inside my head.

The morning I woke up from the first day of ringing, I called my mother and told her. She had listened and said to me, "I'm sorry, Kiddo," and then she was quiet. "Mine started ringing about five years ago," she said. Five years.

"What?" I asked, bewildered. "Why wouldn't you tell me? Why didn't you bring it up or talk about it?"

"What is there to talk about?"

I didn't know what to say to that, and I still don't. No one really does.

My mother has always used a noise machine to fall asleep at night. I remembered the first apartment she had was near a very busy intersection. The noise machine in that apartment played crickets and ocean noises. But once we moved, I missed the sound of cars and gas station chatter. The next apartment was a high rise with concrete walls; she played forest rains.

A few years ago, I had stayed at her house and fell asleep on the couch but was awoken by a very loud mechanical *roaring* noise coming from my mother's room. I got up to open her door and was abruptly met with the crashing sound of rain. It was like she had roped in an entire thunderstorm above her bed. She snored and snored, and I wondered how anyone could fall asleep to something like that.

Not long after the ringing, I went to visit her again to help her in the yard. We were exhausted by the end of it, daytime tired and in need of sleep. We both crawled into the comfort of her bed like I did when I was a child. The jewelry she never took off jingled in the room, and I heard her phone clatter on the side table. She said to me, “I need my crickets. Do the crickets bother you?”

“Not at all.” And truth is, they didn’t. Not like they used to. The crickets scared me at first because she played them so loudly, but that was because I wasn’t used to it. Now, I have to go to sleep with the roaring sound of insects, rain, and white noise. The chaos of it all puts my mind at ease, rocks me to bed. Without the crickets, the quiet would make the room too still, more aware, present. It would welcome the ringing.

“Goodnight, kiddo. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

The crickets turned on and the volume turned up, loud enough to drown out my mother’s snoring minutes later. All of the noises which would make anyone else wide awake, helped me close my eyelids, helped me drift off, and took me away to a room that didn’t require me to listen.

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Inheritance

I was 16 when I told my mom everything, all of the accounts. How he had me lie to my grandmother, my aunt Suzy, my mom, and my sister. Where he touched me, how he touched me, where he asked me to touch him, what he asked me to do. I said everything that made me feel gross. We both sat still in the sunlight of our breakfast room.

My mom never looked so burdened. After some time, she whispered, “When you were born, I never let anyone change your diapers. You weren’t allowed to spend the night at anyone’s house until you could form sentences.” I stared at her, and then I cried with her.

“This isn’t your fault,” I said. “I don’t blame you at all. I blame his mom.”

“I watched you like a hawk. I let you out of my sight *once*,” she wavered. “Once.” After a small patch of silence, we hugged each other, and together we grieved what we had lost.

My mother is the only example in my life of what a strong and too dangerous a woman looks like, and how I am nothing like that. The only woman who told me that if I was ever bullied, I should bring a purse full of rocks and swing it at their heads until they flee. The only woman I once saw drunkenly climb a pool gazebo to just stand on its roof and laugh at her audience. The only woman who, when in a physical fight, took out the sharpened pencil stuck in her hair to use as a weapon. The type of mom who woke us up on special school days to say *we’re going to the beach instead; convince all your friends to skip and come.*

She has mine and my sister’s back constantly. I like to think of her as a gardener, tending to us, her plants, her saplings. She provided sun when we needed it: shade, water, nutrients. She made sure to shoo away the birds, the pests, and the danger. Day and night, she helped us and watched us grow.

One of the first moments I knew my mom would always protect me was when I peed in front of my first-grade class because I was too scared to use the bathroom alone. She arrived early to pick me up and somehow convinced all my classmates that it wasn't pee in the hallway but that I had somehow spilled an entire bucket of Mountain Dew all over the floor. (That lie could only work because my kid pee was very much a bright neon green). I remembered seeing her in front of my class making elaborate movements with her arms while the janitor mopped up my urine.

For as long as I could remember, my mom had always been righteously protective: a warrior. And she always took time out of her day to train us to be the same. Every night and every morning, she would sit us down and make us cite Psalm 91:11: "For He shall give His angels charge over thee to keep thee in all thy ways." And then my mom would ask us: Do you believe God watches over you? *Yes, momma.* Do you believe God hears us when we pray? *Yes, momma.* And then she would smile and smooth the hair on our heads. I liked to think she asked us to chant scripture to apply for extra credit, heavenly protection.

My dad is nothing like my mom. He is reserved, practical: a well-oiled machine. When they met and fell in love, I'm sure it was like something only romantic movies could produce. Sparks, lots of sparks, intrigue, annoyance, burden, break up. My dad liked to sum up their entire 11 years of marriage by saying, "Opposites attract, but they eventually repel."

They divorced when I was 6. And after my mom heard from my father that he was dating someone else and moving on, she decided we would move to Georgia. Instead of hiring movers, my mom asked the neighborhood kids to help pack everything into a U-Haul. From preschool to the age of 18, we moved an average of once a year, sometimes twice. My mom would rent whatever moving vehicle we could find, and we would bring our annual pet in the front seat with

us and go to a new home. Apartments were easy to find, as were pets, as were friends. Everything new was exciting to us, and we were less afraid the more we escaped things.

I was very young the very first time I realized my mom had my back. My grandmother and my aunt Suzy, whom my grandmother lived with, really wanted us to visit them in Georgia, but my mom was too busy working in Florida to visit; so instead, she accompanied us on a flight up there and flew back by herself. We were to stay up there for a week. That is until I walked into my aunt Suzy's house and saw my abuser, her nephew, sitting at the dining room table.

While we were there, I would say I didn't want to sit next to him during dinner. But he's your cousin! My grandmother would say. Show some respect to your family members, my aunt would add. I obeyed and ate my grandmother's Spanish steak and rice, thinking in my head, *I wish I could say your food tastes like poop so I could see you cry. I want to see you cry.* We were never really watched; my aunt and grandmother would send us to the basement where the big tv and couch were, and soon enough, my cousin's creeping hands would find my body under childhood blankets.

A few days into the visit, I called my mom and asked her in a very small and timid voice if she would please come back and get me. Please.

On the phone, it was like she knew without me having to tell her. I was in kindergarten, and she was a full-grown woman, in her thirties, in her career, a mother, decades separated us, yet she still sensed in my voice that I was uncomfortable and for a very important reason. We were silent for some time, our own minds carrying on a hidden conversation that only the abused can decipher.

I'm on my way, she said with finality. My grandmother and aunt tried to convince her not to return; I was just being a kid who missed her mother—I was being a bother. But my mom knew better, and I hate that she experienced what she went through to know better.

When she arrived, it was like a tornado had come for everyone in the house except for my sister and me. My mom yelled at her mom and sister: *something happened here that made Hannah uncomfortable, right under your noses*. They never believed her, which meant they'd never believe me.

It takes me some time, but when we return to Florida, I tell my mom that he forced me to kiss him several times. It's not really a lie, but it's not really the truth either. I didn't go up there without her again. I was never near him alone again.

Because of my abuse, seeing or talking about sexual organs was incredibly weird but also normal for me. Sex was intriguing, but it meant I could never even think of it in my mom's household; she was nearly against all forms of dating until I had an actual reason for doing so. The first time I told her I wanted a boyfriend I was 16, and she had plainly and stoically asked me why. I responded with something along the lines of, "I want to kiss a lot of boys. I think about kissing boys all the time." I remembered her looking at me with concern.

"I never had these feelings after what I went through..." she told me, comparing her abuse to mine, even though she had not known my full story yet. That comparison did something to me, made me question things I shouldn't have. Did I make it all up? Was it really nothing? Or even worse: if I wanted to be sexual with men, did that mean I enjoyed the initial abuse? I didn't find out until ten years later that hypersexuality is a product of sexual abuse. And it was rampant within me, as it was with her.

She finally let me date, and I did. Hungrily.

The day I told my first boyfriend about my abuse, he looked at me confused, and I thought of Lauren. She was my first consensual kiss, though many wouldn't consider that since we were both in elementary school at that time. But whenever our moms hung out, we hung out, which meant that we would crawl under her bed and kiss until we were found and torn apart.

Sometimes she would grab my waist like she had been grabbed there before by someone else as if she knew what to do, like we weren't playing pretend or "house." Every time she did that, I wondered if she learned it willingly.

I begged my mom to see her constantly. We became best friends, closer than most. But when she first told me about a boy kissing her at school, I felt something like jealousy writhe in my stomach. I told my boyfriend this and said, "I think I like women, too."

After a while, he looked at me and responded, "That's only 'cause you were molested."

I had heard this argument before. One of my aunts said that my uncle was gay because "their neighbor touched him as a kid, and that's why he has HIV. He's hypersexual." But I had never expected this argument to be aimed toward me. His response made me feel like I had used Lauren to release the sexual pressure pressed into my body from the molestations and that she returned those actions due to some kind of childlike curiosity. The whole conversation made me see myself as a guinea pig that deviated from the experiment; I felt like I had tarnished her and myself even more. Instead of exploring my orientation further, all I felt was shame. Does that mean I enjoyed it? I wondered. So, I never brought Lauren up again.

When I told my second boyfriend about who molested me, he also looked at me confused and then questioned me the whole night. His reaction was why I don't tell people because, to many, kids touching other kids just doesn't add up; it doesn't make sense. And I initially agreed.

How can a child know how to molest another child? He was only two years older than me. He was only eight when he first touched me, and I was only six. “He was a kid, too,” he said to me. “You guys were just playing.” And I let him say it, but a seed of hatred toward him and nearly all men grew fast enough in my stomach that it bloomed out of my mouth. I tried not to water it.

When I told my third boyfriend, instead of looking at me confused, he didn’t say a word. He hugged me and *cried* with me. Reader, he cried with me. He was the only one who cried with me. He was the first I had sex with, and each time it was with the lights on so we could both see where our hands went. I was the most comfortable I’d ever been with him. Instead of something being taken away from us, it felt like we were giving. When he and I stared at each other, we had the same hidden conversation that only the unfortunate can understand. He knew what I’d been through, and I hated that he knew. I hated that he experienced what he went through to know.

Right at the year and a half mark, I ended the relationship. I blamed it on not being fulfilled, but really, I was bored. I needed to be restimulated, had to feed the never-ending, sexual cycle. So, I left the only person who had shown me how clean I was for a man who made me feel desirable, though I couldn’t ever seem to be comfortable around.

The day I learned that child-on-child sexual abuse was most likely always caused by an adult abuser, I thought of my cousin, my predator, for the longest time.

I feared him, but I was even warier of his mom. As I became more aware of what happened to me, as I went to therapy and spoke about this, I realized that my cousin only knew what to do to me because someone had done that to him.

My aunt Sophia, my abuser’s mother, is the black sheep of the eight siblings. My sister and I called her Latina Dolly Parton, but not in an endearing way. She had plastic boobs the size of ten-gallon jugs pushed up to her neck, leathery tan skin, wide joker lips, and her husband was

old and filthy rich. If you ever wanted to mimic my aunt, all you had to do was stuff oddly shaped balloons up your shirt, get an offensive spray tan, and smack on gum until your jaw hurts. You got extra points if you always carried a bottle of sleeping pills on your person.

Our family described her as a sex addict. She was banned from most of her siblings' life events after she hit on her youngest sister's fiancé before the wedding ceremony. Her main job was as a stripper until she married, and she had her only son when she was very young. As the years went on, I heard more stories about her, all of them crazy and wild and almost unbelievable. One, in particular, made me wonder what happened to her that made her the way she is.

A few years ago, in my early 20s, my sister and I attended a family wedding at a rural barn in North Carolina. Before we made the drive, I was told in passing that my abuser would be there and would also be staying at the house rental my family reserved for the weekend. I still went, for what reason I'm not sure, but I allow the uncertainty to push me.

When my sister and I got to the venue, he was there with a friend. I saw him and was almost thrown off by how similar we looked in age; I had always imagined him to be more of an adult, older. I thought he would be terrifying to look at, but he really just looked scared. Awkward. He didn't want to make eye contact with me, and I didn't blame him for it. When the family members greeted one another, hugged, said the "I missed yous," it was weird between the two of us.

I could tell my presence made him uncomfortable, and it gave me power. I felt like part of me had gained control, like I had become an adult and finally had the courage to say *No*. Confronting him never crossed my mind. Instead, I watched him sit in the pew, I watched him grab drinks from the bar, I watched him converse with family members, eat, laugh, smile. I was

aware of his every movement. In a sick and twisted way, I thought for a second that the tables had reversed. Instead of me being the one uncomfortable, he should have been. I certainly wanted him to be. But then, suddenly, I didn't feel as powerful anymore. I felt tired. I had a few drinks and food and told myself to relax. Something inside of me said I had nothing to fear; the threat I experienced as a kid was over. I am allowed to enjoy myself.

When the wedding ended, we all piled in an Uber since we were too drunk to drive. My abuser was nearby, closer than I wanted. Surprisingly, I was not scared, just wary. We were all rambling and laughing when one of my other cousins asked my abuser, "Why wasn't your mom here today?" The car bumped a little on the gravel road we traveled on, jostling us from side to side. Everything got a little quiet.

After some time, still in the packed Uber, it all came out of him in a way that mirrored how I told my mom years ago. He told us that he was abused by his mom until he left the house. He had cut ties with her when he turned 18. She was suing him because he wouldn't let her meet his girlfriend. She got him kicked out of the Navy. She followed him everywhere, as all abusers do in some form or another, clinging to our psyche and our spirit, but her pursuit seemed more calculated, more desperate.

"I'm sorry, Preston," I said. He looked at me and our eyes had that same, quiet conversation; the one where we both acknowledged we share an experience. In his own way, he told me sorry too.

Years later, after the wedding, my grandmother was admitted to the hospital. Family drama raised most likely heightened by that cloud of anticipated death. She died only a few days later and many people were upset. I was one of the few who didn't care. But then I thought, maybe

apathy wasn't the right way to put it. Because a part of me cared, but not in a kind way. My grandmother had experienced sexual abuse at the hands of her brother. She had a glimpse of what many young girls and boys go through. But when it came to my mom explaining how she was abused, what she went through, my grandmother dismissed her in fear of raising unnecessary conflict. She didn't want to address it. So, I thought about how I did care that she was dead because in her own way, in that context, not participating only made it worse.

Shortly before my grandmother's death, I was at my mom's house. She was answering phone calls all day concerning hospital plans, some of which I wanted to answer for her. Sometime in the early afternoon, the phone rang, and my hand immediately grabbed it to relieve my mom of at least one more conversation.

"This is Hannah," I said, busy looking through stacks of unorganized mail.

There was silence.

"Hannah?" The voice sounded surprised. Something in my stomach clenched as I pulled the phone away from my ear. The ID read the name of my aunt: Latina Dolly Parton. My eyes widened. Suddenly, I could run a marathon, punch someone in the face, scream in public. It was like someone has slapped me with adrenaline, making me gasp.

I had not spoken to this woman since I was a child. The last time I saw her was from a distance years ago when I was small and a little scared of her because of all the stories. I am still scared of her. She was my monster's monster, after all.

"I didn't know you were—" she said while I quickly looked for my mom.

“Oh, here’s mom,” I said, stammering. I passed the phone to her and held back a haggard breath. Some stupid part of me felt bad that I cut her off, that I didn’t take the time to acknowledge her.

My mom and Latina Dolly Parton were not close. They rarely spoke to each other, mainly because she had a hand in trickling down abuse. Aside from that, however, my mom was a staunch, converted Jew, converted years prior when attending her first Pesach Seder dinner. My aunt, on the other hand, was a yoga connoisseur with experience in crystal healing. Naturally, they repelled each other. But they talked for hours that day. Sometimes I would overhear my mom cry. A few moments later, I’d hear my aunt do the same. They laughed loud and hard. But most of the time, my mom was quiet. Listening. When she got off the phone, I knew that they have found something in common.

My mom told me that my aunt was abused hundreds of times before she hit the age of 16 by a well-known and well-loved family friend—a pastor. He was someone none of us would ever suspect. When my aunt was younger, she had the courage to confront him, but he mocked her and said that he’d keep her in his prayers. When my aunt told my grandma and the rest of her siblings, no one believed her or didn’t really care to. Except for my mom. Except me.

Almost in an instant, my anger and hatred moved up a generation. I was still upset at her, but I grieved because something was taken from her too.

After I heard this, I thought to myself: was I a product of abuse? Or had I been given the product of abuse? A family recipe. A tradition, perhaps. A spell needed broken. A lineage of sexual manipulation, physical abuse, mental and emotional trauma. All of it created and packaged in a box that says to me in the dark, “this is actually a game we’re playing, but no one

else can know, okay? Don't tell your mom, okay?" handed down, all in different voices: my abuser, my mom's abuser, her mother's, so on and so forth. The monsters all peer over me when I open the box; it is my body but not my body—a contorted mass of womanly parts. It is something I am ashamed of. What can I do with this box? I wondered. What had been done with this box before? I knew.

So, who do I get to blame now? Who receives my anger? Do my frustrations go back generations, to a person I can't even confront because they're long gone from this world? Since my grandma and her sisters were all victims, my mom and her sisters and brother all victims, myself a victim...what about what comes after me? What are the chances after me? This is something I consider often and talk about with my mom rarely: how are we, as women, already targets? But because we have a lineage full of victims, the target is somehow twice as large? Does it have to do with the fact that we are more reserved in our childhood? That we experience insecurities at a more heightened level than others? Does this make for easy victims? How do I prevent this from happening, momma? It is like caring for a tree that you know will one day die from infestation.

Back in the still sunlight at our breakfast table, she says to me, very clearly, with finality:

Did you know...

I sometimes think of it like I have been given a peach pit and the most rotten of soil, but I have to do everything I can to make it grow so that I can survive, so that the generations after me can live off of it. I water it every evening. I make sure it is in direct sunlight. When the frosts

come, I cover it with tarp and flour bags. When the heat arrives, I check for bruising and weak branches.

That the abused have a choice.

I am so careful, but even then, are trees safe from every pest? Is an orchard safe from freak heatwaves? Droughts? If a fruit falls, even then there is a chance someone will step on it and squash it into the earth. What a loss. Even after all that nurturing.

They can either become abusers...

There is so much stacked against this tree. But then, even though so many bad things can happen, what if it perseveres? No one expects it to happen, but what if it does?

Or...

Even if it doesn't. The squashed peach pit bears more trees with more fruit and more seeds. I want to be known by my fruits and how they have been cared for. My mom and all the women and men who have had a part of them stolen from themselves, remind me of this:

We become defenders.

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