

THE MOCK FAMILY'S STORY

A written creative work submitted to the faculty of
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In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

In

Creative Writing: Fiction

by

Amy Ann McNeely

San Francisco, California

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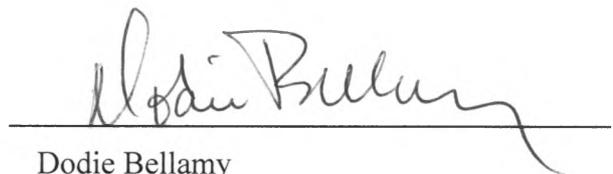
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *The Mock Family's Story* by Amy Ann McNeely, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Fine Arts in English: Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.



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THE MOCK FAMILY'S STORY

Amy Ann McNeely
San Francisco, California
2015

The Mock Family's Story is a Southern Gothic novel loosely based on Edgar Allan Poe's short story "Berenice." A young woman, Denise, returns home after failing to make it on her own in New York City. Her mother, an aging beauty queen and portrait artist takes her in with some resistance. There she reengages with her cousin, Ashley, a stage-four cancer patient who has returned home for hospice treatment. Denise and Ashley befriend each other, learn family secrets, and use each other in this strange, sad, sick, and sometimes funny story of what it takes to become the person you need to be to survive in the family you are stuck with.

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Chair, Written Creative Work Committee

5-14-15

Date

DENISE

The train. Trains aren't romantic, not like in the movies, not like in the books. Denise never meets anyone on trains--at least, no one she wants to meet. Pretends she can't hear over her headphones. Keeps a barrier of invisible steel hornets buzzing around her. Hears the humming, louder louder louder, filling the mouths of all the people, the people talking to her, the people talking to other people, all full of rumble bumble metal noise, it's just knitted scarves of steel wool pouring out of them; how can she be expected to understand that, how can she be expected to know the language of robots? Pretends she's on too much Valium, trapped in chemical quicksand. Valium: such a quaint drug, why Valium instead of Xanax or Ativan? No one takes Valium anymore. But she is a romantic when it comes to her pretend medications and her pretend doctors, no, not a doctor, she has a pretend analyst with a Vandyke and a pince-nez who has sent her off to do battle with her mother her mo-ther HER MOTHER while overly drugged on Valium. On the train she turns her head slowly when anyone talks to her, answers with a soggy cardboard tongue, lead apron eyelids.

The train pulls away from Alexandria Station, pulls away from a woman holding a baby with one arm, making a toddler's hand waving awkwardly with the other, *Goodbye, goodbye train*, crouching in a squat with a metronome head shift toward the child, toward the train, toward the child, *Look, the train, wave, the train, look, it's Daddy, look, understand, remember always, look*. Denise looks back and they are still waving,

still waving, they will always be waving. If a man is dropped off at the station by his wife, toddler, and infant child, how many steps will he have to take in the opposite direction until he will act like he is single? A man sits opposite her, a man with a gold ring, and it isn't really a leer, it's a half-smile-head-tilt. Coy, that's what he wants to be. Must be emulating some Steve McQueen or not-Clint Eastwood, not-Robert Redford, no, the other one, the salad dressing man, him, *Color of Money*, *The Hustler*, *The Sting*, a 1960s moviemanager, she can almost see the name, a quarter rolling under a subway bench, this man must have seen repeated half-smiles-head-tilts when he was young and now he thinks this series works on single ladies and it doesn't; it's just creepy. Denise pokes her tongue a little bit out of the corner of her mouth, just peeking, until he leaves: one song.

Two older women soon after who think craning their necks to see her sketchbook is charming, think following it up with nonquestion questions (*Oh you're an artist, Oh you're drawing things outside the window, Oh that's a barn*) will beguile her into asking about them. If they sit near her long enough and see the sketchbook, really see it, they will leave. The barn, yes, the field, oh, but the farmer is just a set of gray bones. His denim overalls sag low with no meat to hold them up, but the viewer can still see straight through the entire ribcage to the other side of the field if you really look. The end of the wheat stalk in his teeth pokes out the side of his empty jaws, the baseball cap sits low over the naked skull with no ears to hold it up, and the tiny creepy bone fingers wrapped around the levers and knobs of the tractor seem too small to work anything. Behind him fly five bone swallows, trying to find dead insects to eat kicked up by the plow. Dead

birds still have some feathers attached. On the back of the tractor sits the farmer's trusty coonhound, also long past decay, made of bleached bones watching the field turned up behind them. Old ladies do not cotton to seeing paintings of skeletons performing mundane activities in landscapes while on train rides. Who knows where they go. They go wherever old ladies retreat to when their charges are rebuffed.

Denise never meets the hero or the rascal of her story on trains, in the carriages, leaning her face on the on the glass so she can either see her own eyes all ghostly or look out into the meadows and watch the jackrabbits run run run from the diesel leviathan, from impending mechanical doom, into the terrible world of the red tail hawks. How can jackrabbits forget something like the train running past the warren several times a day? Hawks remember, and hawks have tiny little heads with just better than a lizard brain. But you can bet your buttons that predators always remember, even if prey always forgets.

Denise never meets anyone she wants to meet on trains or in the stations they live in. Not when she was leaving Penn Station, and not here, home again. Well, not her home, the place she is from. She always told herself one day she would return in triumph with so much money and so much fame. All of the left behinds would look at their own little tattered lives and inflated hips and be washed with regret and longing because look at Denise Gilbert. This is how it is instead, slinking back in on the train with just two small suitcases and the easel, a few watercolors in the portfolio, to live in her mother's house. A couple of people in New York will probably miss her, but time telling if they

fly five bone swallows, trying to find dead insects to eat kicked up by the plow. Dead birds still have some feathers attached. On the back of the tractor sits the farmer's trusty coonhound, also long past decay, made of bleached bones watching the field turned up behind them. Old ladies do not cotton to seeing paintings of skeletons performing mundane activities in landscapes while on train rides. Who knows where they go. They go wherever old ladies retreat to when their charges are rebuffed.

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house. A couple of people in New York will probably miss her, but time telling if they call. But did Denise call Diamond after Diamond was back in Oregon? No, she did not. It wasn't because Denise didn't care. The dream was fraying at the edges, because if Diamond couldn't make it, Diamond, who didn't really pay rent, beautiful Diamond, who lived with a rich man and had a credit card she could use almost whenever she wanted and was just about as good a painter as Denise was, it meant there really was no hope for Denise in New York. And really, because Denise didn't care enough.

She wants to miss the stop, keep riding along, go onto a new and different future than the one she is hurtling into, but what difference would that make? Where would she go? That sort of shit works in a romantic comedy. This is a life. So she gathers up her cases, and a porter helps her, but not the snubbed flirting lopsided smirking married man, who is very purposefully looking away from her. Denise stares at him as long as she can without turning her head. She brushes his shoulder with her bare arm as she walks by. At the end of the car near the stairs, waiting, the porter tells her to be careful, miss, but Denise still has her subway sea legs, and even in heeled sandals she will not be outwitted by a train. Denise sways, pulsing with the movement of train tides, like kelp, easy smooth and then quick tug pull, she doesn't stumble, she doesn't teeter, holds fast.

Evening now, long bruised twilight, elastic shadows runny across sandy concrete. It is the same temperature in Charlottesville as New York, same humidity, feels hotter. Southern eighty is somehow hotter than Yankee eighty. Maybe heat is a per capita thing, maybe because there are fewer people in Virginia to sop it all up. The air conditioning of

the train station lobby is mostly broken, blows hard and loudly and does not feel cool. Every time the automatic doors open--when anyone walks within five feet of them, every few minutes--the outside air muscles its way inside, Denise is almost grateful for the busted air conditioning. Almost. Something crawls along the floor by her shoe. It is a bluebottle fly. She draws back and it wafts off, lands three feet away. It continues its pilgrimage across the tile floor, slow, rhythmic. Maybe walking is fly penance. Walk ten tile floors for each sin. Or exercise, maybe flies walk the way people swim.

Her phone rings and she picks up her things, makes her way to the curb, looks for the big Buick. There she is, Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert. It's deep dusk now, nearly night, dark in the car, even with the little dome light on in the car it's hard to see what her mother looks like now. Her face is finished, Denise can tell that much.

"Denise, don't put those filthy cases in the car. The trunk, put them in the trunk," her mother says.

"Paul Newman."

"What?"

"Nothing. How are you, Mother?"

"Tired."

"Of course. Thank you for coming to get me. And through rush hour traffic. I do appreciate it."

"Yes. We need to stop at the drugstore."

The Rite Aid. This air conditioning works and well, makes her skin pebbled coral, too intense to be refreshing, much stronger than the car, she shivers, feels her scalp tighten. Everything is bright and green with a purplish undertone in the drugstore. Denise can see her mother more clearly here. Her hair is finished, neat, pressed and curled, falls to her shoulders in long golden waves. Her lipstick, eye shadow and face powder are immaculate, even in this heat, and are modest colors, show she is wearing something but not too much. She is wearing a linen suit, khaki color, that does not age her, makes her look young forties. And her mother is thin, much thinner than she remembers even. Taller by a few inches but still smaller around than Denise. Probably what, a zero? Maybe even a double zero? Denise will either have some explaining, defending, or some dieting to do in her mother's house.

The Rite Aid. All your aids for all your rites. Cigarettes and red lipstick: rites of passage. Pregnancy tests: rites of fertility. Her mother buys a can of Lysol. She pops the trunk of the big Buick and sprays the two suitcases and folded French easel heavily. Rite of purification.

The house, the old family house, the only real house she has ever lived in: it is smaller in the world than it is in her mind. In Denise's mind, the house is bigger than the Disney Castle, and unfolds in a fan-like bellows fashion whenever anyone opens a door or goes up a set of stairs or turns a corner into another room, self-propagating. Six bedrooms is big, but when she sees the house again from the outside in real life it doesn't seem like all of it could fit in this box. Denise can't remember if she's had this memory

before. Is that important, if she's thought about the size of the house before or not. Both thoughts slither away as she follows her mother into the house, the sound of two sets of heels on the front walk, carrying luggage up the two sets of stairs, concrete and then wood, she's been doing this since she was five. Her mother always had luggage then, too, every weekend, another trip somewhere, and if Denise didn't come home with a trophy and a crown god help her.

In the front hall, most of the family photographs have been replaced by paintings. None of Denise's paintings, but none of her mother's, either. There's still one photograph of the entire family with all the familiar extensions, and one of the nuclear, and one of her with her twin brother Bernard when they were small, but none of just Bernard anymore. The one of him in his as quarterback that was centered over the piano, there's a painting of what must be Monticello now: it's round at the top, squished building served over-medium, and claw marks running down the sides show where the shrubbery fell off the top. What looks like it was supposed to be two people is washed into what looks like it was supposed to be a horse is washed into what looks like it is supposed to be a brown bush. She doesn't recognize the artist.

"Who did that one?" Denise asks.

"It's dreadful, isn't it?" her mother says. "Someone I do Junior League with. She gave me this for my birthday."

"It's very bad."

“I think it’s the worst thing I’ve ever seen. She has a Jefferson fetish. Dresses as him for Halloween and his birthday.”

“Where do you put the photograph? The one of Bernard at homecoming.”

“I’ve eaten. There’s food in the icebox. You’re in the attic. I’ve turned the other room into my studio. There’s air and a toilet. It’s clean.”

The stairway to the attic is in a closet, still paneled in plywood, a bare bulb with a string pull dangling from it at the bottom of the stairwell, gives a satisfying click when pulled, even if little light comes down. The stairwell itself was never meant to be this--it was a ladder when Denise was little, she is almost sure of it, she remembers a trapdoor in the ceiling and a ladder that pulled down, but maybe that’s her mother’s sister’s house or her grandmother’s house, all attic experiences are sort of the same when you’re little, but she knows this stairwell is new. It smells new, that smell of sawdust and regular dust and galvanized nails and graphite and fossilized workman hurry. The stairs are too tall and too shallow, her heels hang off the ends unless she steps sideways, which is just as well because the width of the stairwell feels tight.

There is no door at the top of the stairwell. Denise is just in the room now. No railing, nothing around the hole she just came up through. No drinking in her room, because the stairwell is a tiger trap for drunks. After finding the light switch, a quick survey: she can only stand up to her full height in the center of the room, about half the area. Also, this is not the attic of her childhood. There is nothing here. Well, not nothing: a bed, with linens folded and put on the foot for her to make herself. A desk. A

small wardrobe. A full length mirror. An adjustable stool. An ironing board and iron. A scale. In the tiny bathroom: a toilet, a shower, a mirror, a hairdryer, a curling iron. Fresh towels are left on the shower floor. Everything she will need to be presentable. But all of the things that used to be in here, the trunks she used to go through with Bernard and their cousin Ashley, the old pictures, the old clothes, the furniture, all gone. The vent in the floor pushes cold air up into the room and Denise shivers.

The windows are those double-pane deals, recently replaced, and it takes Denise a couple of minutes to figure out how to pull out the screen. She leans out, kneeling on wooden floorboards with her head resting on the ceiling, and lights a cigarette. A large moth swoops in--she ducks and covers her head with her free hand--the moth turns about the light--she shuts it off, trying to cup the ash from her cigarette in the one hand while running barefoot around the room--moth bumbles out again into the night. She grinds the cigarette out on the window, pops the screen back in. No smoking.

*

ASHLEY

“Ashley. Ashley, honey,” Mama says. She always sounds so nice when someone else can hear her.

“Yes.” I could use some gum. Such cottonmouth.

“The nurse is here.”

“Yes.” Nurses never bring gum.

“Can I turn this off?” Mama’s questions are never questions.

“Huh?”

“The TV.”

“Huh?”

“Can I turn the TV off because the nurse is here.”

“But you just turned it off.”

“This is Nurse--I’m sorry, what was your name?” asks my Mama, and a flat sort of lumpy pillow of a woman, one of those cheap sort of flat pillows with too-pink cheeks and legs like stuffed pantyhose they use in therapy practices to help children work out their anger without hurting anyone and show where the bad man touched them, comes in. She’s a big rustling of fabric unfortunateness, long sleeves underneath scrubs in Virginia’s summertime.

“Hi Ashley, I’m Kimmie Peterson.” Upwards inflection at the end of every sentence, like everything is a question. Young, younger than me even, and uncomfortable. She’ll be crushed by hospice in a year. Her hand is out towards me, four fingers first with the thumb under, clamp-style, like I should kiss them. Nurses are filthy creatures, almost as dirty as doctors. I wouldn’t tell you to kiss either unless you’re looking for rough trade or PNP. If that’s what you’re in to, do it, because they have great drugs. I slide my fingers under the tips of hers, but I am not holding them, I am looking at them, as if she is showing me her new engagement ring, but this nurse is ringless.

Nurses should not wear rings. Rings are fomites. A vector needs to be alive, like a mosquito. The word for a nonliving pestilence carrier is fomite.

“Wow, I don’t meet many nurses with fingernails. Yours are really long.” They are, at least three-quarters of an inch off her fingertip. Cheap acrylics, with a bad French job on them, weird android bandage flesh tone and picket fence white, made in a factory somewhere, not even painted on. Nurse and mother are quiet for a few seconds. I think that counts as a beat in a play. Three long breaths, right?

“Nurse Peterson is here from the hospice people.”

“Wow, you have dainty wrists,” I say. Raggedy red picked cuticles, she’s going to get staph in them if she doesn’t cut that out. Lose a hand that way. Flesh-eating bacteria take a cubic inch an hour, you know.

“Thanks, Ashley.” Up at the end, like the quivering feather of a scurrying quail’s head.

“You really need a fill.” Yanks her hand back.

“I’m here to see how you’re adjusting to your new environment. How you’re all adjusting.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I don’t have to go all the way to the hospital to see him every day, twice a day. That’s wonderful.” It’s also easier for Mama to manage and control my pills here. She can keep them out of my grasp and step on my scrip a little without any watchful doctors here.

“Ashley? I’m going to take your vitals and ask you some questions, okay? How are you doing here?” These are real questions, even though the tone is the same.

“Yes?” It helps that the thermometer is one of those ear doohickeys and it’s in the side she’s chattering at. Shoves it straight in my ear from her bag.

“Oh, I’m sorry; let me finish. One hundred one, a little high.” These still tilt up at the end. She is too fat for the seesaw of conversation. She doesn’t know how to talk to sick people; that’s the problem. Or maybe she can’t be in strangers’ homes. Maybe she has never been outside of her own home ever in her life. Her entire schooling was through correspondence courses. Nursing through the mail. The internet was a godsend for people like Nurse Kimmie.

“He’s often running high.” Mama says the *running high* part as if it’s a different sentence, like she’s saying the title of a movie here. *Running High*, starring Robert Downey, Jr. before the free-fall years, somewhere between *Weird Science* and *Less Than Zero*. I can’t look at her and the nurse at the same time, so I can’t tell exactly what she means by running high business, but I know she wouldn’t want the nurse to get my meds cut even if she thinks I take too many.

“On a scale of one to ten, how do you feel today? Ashley?”

“What did you say?” Give her a minute. Let her study that shit out. Really, Kimmie, what the fuck.

Nurse Kimmie’s on my taking my pressure and pulse, with the cuff and the stethoscope on my arm. Those cuffs and the little metal pads are filthy, you know.

When's the last time you saw someone wipe one down on anything but a sleeve that's seen so many sickrooms, or put a prophylactic on one? They've been on arms riddled with MRSA pustules and gangrenous chests, placed there by this woman's *E. coli* acrylic finger habitats. She really, really needs a fill bad. There's at least a quarter-inch of bare nail and raw cuticle at the back end of each nail bed. I can see her real nails creeping up under the tips, and I can see black lint and grime collecting under both the real and plastic nails. Even a hermit crab would be looking for a new shell by now.

"Ashley?" Nurse Kimmie asks. "On a scale of one to ten."

Do I have to do every fucking thing?

"Ten means what? Ten means hot? Ten means cold? What the fuck does ten mean?" I think she has an old M&M in her breast pocket. Either that or a lonely Skittle. Maybe a Reese's Piece. Is that the singular? All I can see is the round green bead in the corner, crushed a little. I can't tell if there's chocolate or candy goo or peanut butter leaking out. The dye starting to bleed through the cotton/poly blend of her scrubs. I don't know any pills that vibrant. Fuck, I miss candy. I can't have it because the radiation burnt my salivary glands and the meds give me dry mouth so bad the acid tears up my tongue and cheeks until they bleed. The last time I had pineapple I got a bloody tongue so bad I got a goddamned staph infection in my mouth and I had to have IV antibiotics. I didn't have to get a feeding tube, but there was talk of one. So now, no candy, no mangoes, no oranges, no strawberries, no coffee, no wine, and no pineapples.

She's blinking a lot behind her glasses. I can't tell what color her eyes are. They're really reflective for some reason. Maybe I rattled you, Nurse Kimmie, but you deserved it.

"One means a bad day, ten means a good day. Are you having a one day, or a ten day?" Her voice is quieter now, and less questioning.

I can feel it, if I want to. I usually try to sit right above it, my body, like I'm using my body for a bed, but I can go back in if I want to. It's a weird feeling, a spreading out, the way a hot bath feels, that hot coolness at the same time, except it isn't heat: it's pain. The kind that happens when you close your hand in a door, and you can't tell how much it's going to hurt, because it kind of blew all your circuits? Blood cancer is a constant body poison, and it's been pumped through my blood vessels and lymph lines and spread into some of my nerves now, and the chemo and radiation and the vaccines and shit they tried to use to kill it killed parts of me because the cancer *is* me, so I feel like I'm wound up with a kind of tight tingling burning static and inside all of me is a sort of bloated fullness of pain, the hottest kind, the kind that's so on so very on it's past pain, a kind of openness that bleeds into the bed and the air and the walls around me, just draining out, and I itch everywhere, not just my skin, but inside my skin, all the way down, like inside of my stomach itches, the roots of my teeth fucking itch, you wouldn't think you could know where the bottoms of your lungs are, but you can find them when they itch like they've fallen in a nest of fire ants. Plus the ringing in my ears, it's so bad, it started after the radiation and it just won't fucking stop. I told the doctor about the sound and he just

said hearing loss was forever. It's a sound, though, tinnitus. It's not an absence. It's a little metal car alarm *rheerr-rheerr-rheeeeerrrrrr* in your ear constantly, never stopping. If Horton had really heard a Who, he would have fucking murdered them to get some peace and quiet, Jeepers Motherfucking Cripes.

The thing is, it's hard to answer to her on the fever thing. I can't tell if I do have a fever. I know that I'm wet when I can sweat, and that the sheets are soaked--although sometimes that's sweat and sometimes that's blood and sometimes that piss and sometimes that pus and sometimes that's lymph and sometimes that shit, who knew I could leak so many things, my body is a goddamned wonderland--and I don't usually bother to check what it is. We'll figure out what it is when Mama or a nurse come in here to clean me up. I know I'm shaking when I can shake. I don't always have enough energy to. I think that's fever, but I don't rightly know anymore. I don't know what the temperature is. That's like asking me what day it is, or what time it is, or which way is north. I can't tell these sorts of things anymore.

I do know more meds make the time pass more quickly. I blink my eyes and it's an hour later. The right ones make television better. Sometimes I can even read without getting a headache or too seasick. By now, I've figured out what to say to get more meds without seeing the doctor again. Not that he wants to see me. He doesn't like me much, either.

"Today is about a three, I guess."

“Your pressure and pulse are normal.” She’s looking in my eyes now, and my mouth. Maybe I have thrush again. They always hate seeing that--*Icky*--but they always feel such an accomplishment from curing it. I can’t tell if my mouth is full of yeast cheese or not. It’s hard to swallow. I know my breath is rank. I have a mouthful of cavities since I got cancer, between the radiation and the dry mouth. Terrible. I had nice teeth. Not perfect, but I had a nice smile.

“What makes it a three?” She’s cautious here. We aren’t friends, but I’m giving her something. She feels my PICC line dressing needs changing, but I don’t want her to. I’ll lose my arm to gangrene. I’ll get a fucking flea under there. Mama can do it. I’m looking at Mama and Mama isn’t looking at me. She wants Nurse Kimmie to do it. So Nurse Kimmie gets out her whole kit’n’caboodle to do it. I turn my head away because she doesn’t give me a mask. I wish the bitch would, so I could supervise her. But then maybe I’ll get some sort of wacky superbug and I’ll die in 48 hours and be on *20/20* or something. Maybe I will live on and Nurse Kimmie will have the most busted mug shot ever. Maybe she’ll be a drag queen Halloween costume. God, that would almost make it worth it.

“I’m in a lot of pain. Burning. Itching. Along my nerves, in my lungs, in my glands.”

“What would make it a five?” She’s fussing with my arm, she’s messing with the catheter, I can feel it moving around in there, so I know she’s not doing a good job because the catheter is not supposed to move, and I can just smell Mama’s disapproval in

my brain. Don't ask how; if you don't have a psychic connection with anyone that's your own damned fault.

But fuck all: use your words, Nurse Kimmie. *What* would make *what* a five, ugh.

"Less pain. Days with less pain are better. The morphine and oxycontin help me a lot." She's packing up now. She hasn't done the worst job I've ever seen, actually. The PICC tubing is decently curled, I can't easily tell if she's left any hairs or nurse nuggets under there. I had thought her scrubs were patterned, but now that I'm really looking at them, I can tell they are covered in something. Not teddy bears. Something else.

"So the pain management isn't going to your satisfaction. I'll tell your doctor."

"You have angels all over your scrubs," I say.

"Yes, I love angels." She is smiling now. Dimples. Very deep. I hope she works them, because those are her greatest asset, I think.

"I have never seen so many angels." Not true: William Blake's masses of angels are terrible and mighty. Nurse Kimmie's squishy teeming swarms, they almost move when I look at them close. With their pink doughy faces, bare fetal feet, Chicken in a Biskit wings. What have you done Nurse Kimmie--you've made warriors of an unfathomable god into housewives' playthings.

"I buy mine online."

"Look at you, crawling with them. Every square inch of you is just lousy with angels. Just infested with the fucking heavenly host."

Mama and Nurse Peterson are in the living room now. She did remember to look at my right thighful of crusted over sores. Not weeping anymore means they're clearing up. So apparently I won't have them for the rest of my life. If I live longer than two weeks.

Mama is back to give me some Percocet. She does not leave the bottle, even though I try to take it from her. So crafty, Mama. One of these days. Not so careful. One day.

"Ashley, you embarrassed me."

"Mama, may I have the remote, please. It's on the other side of the room."

"Sometimes I wonder. How you got to be such a."

"Son of a bitch?" I reach my arm out toward the bureau where the remote is.

"Ashley."

"Bastard?" Open and close my hand, like a swimming scallop. I saw one of those on a nature show the other day. They can really make tracks. Clap clap clap. They have dozens of blue eyes all around the lips of their shells. Super creepy.

"Pill. You are a pill," she says, and she gets up, and she tosses the remote onto the end of the bed, and she leaves.

DENISE

One thing Denise and her mother have in common: they are up early. One more thing they have in common: the best thing about being up early is being alone in the morning. She goes down for a cup of green tea and a good morning (no coffee for Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert; the anti-aging properties of green tea are legendary) and brings it back up to the attic. After her own yoga, her own reading, her own drawing, her own shower, she goes downstairs to prepare her own breakfast.

Timed well, but not impeccably. Her mother has finished breakfast and is not to be seen in the kitchen. Perfect timing would overlap with her there. Then they could pretend they wanted to see each other but not so much. Now one of them must seek the other out to talk. It is best if Denise does. She has an egg and toast. She does her own dishes, sweeps the floor, wipes down the counter and stove with disinfectant.

Her mother is upstairs in her studio. This used to be Denise's room. The room next to this was her brother's room; the door to that room is closed, so Denise can't see what her mother has made of it now. The door to the studio open, but she knocks anyway.

"Come in," Lucia Gilbert says, but she doesn't turn around.

Her mother wears a long, tailored seersucker smock tied over her regular dress. She sits at her easel, working in oils over a family portrait. The wire hung over her easel

has several different pictures of people clipped to it, as well as a few sketches from different angles.

“Were you able to get them all to sit?” Denise asks. Her mother is very good at what she does. She’s managed to get the background of the family’s house in without ever being there. Capturing the different emotions inside of the subdued smiles: bland anger (father), stymied bitterness (daughter), bored aggression (son), weary fear (mother).

“Never together. And the father doesn’t think it’s worth the money. He gave me five minutes. Wouldn’t stop moving, looking at his stupid phone.”

“They always want to make it worse. Prove they’re right.”

“Always.”

Watching her mother mix the paints now, Denise can see where she learned so much she had to unlearn at university under Van Lauden. Her mother doesn’t work with color theory, only from instinct, which is fine, it serves her mother very well, yes, but it doesn’t lead to unity in the finished product, to promise, to allow the artist to use the palette as a metaphor.

The first day school, of Van Lauden’s Painting I. Denise had just left Virginia for upstate New York the day before, arrived later than she meant to on account of her brother’s funeral. Her mother had sent word even though Denise had not wanted her to; she would be there before school proper started. She was just missing the orientation, and she didn’t need to go to that. Now people would know. Drip their sentiment all over

her. Denise's roommate, Diamond Giacometti, wasn't in the room the evening she arrived, wasn't there all night. They didn't meet each other until class.

The easels were arranged alphabetically by last name on the first day, with their last names written on the first sheet of the canvas pad, left hand upper corner. *Gilbert* was the easel right after *Giacometti*, but Denise didn't introduce herself to Diamond. Diamond didn't seem to notice her. She was all waist-length blonde hair and bare legs in a white flapper dress, dark glasses and sandals. As soon as Diamond sat down, she took off her shoes and crossed her legs on her stool. No talking. Van Lauden wove his way around them while they did a quick still life of some fall foliage, a few gourds and what was left of a raw turkey he had left in the woods six weeks before. Van Lauden, standing behind her. Studying her. At the break, she stayed outside, having a cigarette, thinking about him and the way he looked at her. He liked her work. Definitely. Maybe he liked her. Probably. He hadn't spent that much time watching anyone else in front of her. But she couldn't see what was happening behind her. He might have another favorite in the room.

"You're my roommate," Diamond said. Denise hadn't been looking at her, was surprised by this. Diamond Giacometti was taller than she by at least six inches, even barefoot. Dirty feet. Dirty hippie feet. She had a daisy chain in her hair now. Awful. And she smoked cloves. Denise hated the smell of cloves. But her hair was very pretty, even if it was kind of ratty at the ends. And she had nice eyes, a vibrant sort of hazel with a lot of gray in it, even if they were set in a long, horsey kind of face. But her nose

was fine, and her lips, too. She looked like Artemis, sort of, an idealized sort of goddess that isn't very pretty but isn't ugly either.

"I like your dress," Denise said. It was a nice dress, vintage, and kept in good condition. Although really, it would be better with just any kind of underwear under it at all, and if Diamond had shaved at least something. Even if she didn't do everything, just one thing. Just one.

Diamond looked into Denise's eyes and down at her hands and then whispered very quietly, "I'm sorry, you know. For your loss." That would be the only time she ever said anything about Bernard, ever, in the twelve years they knew each other.

When they came back from the break, Denise's canvas pad was gone, all of her supplies missing. Instead, her easel was outfitted with a sheet from a roll of butcher paper, a fat black pencil, worn and dirty pink eraser, and a watercolor paint box, the same one kindergarteners are expected to lick because blue might just taste like the sky.

The paints Denise uses today aren't much more than the paint box Van Lauden gave her then. The cakes she buys have to fit inside those same eight plastic pans. After it cracks, gives out, maybe she'll switch up to something more sophisticated. Maybe.

"Would you do portraits, Denise?"

"I do portraits, Mother."

Lucia Gilbert doesn't turn towards her daughter, just makes a face representing surprise, a tiny mime show, the head tips back, the eyebrows lift up, lids pulling down, lips together, but she says nothing. Denise waits.

Finally, "I have a new client coming in this week. You can paint a second portrait, if you like." Was that worth it? What would happen if Denise just left the room one of these days? Just turned and walked away? Her mother would probably still be in exactly the same position when she saw her again, ten minutes ten days ten years later.

"I could do pets. That could be different enough. From what you do, you know, it could be a new. Market."

"The animals are owned by the insane. Anyone who wants an oil portrait of a pug in jester's bells is no one you want to work for. They think their dogs understand English and have momentarily aphasia and that's why Poopsie Maximilian the Fourth can't talk as soon as you walk in the room."

They look at the work silently. A mother, a daughter, a son, a father.

"You need to come and see your Cousin Ashley soon."

"Cousin Ashley." The eyes all looking slightly to the viewer's left, but only if you really look for it. They aren't looking at the artist; if they were, they'd be looking straight on.

"You know this. I've told you this."

"I'm sorry. What's going on with Cousin Ashley. I haven't seen him since the funeral." Not since her brother was put in a gift box and wrapped up with flowers and ribbons and bows and readied to be presented to the gods. Bernard never slept well. He was always so restless, twisted up in the bedclothes, sweating and mumbling. He really looked dead there in the coffin. Not sleeping: dead. They always say the dead look

asleep, but whose “asleep” is that? Who sleeps like that? Denise has only seen a few people sleep, and none of them were still. Even dogs and babies twitch and whine.

“I’ve told you this.”

“I’m sorry, Mother.”

“I’ve told you.” Her mother picks up the paintbrush again, swishes it in the turpentine. Presses it against the side of the cup so hard the tendons in her arm pop out.

“I know I’ve told you.”

“I don’t remember talking about this.”

“I sent you an email: cancer. Terminal. He’s staying with your aunt. You need to come see him. He doesn’t have the luxury of time.”

*

ASHLEY

Today Mama has given me the right amount of morphine and some fake sweet tea at just the right temperature and the remote control and now, now I remember how fucking lovely *The Rockford Files* really, really is. Jesus, he’s hot. James Garner? Really, really he is. But I had to stop and go back and rewatch the beginning of this episode at least eight times because I can’t get over how great the opening is. Is it the greatest theme? It might just be, I dunno. I mean, have you ever watched it, really

watched it, and applied it to your own life, to your own situation, and listened? I think I can do it all now, by heart.

The first thing that needs to be addressed is what message I would've left. For Jim Rockford, on the machine. Because that's the first thing, the answering machine, in a time when those were really exotic and special, and he had one when he was living in a fucking trailer in a parking lot by the pier. A contradiction of a man. And writers ahead of their time, using the trick they still try to, the voice in the ether crying to nothing for exposition. No one has answering machines anymore.

No, wait, wrong, wrong, wrong. I could put it on, but I want to see if I can see it. In the eye on my mind. Mind's eye, mind's eye. The phone's ringing--mind's ear--I think it's a black, black solid old phone, with gray buttons, but you can't see it yet, because it rings lonely in the darkness. And it starts with a flash, with white letters on a black background. The flash is James Garner's name, and it tells you what he's in, what we're all about to be up to one hour's worth of ass in. *The Rockford Files*. Then the camera pans over his desk. What can I see? It's cards, it's a game of solitaire. Rockford's there, even though I can't see him, he's present, he's waiting, and if I'd left the message, the right message, he'd be on his way here now, to come and help me, spring me out of here, and I'd be sitting shotgun in the Pontiac, flopping around while he fishtails around and gravel flies everywhere. There's the ashtray on the table, half-filled, because he's a real man, with faults like smoking. I could use a smoke. But if I coughed--how embarrassing. No one ever has phlegm in his world, no one ever can't handle their

liquor or their smoke. There's never any stink or farts or puke or sweat or shit or snot, just tears and blood. I'd be so lovely there, just bleeding out of polite places like bullet holes and my mouth. Camera sweeps to a big photo of his dad, Rocky, crazy, caring, pliable Rocky, because Jim's a man who cares about his father, and if you watch this show often you know that Rocky is his father. And only half cup of coffee, because now we know he really isn't waiting, I've missed him, he's rushing out to meet someone who left the right message for him. And then his voice on the machine that's started a few moments ago, I got that wrong, when did it start? Over the cards, I think. Playing cards, ringing, and his mellow, gentle, and safe voice rolls over everything, and then when we can see the answering machine we hear the message someone is leaving now. What would I have left? No, no matter: the message isn't the real episode. It's something just to set context about what kind of person he is, what kind of circumstances he's up against. *Your layaway payment on the used tires is overdue, buster.*

"Ashley? Company," Mama says, and she takes the remote away from me. She sings this last word in three syllables. Com-pah-nee. It means *punishment*. It is three men (barely, their cheeks are still soft, their eyes still wide) with nametags and short sleeved button-downs with ties and polyester slacks; Mormon missionaries--ah, Mama, you have miscalculated. This is a present you have given me. She maneuvers them into the room and leaves to the kitchen.

"Yes," I say.

“Um, your mother said you wanted to talk about Jesus.” This is the tall blonde one. Why is the Mormon in charge always tall and blonde? Do they put the blondes in charge, or do the ones in charge molt their brunette locks and wake up with their feet hanging over the bed?

“Yes.”

“Are you okay? You don’t look so good.” This is the shifty brunette, about six inches shorter than the blonde.

“Yes.”

“Do you know where you’ll be spending eternity?” the blonde one says. His voice is steady, and he’s smiling, but his eyes are roaming my body looking at the PICC line, the weird plastic egg sac a robot laid in my arm, with the larval ropes hanging out of it, a clear H. R. Giger invention, and how bruised my arms and hands are. And at the crusty sores I still have. Fewer than before, but I still have some on my face and arms and neck, with an amber crust. Like I was doing a lot of crank and picking at myself. Or like I have Kaposi’s sarcoma. I don’t, but common mistake. I don’t think I would give a shit if I were dying of the virus, but I’m not, I’m not even positive, so I don’t know how that feels, so it’s not really for me to say I know what that feels like. There was someone in one of the groups I used to have to go to who had the virus and cancer and the cancer was taking him first and he was kind of relieved, but he was in his sixties. He looked better than I did. Not fair at all.

“No,” I say. The third Mormon is trying to stay in the doorway. He’s holding his bible in front of his mouth. What if he had no mouth? What if it were just a raw, open hole, big as your whole hand? Or if he had a mouth like a lamprey, or a hagfish, with the rings of teeth and a spiked tongue, and the other Missionaries didn’t know it, because he always managed to cover his mouth with a bible or a pamphlet or newspaper or something? And what if he didn’t really want to hurt anyone, what if he were just a Mormon alien doing his Mission on Earth? What if all aliens seen on Earth were just Mormons doing their Missions, spreading the Good News? Boy, would we have egg on our faces.

“Can I show you some literature?” the blonde one is reaching into his back pocket for something.

“Do you think you’ll get cancer?” I ask. They’re quiet. The brunette and the blonde look at each other. The doorway kid looks at me and keeps the bible in front of his mouth. “Do any of you think you’ll get cancer?”

“My mom had it,” says the blonde. “Cancer of the--of the breast. She’s a fighter. She prayed to be healed. And she became even more active in our church. She helped other people with cancer. And the power of Jesus pulled her through. She’s been in remission for two years.”

“So if you’re good enough God cures your cancer?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“It sounded like you said I deserved to die. Like all people who die of cancer or any disease deserve it.”

“God works in mysterious ways.”

“Cancer is more unpredictable than mysterious. It’s pretty clear on how it works. You become pregnant with a shadow self that eats you alive. God should know this.”

“It isn’t for us to understand God.” His eyes are lowered now. On the inside. Like he’s closed the bathroom door in his mind. Shutting me out the way he shuts out those asshole atheist fundamentalists. Fuck, I wish they would come to the door.

“You believe in a loving, all powerful god.”

“Yes, yes I do.”

“A cancer granting, loving, all powerful god.”

“God doesn’t give people cancer.”

“Who does?”

“No one does. It’s nature.”

“So God isn’t making me die, and God isn’t healing my cancer.”

“Have you asked God to?”

“I have to beg? That’s hot in a leather daddy kind of way, but that’s not what I’m looking for in an almighty deity.” Now the tall Mormon and the brunette are looking at each other. They’re done with me.

“Well, we’ll leave some literature with your mother.”

“You should ask her first. I don’t think she’ll read it. And please ask her for the remote back on the way out?”

“God bless you,” the blonde says, as they leave.

“Hang loose,” I say. “Y’all might want to put on some sunblock,” I call into the hall after them. “You’re pretty fair. Melanoma is the worst, from what I hear.”

*

DENISE

Denise lies around rereading a four-month-old *Vogue Italia* all morning.

“Are you coming today?”

Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert is wearing a straw sun hat and strapless poplin dress printed with sunflowers that showcases her keen clavicles. Wasp-waisted, such a full skirt, her mother must have made it herself, her mother still believes in Dior’s New Look. Is this all that different, though, from hipsters wearing bellbottoms or legwarmers? It’s all freeze-dried past, fashion from before your time. And her mother does look good in it.

Denise isn’t sure. No. No, she is not going. She needs time to prepare.

“If you aren’t coming today, at least empty your cases so I can leave them at the Goodwill.” Her mother swishes out of the room, a small cloud of volatile solvents and germicides wafting after her.

While her mother is gone, Denise wanders through the studio. What used to be her room. No surprises. Paints. Canvases. Notebooks. The door to what used to be her brother’s room is locked, new brass deadbolt, no key scratches around the lock. No getting in there. Her mother’s room is open. It is the same, and her mother will know if she has been in there. The Professor’s old room is the guest bedroom again. One framed photograph hangs on the wall. It is of Denise and Bernard when they were little, ten, twelve maybe, dressed in Easter best: she in white patent leather Mary Janes (the last year there would be no heel), short white frilled socks, ruffled petticoat, blue gingham dress with leg o’ mutton sleeves puffing out over her shoulders. Her black hair with the pageboy bangs she always hated to cover the forehead her mother said was too large, black like the Professor’s, twisted into long, open curls down to her elbows. Her brother, in a cream sweater vest over a light blue button-down, yellow waffle-textured tie, gray slacks, brown penny loafers. This was the first portrait where you could really start to see it, how Denise’s face was starting to look different from her mother’s. Broader at the top than the bottom, pointed chin, severe cheekbones, the heavy brows starting to brew even at age ten. Here, away from any other pictures of family, there was little to compare it to. Everyone said she looked like Grandpa, who knew if it was true or not. Her face was still moored Bernard’s but starting to drift from his, too. He still looked like Mother; his face,

it never left hers. Sweet blonde, his face was perfect oval, balanced, turned up nose, light blue eyes, he, he was perfect. They sat next to each other on the photographer's carpeted block in front of a backdrop of cherry trees in full bloom. They held hands, legs crossed at the ankles, shoulders thrown back, chests turned three-quarters to the camera, and smiled. No, Denise parted her lips, bared her teeth, there was nothing wrong with the way she moved her mouth. But if you covered it up, you couldn't tell what expression she was supposed to have from the eyes. This was the way she always posed for pictures. This was why she never succeeded in the pageant circuit. Her mother had seen her score cards, shown them to her, even as she could do two backflips and sing a perfect *Star Spangled Banner* without cracking or losing air, she never was never Miss Virginia or even Runner Up because she was "creepy," "distant," "unpleasant." Her mother had told her if she could just smile like Bernard she could be Miss America. Why can't you just smile like your brother?

She sees Bernard now. He smiles at her out from the past. The last time she saw him smile like that. They were, what, seventeen. They weren't talking much then. He was always out, she was always out. He was at "practice," she was at "lessons." She really was learning things. James Magary, with the thick uncombed hair, more gray than brown at twenty, making him look not unlike a wolf, taking a year off from Berklee to get his shit together, taught her Bach, Satie and how to roll a perfect joint. She would lie on the wooden floor of his studio, looking out of the window and up at the piano's belly with a tab of orange sunshine on her tongue, breathe with the floor, and listen to him play

his own pieces, listen to him slip into stride and ragtime and back into sparse modernism. James Magary would never touch her, never slip his hands up her dress, or down her top, even though she wanted him to. He only touched her hands, corrected her piano fingering and waggled his wild eyebrows when he said it, *fingering*, and squeezed his hands over hers to make sure she put the right amount of pressure over the rolling papers. James Magary could roll a joint one-handed with either hand. Denise never did figure out if he favored his left or right. He could write with either one. He had nervous mannerisms with both hands, like scratching his head twice with his left hand and tapping the edge of the piano top-middle-top with his right. He wasn't invited to her brother's funeral. She had wanted to suggest to her mother and the Professor that James Magary play the organ at the church, she had wanted that so bad sometimes in her mind she can remember saying it, but she knows she never did, never would have wanted to have that conversation. She always looked for him in the listings in New York, to see if he was playing, but he never was. No James Magary. She hoped he was, he changed his name, he reinvented himself when he left Charlottesville.

She hears the old Buick coming back up the driveway. She forgot how close her mother's sister's house is. Everything is close together here. As quickly as she can without hurrying, Denise moves out of the room, trying to smooth out the footprints from the carpet. It is a useless battle; her mother will know she has been in here looking at the photograph. What of it? Why shouldn't she look? Still, she hasn't touched anything, only the floor, so nothing should be amiss.

Her mother has her good judging brows on. They move independently of one another, and so high, too. It's all disappointment all the time in those eyebrows. It's the way the eyes paint her daughter up and down with imaginary kerosene sans any neck movement, plus a huge intake of breath, then the closed lids, with brows gliding skyward, the eyelids flutter, the sigh in the back of the throat--better than any New York yoga teacher, she can tell you that, her mother's Ujjayi Pranayama will conquer all--and then the stare directly at one of the condemned's eyes with one brow up to light the match. All these little plays on her mother's face. Her mother would love Balinese dance. So much facial calisthenics.

"You don't have much time left, Denise. It's a matter of weeks now. Your Grandmother has canasta tomorrow, but I'm going again. Such a shame when children don't outlive their parents." Swish, poplin--clip, heels--growl, throat--she is gone.

That night, her mother is back on it.

"Are you coming to see your cousin? Tomorrow morning. He always liked you."

A fat June bug rams itself full speed ahead into the screen door, because June bug Valhalla is always on the other side of all screen doors. After the crash, it spins around on its back on the cement porch, legs climbing nothing, a June bug pantomime: *Invisible Leaf*, rights itself, climbs the screen, then alights into the darkness. Again and again,

Denise listens to the irregular sound of bodies the size and heft of pistachios with their night flight suddenly aborted by something hidden from them--it sounds like slowly popping mechanical corn, such whimsy, but knowing the origin of each sound has six legs on it makes her skin feel a little too small in quarter-sized spots for a moment, again and again. She listens to the sound of insectoid hail on metal and vows to wait out her nicotine headaches and stay her brittle nerves. She quits starting *now*.

Denise decides to go the next day. She's never seen a dying person before. Dead in a casket, but not dying. Maybe it will be interesting. She hasn't seen her cousin in eleven--twelve? Twelve, yes--twelve years now. Denise never came home for Christmas, but she always got the photos from her aunt's parties. Relatives she doesn't know wearing ugly sweaters sincerely smiling big in front of a tree dripping with tinsel, the strip kind that looks like machine snot. Her now-dying Cousin Ashley always faded into the background. He is separate on an ottoman or tucked in a corner on a piano bench. He is a missable person. If he had died on accident before this, it would have been days before anyone noticed. The smell would let a super know and bit on the local news before the lacrosse score would tell everyone else who looked up at the right time and that would be that.

Cousin Ashley is asleep when they get to the house that morning. Her Aunt Lucille is pained in the face to see her, tries too late to stretch it into a surprise. She

didn't know Denise was coming over today; oh, how lovely to see her, but the house: a mess; Ashley: asleep; and a million things to do. Could they come by tomorrow? So sorry to do this, and to family. And she clasps her hands in front of her in a tightly interlaced finger mace that lets them know they will not be getting into the castle today. When her mother shows her sister the dish of food, the password is: chicken casserole, but does not work. Her sister exchanges it for an empty dish she has handy by the door and thanks her twin. Denise notes her mother's bizarre eating and potions and rituals and unctions are working. Aunt Lucille looks at least ten years older, even though Lucia has two minutes on her. Denise and her mother are sent away firmly.

“This isn't my Pyrex,” her mother says in the car on the way home.

“Can't you just bring it back with something else in it?” Denise asks, staring at the broad streets through the closed window, air conditioner in the Buick fighting the condensation on the windshield at eleven in the morning. Elms with boughs like mermaids' thighs, magnolias with limp, faded yellow ribbons, drooping low but still nailed up in parts to their tree-hips, undone ratty bows looking more like bolo ties than presents now. Porch swings, some neat and tidy and inviting a nestled talk with a lover, some with green mildewed cushions. A lemonade stand on a corner lawn at a stop sign, a little girl and a boy, neat and clean and fierce, defiantly asking for two whole dollars a cup, no smiles at all, they call to cars as more a challenge than an invitation, their mother watching from the shade on the steps, futilely waving her face with a hand fan. Denise wants to stop, to have this experience, Americana that she can remember forever and

paint authentically, relate to those black and white episodes of *Twilight Zone* and *The Andy Griffith Show*, but doesn't want to spend more time with her mother. "Get your own dish when you go back tomorrow or the next day?"

"I hate to use someone else's dish." Her mother sighs with a closed mouth. Tiny angry roar. "You never know if someone else's house is clean or not."

*

ASHLEY

I can hear the doorbell from here. It's either one of Mama's "clients" for a "reading" or one of my nurses or social workers or home health aides or just cray-cray Aunt Lucy and sometimes Fat Granny (Shaky Granny doesn't know who I am anymore. I don't know if she knows who Mama and Aunt Lucy are anymore). They're always bringing over their tuna noodles and cheesy beef bakes, the full range of vomit casseroles. I don't know how Mama disposes of it all but I know she won't eat that shit either.

But today, no insectoid aunt flying through the room, no blobby snail grandma leaving a sweaty snot trail. No one hushed into the parlor Mama uses to do pull their

tarot and throw their runes and map their star charts and read their palms. No nurse in here to bother with. The doorbell rings and then it's over; no one.

Jim Rockford takes it all in stride. Late night calls, visits, no visits, people waking him up at four in the morning, which happens in nearly every episode, despite his protests. But everything is information. Everything is weighed on its merits and maybe added to the case. Who rings and isn't let in? It's a salesman, someone unexpected, or someone expected and unwelcome. Why wouldn't Crazy and Fatty be welcome? Mama loves to have someone to complain to about me, the state of the world in general. And they always clean the house for free.

“Did we get those awful JWs, Mama?”

“What's that, Ashley?”

“Oh, the bell rang. But no one came in. Mormons Mormons Mormons. They weren't JWs. They were Mormons.”

“Oh.” She is not looking at me right now. She is very busy counting out my afternoon meds from the pill bottles--my pill bottles that she keeps in her room in her nightstand or at least used to, and I know this, because I used to be able to get up and get them myself when she wasn't here, but I can't anymore and she knows this-- and messing with my water and juice and ice packs and heating pad and my spit cup and pillows and blankets and air purifier and robe and walker absolutely not looking at me. “Do you need to go to the bathroom?”

I will not answer any of her questions in the toilet. She is talking to me, wanting to know how I feel today, but I will not answer. She has not answered my question yet. Until she tells me who was at the door, I am not speaking. I don't have to. After five minutes, she stops talking.

"It was your Aunt Lucy," she says, helping me back into bed, "with your Cousin Denise."

"Cousin Denise." I try to keep this level, but I don't think I do.

"You do remember Denise, don't you?"

"She left a long time ago. After her brother passed. Cousin Bernard." Keep it flat. Flat-flat even smooth.

"Yes. Anyways, I didn't think you would want to see her without knowing first. And I didn't want her in the house without making sure it was clean. It's been so long. She's. Well, she's family, but."

"No, Mama, I know." I put my hand on hers, but she tenses up, so I take it off again. "If she comes over again, send her in. I'd be happy to see her."

DENISE

He is awake the next day. Her Aunt Lucille shows her to the solarium, where the hospital bed and Ashley are kept, and gestures her in, introducing her, but then her mother and aunt just sort of linger there, right behind her in the room, just inside the doorway. Here it is again, the coaching by her mother, just like she's eleven years old again and they know she'll get a question about the importance of pageants after the tragic death of JonBenét Ramsey and Denise needs her mother near her to pull the strings properly or else the right answer won't come out.

The solarium has a bent wall of windows overlooking the backyard, the kind of windows advertised in the back of magazines, natural light, save money, remodel now. She remembers playing cards in this room, but the windows are new. New to her, but not new. This is not housey, this is more like a store: the room should be filled with strangely shaped dark and plush couches, all marked down, impractical, bloated, too wide arms, seats so deep that if you wants to lean back your knees can't bend and your feet stick out stupidly like cords of wood; the kind of couches drug dealers always have. Before the windows existed, Denise, Bernard and Ashley played Go Fish, while their mothers played Mahjong. Sometimes with other cousins, but usually just with him and her brother. Sandwiches with the crusts cut off, Kool-Aid, Cheez-It. The bed is folded up and holds him bent at the waist like an open birthday card left on the floor. Skin so thin. How does the skin of the infirm become translucent, she wonders. Does Death

whittle them down a little at a time? Steal the dying layer-by-layer? Maybe when they're washed they don't grow back. Maybe it's erosion.

"Hey Denise." He reaches out his hand.

"Hello, Ashley." So cold, so bony, like an old man. Soft, dry. He looks sick, but he doesn't look cancerous. Nothing is missing. Nothing is hanging off. Just so thin. He still has hair. Wearing a cardigan in bed, they could be visiting him for flu or something where he could get better. Her mother was guilted her. He doesn't look like someone about to die. She's seen worse in functioning anorexics.

"It's been a few years," Ashley says. His smile is pleasant, easy. His eyes are soft. Blue eyes. Light brown hair. A pretty face, he sort of looks like El Greco's Saint Sebastian. Except skinny and mean instead of godly and forgiving. Saint Sebastian looks like this is all one big misunderstanding, any minute now someone will rush in and take his place and he and the Romans will all laugh and laugh and laugh about this over dinner. Ashley has his head tilted back and is staring at her through the narrows of his eyes, with giant pupils, open mouth, cracked lips. Ashley talks slow, and it isn't stereotypical Southern slow or sleepy slow or stupid slow. It's slow like her roommate MacIntyre used to talk. Vicodrawl, they called it.

"I know," Denise says.

"So."

“Yes.” She can outwait him. She can outwait anyone, but especially someone who is supposedly about to die. She has no expiration date.

“Are you back here with us for a little while then?”

El Greco’s Saint Sebastian skinny and mean is probably a washed Sid Vicious, dressed like Mister Rogers, on a good day, very high, playing with a basket full of puppies, Denise decides. She should paint that.

“Yes, it looks like. Mother’s been good enough to let me stay on with her.”

“My mama has, too,” Ashley says, and he smiles big in a way that’s all mouth and eyes and teeth and wrinkled flesh for a split second, like a cartoon wolf, then his face is placid again. She’s not sure if her mother and aunt saw that. Maybe it wasn’t really there.

“You’re a painter, like Aunt Lucy, right?” He looks back and forth between his mother and his aunt, pointing at Denise’s mother with the remote control. Drawing little circles on her in the air.

“I try to be.” Denise hopes this is the right answer. She tries to see her mother without moving her eyes. Crawl through the periphery. Did her mother move? She didn’t hear anything. Probably safe.

“I’d love to see some of your work, if you have the time.” This doesn’t sound sarcastic, but she can’t tell. It’s flatter than the rest of what he says.

“I don’t have that much here.”

“Maybe you could do a portrait?” his mother says.

“My mother could do you better justice,” Denise says.

“I’ve done one,” her mother says, “from some older photos Ashley gave me. Besides, this will give you two some time to talk.”

“I think Ashley needs some rest,” Aunt Lucille says.

“Goodbye, Ashley,” Lucia says.

“So long, Aunt Lucy,” Ashley says.

“I’ll see you soon Ashley,” Denise says.

“It was really good to see you, Cousin Denise.”

Denise and her mother are shown out. There is no discussion about the portraiture, whether or not it is really happening. Denise’s mother and aunt are in the kitchen for a moment, low murmurs. Denise’s mother emerges from the kitchen with a large glass rectangular dish in her hands.

“Let’s go, come on,” she says to Denise.

“It was really good of you to come, Denise,” Aunt Lucille says.

“I’m sure I’ll be back soon,” Denise says, and from the corners of her eyes she catches her mother shooting small darts at her. Mistake.

“We’ll be happy to see you anytime. Just call before you come, okay?”

Back in the car, “Is that the right Pyrex, Mother?”

“You shouldn’t have said that, about soon,” her mother says. “You should never say soon. Always be certain and careful in your language, even if you don’t mean it. Never be circumspect. It seems untrustworthy, especially with family.”

“I will try not to, Mother.”

Denise can see her mother’s jaw working, pushing forward and around, as if she were chewing her cud, and she hears a loud crack like breaking toffee. Her mother raises a hand to touch her own cheek near her ear, but lowers her hand before it reaches her face. Both hands on the steering wheel as they pull into the driveway.

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ASHLEY

Watching it again, the beginning, I can see someone bored and frustrated may just have built the opening credits of *The Rockford Files* as a metaphor for the beginning of the Book of Genesis. No, really, it’s all in there. There is darkness. Then there is the

word. The word is the sound of the telephone. And then there is Light. The Light comes in the form of the first of the credits. This is the First Day. The Light is separated from the Darkness, and we get to see color pictures: the desk comes into view. Firmament: second day. I'm totally cross my heart and stick a needle in my eye right now. The desk is the Garden, and the objects on the desk are the many animals and plants that God has created. Fourth through sixth day, stars and critters and plants, and the Sabbath and it was good. Then we see the picture of Man--Rocky--the second to last creature that God created. Then the zoom on the phone, and we hear the other voice come on. This is the invader into the Garden. The person leaving the message represents the Serpent, Satan. The message is the temptation of Eve, and the viewer is Eve. Then the music starts and we see a man, Jim Rockford, thrown out into the real world, which is Los Angeles, full of pain and triumph, full of observation and conflict. There's electric piano, the music of the world, and then harmonica, the sound of the unlikely hero, the hound-dog sound of one man among the teeming millions, one thread shot through the tapestry of humanity. Maybe he's Cain, I'm not too clear on that part. He was pardoned for his supposed crime, and no one lets him forget it ever. The crime, I mean; he will always mention the pardoning. (This is just like Cain. Cain thinks he was set up. Really, was it his fault his God wasn't a vegetarian?) Watch it next time and think about these things. Try it with other TV show openings. You won't see it in *Cannon* or *Streets of San Francisco* or *Silver Spoons*.

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DENISE

Green tea, a cigarette on the back patio. A book on Buddhist philosophy she found in the house. The patio is pleasant in the mornings, the push of the breeze, already damp but not so much she need go in yet, moving through the weeping willow, the air conditioner on the house and the ones immediately adjacent kicking on, that strange rattling mechanical sound, the mating call of a cicada coming from a creature the size of a burro stuck to the side of a house, then dropping off again, leaving her with a feeling of absence and the rush of the birds cackling and dogs barking and children laughing, oh, the world is so alive, the world is a natural place once more. Reclaimed.

Her mother comes outside. Her own cup of tea in hand, but the amazing part: her caftan, peacock blue, the sleeves attached to a giant cape with gold fabric fixed underneath, gold to match her turban. Her mother now wears a turban and caftan around the house, like she's in *Dynasty*. Or *Auntie Mame*. Denise is now a witness, a party to the caftan-turban scene. She isn't sure if this is a gift or a sign or crumbling? Does her mother trust her now? Will she get a turban? Who does she think she is; she'd have to make her own. Twenty years ago, when she was small, her mother would have forced her into a matching turban. No, not accurate: gold sari, blue turban, some way of showing she was a servant in some made up culture of her mother's. She always loved to, call her weird amalgam costumes and routines things like *Tunisidu*, *Khapitean*, *Burminam*, *Samonamese*. Denise isn't skinny enough to pull a turban off. A size four

neck is too thick. The caftan, that might be flattering. Appropriate footwear with a caftan and turban, according to her mother, who must know these things: gold strappy sandals with a kitten heel. Giant gold plastic button earrings. A huge cocktail ring with a fake sapphire in it. Giant sunglasses, because her eyes are never unprotected from the demon god Helios. Her mother has changed her manicure from pink to white. Long talons, strangely spiked and tapered to a point, a shape no one wears today. Stiletto nails. They aren't as long as they look. They aren't as sharp as they look, either.

“Denise, after seeing Ashley in that bed.”

“I know.” She takes a long, luxurious pull off of her cigarette. She turns away from her turbaned, caftaned mother and exhales. She is lightheaded, but she feels like she earned some ground. Some empty, invisible real estate, somewhere.

“Smoking, it gives you wrinkles around your mouth. Your lipstick will feather. Fillers, the shots, they don't fix it. The microderm, it can help, but you shouldn't have to. Every week, forever, just to keep your mouth looking where it really is.”

“And the cancer.”

“It's the puckering. It's why I never let you have straws, or play flute. Constant puckering, over and over again. Ten, twenty times a day. Think of your mouth. Your lips. Your smile.”

Smile, smile, Neechie! She can still see her mother all those many years ago, there, so far away but the only thing that mattered, while Denise is walking the stage, her mother moving her finger over her mannequin mouth, that quick swooping slash over her

easy frozen smile from the dim back of the room, over her own perfect model face, her own straight teeth, towering at least a whole head over all of the other women, some dumpy, some neat, some pretty, but none as perfect as Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert, none who had risen so high up in the chain, gotten so close, none so beautiful there in the ballroom of the Howard Johnsons in Richmond. No other woman inspired such fear among the pageant mothers. No other mother was openly asked for advice, or solicited for coaching. No other daughter should have won--everyone knew it. Charisma, that's what she lacked. At least, that's what they told Lucia Gilbert. Nothing to be done about that. No shame on Lucia Gilbert for that. Denise pulls herself up in her chair from the imaginary string hooked into the center of her skull and rolls her shoulders back twice. Deep breath, from the diaphragm. Toy boat toy boat toy boat toy boat toy boat she sells seashells she sells sea skulls she sells seashells down by the seashore.

Her mother has a client coming that afternoon, a new one. Her mother wants to see Denise paint a portrait.

"I'll be doing the real painting, of course."

"Of course."

"But it's a good opportunity for you. To practice. Establish yourself here."

"Of course, Mother."

So she prepares herself, sort of the way she would prepare herself back in Brooklyn, but a little more professional-like. She would sketch while they were there, and take some notes. She doesn't like using photographs. She doesn't need to. She can

get everything from talking to them. As she's gathering her paints and cleaning the palette out: she's never painted anyone she doesn't know before. She already has studied their faces, made a story around her nose, the break in his left eyebrow. With these people, she may have to take a picture or two if she's to remember, really remember, what they look like to their satisfaction, in a flattering and appropriate way. She can use her phone. That has a good enough camera in it.

She puts on a clean dress, white with a gold jackalope screen printed on it, midthigh, but she has the legs for it, cleans up her eyebrows, curls her lashes, puts a comb in her hair, takes it out again because it looks stupid, puts it in again, takes it out, leaves it out, because her hair is an unnatural shade of flat black and nothing is going to make that look different. She irons it, so the whole length of it lies down her back to her waist, perfectly straight. She trims the ends neatly. She puts a coat of red polish on her nails. Red stain on her lips, followed with a little red gloss. Eyeliner and mascara, but no eye shadow. Her favorite earrings: gold fans, too big, she is sure of it, but she loves them. White chunky wooden sandals.

She examines herself in the full-length mirror. Dress not as flattering as it should be: she's lost a couple of pounds in her mother's house. But it's fine. She thinks she looks like an artist. She thinks she looks age appropriate. She has no idea what her mother will think. The time: 11:45 AM, enough time for her to change if it's wrong? No. She must be committed to the folly and carry it with aplomb.

She carries the easel and paints downstairs to the room that she used to sleep in, used to wake in, used to cry in, used to paint in, now her mother's studio. Her mother is already in there and not wearing a caftan and turban. No, she is wearing a silk, peacock blue dress, long-sleeved, with a tiny gathered belt sewn in, long enough to not be a mini, about as long as Denise's own dress. It has a brown Indian sort of print on it, stylized diamonds, in green and yellow and purple, like mosaic tiles. And she is wearing shiny white boots. White patent leather go-go boots. Denise does not remember these boots. She is sure she would remember her mother in these boots. Her hair is in a white headband, with a perfect flip on the ends. White, geometric circle earrings that move mobile-like with her head. She has doe-eyed black eyeliner, false eyelashes, and pale pink lipstick. If the last outfit was 1980s soap, this is 1960s Italian Eurospy movie. She is messing with the stereo. Some strange sort of Brazilian orchestrated Bossa nova from forty years ago is on.

“You changed, Mother.”

“You changed.” Her mother turns, does a quick appraisal. The elevator eyes, but they go to the penthouse and basement several times. Nothing comes out of her mouth, but it does tighten at the right corner, then the left, and a small, short puff of air comes out of her nose. “Put your easel there.” She points with a white claw at a small space close to the door, behind her own easel. Her mother has cleared some room for Denise, has moved a few things around to put her there. While Denise sets up, she sees Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert watching her in the small mirror clipped to

her own easel. Denise makes sure she blocks the mirror with her easel, realizes there are probably cameras in the studio so fuck it.

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ASHLEY

Okay, so I'm working on a theory that folded into *CHiPs* is the story of Moses's time as a young man, before he realized he was a Hebrew. I mean, he knew, but he didn't really want to know. How could Moses not know? He wasn't in line for the throne. He looked kinda like the rest of them, but not exactly like them. And although he was loved, no one hesitates to remind him where his place is: as the sexy fuckup of the royal family. I wonder if most children know if they're adopted or not. Anyways anyways. This story is the early part of the hero's journey, except it's Moses's time persecuting the Hebrews, on a motorcycle, and Egypt is Los Angeles, and Pharaoh--John--is all blonde and blue eyed, and their adventures are told through the language of disco. What is that instrument anyways, what is it that sounds like a dial that trills and strums and cranks and pips? It is fantastic. I can feel it, all carbonated at the base of my spine, with little bubbles breaking off and popping up in the top of my skull. This all happens before Ponch kills a man and has to run from the law. I guess that's when he went all *Dos Mujeres, un Camino* on us in Mexico. Man, I wish I could get *telenovelas* on this set. I wonder where Ponch buried the body, and if John ever found it. Maybe he just

overlooked it because of what they had together before. Out of loyalty. There are tons of bodies out there in the California deserts. What's one more? Why ruin an ex-cop's life over it? Sometimes two wrongs do make a right. I really do like disco. So much good time energy.

DENISE

The client is actually two people, a mother and daughter. The elder is forties, the younger fourteen or so. The mother: very good dye job, the subtleness of color is kept, highlights, lowlights, and the entire business still has body and flow. She goes to a good salon, and she uses a deep conditioner. Very rare, deep conditioning. It is freshly done, roots to tips, for the sitting. Transparent Brown Oxide with Opaque Burnt Umber. A modest length, not too young for her, just brushing her clavicles, though she should have had an updo for such an occasion as this. Poor dear, she has no one to tell her. Maybe she's the first of her friends to get a portrait done. She'll look like a housewife. Still, the hair is lovely, for what it is, and that should be emphasized. Her manicure is neat, nails long, not in a style Denise's mother must approve of: square, French tip, almost half an inch off of her fingertip, with the creamy white ends and the mocha-taupe Barbie flesh, almost human color: acrylic nails down here are a sign someone is new money, married in, a sign someone doesn't know what to do with themselves when confronted with the unending bottles of polish, the small counters of service women who will push you to follow the trends. You need to take charge of the help, make them do what is right by you. This is the natural order of things. Understand your place in the wheel, in the chain. These days Denise keeps her own nails just at her fingertips or filed into rounds. She tried stilettos once and ended up with a scratched cornea.

She married up, this woman. Probably some scholarship business, transformed herself at a big school, pledged but was never accepted to a sorority, still managed to snag herself a wealthy one, one who never had any use for that sort of stuff either, a bookworm or wallflower or someone too ugly for most of the coeds to get near. Or maybe there was something too wrong with him for polite company. Maybe he had some sort of mental diagnosis, Tourette's maybe, and called everyone a cunt motherfucker, or weighed four hundred pounds and broke chairs, or had thalidomide flippers, or was a conjoined twin. What fun to paint. Denise never gets to paint the best bodies in person. She hopes her mother suggests he come for a sitting. The whole family.

The daughter: blonde and dull, empty brown eyes and brows too dark, not matching, a fake dye job, not nearly so good as her mother's--she should be going to her mother's person, but she probably doesn't want to look old--the cut not as good, either: bangs, the rest worn long but choppy, with a cockleshell of ends coming in to frame her face. It's supposed to be different and new, cutting edge, but it's cutting edge for 1993, like she belongs in *90210*. Worse, she's more Brenda than Kelly, and who wants to be Brenda? Terrible. At least she doesn't have hair like what's her fuck, Aaron Spelling's daughter, the egg faced virgin. The daughter is wearing a string of pearls, a scoop necked black velvet dress, ballerina peplum skirt poofing out, a little too long, it makes her smallish bust look even smaller, her waist, which isn't even that thick, look even thicker, and her hips wider. Like a weeble that wobbles. Her face is fine. Even features, if used, well. Unwisely. Too much dark eye makeup on her pale skin, her small and deep-set

eyes look smaller, sinking into her head, two stones on snow. Her lipliner is showing--it is a nice color for her, though it doesn't match her lipstick, too dark, not blended, put on in a moving car with no skill or perhaps little pride or interest in the task--and her lipstick is just outside of the line. An attempt was made to contour cheekbones into round checks with rouge, and was unmade, but the line is still there. Maybe her mother doesn't want her to look as good as she does.

Denise went to school with so many of these girls, was hated by them there, saw them look at her face while whispering loudly to their friends behind cupped hands, and was feared and respected by them in the auditoriums and halls of the pageants. Funny, the bigger they talked at school, the worse they were on weekends: couldn't hold a note for three bars without a crack, couldn't throw a baton without hitting someone in the front row, teetered on their heels. Most of them would even show without wigs, and in gowns you could tell were homemade. Embarrassing for everyone. The girls who lost family money on pageanting, instead of coming out ahead. This girl sitting before her, she is uneasy, she is clenched, her muscles are tight, she is starting to sweat and the hot lights of the studio aren't even on. And then, Denise smoothly swivels her head toward her mother while smiling gently, looks straight at her mother's eyes and then at the top of her mother's headband and quick: into her eyes--at her headband--into her eyes--at her headband, that double eye flick, and there, there it is, her mother too has looked right into the bottom of Denise's eyes right into her brain and clicked her eyes up to the crown of her head and boring deep into her pupils again, and up to her hair once more down and

the unblinking gaze into hers. This is the sign: the girl is lame gazelle, easy to finish her, and Denise should do it, say something, do something, just anything that will make this girl cry or crack or run out of the room, because Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert is a winner and Denise Gilbert needs to be a winner, too. It's been at least thirteen years since Denise was in The Arena and still with this shit.

No: she will not look at her mother again. Not without control. Very controlled now. She is on this sweating weak girl's side, at least for the sitting. Dumpy Hammersgill or whatever her mother said their last name was has nothing to fear from Denise. Why would she hurt her. Denise doesn't compete, and doesn't do pageantry, and isn't into anything that this girl is in. No. Not today.

Her mother explains to them that Denise is her daughter and Denise does a little how-do-you. She says Denise will be working on a second portrait, and no charge for that, and the unfortunate mother tries to be charming about how lucky they are to have two artists on them at once, isn't that great, Lenora? And Lenora, she does her best to smile, and then it's over: poor Lenora still has braces, and Denise can hear the ropes in her mother's mind tightening, the pulleys and gears whirring. Her mother's spine straightens up, and her ears move back a fraction of an inch, but she gracefully gestures to the chairs where they will be sitting, open palms up. A small dance. She explains: they will sit for some time in the room, but she will also take photographs, do some sketches, and most of the painting will be done without them there at all.

And so they decide, this client of two. They will sit next to one another. This is also a mistake; the daughter should either stand behind the mother, or sit in front of her. But they don't know this, they don't understand, and it is not the place of Denise or her mother to explain symbology to them. They could have at least taken the time to look at a book of portraiture, you would think. See how the younger generation comes after, or how we defer to our elders, if only for show--and this is the biggest show there is. But this way, it will look as if they are sisters, for god's sake, sisters by some illegitimate father. Borgias, the Borgias would do this. How much fun that would be, to do the Borgia's family portraits! She should do them anyways. She will become famous for repainting the classics, but not as recreations, as Lucretia and Josephine would be painted today. In jeggings, in deep magenta hair.

Her mother seats them, and turns on the lights. She tells them they must be used to these hot lights, no, and they smile knowingly, the mothers, and look at this poor Lenora, as if she is a model. Sure, she's had portraits, but modeling? If Denise is too fat, then Lenora is a behemoth. She's at least twenty pounds heavier, a size six or eight. Lenora is a girl who never cuts a sandwich into quarters and eats only one, a girl who never has just an apple a day, a girl who is never dizzy, a girl who never brings it back up for a week to fit into something. Fine for catalog work, if she were very tall or very sporty or very, very beautiful, but she is none of these things. The camera will run over her like a steamroller does a coyote. She will be a two-dimensional sadness, all her poundage spread across the chair. Better make the seats bigger than they really are, like

that awfulness that Lilly Tomlin unleashed upon the world and shall burn eternal for, ugh, with the voice like her nose was coming out of her own ass. Now Denise hears Lenora's voice like that, a sinus full of mayonnaise, as Lenora has not filled the void yet. Lenora just sits. A dollop of girl in an ill-conceived dress.

Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert tells them to choose their hand positions carefully, while she gets her camera out. She looks expectantly at Denise, who brings out her phone. Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert is not pleased, but all that moves are her teeth--Denise can see them grind a little and to the left--not good, really not good, but there's nothing she can or wants to do about it now. Her mother's camera is an old film business, none of that digital for her. The same 35-millimeter she's always had. They both take pictures of the sitting women. Denise lets her mother get her shots first, and knows she will not be able to use any work but her own to do this portrait, so she makes sure she gets everything she could possibly need--hands, eyes, feet, the ears, everything. After ten minutes or so, they are done with the photographs. Her mother looks at the stereo, although the music has not stopped, still soft sounds of what Hollywood told Americans Brazil sounded like in the 1960s are coming out, uninterrupted. Denise's mother settles in without looking at her. Denise sits at her easel as well, and the portraiture begins in earnest.

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ASHLEY

Ed Begley, Jr. is immortal. He shows up everywhere. From 1967 to now. Well, that's the documented part; who knows what happened before that. The man has been reincarnated in a different form at least once every year since then. This is not about his age if he walked into this room, because that is not happening. This is about: what is your chance of seeing Ed Begley, Jr. if you turn on the television? Your chance is extremely high. More likely than Heather Locklear, even, and she's managed extreme broadcast saturation. He's in the Pacific Northwest, doing soft satire, the kind that makes people internally grumble laugh, because that's what the cheese shops are like in their neighborhoods. But he was busy solving crimes in a spin off procedural in the humid south on a show kept alive by everyone's mothers' love of a good silver fox serving up cunning justice at the same time as sexiness. He's always three places at the same time. He's in a British show about family connections shot through everything like mold. He's a doctor with Denzel. He is on a show about being a parent and I don't know why that is appealing but I guess it is. I never got to be a parent so I wouldn't know.

I'm not sure which of the immortals Ed Begley, Jr. is, though. Not Cain; Cain is Jim Rockford (or James Garner, now that I think of it). I don't think he's Jesus. Jesus can work miracles; I would think would choose a career at the independent film level or higher. He'd be at least as captivating as Jeffery Wright. Likewise, I'd think Enoch and Elijah would get special powers after being spirited away by god or aliens or whatever like that. After this many years in the business I'd think they'd have more star power.

Not that Ed Begley, Jr. doesn't have a very respectable career, because he does, he works constantly, that's my point, the man is everywhere, The thing is, he's still not instantly recognizable. That leaves Lazarus. It makes as much sense as anything else that Lazarus would be working as an actor in Hollywood. It's not like Jesus gave him a job after he raised him from the dead. He's kind of on his own after that.

DENISE

Denise has not been able to watch her mother work since she was a little thing. They work differently; she works in watercolors, mostly, although some woodcut or linocut these days, and her mother is all oils and the preparation for oils. Today, Lucia Gilbert is sketching the dimensions of the mother and the daughter, the proportions and the relations between them. Figures in space. Denise does this too, but much faster, with less deliberation. It is easier for Denise, she realizes, sitting here, watching her mother: it is easier because she was trained. Her mother pulls her hand from the edge of the easel so often to make sure her gridlines are perfect. Does not know where they are in her mind, even after so many years. Denise drew like this when she got to school. Her wrathful teacher cured her of that. Van Lauden. Van Lauden put her in the plastic Cone of Shame (really, an Elizabethan Collar, but calling it that wouldn't have helped) in figure drawing, still smelled of his Rottweiler and something human, who knows how many students' sweat and skin flakes from previous classes. Denise had to turn her head to hear him, his deep, sharp, hollow voice, not unlike a bass clarinet, just as unpredictable as the Eric Dolphy records he favored in the studio, echoed against the textured plastic rim, bouncing down into her ears. She couldn't see her own work while she was creating it with the Cone on, the easel tilted down, nearly flat, her stool placed so close to it. In front of her, Jae-Su Park, the kid Van Lauden put a sling on so he had to use his clumsy right hand to draw. Behind Denise, Diamond, with a patch over one eye because she

needed to relearn how to render shapes more fully, three dimensions poured into two. And behind Diamond sat MacIntyre, MacIntyre Nakamura, with his hands taped, different fingers on different days, so he would learn to use tools besides his fingers. The last was Lincoln Wexler, standing, his stool taken from him, so he would learn proper posture and stop his hunching over. All in a row in the middle of the studio space, where all the other students could watch them. Denise couldn't remember who named the row Gimp Alley, if it was Van Lauden or another student, or if it was always called that. Van Lauden didn't care where anyone else put their easels, how they sat, what tools they used. But his Gimps, they had bright red easels, with crosses of tape on the floor to show where the easels needed to stay. At the start of each class, the five of them would line up, Van Lauden would put the Cone and the sling and the patch and the tape on the Gimps, and kicked Lincoln's stool in the corner. A tiny thrill, feeling his cool calloused hands on her body while he tied the dirty gauze around her neck. By the time Denise had a rash from the Cone, she had a mind in her hand.

Denise has done three different versions of the same figures in the time it takes her mother to do one. She draws her mother as well. Draws the entire room. Her room. Her bedroom. There, that's where the canopy bed was. She draws that. No one else can see her pad from here, on her easel, it looks like she's looking at them, so she can draw whatever she wants. Her old room. There, that's where the trophy case was. All the crowns. She draws Lenora and her mother sitting in front of them, still just shapes, empty proportional figures, marionettes, ready for action in any perspective drawing she

gives them. There, that's where she used to lean out of her window in the night and Bernard would lean out of his in the bedroom next door and they would whisper to each other after bedtime. The signal: he would shine a flashlight onto her face, blinking in Morse code: they learned it from Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew mysteries. Not always, but in her memories, she wants to make it more than it really was, she wants it to be every night. She can see him now, see his blondeness in the moonlight. His Flash pajamas, red, with the lightning bolt. They ran away from home together when they were four. Got as far as the Dairy Queen a mile away. When he ran away when he was six, he didn't take her with him. Bernard, always able to make her mother--their mother--calm down by touching her, like she was a goddamned horse or something. Bernard used to put his arm around their mother, pull her hair gently, and she would smile or sigh and just stop, stop whatever she was doing to Denise. Bernard moved through the house like he was from some Koloman Moser Art Nouveau piece, a god chasing an unseen nymph, all liquid and loose in the joints, and everyone else frozen in some Grant Wood farmhouse monstrosity.

Denise misses this sort of busy nothingness, faking work with little to show for it. Creative loafing, that's what MacIntyre had called it. Her with her little hostessing job and the other one in the gallery and the one in the boutique when they needed her, him with the bartending gig. Neither of them working more than halftime, more than enough money to pay the rent and bills when they sold at least two pieces a week, but the money kept disappearing and so did Denise's jewelry and MacIntyre was getting skinner and

skinner. They didn't talk about it. He was on the methadone line for a couple of months and it was better, and then he was off and it was worse. He was on the Suboxone for a couple of months and they caught up on the rent and then he was off and it was worse. But there had been some times in there, when Denise could still deny the uncertainty, when doing nothing could be so grand. She and MacIntyre sunning themselves on a blanket in the park, sketching people and dogs, stretching out a bodega sandwich between the two of them all day. Then they were really going to get evicted, no way around it this time, and Denise had to call her mother. MacIntyre had already cleaned out most of the shit from the apartment. Denise had taken to locking her room with a padlock so he couldn't get into her room when she wasn't there. Maybe she should call him, make sure he's still alive.

A peaceful chime rings somewhere in the studio. Denise folds back to the beginning sketches, the ones that are passable, and sits for presentation. Cleans her hands on a wipe that smells of robot lemons. Yes, that is the face of the mother. The face of the daughter. Very nice. Hands, hairdos. She has done well by them. It is agreed they will come back in two weeks for another sitting. And then: the twos of them are free of the twos of them.

She wasn't planning on going to see Ashley that afternoon, not by herself, but her mother insists she go, bring over something for her sister and nephew to eat. It's some soupy chicken thing. Her mother loves to mix canned creamed soups with meats. Loves is not the right word: does this as it was done unto her; does this in remembrance of her

own mother's cooking. Her mother, Denise's grandmother, who is not dead. Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert did not concoct this foodlike approximation for her own family. Too caloric for Denise, not nutritious enough for Bernard. And the Professor, he never cared for whatever these things were. Meat should not jiggle or run, he would say. Potlucks have always been her primary outlet to beget this cooking unto the world. Or when someone has died, or is waiting to die.

*

ASHLEY

Jim Rockford can't win. His friends manipulate him. His clients use him. No one can be trusted. His plans usually work out best when he accounts for a double or triple cross. Everyone is trying to make a buck off of him, and it's not like he's made out of money. The poor man lives in a trailer and is eating hot dogs, tacos and fish that he catches off the beach most days. Good god, people shit in that water. Jim, don't eat that. Well, it's not like fisherman don't just empty their johns right into the water they catch the fish from. The ocean. Nature's cesspool. That's where we came from. Life, right out of the toilet. I guess David Attenborough sounds amazed. Not so much amazed, but pleased that life exists. The way most people sound when they find a twenty-dollar bill on the ground, that's the way David Attenborough sounds when he sees a pod of a hundred dolphins leaping out of the water and their weird scissor mouths with all the

nubby teeth clapping and their rubber boiled bodies dripping while they hump in and out of the water. Oh! I see it now: sea serpents. Dolphins are sea serpents. The many coils pulling in and out of the water like rainbows made of snake-flesh are really the lumps of dolphin bodies. So this is the Leviathan I've heard so much about. No, God, I cannot draw him out. Fuck you, Flipper, you arrogant fuck.

DENISE

She drives her mother's car to her aunt's house with the lukewarm glop and is greeted by her mother's sister in an over-enthusiastic manner. Ashley's mother wants to go to the store. Denise doesn't know what to do if something happens to him while his mother is gone.

"Call me first, and I'll tell you if you should call 911. My phone number is on the fridge. You'll see it when you put this in there. It'll be fine. Thanks so much!" His mother leaves without giving her time to say no.

Ashley is watching television but turns it off when Denise comes into the room. He smiles. She notices his teeth: perfect, clean, white, shiny, huge.

They sit in silence. The grandfather clock in the hall chimes. It is three or four o'clock. She can't remember which and can't keep track of the chimes. It was only a few. She should have.

"What kind of cancer do you have?" She didn't mean to ask that, did she? It just sort of came out. Is it rude to ask a dying person that?

"Stage Four non-Hodgkin Lymphoma." When he says this, his eyes change and his consciousness seems to leave his body a little, but instead of going behind himself or above himself or dissipating into a fog of himself, he comes straight forward, fast, in front of his body, right up to her, like he clapped his hands in front of her face. Then the psychic part of him snaps back, an eel retreating into a cave.

“Yeah.” Wait: did he say it, or did she say it? She’s not sure just now. He’s still smiling. Sort of smiling. Tight mouth, it’s closer to a smile than anything else. His cracked lips aren’t bleeding. She can smell the room, the strange smell of a body that doesn’t sweat or move, with a little blood in the air, a little iron copper salt, and that strange scent that comes with hospitals, that weird close disinfectant and skin smell, that weird rubber outgassing--it must have wrapped itself around the equipment in the room. The hospital bed with the funny mattress. It has real bedding on it, afghans in brown and orange and green and pink crochet circles and squares piled around him, but there’s no mistaking the metal rails, folded down on one side, up on the other. A little raised bed table with a tablet computer, a notebook, a bible, the remote control, a glass of water, one of those kidney shaped plastic dishes only hospitals have. Pools and hospital dishes and kidneys and beans; she can’t think of anything else shaped like that. The IV stand, the walker. She didn’t notice the walker before. He isn’t hooked up to a tube today. She hopes she won’t have to hook him up to a tube, get him out of the bed and onto the walker. She is afraid she will fail at these tasks and Ashley will end up a pile of bloody bones on the floor.

“Yeah.” This time, she said it. Now that she hears it land in the room soft and dead between them, a handful of tissues on the floor, she thinks it came out of him the last time.

“It’s okay. I think about it every day, dozen times. Not news.” He smiles again with his teeth showing. His lips are chapped and flaky, but beneath them the teeth are

pristine. So white. Like shiny new tubes of paint from the art supply shop, before they've been squeezed and bent out of shape by fingers and hands. When they're still just full of potential, when they can be anything. She is staring at his teeth. She blushes, looks away, laughs at herself for such a silly little girl thing, looks back at him full in the face because she isn't afraid of her milksop cousin. He should be afraid of her, like Lenora is. Ashley is studying her when Denise looks back at him, but she will not look away this time. She doesn't know what she will say if she talks. The last time she said *what kind of cancer do you have that sucks*, so she's quiet. He doesn't say anything at all.

The air conditioner starts up and blows a wave of cold air across her bare shoulders. She shivers hard, her skin all prickled, feels it tighten, too small for her.

"If you're cold, I have this," Ashley says, picking up an afghan, letting it drop. "Or you can turn down the air. I don't give a shit. I can't really feel it." He talks really slowly. Not slurring, but hopped up slow. But he is dying, so officially that's what those pills are made for. It's pain medication. It's people like MacIntyre that call it dope.

"I'm not really cold, I don't think."

"If you need to pee, the toilet's down the hall." He is still picking up the afghan and letting it drop. "I get piss shivers. It's one of the last things I can still feel."

"Where did your mother go?" Denise hopes this doesn't sound too anxious.

"Caregivers support group. They go there to talk about how hard it is to take care of us dying people. I used to go to a Stage Four dying people group at the same time.

But I haven't been in, oh, a month and a half or so." Ashley talks slow, but his eyes are fast, sharp, crawling over her face, hands, body. Denise can't tell what he's looking for; he isn't checking her out.

"Because you can't make it?"

"Because they told me not to come back." A hint of the wolf smile comes back.

"What happened?"

"Mama says I'm cruel," Ashley says. "I just don't see the point in not telling the truth, most especially to other dying people. The truth in this case being: if you believe everything happens for a godly reason, and god is micromanaging your super duper important death then you're a super duper asshole, because even Jesus wasn't talking about himself like he was Heather Number One; Jesus was talking about everyone else all the time. These pricks were all about, 'Everyone's gonna miss me so much, what will my kids do at their weddings without me in twenty years, who will head the PTA?' People have been dying in droves every day since people began and it's been okay. So I shared this information with them. And after two times in the group they told me I should seek help elsewhere. Because I was not conducive to the process."

"So now you just sit here."

"Sit here and watch the TV, yeah. Read a little."

"The Bible?"

"It pisses Mama off. Especially since Daddy was a preacher. Supposedly. I never met him, so I don't know." He's stopped lifting the blanket up by now and has

started to tease the yarn open with his nails in one spot. He's still looking at Denise with his roaming eyes. "I don't know what else I'd do. I don't want to go to therapy. I don't believe in last rites. I don't want to fuck anyone who wants to fuck this, or else I wouldn't have come here to die in the first place. And there's no Make-a-Wish for grown-ups, coming to give me my last final wish. That'd be a mess. All blow and hookers and threesomes with wives' best friends."

"Daughters' best friends," Denise says.

"Sons' best friends," he says, nodding.

"Do you want me to do a portrait, Ashley? I can. I don't know. And my stuff is." Denise does an up and over hand gesture, but only once, an egg flip.

"Show me." He hands her the little tablet computer.

Denise goes to the website of the gallery that handled most of her work in Brooklyn and shows Ashley five of her watercolors. Bone pigeons pecking up crumbs in front of a carousel, small piles of food underneath them, no bellies to hold it all in; a skeleton custodian wearing coveralls sweeping up trash, and all the wooden skeleton horses shiny and polished waiting for the day. Waiting on the subway platform, a skeleton girl in a skirt and legwarmers and boots with a denim jacket in front of a skeleton Katy Perry billboard, something about the way her head is turned and her arms are crossed high on her body makes her seem uneasy, even without the face on top of it. A group of skateboarding skeletons, none of them are wearing shirts, just pants tied very tight to the pelvis, some with belts, a couple with rope, one with a bungee cord, and oh

shit, one not in the front and not in the back is doing some sort of trick, sliding down a railing on a staircase, and he's airborne, and it's not going to end well, the board is just behind where his feet can regain proper purchase, and his arms are not quite flailing yet, but his head and shoulders are farther in front of his hips than they should be, yes, he's going to be down, there's something very vulnerable about the falling of a skeleton. A wall of the animal shelter, all dogs, all already dead, some up and barking, some listless, some waiting, some watching, some livid on their hind legs, some trying to chew their way out, some trying to dig their way out, some asleep, but yes, all bones, all skeletons. A preschool with little skeletons dressed in bright colors with round heads sitting in a circle, Indian-style, on their carpet squares, all raising their hands as high as they can to answer the skeleton in the front's question about the picture book about skeleton frogs she is reading.

"Why wouldn't you want to paint me like that?" he asks. He's made a hole in the afghan now, big as a quarter.

"I don't paint people I know as skeletons, unless they ask me to."

"But why not?"

"It's up to you."

"You should start soon. They said six months four months ago."

When his mother comes home, it is time for his medication. Denise is sent home. Navigating the big Buick is strange. There is no lemonade stand this time, though she is

sure she is on the same block that she was on before. She never was allowed a lemonade stand. She wants to buy a cup of lemonade.

*

ASHLEY

Denise doesn't look anything like Bernard. Absolutely nothing like him. Bernard was blonde and had such a soft, gentle face, with an easy smile, and those mild blue eyes. Denise has long black hair, sharp blue eyes, a square forehead, drawn cheeks with severe cheekbones, and a pointy chin. Like a young Disney witch, before her heyday. Probably needs her mother to die first. How do witches' mothers die? Wand through the heart? Trampling by unicorn? Probably matricide.

Goddamned, but she stares. Gets fixated on something and just sticks to it. Bernard used to say she was a broken android. His mother was the working robot. Somehow Denise's circuits got fried. I don't know what he said his father was; I can't really remember what he looked like, not at all. Smart and cold and always an arm's length away from everyone. How Bernard ended up looking like he did, and being Denise's twin, I don't even know, but Mama and Aunt Lucy are twins, so there you go.

But really, how can she look so different than Bernard? And not handle Aunt Lucy at all? He would have told her she was nuts about any and everything, and then hugged her and she would have folded in curious angles, laughed her strange muffled

sighing sound, like leaves crunching under boots. Bernard would have made everything better.

I do remember, the funeral, it was an open casket, and he looked okay; he hadn't been in an accident or anything. But it was only three days before that I had seen him, and held him, and he seemed happy, or at least as happy as he always was. I mean, we were young, we were temperamental. Volatile, that's what we were. Bouncing off the walls. Sex one minute and then angry the next and then hungry and then laughing. That's just being seventeen.

But there, in the funeral home, he was lying down, and I could see his nose and chin and forehead and hands folded over his dick, where I'd been lying on top of him just the week before. I wanted so badly to stand up and vault over the pews, past everyone, his mother and father and sister, they were all still a family, as much as they ever were, sitting in front of us, my mama and me, and push the pastor down on his fat face, and crawl into the casket and pull the lid down on top of us and then, maybe, he would wake up because he hadn't really died in his sleep, he was just more asleep than anyone knew, like Briar Rose, and if he just felt my touch again, he'd wake up. Around me, all these people who thought they knew him, who pretended to know him, who had no idea who he was. I could taste him. I can still tell you what he smelled like: some places like beach sand and some places like redwood bark and some places like cotton candy and some places like slightly moldy strawberries and some places like orange juice and some places like buffaloes.

I don't remember when Denise left. Mama is here with my medicine and the television is on. *Hawaii Five-O* is on. Jack Lord is Detective Steve McGarrett is floating in an orange latex suit in a sensory deprivation tank inside of a tanker ship. Detective Steve McGarrett is inside the belly of the whale, sacrificed by the people he sailed with to appease an angry god.

DENISE

Denise brings the empty glass pan into the kitchen. Rubber gloves, hot water, soap and sponge. Washes it. Rinses it and makes sure it squeaks under the glove. Washes it again. Puts it in the dishwasher. Back to the attic, passes her mother in the studio, pauses in the doorway. She can see her mother's back, something with a halter-top--light green satin, tied behind her neck in a neat bow. A belt around her waist, also long, and the legs are loose green satin. Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert is wearing a green satin jumpsuit. You know, just to shuffle around the house. Her hair is curled today, soft, big, bouncy curls. The Bee Gees are asking her how deep her love is, and she is working on the portrait of the unfortunate mother and regrettable daughter, Haskergill or something like that. She has her rough sketch completed now. The Hatterskills sit next to one another, smiling gently toward their left. Their eyeline--strange. Normally, it leads to the viewer or to the painter, but it isn't where her mother is seated, it's to her right. There's nothing there, though; it's empty on the wall. The drape of their dresses, the drop of their earrings, the flow of the hair: all correct. The push of a nose, the sweep of an eyebrow. All of the hollows are there; all they need are the light and shadows. On another pad, she is mixing paint, working on the perfect shading for the varying skin tones, for the clothes. For the dead eyes: blue and hazel.

"Did you--" The eyes on Denise in the little mirror attached to the easel. Boring into her skull.

“It’s in the dishwasher,” Denise says. Her mother’s back, the bones: the scapulae honed to an edge from years of restriction, sure to give way to osteoporosis any day now. The pale skin, never gets any sun, but she couldn’t predict the wrinkles that would form from underneath.

Her mother nods. Denise stands there a few moments longer. Silence. She feels she is excused.

Denise passes the next door, the locked door, Bernard’s door. She walks to the end of the hall but she tries to remember what the room looks like, looked like the last time she was in there, was it after the funeral? No, her mother was in the room in the days afterward, just sitting on the bed, looking out of the window. Some sort of energy coming off of her filling the entire room, like a static charge. The Professor was at work, at his university job, and when he was home he was on the phone, talking to police and mortuary people and telling newspapermen to stop calling. Denise remembers packing by herself. No, no, her aunt helped her. She’s making it seem worse than it was in her mind, like she’s an orphan or something and no one loves her and poor Denise Gilbert. Denise took a cab to the airport, that she remembers. The Professor had given her eight hundred dollars cash the night before she left and told her he would mail her a check sometime soon. He wasn’t in the house in the morning when she left. She should call him now and ask for that check.

The last time Denise was in that room what the day he died, she is fairly certain now. Late August, heavy pollen in the air, fireflies just out in the bushes, she was told to

call Bernard to come down to supper. She started up the stairs and he wouldn't come. *Dinner's ready, dummy*, and he still didn't come, and she had to go all the way up to his room, and he didn't answer, and she didn't want to go in because maybe he was jerking it and no one wants to see their brother doing that. She knocked and knocked and knocked and he wouldn't answer. The knob turned in her hand. He would have locked it if he had been in there. He must not have been home. He sneaked out when no one was looking. Went to go meet his secret girlfriend, someone their mother would hate so much he couldn't let them see her. Or maybe not a girl, maybe a full-grown woman, maybe one of their teachers or something. It always seemed weird that he would go to prom and stuff with the right girls but he was always in a group with the right crowd and never had a steady girlfriend out of the queen bees. There had to be someone, someone like she wanted James Magary. But Bernard would pull it off, Bernard always won, everybody loved Bernard. *Why can't you just smile like your brother?* And when Denise finally did open the door there he was on his bed on his back with white foam coming out of his mouth and his eyes all slitted and he was blue, so blue, and she didn't scream, and she didn't cry, and she just stood there and looked at him, looked, and waited a minute, a good long minute, before she went to the phone next to his bed and called 911. She can't remember exactly what happened next. Something something morgue something something funeral home. Then her mother is sitting in Bernard's room. She is sitting on the bed, but where it is in the room is a mystery. The bureau, the closet, the dresser, the window and the phone Denise used to call 911, Denise can't see any of it.

Denise is at the end of the hall now, in the closet with the tiny staircase, such short steep stairs, twice as tall as they are deep, and she takes them sideways, leaning against the bare plywood wall, it catches the cotton of her dress a little bit, short snags in the twill weave, she tries to stand free and wavers, uses her hands instead to balance, and a splinter of wood fiber stabs her deep in her palm--winces--she starts to pull it out--hurts more, she leaves it--totters up the stairs unaided, wounded hand cupped in front of her, holding an invisible tiny baby.

Up in the attic, her hand, the sink in the little toilet room. Water closet. Her hand. The sliver of wood imbedded is three-quarters of an inch long, wide as a toothpick, from the meat of her thumb to the end of her lifeline. Her mother's sister, Ashley's mother, had been the first one to point out its premature terminus when she was thirteen. Aunt Lucille, with her palm readings and rune throwing and tarot cards. Bernard refused to give his hand up when she asked for his next, always the baby hiding behind his supposed football boy bravery, but compared his hand to Denise's later: twinned exactly. She didn't get to see what his palm looked like when he was in the coffin; was his lifeline shorter now, because hers was unchanged. They wouldn't let her touch him. *Just let him sleep.* She didn't think of it earlier when she saw him in the morgue. Denise loves to offer up her faulty hand to all palm readers who give free readings to see the looks in their eyes: horror, resignation, pity, and when she's lucky, fear. A woman once dropped Denise's hand like it burned her, spit on the ground, threw the pinkie-forefinger goat horns to upside down twice with one hand to blind the evil eye and crossed herself with

the other to placate god, murmuring something in a language Denise didn't understand. Of course, all of the people around her paid her thirty dollars each for a reading afterward.

The splinter is under a thin film of skin. She can see all of it through her own living tissue. How many cells thick is that skin? Two or three maybe? Could she live forever with the splinter inside of her? Would the wood become a part of her ever, or just coexist, like people's fake noses and new knees do? Or would she eventually expel it, the way amoebae expel vesicles? Make new skin under the splinter and push it out? She flexes her hand flat and feels sensation change from a dull ache to a stinging, stretching hurt. Her palm turns white. She cups it: bright red, Cadmium Scarlet with Alizarin Crimson. Her tweezers grip the butt of the splinter easily, but the ragged edges of the wood make the pulling painful. Slowly is best. She feels each small wooden antenna yank against her flesh like a cat on the way to a bath. All comes out but one small fragment, deep in her hand, like a little flat seed. She tries forcing it through with the tweezers, but this is not going to work. A needle is called in, used to perforate the skin. Wood is pushed through the puncture. Denise is bleeding now. Not too much, but a few red drops fall out of her hand onto the white sink, slide down into the drain. How many cells thick are those drops? Drops of blood always make a border, always keep that border. A corral, even when all of the tiny lives inside it have stampeded away. Now she will get tetanus. Lockjaw, with the teeth knocked out so they can feed her soup through a tube in a dirty hospital with dozens of metal beds in one room. Maybe amputate her

hand. She will paint with her teeth if she has to. She saw it on a telethon once. Teeth, feet, the crook of an elbow, the armpit, no one can stop the determined artist. There is no rubbing alcohol, no hydrogen peroxide, no witch hazel in the bathroom. She pours some nail polish remover over her hand because she thinks it will hurt--it hurts, burns real bad--so it must be doing something to the cut. If it burns her, it must hurt the things that want to live in her. Denise resists the temptation to blow on it, settles for curling and uncurling her fingers in and out while she bleeds, a starfish with its hungry mouth showing. A turtle on its back.

Denise looks at her own sketches, her own photographs of the two women. She is looking at the photographs of them, looking for what she missed before, why her mother is taking so long with this. The mother Hankerkill. Married up. Married someone who could take care of her. Financially, like the Professor took care of Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert, but at least her mother picked a good one. Denise can't fault her for that; the Professor did a good job by them. Should Denise start actively picking one now? Will she have to settle for a bad one if she waits? Will she be a Mrs. Hammermill, inappropriately outfitted for the time and place and not even know it? This is the lesson, this is what her mother wants her to see, isn't it; this is her future. Or does she want her to see that she needs to learn to paint portraits of hoi polloi dressing the way they think rich people dress. Women who nurse themselves on too much *Sex and the City* and *Real Housewives* shows. She squeezes the wad of toilet paper in her hand, and feels the hurt, it pushes all the way up her arm to her spine, that one long nerve, and she

feels it in the roots of her teeth and in the back of her neck, and it is sharp and itchy and it is happening right now.

What she needs is another cigarette. Maybe a cocktail. She finished the pack she had while she was out, and it's not like she can ask her mother for money. Denise looks through her paintings, finds ten that look passable--*she* wouldn't buy them, Denise knows slapdash work when she sees it--and puts them in two portfolios she's brought with her. Not practical, this is the only kind she really likes, with no handle, string ties on three sides, thick cardboard and a fabric joint, makes her feel a little like she's in Paris in the 1920s. She discovered these in school, saw more than one student copy her, but she didn't care, they were always *Neechie's Portfolios*; besides, the bother of them would always lead people to abandon them. She can really only hold five pieces comfortably in one, and they need to be tied very tightly, lest they rub, and nothing with any real lift above the surface, and and and. Such babying! Such a stupid bother, but every time she strokes her hand over it, that cool Kraft paper, that feeling, that high ceilinged feeling, and she can think for a moment that the Rhône is flowing outside her window, no, the Seine, not the Rhône, the Seine runs through Paris, the feeling she will be teaching a painting class later for rich young unmarried ladies who have bustles and parasols, she is engaged to a count even though her family is not noble, and there are gaslights hissing and flickering on the streets and dark secret barrooms with men holding sizzling matches under teaspoons of melting sugar slowly dripping into green glasses of absinthe and horses clop clip clop clipping as they pull teetering carriages full of important people

with their top hats and nickel tipped canes and monocles on silver chains in buttonholes and the string ties on the picky portfolios are worth it.

*

ASHLEY

I really don't think smooth jazz was the best soundtrack choice they could have made for this documentary on human spontaneous combustion. While it does make me glad I'll be dead soon, because Kenny G is the worst, and the less soprano sax I hear the better, I just don't know who can see a pile of ash and then two legs with pants and shoes and socks attached (because your legs don't burn if you spontaneously combust) with the smooth, smooth sounds of the Quiet Storm layered over it and take this apparent syndrome seriously. It's about two rungs on the ladder above *Yakety Sax*. I could die from human spontaneous combustion at any moment and I'm not even trying to find out how I can make this my today like the therapist said I should with everything I desire because I am giggling my ass off. Focus, man, focus! How can I spontaneously combust? I think I need to get a heater, put it close to the bed, make sure the room is super stuffy. I think I need to make this my today.

DENISE

Her mother says she may not use the car. Not today, not right now. So Denise puts on sneakers and does the New York thing and walks to the gallery, the gallery she has chosen according to the reviews on her phone, the one she thinks will be most likely to give her cigarette money in exchange for paintings. A mile and a half really isn't far. It was June in Brooklyn, too. But there something different in the humidity in Virginia, something heavier in the airborne water, the air is a woman with flushed pink cheeks swooning on a rattan chair next to the window, a woman with the vapors, too tired to even wave her fan, a woman hoping she will live to see her fiancé come home from the war. The air in Brooklyn in summer smells like a sharp blend of the back of a butcher shop and the front of a urinal and is a kind of stimulant. Here, the air is a thousand tiny tendrils pulling her down. Cleaner, yes, sweeter, yes, but thick, coagulated.

She is grateful for the straw hat her mother suggested as she walks down the street. She tries to catch herself in the windows as she walks past, a girl in sneakers and backless dress and hat and giant glasses, tries to see if she fits here or not. Is she a native now? She should call someone, see if her accent has come back. At school, they said she had one. A weak and disappointing accent, but an accent that was Southern. Everyone always wants Southerners to talk like moviepeople, as if they are trying very carefully to keep a Confederate gold penny underneath their tongues.

The streets: hedges, less obvious fencing between most neighbors' houses, then a huge fence signaling bad blood. The houses: big like her mother's. The Professor lives in a big house with his new family, Denise knows by the address, all the houses in that part of town are big, but she's never been there. The Professor's wife came to her final show in New York, that was kind of her. That was the only time they ever met. What, eight years ago. A psychologist. Or psychiatrist. One of those witch doctors of the mind. She must have so many things to say about his old family. She came from poor stock and had a nose job and her eyes were too close together and she didn't understand makeup, so Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert was happy to be creepily kind to her.

The gallery is downtown, in the touristy area of Charlottesville, but not in a high rent district. A tourist wouldn't see it without looking at every store, or without a concierge giving them a hot tip on some hip art. There's no sign, just a number, and the north-facing windows don't have anything in them but a view of the inside. It's a working studio on one side, with a gallery space off to the other. The website said it also hosted a poetry reading series, but the list of events hadn't been updated in seven months. Inside, Denise feels the cool air, smells rubber, acrylic paint, linseed oil, spray paint, oil paint, wet clay, male sweat, leather, a very slight trace of marijuana, and a little bit of dog. Someone is playing some weird music, just an electric guitar solo and with a drum solo, just the two musicians jamming. The paintings hung up are good work, she can tell from a glance, and are by four different artists. The prices are reasonable, nothing over

eight hundred dollars. And they are absent of watercolors: mostly woodcuts, linocuts, and prints.

“Can I help you, Miss?” a man says, wiping his dirty hands on a filthy rag while he ambles over from way in the back. She sees him coming, hears the jingle of tags on an animal collar and the scratching of claws on cement as a big mutty sort of dog, black and white blotches like a Holstein cow, kind of like a Pitt Bull but narrow like a Greyhound, all sneaky and meek-like pads up behind him, tail wagging and head down, looking up at him with a sweet panting dog smile, dog smiles are deadly, trying to give Denise the big eye, because maybe this new person has a head pat for Dog, or a belly scratch, and hey, Dog loves a belly scratch, or joy upon joys, does new person--oh, do we dare to dream?--does new person have a pig ear? Because once a person came in with a pig ear and it was the best day ever. Dog takes a step forward past Man and Man barks at Dog. Dog cowers and goes to her bed in the back. Dog didn't mean to be bad. Dog hopes Man saw that her tail was low. No pig ears today.

“Sorry about Fanny.”

“She's a dog. She was just saying hi.”

“What can I do for you, Miss?” He is that guy in art school who got all of the girls--Denise fucked a few of her school's That Guys once, too, she wasn't above it then--but this one has rapidly outworn his rascalion charms and has become a bit of a scumbag. Stubble and worn clothes and paint everywhere and not bathing are kind of hot when you're twenty, but not so much eight years later. He is always shackled up with a

girl though. Always. This one is tall, ponytailed, starting to gray, needs a shave, brown eyed, smells of stale smoke, dirty white t-shirt with oil paint on it, pit stains, once-white painter's overalls. Work boots that have seen both art and real work. Some muscles.

They are looking at her paintings on a table. Carefully, he has laid the ten paintings she has brought out. Barn, skeleton. Backyard, skeleton flock of birds. Brooklyn, skeletons playing hopscotch. The skeleton horses running at the track with skeleton jockeys on their backs, skeletons in the stands. Everything is gloriously dead in her paintings.

“You spend time in Mexico?”

Denise shakes her head.

“You don't look goth.”

“You want them or not?”

“They're very good. Where did you go to school?”

“I studied with Van Lauden.”

“Look at you, all fancy.” He smiles at her with his lids heavy, leaning on the table with his ass out, flirting because he flirts. He drums his fingers on the table and Denise notices his hands: manicured. Yes, definitely. Nails buffed and shiny, cuticles trimmed. He sees her staring and moves them around the table, keeps them in motion like tarantulas, doesn't hide them, but keeps her from focusing on them. “We'll show all of them. We don't have anyone here who works with watercolors primarily. We take forty percent. Sound good?”

“Sounds good.”

“Can I recommend you keep your prices under four for all of them except this one?” He is pointing at the one of the track. “This one should be at least seven or eight. This one you should let us put online for the gallery, and I know someone who will come in immediately and buy today.”

This sounds good to her. She thanks him.

“What happened to your hand?”

Denise looks down. She is bleeding again. Quite a bit. It must have happened suddenly. It didn't get on the paintings. Not on her dress. On the table, though. Embarrassing, so embarrassing, to be so out of sorts like this. He locks the front door, then ushers her into the back room and finds the first aid kit. Cleans her hand and wraps it in gauze. Gives her a cold beer to hold and drink to numb the pain. Dog thinks this might be her chance to see if she is forgiven, and she comes out and stands in front of Denise. Denise ignores Dog until Dog sits down, and then Denise gives Dog a good scratch behind the ears. All is well for Dog. But scratching lady does not smell like pig ears. Blood, yes. Dog likes blood. Then Man comes back and Dog goes to Man. He does not bark at Dog.

Twenty minutes later, the buyer comes in to see the watercolors. He is older, the Professor's age, sixties, and works at one of the libraries on the University campus. Sensible man shoes, neat haircut that doesn't hide his bald spot, polyester blend pants and shirt and tie, transition lenses on his bifocals, everything about his physicality is practical.

The artist whose name Denise has forgotten until this moment, did he tell her, introduces her to Dr. Sydney Jacoby and no, the artist man doesn't know her name either. She makes him uncomfortable by waiting too long to say it, but does: she is Denise Gilbert. And then the Doctor who probably couldn't treat her hand any better than the artist man could (Doctor calls him Patrick), starts looking at the paintings silently, and Denise and Patrick hang back.

"Interesting," the Doctor says. "Tell me about your process."

Denise hates this part. It feels so forced and egotistical. You wouldn't think anyone outside of academia really gave a shit; it's either something they like or something they don't like. What other people think about their art really shouldn't matter to them. But she went deeply in debt for a reason. *Smile, Neechie!*

"I started painting skeletons because I wanted to strip down the human form to its pure expression. I didn't want to rely so much on the face to give the viewer a read of the painting. I wanted to understand what makes the mood and the emotion of the body happen in art. It helped me understand so much more about nuance, vulnerability, the distillation of feeling. I don't only do skeletons, but I mostly do them. They help me to see what's really happening in life, what's happening underneath everything. So it's less about Pieter Brueghel the Elder, although I really respect that sort of expression."

"More like the x-ray paintings from Australian Aboriginal art?" the Doctor asks, with a smile, trying to be a friend to her.

“The Aboriginal art is more in alignment to what Brueghel was doing than what I’m doing, I think.” She’s not trying to be snappish, but she knows that came out harder than it needed to. She does need to make a sale, though, she does need to be nice. “Instead, I try to see it as a sort of modern extension of Vesalius. Skeletons hanging out in daily situations. Sort of as if they’d been models for the *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem?* And they’ve just been around since then? They wouldn’t have died; they’re already dead. So they just do their thing, and sometimes you can catch them.”

“So everyone is dead.”

“Yes,” says Denise.

“And the animals?” the Doctor asks.

“I like painting the skeletons more than the feathers.”

The Doctor goes away, satisfied, knowing the painting will be delivered to his home, framed, for seven hundred and fifty dollars plus tax. Before framing and delivery, the cost is six hundred dollars, which nets three hundred and sixty for Denise.

“He’ll be back for at least two more,” says Patrick.

“Do you know where I can buy some grass?”

“Give me back forty of those dollars. And leave your number so I can call you when the rest sell.”

Denise leaves with the marijuana tightly wrapped in several baggies next to a rag with linseed oil in it in case she comes across any interested dogs and goes to the liquor store for cigarettes and a half-pint of whiskey. Then to the drug store for a new bottle of

nail polish in a color her mother won't like--gray, gray must be gauche--some minutes for her phone, a Diet Coke, the thickest fashion magazine they have, some tampons, and toiletries. She saves out one hundred and fifty and puts the rest of the money in the bank and walks home.

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ASHLEY

Why do they always go through Chinatown on *The Streets of San Francisco*? It's the worst way to get anywhere. That's like driving through Fisherman's Warf. The worst decision you can ever make is driving through Chinatown. The second worst is going through the Haight. Someone is going to die because you let Inspector Steve Keller drive, Lieutenant Mike Stone. Blood will be on both your hands. And you won't even know it because you'll be pontificating about what a real cop you are while you're sitting shotgun in traffic, waiting three changes of a light to go one block. You should have zigzagged through the avenues, dummy. Someone's gonna throw that body off of the Golden Gate Bridge and get away scot-free.

DENISE

Her mother is in the kitchen when she walks in.

“Hello, Mother. Here is some money. I sold a painting.” She holds out the money.

Lucia Gilbert, still jumpsuited, shiny, green, turns around from the open refrigerator and looks at the money. She is in wooden platform shoes, open toes. Light green frosted toenails. Fingernails, too. All those curls. Is it? A wig. Her mother is wearing a wig in the house today.

“Oh, thank you, Denise, but no, you keep it. I do appreciate that.” She nods. Her head is still a moment, and she nods again. “Yes. I appreciate that.”

Outside on the patio, in the late dying day sun, with a whiskey and Diet Coke and a cigarette, Denise decides she will make brownies for Ashley. Magic brownies. That will help him eat and feel better. She'll need to go get chocolate and eggs probably, because she can't just use up all her mother's ingredients, and she should get a pan for them, and she should find a way to say they are just for him, lest her Aunt Lucille get arrested for DWI, and the smell is going to be awful in the house. Horrible. Everyone will know she's making something with weed. The idea, really, of everyone being more scandalized by her mother smoking weed than wearing wigs and caftans is laughable. Laughable. Denise tries to cackle, a really good one, but coughs instead. It's too hot, and

she's too tired. She'll go and get chocolate tomorrow. She has a magazine to read today instead.

She sold a painting. Maybe it won't be like New York all over again. Maybe it will be a new beginning, a fresh start, something better. Or another chance at the first time, the phoenix has to burn itself out to become a new bird, right? Maybe she had to do terribly the first time for things to work out this time. She will not let the same things pull her down this time. She won't let another MacIntyre into her life. If there are any other people she lets in, they will have to pull their own weight. Girls are easier to take advantage of than women. Still, it was only one painting. Just the one. She can't get ahead of herself.

Upstairs, in the attic--the attic, how much farther could her mother put her? Just say she doesn't want her. She could look her father up. She could do it still. Tonight, even. She closes the vents to the room and opens the windows. Ugh, stooping down to open the windows, this was fun when she was ten. She wants a place where she's far from her mother and it's quiet and she can smoke. It's not like she smokes constantly. She attaches a mirror to her easel. Moves it into the light. See, there are no wrinkles there, not even when she puckers! If there were, her lipstick would have bled by now, and it is fine.

She pulls out her headphones and puts on some ambient music. Something with no words, all computers and synthesizers and guitars pulled like taffy. Golden rolls of sound like syrup poured over her eardrums. She unrolls a cigarette, rerolls it, replacing

some of the tobacco with a little weed from the eighth she bought from Patrick. Licking the paper carefully, carefully. *Thank you, James Magary, for all you taught me.* What if James Magary were still in Charlottesville, and that's why she never found him in New York? Should she look for him now? She lets the question hang, then float away. Back to the joint: there's still plenty left for brownies tomorrow. Plenty left. It's been so long and the weed is mostly orange with hairs, she only needs a thimbleful to knock her on her ass. She looks for the fire alarm, finds none in thirty seconds, and doesn't care. Leaning next to the window--remembering the attack of Mothra, keeping the screen in, she lights it, with her ash cup near her. She takes a long pull and holds--it burns, and she chokes to hold the smoke. Grateful she's been smoking and not too much. It smells of rubber and skunks and dog shit and caramel and marmalade and mold. She never did think weed was a delicious thing; it just represented a delicious thing. Never smell a dried peach, either, it'll turn you off of it. She finishes the whole thing in ten puffs.

The sketch wasn't bad. She has the proportions of the room right. Everything is where it ought to be. She has to do at least one portrait of the Hemmerjills for reals for reals, but tonight she will paint the one for her. Maybe even one she could sell to Polyester Jacoby via Sleazy Patrick. No one has to know who the subjects really are. She should make it look a little less like her mother's studio, a little less like their actual clothes. Where are they, where are they, where are they? In front of a burning building. In front of a police beating. She thinks, can't figure it and it hits: a pageant, make them a pageant mother and daughter. Backstage, she'll put them backstage, getting ready.

The skeleton daughter in a bathrobe, sitting in a folding chair in front of a lighted mirror, makeup in huge tiered cases and suitcases overflowing with costumes and so many skeleton girls and skeleton mothers lined up at this never ending counter and little skeleton brothers and sisters running everywhere, it's fucking chaos, a skeleton assistant with a headset walking through the foreground with a clipboard. The mother is putting a wig on the daughter, this is big hair, this is full glitz. The mother is easing it on over the daughter's wig cap, so unnecessary over the bare scalp, but details are important. Giant hair, it'll look like a Jessica Simpson thing, but she'll pull it back into a ponytail. It's for the swimsuit event, you can see the bikini just peeking through the bathrobe a little over the bare ribs, the daughter is trying to both sit perfectly still and raise a mascara wand to her face at the same time and her robe is opening. The mother is a generically clothed thing, hot for the 1980s, Claire Huxtable, Elyse Keaton. That's what she really was wearing, wasn't she? Wasn't she. All loose brushed silks brought in at the waist, a nod to the 1940s with none of the tailoring or drape. The mother's hair, a little more like your Sally Field or your what's her name, Phylicia Rashad, or Meredith Baxter-Birney--Jesus, how much brain space is Denise wasting with these people and their hair? Can she choose to burn that part up with drugs? But the hairdos, she has both of them now. The forehead on the daughter, it was large. Not hydrocephalic, watch it, this isn't for the Mütter collection. She giggles a little. A cigarette, that would be nice. Too bad there's no Diet Coke up here. Delicious Diet Coke. Make the mother's pearls sit the way they really sit on bare vertebrae, right up to the bone, like they're hanging on a broom handle,

and not the way they sit on necks, with all that ghost space floating around them, that's most painters' issue right there. Paint fantasy realistically. Learn from your Max Klinger. Make that centaur the right size.

The daughter's teeth have those little bumps on the incisors, teeth with tiny teeth, the egg teeth that tear open the gums, they haven't worn all the way down yet, like she's still seven years old. She has the teeth of a creep, of a serial murderer. And with the braces, the metal fencing on them. The mother has caps. She can tell. They're too even, and the ceramic is stained. Maybe the mother was in an accident, or really didn't feel okay about her teeth. She has seen and focused on so many teeth, seen stains that don't come out, from overzealous fluoride treatments when the teeth were young (a strange whiteness that floats on the surface like cement patches on stucco), or high fevers when the teeth were tempering in the gums (a tea-color, like a napkin that has been impregnated with the contents of the cup)--it is often the teeth that make a skull distinctive. And with caps, you can see it on a skull. Where they've worn the teeth down to the gum line and then built them back up again with ceramic. Maybe her family couldn't afford a dentist when she was little because of food and shoes. Now she doesn't want anyone to know they called her snaggletooth. They are straight and well-shaped if a little dingy. She should get them bleached.

Denise still has her mother's easel in the corner of her painting, just barely sketched out. Still blank. The stool where her mother was sitting. She could put another table there, or the hostess stand. More skeletons. A harbinger. And it cracks, it comes to

her, and it is huge, and she feels so big and relieved she claps her hands and there are drops flying everywhere from her brush and she is startled because she forgot she was holding her brush.

The easel has the painting-within-the-painting. Everything is just as she is painting it, except the people and what they wear; just as she alters reality, so would her painters. She decides her painter will wear a Regency dress, circa 1800 or so, with a little Spencer jacket over. Surely, her mother would appreciate that. And so the painting within the painting is similarly distorted, everything ancient. But there are no heads, no bodies in the painting. Everyone is a ghost. And the painter, she is also empty inside. Denise completes the painting, does the background, fills in the room completely. Pulls back a little, so that the easel she was standing at is just barely visible, just the corner of it, just the leg, is at the edge of the canvas. No one can see that.

She stops and looks. Not bad. Even when she's high, she can control the paint.

She puts up another watercolor paper pad and looks at the mirror. She pulls back her lips. She starts with a brush, some opaque white with a little burnt umber mixed in, and starts to paint her teeth. Not her skull, but just her teeth, as they'd look without her lips. She starts from the molars in the back, clenched together, first the upper, then the lower, and after she gets half of her head done, starts again, changing perspective: from the front. Then the other side. Looking down. Upwards. She paints her teeth open. She starts on them one by one, gets through ten of them--by then she is exhausted. She cleans her brushes in the tiny sink attached to the attic, takes a shower, and goes to sleep.

*

ASHLEY

It seems like Coach and Woody should have known each other. I understand in the logic of *Cheers* they don't. We got Woody because Coach died. Both in real life and in the show. But they seem like they would have gotten on so famously. It's just not fair. I think Woody is the prodigal son returned home too late, but instead of coming home because he was in trouble, he came home because he got his shit together. When he was out there with the pigs he was made a swineherd, and he made good, and Dad, he wanted to come home and tell you everything was fine now and he can pay you back and make good with his older brother who he shouldn't have said those things to, that was fucked up, but he wants to make amends and guess what: he has a company now and everything is going to be okay between the three of us from now on and do you guys like ham because I have a ham but when Woody gets back to the family estate and sees him, his brother, and his heart swells and he has so much to say to him and to his dad Coach, so many things, his brother leans on his shovel all mean and spits and says, "Pop's dead," and all the wind is sucked out of Woody's sails because what good is restitution to the dead.

DENISE

The next day, Denise has risen early, walked to the corner market for her items, not actually on their corner, but they aren't called *bodegas* anywhere but New York, in an attempt to walk before the wilting heat begins, and nearly makes it. Walking along the little black springy rubber walkway with the pinging electric eye at the hip level, the one that always fascinated her as a little thing, an *electric eye*, a talking one at that, with the glass doors shaped like tombstones and the metal bars right at the center, two doors, one for entrance COME IN *Yes We're Open!*, one for egress EXIT *Sorry Come Again!* The hospitable cool, the grainy groaning of the motors of the dozen coolers lining the walls full of beer and pop and wilting lettuce and milk two days from sour and the huge waist high freezer in the middle of the store, an upside-down glass bottomed boat full of frozen treats on sticks and ice cream and malts and homemade dipped cheesecake balls and frozen banana slices covered in chocolate with chopped peanuts or pink stuff with rainbow sprinkles or white stuff with jimmies in little cups with the domed plastic lids on the waxed paper cups and Denise really wants one, she really wants some frozen bananas, for some reason the coins are always so much better than gnawing on the icy fruit on the stick, but chocolate at nine in the morning will not do. She winds her way through the aisles, finds some dusty cocoa, half a dozen eggs that aren't cracked and have some time to go on their life span, an aluminum foil pan, a pound of butter with a water spotted carton, and some clumpy chocolate chips. The electric eye tells the world she has left. It

always takes two steps into the heat to really feel the heat. She needs to be encapsulated by it, in the sun and the water and the wind of it, to really understand how hot it is outside. When it hits her it feels like it isn't air anymore; it's water. She's breathing water, walking through water. She didn't realize, you never realize how nice something, someplace can be until you're gone, she didn't know the checkered linoleum was inviting until she compared it with glaring pavement, the loud knocking air conditioning was a blessing until the heat the heat was on her again, the sounds of gospel radio were pleasant until she heard the interstate again. She didn't know. You never can.

Home again, the marijuana through a food grinder, then forced through a sifter three times over and sitting in the melted butter. Brownies are made the same otherwise, just baked a little lower. Denise makes excellent brownies. Extra moist, that was their code word to say they had weed in them. Everyone else went to outrageous extremes to make them, making pot butter and honey oil and all sorts of stuff, but she went old school, like Alice B. Toklas, and everyone agreed hers were the best. She didn't care if anyone knew her weed secret. Hers were the best because she used her grandmother's brownie recipe. Of course people got three times as fucked up on hers; they ate three of her brownies for every one of someone's Betty Crocker atrocities.

After Denise mixes the butter in, her mother comes into the kitchen. She is dressed in denim today, a prairie skirt with a denim vest, a petticoat underneath, and red cowboy boots. Her hair is in a braid down the back of her head. Denise can't immediately tell if the braid is entirely made of her mother's hair or if there is a fall in

interested in doing things for me in exchange for my pills. She just says she got the weed from him. Patrick Sherman. I don't know him, don't recognize him, don't think I know anyone in his family. Tall, and that lantern jaw that guys are always going on about, a jaw like Batman has, but really, a wide chin doesn't make for strong character or a big dick, not at all. Denise says she isn't sure if he was hitting on her, but she says it in a way that makes me know that she thinks he was and she wants me to confirm it. I won't.

“This is the guy who bought your painting?” We're looking at Dr. Sydney Jacoby now.

“Yeah. I don't think he was flirting with me.” Doctor Sid.

“No.” This guy. This is the guy who paid me for blowjobs in his car behind the Food Lion when I was eighteen, going to junior college. At least he came quickly. He paid just okay. He always wanted to hang out afterward, buy me a soda or go to the movies, which was so wrong, so very, very wrong. I had a house, dude, and a family that took care of me, even if it was just my mom. Save that charity shit for your homeless tricks. If I could call him, call his husband today. I'm guessing that's the other guy in these photos with him. Look at them, all domestic in their shorts in New York together. In Rome. In San Francisco. He should ask Dr. Sid which has the freakiest underage whores. Fuck this guy. “No, this guy doesn't do girls.”

“Really? You think? I didn't get a vibe one way or another.”

I don't want to talk about it anymore. If I do I might barf. I can remember the smell of his cock, the smell of his Volvo, the sound of the radio, always classical, the heat

of the of the Naugahyde burning my bare thighs through my shorts, the sweaty hairs going up my nose--

“Do you want another brownie?” she asks. I can’t even look at the milk.

“They’re really good.” I hope she can’t see how much I’m sweating. If I don’t swallow, I might not puke. That’s part of the key. Don’t swallow, shallow breathing, don’t even lay your hands on your stomach, no pressure there.

“I’m glad you like them.”

“Denise. Could you do something, something important for me? Something to help me?”

“What.” She’s suspicious now.

“Could you bring me brownies like this every day?” Now I really can’t barf, and my tongue is way to high in the back of my throat.

“Of course.” It’s the show pony smile, but I think she’s really happy.

“But I need you to do something different for me.”

“What? You want nuts in them? I didn’t know if you liked them.”

“Walnuts, please. Walnuts and lead. Well, lead paint.”

“Not funny.” Her whole face breaks, and her head with the hard dark brow and the bangs is tilted down now, and her eyes are narrowing at me, and although her tone hasn’t dropped into bitch yet, her mouth is pulled up in that weird sneer rich girls do, that one that makes them look like tiny dogs. Her nose is pulled up and her chin’s gone puckered like a peach pit and the ends of her mouth are turned down but the middle bow

part of it is up. I guess it's called a pout, but that sounds safe and right now, Denise would bite me if she could get away with it. Not sure why she's so pissed off.

"Not joking." I can feel it, the rising sick inside. Try not to swallow. It makes it worse.

"You want me to kill you." Now she isn't even keeping her mouth closed. This is how rich people show their disgust with you, if you weren't sure. They pant at you, or they bare their teeth, or they breathe on you. Like great apes or wolves.

"No, I want your help. I'd do it myself if I could. Mama and my doctors and my nurses are forcing me to do something I don't want to do. Why? So they feel better about it? They aren't stuck in this body." I pull up my sleeve to show her some of my sores, but they're clearing up now, so it's mostly dried scabs now. Not nearly as effective as the weeping ones were.

Denise gets up and leaves the room without saying anything, not even goodbye. It's just as well, because I can't even wait until I'm sure she's out of earshot before I puke and only thing I can grab in time is the aluminum pan with the rest of the brownies in it. Ugh, a bad one, through my nose and everything. I'm not well enough to get up and walk it to the toilet, so I put it on the table of the bed. Mama will be here soon to help me with it. I'm sorry, Mama. I should have known better. I shouldn't have eaten two brownies, I shouldn't have had a glass of milk, and I shouldn't have lingered on Dr. Jacoby.

My throat burns something terrible now, and the tears are running, and the smell, the acid and chocolate and snot and milk and blood, it's so yucky, so bad. I did so bad. I know better. I really do. I'm so sorry, Mama.

I want to call Mama in here to help me and clean me up and give me a pill, and I won't do that.

DENISE

At the corner store, Denise finds an old bag of walnuts. They don't seem to be rancid. More butter, she needs another pound of butter. And foil pans so as not to taint her mother's precious Pyrex. She passes the cooler in the middle of the store, the giant trough filled with cool air, it looks a little smoky, and this time she picks up a waxed-paper carton of frozen chocolate covered banana slices with chopped peanuts on them. She has wanted this carton of banana slices with the domed plastic top since she was last in the store, an unvoiced longing, just under the skin of her mind. It doesn't matter that it's early, it doesn't matter that it's chocolate; she will have them.

"These are always so wonderful, aren't they, dear?" the doughy woman in the gauzy housedress and headscarf behind the register says, almost tapping the waxed paper carton, but not touching it, because she knows better than to touch someone else's food. Even if she made them in an outhouse with her feet, she knows you don't touch that right before someone else eats it.

"Yes, ma'am," Denise says.

"You Mrs. Gilbert's daughter?"

"Yes, ma'am," Denise says.

"Well, we're glad to have you here. I'm Mrs. Peterson. You need anything, you call on me."

"Thank you, ma'am."

“We have a counter inside, if you’d rather eat in the AC, but if you’d rather be on your way, the utensils are there.” As she points, Denise gets stuck looking at Mrs. Peterson’s coagulated upper arm wavering in space instead of looking at the counter, like a golden retriever missing the ball flying through the air. Mrs. Peterson licked the spoon too many times after making too many batches of chocolate covered bananas.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“We’re all praying for your family. For your cousin.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Denise is on her way again. How did she extricate herself? Did she say goodbye? She can’t remember. Is that important? It doesn’t matter, she is walking now. Now she is walking. She walks down the street, the plastic bag holding her parcels cutting a red mark deep into her forearm and the cup of frozen bananas icy against the pads of her fingers. She holds the spork awkward in one hand and the plastic bag with the butter and shit in it keeps banging against her body as she walks down the street. It is so hot and stuffy feeling for outside, she can feel the sweat trickle down her back under her dress, crawl under her armpit like a bug. Gives her a shiver, but not the cooling kind. She tries to stab one slice of banana and fails, the short little teeth of the spork bending against the slippery chocolate shell, wet now with condensation. She works the edge of the spoon underneath one, chips it off the pile. Pushes too hard and it flies up and out of the cup, hits the front of her dress and lands on the ground. A small chocolate scar on her chest. She stops on the street and picks a banana free with her fingertips. The cold hurts

her teeth, goes straight from the surface of her tooth through the root to a spot behind her eye as she mashes the slushy melting fruit with her molars. Denise can't stop shivering even though it must be nearly eighty degrees outside now. The cold banana is separate from the cold chocolate and the chopped nuts in her mouth, and as the bolus starts to come to body temperature it all mixes together. The chocolate isn't really chocolate, it's chocolate coating, chocolate and floor wax, and it feels like her mouth is full of motor oil. She wants to spit it out, back into the cup or on the sidewalk, but just then she passes a hairdresser with a huge front window and six women are all facing her. Something about the audience makes the whole business unseemly. She could tell them she is pregnant, that's how she usually gets out of throwing up or spitting out food. *It just wasn't sitting right.* All women let her slide with that one, and no one says anything to her when she never gets any bigger. It's against the rules of womanhood.

She swallows it, and it isn't that bad, not bad at all. Denise throws the bananas in the next trashcan she sees. Does not want to have to explain sweets to Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert. No napkins, she forgot napkins, and now there is chocolaty ick on her hand. She sucks it off, holds back the gag by closing her eyes and holding her breath and tightening every muscle but especially her stomach flat on the outside like an ironing board. An old trick she taught herself to stop when she'd brought up enough: stop seeing and smelling and hearing and make her body not a body anymore, make it a board or a stone or a plank or an ironing board or just anything that isn't flesh and it can't do flesh things anymore.

Walking up to the house again, Denise swears she can see the wooden blinds in Bernard's old room close. She goes straight upstairs. Her mother is in her studio, painting. Lucia Gilbert says nothing, does not turn around. Denise says nothing, stands in the doorway. They are watching each others' eyes in the little mirror attached to her mother's easel. After a minute, Denise goes downstairs with her brownie supplies.

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ASHLEY

So I haven't seen *Miami Vice* in a long time, but I think this is where I started to have this problem with television. How come pretend drug dealers can't recognize pretend narcs in different pretend settings? They have facial blindness nearly as bad as Lois Lane for fuck's sake. Tubbs at least does a terrible generic Jamaican accent and goofy smile--*Hello, White America! I will dance for this stripper in lieu of tap dancing for you*--but Crockett doesn't even change his fucking jacket and they still can't seem to recognize him in the afternoon when they failed to blow him up across town in the morning, and there he was, talking it over with a bunch of cops all chummy in broad daylight for ages and ages. If that's how shitty you are as a connect, you deserve to lose everything. Unless you are getting high from your own supply, and your shit is really good. Look, I'm on fucking morphine, Oxycontin, and I just got these fantastic patches (I am all about these patches, let me tell you, I wish I could yelp these fucking patches) and

I can still tell it's my mother when she's crosses from one side of the room to the other. It's not like she looks like two separate people. Cocaine doesn't do that. I don't know any drug that does that. Maybe PCP. I never did do angel dust. Maybe I can get Denise to get me some PCP. I wouldn't mind trying that. Unless it's like ketamine because I'm already trapped in an invisible coffin of forgetting and I can't really use my legs and I sometimes piss myself. That was no fun. Unless I didn't do it right. Maybe it's different if you eat it or smoke it or shove it up your ass. Rusty used needles, so I used needles. Maybe that's the exact wrong way to use Special K, but he fucking loved it, so I think it was just me. I don't like white wine either, and people love chardonnay. Tastes like piss cut with grape juice. Disgusting.

But back to my original point. Drug dealers in real life know who narcs are. They're kind of single serving products. On TV, connects are like the Mystery Gang, continually fooled and baffled by the same trick. So stupid. In real life, snitches get stitches and end up in ditches, no matter how pleated their pants may be. And an alligator is a terrible pet. There's no way that shit will love and remember you. Lizards are stupider than chickens. You will be eat up for sure, Nash Johnson Crockett.

Is my quality of voice "festive"? Can you tell from my voice at all that I'm queer? Is it better to be described as festive than "sassy" or "swishy"? The dangerous gay in this first episode was still a cross-dressing murderer, so I don't know. And a Cuban. He was also a Cuban. Let us never forget the hatred of foreigners, most

especially commie bastard foreigners. They are a threat to our American way of life doing drugs with alligators on boats.

Mama knocks on the door.

“May I come in?” she asks, but she always does. I don’t really have a say in it. I tried saying no once and she thought I was being mean-funny, and I wasn’t, I really didn’t want her in here. If only I could close the door with my mind.

Mama doesn’t just come in here to talk. She’s always doing something to my body, or the bed, or the television, or ushering someone in and out again. But she doesn’t want to talk to me, which is fine because I don’t want to talk to her anymore, either.

“Ashley, I wanted to ask you something.” She’s perched on the edge of the bed now, looking just over the top of my head. Not looking at me, looking above me.

“Oh.”

“Ashley, please.” She takes the remote out of my hand and turns off the TV. That’s fine, I was expecting that, I’m not resisting that. “Please. Look at me.” So I look at her. Her pupils are big now. I don’t know how many pills she’s taken, but it’s a lot. Maybe she’s skimming the patches, too. She ought to. They are the bee’s fucking knees. I feel smaller than my body with these patches. Don’t know how long that’ll last, but I’m gonna let it ride.

“Okay.” I stroke her hair, just a little. “Your roots are showing, Mama. Are you growing the dye out?”

She sighs real hard, with a little sob that catches in her throat at the end. I think she's faking. When Mama really cries she doesn't make any noise. When she really cries, her shoulders just shake, like a vulture's wings flapping. I don't know what her crying face looks like, because I've only seen her crying from behind. Her crying face is always hidden up in her arms or turned to a wall or on a bed or in a towel. Her crying face is private and powerful. Mama's weeping face will turn a man to stone.

"My friend Katherine wants to do a healing service for you. She does Reiki. It's an energy healing, with the subtle body, the, ah, the energy of the universe. I didn't say yes because I wanted to ask you first. It's your choice."

"How thoughtful of you."

"You don't have to say yes."

"She's a little late on the take, isn't she?"

"I'll tell her no. Okay? I'll say no."

"You don't seem to want her here, Mama. I thought you believed in all that hocus?"

"I'll call her and say no."

"Why don't you want it for me, Mama?"

"I'll call her and say no."

"Don't I deserve that hocus?"

Mama gets up. She stops in the doorway.

"I do love you, Ashley. I'm sorry that you can't see that."

Benson is Daniel, also known as Belteshazzar, living with King Nebuchadnezzar, also known as Governor Eugene Gatling. Benson is a stranger in this land with the eerie gift of prophecy and dream interpretation. Wait, I can make this work. I know I can.

My phone is chiming at me, and I'm not sure how Denise has gotten my number.

"Ur mom gave it 2 me," she texts me. Weird, hearing this in her almost but not quite flat affect. Like hearing Lieutenant Data from *Star Trek: the Next Generation* send me a text message. Maybe Cousin Denise was dropped on her head, or maybe Bernard took all the nutrients in the womb. He was always way taller than she was, bigger than she was in every way.

"Ur mom gave it 2 me all nite long." Really, there is no other reasonable response. I dare you to think of another.

"Can I come ovr? I'll bring u brownies ;)," she says, with a lying smiley face. Bitch never winked at anyone in her life.

"With nuts?"

She calls me, and I do not pick up. She calls again. I will not answer. The third call I pick up, but I don't say anything.

"Ashley?"

"What? I'm watching TV. What do you want?"

"Can I come over?"

"Will you make them the way we talked about?"

“Why are you doing this to me?”

I hang up on her and turn my phone off. This is the only way to push them to do what you need them to do. Rusty called it tough love, but you don't have to love them and it's not really tough. Dusty told me I was manipulative, but he still did what I needed him to do. It just like dog training. The ones who don't want to do what I ask them to don't come back and certainly don't do anything. I mean, what really are the consequences of saying no? I'm mad at them? So fucking what? Ooh, Ashley the asshole is mad, isn't that terrible, I'll cry so hard. I wouldn't do what I asked me to. That's why I have other people do it for me.

DENISE

Denise is back at the gallery with a few new paintings, the mother and daughter as skeletons readying for the swimsuit competition, and Sid Vicious as Mr. Rogers, because she did paint that, he's opening the door and Ian Curtis is looking lost as Mr. McFeely on the porch. Rig and singed cookers and cottons and lighters and aluminum foil and half-empty bottle of 151 on the kitchen table and the fish are all belly-up in a scummy tank, because patrons of the kind of art Denise makes like it when you fully invert and assault the memories of their childhood. Great social status for them, symbols of how very dead inside they are. Conversation starters about violence and corporate America and the hardness of life while they drink artisanal bitters in small batch gin and with mineral ice instead of that horrid tap stuff full of toxins. Toxins are today's miasmas. Another painting she has brought: skeleton news anchors having a morning talk show in front of a window of nuclear winter with steaming hot mugs of coffee being filmed by skeleton cameramen with skeleton grips and skeleton best boys and a skeleton director and a skeleton teleprompter operator with the skeleton news of the skeleton day. She had trouble with the text of the news itself, so she pulled some text out of the Buddhist philosophy book she has been reading in her mother's house: *COMING UP NEXT: HUNGRY GHOSTS--WHAT ARE THEY AND WHAT DO THEY WANT? WHY SOME PEOPLE SAY YOU--AND YOUR FAMILY--SHOULD BE CONCERNED. MORE AFTER THESE MESSAGES FROM OUR SPONSORS.* Two male anchors with toupees

with a blonde lady, real hair, extensions, decent ones, sitting between them. The viewer can see right through their skulls through their eyeholes, through their mouths.

It is loud when she opens the door to the gallery, the stereo on blast telling her, *I look, I feel, I smell like money, I look, I feel, I smell like money, just look at me, dummy*--a particular subtype of rap the boys in her life in Brooklyn would know, would roll their eyes and tell her and then go back to blocking her out of their music-based conversation because she doesn't know anything about anything unless it's art or clothes or makeup. Almost as loud are the yelps and squeals and barks of the dog with tinny clangling of tags and scratches of nails on concrete, What's-it, Fanny, now she has a friend, a squat bulldog, and they're jumping and wrestling and yapping and running and barking through the gallery all crazy. Denise doesn't move; they ignore her, run around her: she has no pig ears. Patrick is there, he's hanging paintings with a Black guy, a little younger than Denise, long dreadlocks, neat, well-kept, thin and even, in a rubber band, hanging down to the middle of his back. He's wearing a white tank top, brown work pants, paint on them, work boots. His back is broad at the shoulder, small at the waist, the muscles are small hills and long dunes and waves of water, a land and sea of flesh, under a rich Cadmium Orange mixed with Dioxazine Purple into a deep rich brown, vivid and transparent and alive. Denise hasn't been close to anyone Black for this long without some sort of commercial transaction since she was on the train. Forgot her family was like that. Not racist, but--well, no, scratch that. Not having Black people in your life on

purpose even if it's just because of inertia if you agree with the inertia is actually sort of racist, but she didn't know it was racist until she left for college.

The dogs are frozen in the middle of the gallery floor. Patrick is yelling at them. They're still smiling and wagging their tails. Denise has never seen such a tail on a bulldog--straight up and pointed, an antenna, much too tall for such a squat beastie. Also, she's mostly black, with fried white fur spot over her egg-eyes, and pigeon-toed. This one must be defective, a bad apple from a breeder. The reject dog doesn't seem to know she's seconds, though, gives a little smile and bark like she's the tits, lies down and drapes her tongue over giant jaws.

"Hey, it's *Denise*, right?" says Patrick, pointing at her with both hands. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" Patrick may not have changed clothes since the last time she saw him. Patrick emits a strong man-odor, armpit funk and stale beer and turpentine and hair grease.

"I have some more paintings," Denise says. Grouper, the word she's looking for for some reason is *grouper*. A fish with the big jaws is a grouper. The dog looks like a grouper.

"Well, let's take a look-see, then," Patrick says. He has her portfolio now, spreads the paintings across the table. The guy in brown pants is looking at her face. Black guy in brown pants. People don't usually say what color people are. It isn't polite.

"Denise Gilbert," he says.

"Yes."

"You don't remember me." Brown Pants smiles a little, then lets it fall.

"You aren't helping," Denise says.

Patrick and Pants look at each other and laugh.

"She's got you there, dude. That's just kind of a dick thing to say. Miss Denise, these are fucking fantastic. Better than the last. Not that the last were bad. These are just. Wow. Wish I could afford them."

"You used to compete with my sister. Desiderata Jefferson. I'm her little brother. D'Artagnan. I was three grades behind you. Freshman when you were a senior at Monticello."

Desiderata Jefferson, she was always on the stage at crowning, usually with a bigger fan of money and a bigger trophy than Denise. Their mothers, a tense circling around each other, Denise never heard what they said, how could she when they kissed cheeks, but whatever it was, Mrs. Jefferson never gloated, was always uneasy around the two of them. Desiderata Jefferson, always Denise's true competition, with her splits and contortions and smile they said looked like Whitney Houston's back when that was a good thing, always pushing Denise down to Supreme, not Ultimate Supreme. Quiet in the car back home, the energy between Denise and her mother burying into her skin: invisible, electric, crawling, like cactus hairs. Until the day Denise and Desiderata were both on the stage in a Red Roof Inn in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, in front of an all white judges' panel, the ladies wearing gloves and pantyhose, none under sixty, and they called *Denise Gilbert*, and the Buick was hers. Well, her mother's. Denise has never had keys

to the Buick. Denise drove the Chrysler the eight hours back home. She was able to stop competing after that.

"It's good to see you, Denise," D'Artagnan says. "You look well."

"How are you? How's your family? Your sister, how's she doing?"

"She's well, she was Miss Georgia, don't know if you know or care."

"Not really plugged into, anything." Denise starts to make a gesture but can't get any effort into it so it's really just fingers off the table and down. The sound of the nails of her hand on the table scratches something in her ears and she does it a couple more times, just for herself. She can't remember D'Artagnan, not at all, which is too bad. He's got great arms. Muscled and defined and stretched lean along the bone. She glances at Patrick. He's staring at her, doing something weird with his mouth, sucking his tongue or something without thinking about it. One of the dogs is growling in its sleep. The music is still on, but quieter. Patrick must have turned it down. She didn't notice that.

"Yeah, a lot of people gave a shit. Because Georgia, not Virginia. But she was at Morehouse, so whatever. She was a Redskins cheerleader for a while. Married one of the players, trying to get on *Real Housewives*. We don't talk much."

"She can do better," Patrick says. "He's a shitty DT." He chuckles to himself.

"My mama's fine, pop's fine, thanks," D'Artagnan says. "How's your family?"

"They're mostly fine. Except my cousin. He's going to die soon."

"Oh, oh...I'm so. So sorry."

"Thank you. I was wondering, if you, or you," she turns to Patrick, "have any clay?"

"Clay?" Patrick asks. "Uh, none of us are potters. I think there might be a couple of pounds of something somewhere in the back that someone left here. Might be dried out by now."

"That would be perfect. Dried is better."

There is moment, Denise can see it, where Patrick wants to be helpful but does not want to leave her alone with D'Artagnan. But he goes to the back to check.

"Maybe we can hang out while you're here?" D'Artagnan asks her in a low, hurried voice. He's sort of looking at her, sort of watching the back room.

Denise recites the numbers, then recites them again when he fumbles for his phone. Patrick comes back out of the back room with a brownish-gray opaque dirty plastic bag. Paint water, it looks like paint water.

"I dunno, it's dried, and the label's gone. Want me to put it in your trunk for you, Miss Denise?"

"I'm walking."

"Oh," he says, and his smile comes back in a flash, real toothy. "Then please, allow me to drive you home."

Patrick's truck is full of garbage, handwritten receipts and invoices, fast food bags, empty cigarette packs, beer bottles, a couple of foil condom wrappers. Fanny the dog gets ready to jump into the cab but follows Patrick to the truck bed and happily hops

up. It's not the front seat, but it is a truck ride. The bulldog can't jump up that high, barks at the truck. D'Artagnan calls her back, but she is not a good dog and it takes a bit of yelling to get her away from the prospect of a truck ride. Denise is in the passenger seat now, and Patrick closes the door for her and puts the bag of old clay in the back. Fanny keeps trying to force her too-big dogface into the little window of the truck cab behind Denise's head, and there is a wet dog nose with a rapid snuffling breathing just behind her ear. The truck has been in the shade with the windows open to keep the smell down and it's still wiltingly hot in the truck and it still smells like dirtbag boy. Patrick goes back to D'Artagnan for a moment and the two men have a quick conversation that Denise cannot hear. Their bodies are still and their hands aren't moving. As Patrick gets back into the truck, D'Artagnan waves to her, with blank eyes and a purposeful stance and uncertain open palm, like a saint in a Mariotto Albertinelli painting, a man rising to occasion reluctantly with his soul boiling out of the back of his skull in the meantime. Such strange rounded bubbled beauty. She should paint that, an Albertinelli gas station or prom.

They are nearly silent until Patrick pulls up to Denise's mother's house and asks if he can use her number to call her sometime.

"That's fine."

"Because you only gave it to me for professional purposes, and I don't want to do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

"Fine. Totally fine."

“Or text. I might text instead.”

“Sure.”

“If you have a boyfriend, I get it.”

“No. Call. It’s fine.”

Denise gets out of the truck and Patrick gets the clay for her. He walks it up to the front porch and puts it down on the side of the porch for her, away from the welcome mat.

“Great. Then I will. Talk to you soon, Denise.”

As Denise opens the front door and the truck pulls away, she remembers she forgot to look at blinds in her brother’s old room. She forgot to see if they were moving again.

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ASHLEY

I don’t understand how people say that television rots your brain. Well, I understand how they say it, but I don’t understand the why of it. I can see so much through it, so much in it. It’s all there, if you want it to be. You just need to be open. I’m watching *Danger Man* with Patrick McGoohan, and there he is, my boyfriend Rusty. Everything about him, down to the giant Neanderthal forehead and the weird staring contests he has with everyone without telling them he’s playing and the neat jackets and

ties. Junkies with ties are the worst kind of junkies, because they think it negates the whole shoving a dirty needle so dull they had to sharpen it on a matchbox to get it to hit home in the veins under their fucking tongues. You can put a silk ascot on a fly-covered turd and it's still filled with maggots. But that was Rusty. Thought because he took a shower and ate a salad every day no one could tell he was yellow as a banana, even his fucking eyes were like egg yolks.

Anyways anyways. What I can see now, beyond the fancy clothes and the intense weird eyes and the deep voice and the big hands and the intensity, is that I had all the information I needed at the very beginning to see this relationship was a terrible idea. Yes, the sex: great. Best I've ever had. But Rusty didn't adore me. He didn't want to know everything about me because he cared, just like the Danger Man isn't looking for where Gina lives because he wants to propose to her and spend the rest of his life with her. The first eleven minutes of the first episode are the last eleven minutes Danger Man is ever okay. Why aren't audiences terrified when he starts bursting uninvited into women's dressing rooms? An "excuse me" won't cut it, buddy. He becomes someone different for everyone he meets, charming when he needs to be, hard when it serves his purpose, handing out crisp handfuls of lire to get information when he needs it, and then just waltzes into her house in the country and her maid just lets him. I'm not beating myself up for it today. I was inexperienced, I didn't know. I thought it meant a Danger Man loved me if he was everywhere at once for me. I thought it meant he was looking out for me. Common mistake. More common than you might think. You never really

know what that smile means on someone like him, and when I was young, I hadn't seen someone smile when they hit before. So for that mistake, I may be forgiven.

But the talking, even that, I knew it was crazy when I heard it. That I'm not forgiving myself for. When he would tell me about his plan and how he had radiation pills saved and water and that they would come for him someday and not even I knew his real name so I would be safe when they did--all sorts of shit like that. As soon as he started with that, I should have left. If the drugs weren't enough, if the hitting wasn't enough, the crazy should have been enough.

But he did disappear one day. Didn't take his shit or anything. Maybe they did take him. Maybe *Danger Man* went to the Village in *The Prisoner*. Maybe he is Number 6. Or maybe Rusty was more insane than thought. Or maybe he OD'd at the connect's house and they threw him in an alley. I don't really give a shit. That's one good thing about having cancer. I will never have to see Rusty again.

Run, Gina. You in danger, girl.

DENISE

Denise grinds an eye-sized lump of the clay up into a powder up in her room, tries adding different amounts of water to it. Tastes it. Metallic, earthen, familiar but very much not food, and with enough of a siliceous crunch that the teeth notice it for a good long while. Hopefully it will make the brownies taste off enough. Hopefully Ashley will notice. Hopefully he will be happy, think she is on his side.

“I will bring u brownies w nuts 2moro,” she texts him.

Ashley doesn't answer.

Denise begins an Albertinelli-style triptych of a holdup at the Circle K. The center panel has a man with a balaclava, a pistol and a halo holding up a man in a uniform with a halo and a look of ecstatic bewilderment. The first panel will show crumpled dead robber. The third will show the dying employee, gasping behind the counter with a shotgun in his hand. Little slices of things going wrong. Little slices of bright lights and magazines and packs of cigarettes and peanuts and magazines and blood. Halos over their heads and those strange black blank eyes and fat round fingers.

The next day Denise is working with her mother again in her studio with the Hamsterkills. She had almost forgot to work on a real picture of them, but knocked something out in the last two days. It's not bad, but it's not good, either. Denise hopes it will be much worse than her mother's, but will still look like she's trying. She has painted the mother and daughter right out of the room--it kept killing them, and while that

made for good selling art, it wasn't going to make her mother happy and it really wouldn't do to show them--and has put them in a bare room on an 18th century settee. She is surrounding them with birds, toucans, birds of paradise, flamingos, hornbills, parrots, all sorts of flying color. A bit of Da Vinci, a bit of Rousseau, and a couple of small cats in the corner, the Goya, to keep it interesting for herself. On the mother's upright fingers a giant creamy cockatoo with a huge yellowish crest, and in the daughter's open palm two small lovebirds. They are dressed like local Virginia gentry of the period, both in silk, the mother in gold and the daughter in orange, with tight bodices and large hoop skirts. She sneaks some broken fetters and an uncoiled whip in down in a corner and uses them as a perch for some birds, down in the darkness on the forest floor. No one will see them there for years and years if they ever see them. They look almost like broken tree branches and a snake. That's the closest she can do to slaves in a painting for the daughters of the confederacy. Really, all of them should always have a slave or the ghost of a slave or a hanging man or woman or child in every portrait. Every single one should have to look at what they did every time they look at themselves.

Denise has taken the canvas down to her mother's studio to work on it. She has the outlines drawn on, but the color is barely started, just a dab here and there, not really for herself, just to let the people who will be looking over her shoulder know what it will look like. Denise always thinks it looks worse like this, a spilled pile of beans or beads all over a topo map, but she has learned the hard way people who are not inside of her head cannot understand what she means when she tries to talk about her work. It was

MacIntyre's idea, to do this. She thought it was stupid. He was right about so many things. How can someone be perfectly right about so many things and still be such a complete mess? Such an asshole?

Denise is working on a toucan, on the black body. They have a shine to them, a glossiness. The beaks (are the bills? What is the difference? There is a difference, but what is it? Is that important, when you're painting them) are large, yellow, striped, hollow, and she saw a documentary once where the toucans used them to pull small eggs out of the deep woven nests of smaller birds, throw back their heads to swallow them like they were doing shooters. Toucans had always seemed so nice. Something about the wide eyes of birds makes them robotic. A flamingo now. White bleeding to pink to red. That strange bill (beak? Bill) that looks like an animal in itself, that grayish thing. The knees are so knobby, like something is wrong with them. The other side of the canvas has palms on it to balance it out, with a flock of cockatiels in it, gray and yellow. They're chatting and laughing, looking more toward the two women than to each other. Make the portrait seem like it is a special occasion.

"That's different," Denise's mother says from the doorway. Denise doesn't turn around. No snorts, no sighs.

"Birds are a symbol of the soul," Denise says. What this has to do with the painting, she's not quite sure, because it's not like these people struck her as particularly soulful, nor is she trying to point out they are responsible for a particularly large number

of deaths or births; she doesn't know if they were direct descendants of slaveowners. That would be the easiest interpretation.

"We'll see if they like it," Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert says, moving toward her own canvas in the front of the room. The outfit she has on today Denise would call Cocktail Dominatrix. She is wearing a black dress, either vinyl or pleather, not leather, too much stretch, with close short sleeves, a tight bodice, and flared skirt just above the knee. Her Doc Martin boots have no heel and lace up to the knee. The stockings under the boots are fishnet lace. Her hair is slicked back into a high ponytail, and her eyes are darkly lined in black. She is wearing bright red lipstick. She takes off her black leather gloves and ties on a black long-sleeved apron. It's a bit much of a look for nine o'clock, but this is a look Denise approves of. Unfortunately, the dress is too small for Denise. She'd have to lose twenty pounds. At least twenty. Maybe thirty.

They paint together for a long while. Her mother has put David Bowie and the Rolling Stones on the stereo, which is not exactly what Denise would put on for the outfit, probably more Black Sabbath, Nine Inch Nails, Bauhaus, but whatever, it's listenable. Her mother's painting is the two women, not in the studio but in a house. Denise assumes it is their home. It is well done, even if it isn't to her tastes. It's boring, that's what it is. There's nothing wrong with it. Everything is done well, and she's made the women a little prettier, a little thinner, a little longer of proportion, a little better made up, with the colors of their clothes more vibrant, richer, but there's nothing there to

distinguish it from anything else. It looks like a photograph that was run through a computer program on an oil painting setting. So dull.

They break for an early lunch, not together, and Denise gets a message from Patrick. A second Saturday gallery show tomorrow, she should come, people will be there to see her paintings, would like to meet her, she can make a lot of money, and there will be a party afterward. Let him know.

Denise had forgotten there were days of the week. They don't mean anything to her anymore. She should get a real job again. Probably. Working in a boutique or something. She's only so good at that sort of work though. Sooner or later she loses interest, stops showing up regularly, and that sort of thing is not well tolerated by management. But it must be a Friday. How long has she been here? A week? Two? Something like that. She should make a plan, lest she end up here indefinitely. She tries for a moment and fails to name a city she wants to be live in five years from now, much less this year next time. Goal setting was always difficult, was always her mother's job. All Denise had to do was win, and she usually didn't do that. Such a disappointing child. Maybe Europe. Paris. She could brush up on her French. Why not? She could do that. Nothing's stopping her but her.

Her mother has changed into an ankle-length brown prairie dress. The main color a yellow calico print, and the bodice is brown a velvet with a lace-up front like a corset. She is wearing high-heeled clogs, and her hair down now, soft looking. Her makeup is

soft, except her eyeliner, still copious, bold, long. As she walks to do the door, Denise hears soft chimes: her mother is wearing an anklet with little bells on it.

When the Huppafills (Denise listens closely this time, and this is what it sounds like her mother says, *HUPP-uh-Fill*, even though she swears it didn't sound anything like this the first time) come in the door, it seems something has happened to them, maybe a fight in the car. Maybe the daughter didn't want to come at all. There is an energy, a wrongness that rolls in the door with them. Lenora is crumpled at the shoulders and glaring through her eyebrows. Her mother pushes forward super erect, her chest the prow of a boat. God bless Mrs. Huppafill and all who sail her. Denise attempts to keep her mouth and eyes as flat as possible. This has nothing to do with her. The best way to deal: drill a hole in the top of her head from the inside with one of those old hand drills, the one that's half-corkscrew, half hurdy-gurdy, and then let her insides escape into the entire room. Depending on her mood and the temperature, sometimes it's liquid into liquid, like food coloring, and she's everywhere, a sad small godling, sometimes it's a gas into a gas and she's so spread out she can't feel her feelings or think her thoughts anymore but she can still see everything at once such a trip, sometimes it's her whole self shooting out like an octopus darting around the room choosing where to stay or attack or nest or hide or sleep.

Denise doesn't even get the bit through her skull before her mother is saying her name again, twice, sternly, and the four of them are tramping upstairs. What a bother.

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ASHLEY

I think the most realistic part of *Wonder Woman* is the way all these men keep ignoring all these women, even when they're obviously right. A Nazi lady understands Wonder Woman's powers, and everyone assumes the dumb broad's stupid. Wonder Woman can leave her Diana Prince job for hours and no one seems to notice, because no one notices ladies, but if Steve Trevor takes a shit, everyone wonders where the fuck he's gone. I do like watching her throw Nazis around. I could watch that shit all day. And Lynda Carter looks exactly like Wonder Woman should look. It's bullshit that people don't accept she's as strong as Superman, though. Just because Amazons choose to wear really short negligees and babydolls and no bras while they do the shot put and race and high jump and javelin is no reason to discount their opinions or prowess. Maybe they like the silky feel of polyester and silk and lace against their skin while they exercise? Maybe lingerie is really the best exercise garb ever, and no one has figured this out but the Amazons. I will call bullshit on guns on Paradise Island to do that bullets and bracelets shit. They're a secret island separated from humanity (because men are evil) for millennia, but they use revolvers for a sacred ritual, a ritual of shooting at each other so they can try to deflect the bullets with some special bracelets? That's some *Zardoz* level weirdness. I wonder if I can see *Zardoz* again. I'd settle for *Death Race 2000*, but

Zardoz is the next level. I wonder where I can find *Zardoz* in the Bible. Maybe that's Sodom and Gomorrah, but I'd have to watch it again.

But then maybe the secret link for all special societies is really six-shooters. Maybe there was some sort of time warp in a stagecoach in the 1800s and all these pistols fell through into all the lost civilizations throughout time and space everywhere. Maybe it isn't aliens at all that made the pyramids and the Bermuda Triangle and Atlantis possible. Maybe it's the Colt Peacemaker. Maybe think on that.

*

DENISE

Denise's mother shows the Huppafills to the studio. Denise's painting is closest to the door, so she stands for presentation first. They are complimentary even though it isn't much to look at now, mostly fine pencil lines that are very hard to see and so many of them. Still, the mother gushes as best she can, *Isn't that something, Lenora, look at all those birds there, we've never been to the jungle before, well, we've been to Epcot,* and the daughter tries, but isn't really at language right now. Denise knows it isn't really something worth cooing over. Only a third of the birds are fully painted, a rough job at that, and only in the back and the sides. Denise doesn't like using a Mahl stick or a handrest, so she works back to front, the opposite of wiping your ass. Can't remember who used to say that to her. Not funny then, not funny now, but she will always hear it in

her head and he will never die now, even though all of him is burned out of her memory except those words. Maybe someday in the few days before she dies he will be all she think of. Maybe he has infected her memory, maybe he will be like shingles of the mind.

They fawn over Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert's work. Well, Mrs. Huppafill does, Miss Huppafill really is not capable of much enthusing at the moment. She is trying, she really does, but Lenora is not at her best today. All of the women are looking at her, she opens her mouth and a sound like someone stepping on a bagpipe comes out. This is not going over well with Denise's mother, but she is able to keep it contained. Her head tips a little more, she shakes her hair a little, and her smile spreads farther across her face as she thanks them. There is no obvious, no clear threat to an outsider, but Denise can feel it. Now, looking at the painting compared to the girl, it shows: it doesn't look exactly like her, it looks more like a prettier sister. For years, people will ask who that is in the painting, and Lenora will have to answer that it is her. Supposed to be her. She could have done worse by them. She could have made her uglier.

Now Denise wishes she had given Lenora a macaw, a rainbow or blue one, instead of the lovebirds. She knows the little birds are more appropriate than the big one, but she wishes she had given Lenora a present, something nice. She'll give her the nicer earrings, that's what she'll do. Diamonds for her, pearls for her mother. Not extremely noticeable, but Lenora will see, and her mother will, too. And the cats, she will make the

cats threatening towards her mother, can she do that? Maybe, it will take some rethinking in the work.

Denise glances up at her mother; her work seemed nearly finished today; what did she need them for today? Lucia Gilbert is sort of pushing paint around. She is putting a necklace on the mother, a choker collar of pearls--how did she know the mother Huppafill would wear different jewelry to the second sitting? The first time it was a set of pearls, Denise is sure of it. This time, a diamond tennis bracelet and a large aquamarine pendant on a diamond chain, not a nice shape or well-set piece. It looks like she bought it online or at the same place you buy your steaks and televisions, with less character than a bird shit on her chest. Denise remembers going to the family jeweler with her mother. He was Swiss. Lucia Gilbert told Denise the Swiss made the best jewelers. It was in their blood. Denise has one piece the family jeweler made for her, purchased for her by her grandmother. It is a golden thyrsus pendant, the traditional staff of Dionysus, her namesake god, made of gold, with a pinecone made of brown sapphires at the top and a silver ribbon tied in a bow around it. Her grandmother gave it to her when she turned seventeen. She asked her grandmother why. She didn't answer.

*

ASHLEY

Maybe it isn't so great, to have that limo pull up to where you are, have some rich guy come out and tell you, no, this isn't where you belong, come with me, your real life starts now, I'm going to take you to where your real family is. From now on, you'll live in a mansion. You'll eat only the best cuisine and you wear only the finest clothing, designer labels. You'll meet all of the beautiful people. The opening of *Diff'rent Strokes* is that dream. Arnold and Willis are playing basketball, together, as team of two, in a concrete jungle, when a white man in a three-piece suit that they somehow know shows up in a limo and they run to him. He herds them in--not ushers, because they run like wild, and he kind of pats them on the back as each gets into the back of the car. They drive somewhere they don't seem to know, because each of the boys is pointing out of the car at the buildings--*Is that the one? That one?*--and the opening ends with the older boy, Willis, looking back at the limo and the camera. I'm not sure what he's looking for or towards. He can't go back, and I don't know if he wants to. He should. Well, maybe he should. He isn't going to die, but his TV little brother will after a hard short narrow punch line of a life, and his TV sister will OD after a really bad run of it, and her son will shoot himself in the head not long after, and he will become a crackhead and have a very public trial for attempted murder that the public will be fascinated in because everyone wants to see a rich kid get his just deserts, burn, burn, because that limo was meant for one of us, so maybe, just maybe he should grab his little brother and run back to Harlem and play that basketball game forever and ever and never get back in that big black car with that man, because no matter how well meaning he is, he rides the Black Horse, he

spreads ignorance, he spreads fear, he fills the bellies of the Children of Israel with Babylon's wine and meat and pulls them away from the one true God.

DENISE

The gallery is half full of people. It's only seven o'clock; Patrick asked all of the artists showing to come a little early. A DJ is spinning something, technically music, not particularly pleasant. Some sort of electronic thing. Not syncopated, he's not blending the competing rhythms he's mixing in any way Denise's brain can hook into. There's no way to predict how soon the next beat will happen. It's not four-four time, it's not seven-eight, or eleven-four, or anything she can count. It's a junk drawer of beats. It's what they play when they're trying to brainwash you. Maybe she's joining a cult without knowing. Maybe she'll leave with a dog and won't shower again.

"You don't like the music?" Patrick is low in her ear, handing her a plastic cup of some red beverage. Sangria, it's shitty sangria. Too sweet and yet too acrid.

"He's not good. Why?" Something different tonight.

"You're glaring at him."

She doesn't say anything, just turns around and looks at Patrick. She couldn't smell him coming, that's why she didn't notice him coming. He's showered. He's still got on old paint-stained clothes, but he's much better looking when he's bathed. He should cut off his hair, though. Look less scumbaggy with less hair.

"He's my little brother, and no, he's terrible. He deserves all the glaring you've got. He'll think you want to bang him, though."

“No, not even a little bit,” she says, and Patrick laughs out loud, snorts a little, and briefly blushes from the snorting.

She has brought a couple more things, smaller work she has done, postcard sized skulls in fedoras and baseball hats, a skull with hand smoking a blunt, a skull wearing a gasmask, a skeleton pole dancing. and sees Patrick has increased the price on her work. None of the big ones are under \$1,200. The postcard sizes he gives to someone to quickly mat and frame; at least \$100 for those. Maybe she will get out of Virginia. Maybe she can get to Paris.

D’Artagnan is there, selling his linocut prints. They’re very nice, mostly animals with other things within and without: a fox with a supernova inside, a white buffalo filled with a dirty bomb, people running away from something in terror and a flock of geese or maybe swans taking off cut out of them. There are six artists in all, including Patrick. Denise had never found out which work was his. Oils and pastels exclusively of many different nude women, reminding her very much of Edgar Degas. They’re well-executed. One of the girls in a picture is already in the gallery with a friend of hers. She’s pretty, college-aged, and keeps looking at Patrick. She has had a couple of cups of sangria, and is camped out by the painting of her.

Denise has answered a few questions about her work. A few people who work in technology and want to seem hip, exactly the same kind of people who bought her work in New York except there it was finance or lawyering, or maybe they are really hip, who

gives a shit, really seems to like her work. Everyone wants to be the one with the next new thing, on the crest of the wave. Her work is the new thing, just for a moment.

A man who is showing his mediocre prints--etchings of people with cameras for heads or eyes or hearts seem to be his thing--at the gallery asks her if she does prints.

"You should consider it. We can do a limited run. Not many, fifty or so."

"Maybe."

"I'm Alex."

"Maybe, Alex."

Denise gives Alex her number to talk about prints. He has a set up for it, a giant scanner, a giant printer for canvas, ad infinitum. She doesn't have to

Someone else has taken over the turntables. Now it's all jazz, cool and hard bop and a little west coast. James Magary would be disappointed, mixing movements like that. But James Magary isn't here.

Almost all of her paintings have been spoken for when Dr. Jacoby shows up. It's nine o'clock now. Still very hot in the gallery, still full of people.

He buys the last two, a painting of a skeleton dentist high on gas looking at himself in the mirror, and the Circle K triptych. Each costs more than twice what he paid for the first. He pays without saying anything to her.

Denise goes out back for a cigarette. There are a few people outside, mostly smoking electronic gadgets. A few move away from her as she lights up. She sees a glowing ember a little ways away from her, smells the weird burning hair smoke of a

bidi. The girl smoking it shrugs while making eye contact at her, touches her fingers and her thumb together in a circle, and jerks an imaginary penis toward the electronic smokers. Denise blows her smoke at them, tapes her ashes in their direction, and takes a step toward the bidi girl.

“Hey,” a guy says, stepping from the gallery towards her. He hands her a beer.

“Thanks.”

“You were looking at me earlier?”

Denise can't remember this.

“When I was at the turntables. You were looking at me, kinda intensely. We really shared something, I thought.”

Now she remembers.

“Oh, I suppose that's what I was doing. Thanks for the beer.” She walks toward the girl with the bidi.

“Do you know that guy?” the girl with the bidi asks in a low voice. It's hard to see what she really looks like in the dark. Pixie cut, Denise can tell that much, and she's wearing pants.

“Nope.”

“He's still there.”

“Is he coming over here?” Denise asks.

“Not yet. I'll let you know.”

“Thank you.” Denise raises the beer to her mouth.

“Wait: that beer is open. Maybe don’t drink it. He’s creepy.”

“You think he’s that bad?”

“It happens here all the time. College town. Lotta roofies. I haven’t met you at one of these before.” She offers her hand. “I’m Egypt.” Leaning closer, Denise can see a well-proportioned heart-shaped face, dark eyes, wide mouth, slim neck. She probably gets compared to Audrey Hepburn, but that’s not the closest. If you squished Twiggy’s face, that would be it.

“Denise.”

“You do the skeleton watercolors. Nice work.”

“Thanks.”

“I do the woodcuts.”

“Very nice. Love the play on *The Lady and the Unicorn*.”

Denise and Egypt have been smoking and talking about art for who knows how long when Patrick interrupts them.

“Ladies, ladies, I’m so glad you found one another. You should come to the after party. It’s going to be at Benny’s.” Patrick has his arms open and is trying to put his arms around both of their waists, and they both step away from him. He can’t figure out which of them to chase, and he can’t touch either of them from where he’s standing just now, so he just stands there with his arms open like a ringmaster or a supervillain. “It’s going to be great.” He is committed, to the party, to the invitation, to the big arms.

Twenty minutes later, Denise is in a car with Egypt and Egypt's roommate, a girl named Julia, who probably shouldn't be driving at this point. Julia has long brown hair and a tank top and jeans and her eyeliner is all over her face. She's had too much to drink and maybe something else, maybe too many pulls off a bong or a couple of pills or something. She's not weaving or slurring her words, but there's something not quite connected about all of her sentences.

"I'm so embarrassed," Julia says.

"Don't worry about it, nobody cares," Egypt says.

"But everyone knows," Julia says.

"They wouldn't if you wouldn't keep telling everyone. It's a right at this corner. But stop first, there's a stop sign there."

"I fucked Patrick," Julia says, looking at Denise in the rearview mirror.

"I don't care," Denise says.

"She didn't know until you just told her," Egypt says.

"Oh, fuck, fuck."

"Stop! Stop. It's a stop sign. Now, turn right."

"I'm so embarrassed, it's so embarrassing," Julia says.

"I didn't say that to make you feel worse, honey," Egypt says with a deep sigh. "I just want you to know that no one is spreading this around. No one cares. If you stop talking about it, no one will know."

"It's just so fucking *embarrassing*. And he has a girlfriend."

“Yep,” Egypt says.

“He has a girlfriend,” Julia says, looking at Denise in the rearview mirror.

“I still don’t care what happened between you. That’s your business,” Denise says.

“Did he tell you he had a girlfriend?” Julia’s eyes are still on Denise.

“Red light stop red light stop red light stop red light stop!” Egypt says.

There is a squealing of brakes and a tumbling of bodies toward the front of the car and they come to a stop at a red light. The girls start to giggle. Next to them, to the left: a police cruiser. The three girls look over at the cops and give them weak smiles. The cop gives them a stern look. Julia mouths, *Sorry*, at them, and, miraculously, when the light turns, the police pull away first.

“It’s on the next block,” Egypt says. “One of us can’t drink if we’re going to drive home.”

“Oh, oh, Patrick is here.”

“Do you want to sleep it off? In the car?”

“I shouldn’t have any more, either,” Denise says. “I live with my mom, and coming up drunk is like high school. We can sober up together. It’ll be weirder than drinking. Let’s try it.”

“Really?” Julia says, looking at her. “You don’t know me. You might want to leave me.”

“You don’t know me. You might hate me after ten minutes,” Denise says.

“Girls club,” Egypt says, putting lipstick on. “Let’s go be mean to boys.”

Benny’s turns out to be the house of a guy named Benny, or rather, the place Benny stays. It’s got a couch on the front porch, and a lot of people are there, way younger than Denise. Julia and Egypt are at least five years younger than she is. Looking around the packed living room, Denise notes being thirty makes her one of the oldest people here. She’s not sure how she feels about that. She just told two strangers she doesn’t know if she can trust she lives with her mom. Whatever, it doesn’t matter. The girl who was driving her almost got a DUI and told her about her sexual indiscretions, so it’s not like she was sharing anything above and beyond. But if Julia’s that indiscreet, she’ll probably tell everyone everything Denise tells her within twenty-four hours.

The three of them camp out in the backyard on a mostly clean picnic table, smoking and drinking tap water out of red keg cups. D’Artagnan waves to Denise from the other side of the backyard and she waves back, but she doesn’t smile. Egypt and Julia tell her he has a girlfriend, too. All the boys in this scene have girlfriends. None of the girlfriends do the art thing, so none of them come to the parties.

“Hey.” It’s Patrick’s little brother again. He’s looking straight at Denise.

“Ian,” says Julia, punching him lightly on the back.

“Oh, hey, Julia,” he says, faltering.

“You stole a crate of my records. I want them back, you little shit.”

“I’ll get them back to you.”

“Are they in your car? Were you fucking them up tonight? I want that shit back. That shit’s my fucking livelihood, it’s your fucking hobby, you took that shit out of my fucking car you turd. You stole a crate of my fucking records.” She yells really loud now, a little more cogent, but not sober yet. People in the immediate vicinity are looking. Ian is looking for his big brother to save him.

“I have them, don’t worry, I’ll get them back to you.” He is shielding himself from her slapping blows. “Fuck, stop.”

“Little piss, you limp dicked pussy, I don’t give a shit anymore, I want my fucking records back, you pizza-dicked scrote!” People are laughing.

“Fuck, you crazy cunt, get off. You’re a slut and a cunt. Get the fuck off me. Fucking cooze.” He is trying to grab her arms but she swings wild and fast.

“You’re a thief and a terrible musician. Who cares who I screw if I can do my fucking job, you piece of fuck. Give me back my records you little boy.” This insult lands hard, a couple of people in the crowd react with hard *ooooos*. “You *child*.”

Patrick comes over with a case of records. Julia begins to go through them, examining each of them for damage and bickering with Patrick over which were and were not in the case when Ian stole them. Ian attempts to slink off and is stopped by Julia and Patrick both.

Most of the crowd has lost interest when a younger woman comes up to Denise.

“You’re Denise Gilbert.” The smell of red wine and stale sweat come off of her in a funky wave.

“Yes,” Denise says, taking care not to blow smoke into this woman’s face. She’s maybe twenty-four or so. Not pretty. An unfortunate face. Eyes small and close. Weak chin. Wearing some sort of men’s jeans that don’t fit her well. She’s got a cute shape, if thick, and she’s wearing something that disguises the curvy parts of her in a shapeless sort of lump. Work what you have. If you have ten pounds of ass, know that some people want that, too.

“I’m a Gilbert, too.” Not a Southerner. Somewhere else. Northern, probably.

“Is that right?”

“Well, by marriage. Smith-Gilbert.” She says it with some finality, but Denise doesn’t catch the ball. Denise just sits there with Egypt, staring at her. “You’re my stepsister.”

“You’re the Professor’s wife’s daughter?” Denise says. “She’s a doctor of some sort, isn’t she, Miss Smith-Gilbert?” Denise offers her hand out to shake.

“Uh, yeah, she’s a psychologist.” The girl takes Denise’s hand, shakes it weakly.

“Well, that’s very nice. Two doctorates in the house. How nice for you.”

“I’m Lily,” the girl says.

“Of course you are.”

“It’s so nice to finally meet you,” Lily says.

“Charmed,” Denise says.

“I am so so sorry.”

“Excuse me?” There is an abruptness in Denise’s voice even she wasn’t expecting.

“You know. About your brother’s suicide.”

Denise stands up.

“Miss Smith, it was remarkable to meet you. Please give my regards to your mother and stepfather for me.” Egypt stands as well.

“I--I didn’t mean--I--I--”

“Miss Smith,” Egypt says, “you really do know how to make a name for yourself. Julia, we’ll be at the car.”

“Do you know that chick?” Denise asks Egypt in the car.

“I’ve seen her around, but she’s not my type. Groupie girl, a little easy, but she’s straight so I’ve never come across her. Why? You want me to cut her?”

“No.”

“That’s the first time I’ve seen you smile, ever.”

“Yeah?”

“You’d probably laugh if I really cut her.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“Okay.”

“It’s true, though.”

“Okay.”

"I had a twin."

"Okay."

"He killed himself when we were eighteen and then I left for college and now I'm here but most people think he just died in his sleep."

"That's heavy."

"Now my cousin's dying. He's my age, too."

"That's kind of fucked."

"Yeah."

"Okay."

Julia comes out with the crate of records and another guy, one Denise doesn't recognize. He helps her put the records in the trunk.

"I'm Benny," he says, and offers his hand to Denise.

"Are we disinited from now on?" Egypt says.

"Fuck no! Can I come stay with you? Because my house is straight infested with chucklebunnies. That kid needed to get slapped a long time ago. I might go slap him myself. If it's okay with you, Julia?"

"I want nothing to do with that family ever again. Not for any amount of money."

"Well, I hope I get to see you again, because I like you more than I like them," he says, and it sounds earnest. "I've just known them more than I haven't. They're like my brothers now. It's hard to unknow them, and they do some stupid shit, especially to women. They really don't like women, and they don't know it. Fucked up."

“It’s nice to hear that Benny,” Egypt says, and she turns the key in the ignition.

The girls drop Denise at home with a promise of talking to her soon.

Denise washes her face, excited. It’s been a long time, not since Diamond, that she had a girl to talk to.

*

ASHLEY

The brownies don’t taste like poison--I’ve had too much cut in my coke before to know exactly what that tastes like--but they are silty, sticky, gummy. There’s something in there, something metallic. I ask Denise what it is, and she tells me it’s ground up watercolors with high lead content. It’ll seem like I just got lead poisoning from some other source. There’s lead in everything, and I’ve been in so many county hospitals lately with so much flaking paint, Jesus. I should have just eaten the paint all along.

The price for the brownies is a portrait. That’s fine; I really don’t mind. She’s brought a travel easel and her paintbox. Weird, it looks like the kind I had when I was a kid, with the eight little sections in it. I would have thought she’d have something classier.

“Don’t they have grownup watercolors?”

“This is what I use.” She shows it to me. It really is a little kid’s paintbox. The white one that folds like a wallet with room on one side for a brush and to mix the paints together in the dirty water.

“But they do make them, don’t they? For professionals, who do this for a living?”

“I’ve replaced the cakes, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“So, why the box?”

“My teacher gave it to me.”

“Did you fuck?” Weird, I never see Denise having sex with anyone. I don’t know why. She’s pretty enough. A lot of men like really underweight girls, just like guys like twinkles. Thank god they do, because I always had a place to sleep.

“No. How do you want to pose?”

“I don’t care. Were you in love with him?”

“No. You can watch TV while I paint, so you should be as comfortable as you want. It’s best if you stay still.”

“Was he in love with you?”

“No.”

“Did he fuck other students?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think so. He married twice, and both of them had been students, but I think they had graduated a long time before.”

“You ever mail him? Email him?”

“No.”

“What’s his name?” I have my little tablet ready.

“Search for Erik Van Lauden painter.”

He has Rasputin eyes. And the face of a *Station to Station*-era David Bowie who just aged from there to sixty or so with the eyes of a cult leader instead of the eyes of a rockstar. And no, rockstar and cultleader are not the same so don’t even come at me with that kind of level of bullshit. Go watch some shit about the People’s Temple or Waco or Warren Jeffs, and watch some shit about the Beatles or Radiohead. The only fear that might happens when you mention the Beatles is hearing that shitty Christmas song over and over again. Another good thing about cancer: I will never have to hear that song again. I can thank the Baby Jesus for that.

“He is kinda hot.” He is. I’d definitely suck his cock after doing too much coke with him in the ashram.

“It’s not just the way he looks. He’s got a really strong presence.”

“The whole cult leader package.” I’m surprised Denise hasn’t joined a cult yet. There’s still time, I guess.

“Kinda.” She’s taking some photographs of me with her phone. I guess she might need them when she’s working from home. From all sorts of perspectives. I haven’t seen myself in a long time, and I kind of want to see these, but I also don’t. I don’t want to know what’s happened to me.

“You ever miss pageants?” Despite the poison, the brownies aren’t bad. Better without milk. I can do this.

“Fuck no, they were awful.” She’s drawing me now. I don’t know why I thought she would be painting me immediately. This makes more sense. She doesn’t look at the paper much when she’s drawing, just staring at me. “No. Not at all.”

“I always assumed you liked them.”

“Mother liked them. Mother wanted to win.”

“What would you have liked?”

“I never got to find out. I never got to pick anything. Mother picked everything for me. She painted, so I paint. She did pageantry, so I did pageantry. She sang, played piano, did gymnastics, all of it was her.” Her hands are still controlled but her voice, it doesn’t get angry, it gets soft and kind of out of rhythm. “No, Bernard was the one who got out. The Professor didn’t know anything about sports, and Mother couldn’t be there, so he was free.”

“He was freer.” Bernard never felt free. Bernard knew Denise had it worse from Lucia, but that was because they didn’t know yet. About me and the whole gay thing.

“If you ask me, he was free. If you ask him, he was freer. He didn’t have to drive with Mother twenty-two hours in a weekend to compete in a beauty pageant in Jacksonville. Nashville the next, Bowling Green the next.”

“Asked him.”

“Asked him. Because he’s gone now.”

“Yeah.”

“Some bitch came up to me at a party last night and said she was my stepsister. I didn’t know I had one.”

“I didn’t either.” I did know this, but she’s talking, and that’s good.

“She comes up to me and says she’s so sorry about my brother’s suicide. There, in front of everyone, and she’s just met me.”

I am having a hard time breathing now.

“So I guess that’s what the Professor considers dinner conversation in his new household. The rudest person I think I’ve ever met. They aren’t family. Only family knows.”

Only family knows. I can’t breathe.

Now Denise and Mama are both over me. I must have lost my air. That doesn’t happen very often.

“I’m sorry, Mama.”

“Don’t worry, baby. Are you okay?”

“I ate too quickly, I think. I lost my air.”

“Tell me what to do,” Denise says. She doesn’t look scared. Concerned, but not scared.

“He passes out sometimes. Vasovagal reflex. Stress, pain, just if he coughs too hard he can pass out. When they give him shots in the wrong place he goes out. Easy now.” Mama is helping me get my legs moving a little, to keep the blood from pooling too much. When did I become so weak.

“Then they feel like assholes,” I say. So quiet. I sound like I’m ten feet away from myself.

“Well, they are assholes. They never think vasovagal reflex is a real thing and it is. So just having a visitor here out of the routine may have given his body a boost. Everything is pretty much the same every day. All the blood may be at his stomach. Who knows?” Mama is being so nice right now.

“Should I pack up? I can come back. Tomorrow, the next day.” Denise is ready to start leaving.

“Yes, I think that might be best, Denise. Thank you.”

After she’s gone, I ask Mama.

“Mama, are we family to Denise and Aunt Lucy?”

“Of course, baby.”

“Then why didn’t I know about Bernard?” She stops adjusting my pillows for me.

“Didn’t know what about Bernard?”

“Denise told me she was at a party and she met Lily and Lily said Bernard killed himself and Denise was mad because only family knew. But I didn’t know, Mama.”

Mama takes my hand.

“Ashley, I should have told you. Your Auntie wants to believe it wasn’t what it was. So she told everyone else a lie about it. At the time, I didn’t know how to tell you because I knew you two were involved. I didn’t want to hurt you more after you lost him

by knowing what happened. I'm not saying this is a good reason, but I thought you might make it through without knowing. I was wrong."

"How did he do it?"

"Pills. A lot of pills."

"Did he leave a note?"

She shakes her head.

"Who found him?"

"Your Cousin Denise did."

All these years I thought he was just taken from me. He left. He up and left.

What an asshole.

DENISE

Denise is making decent money now with the paintings at the gallery, has been selling prints for a couple hundred bucks and the originals for over a thousand. She's making a little nest egg for herself. Things could go okay for her this time. Egypt and Julia are talking about leaving, maybe for Austin, and Denise is cut in on the plan. She still doesn't know that much about them. Egypt was a debutante, comes from money, doesn't like talking about it, forgives Denise all her pageantry, but Julia finds it fascinating.

"Like JonBenét Ramsey?"

"She was killed when I still did pageants. Five years younger than me."

"Did you do things like that? Like *Toddlers and Tiaras*?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Like, the wigs and the tanning and nails and stuff."

"You mean glitz pageants. Yes, I did those. There wasn't as much tanning, but everyone wore wigs. Sometimes you wear two at once. And you wear makeup."

"Did you have fake teeth?"

"A flipper? Yes."

"That is so crazy."

"I suppose. You get to the art scene and you see how crazy people are for their process and it's the same. Some people stop eating, I saw someone make all of his paint

and ink out of dead animals, some people take insane amounts of drugs to produce, everyone is so competitive. It's the same. And most people are just as mean."

"I haven't seen that girl Lily around since that night," Julia says.

*

ASHLEY

If I were Bill Cosby, I would do everything in my power to get rid of the credits for the first season of *The Cosby Show*. The whole family (minus Sandra, because I guess they decided a couple of episodes in there wasn't enough snap or something and they needed another child so they sneaked her in) goes to the park in a dark van and then there are shots of Cosby and the family doing fun things. Only it's not snapshots and it's not video, it's like stuttering, like trails between all of the pictures before it settles on one of them. There are something like twenty-seven real photos (I've tried counting a couple of times and it keeps creeping me out more and more), warping and changing before they land on another image.

Someone was trying to tell us that Bill Cosby will give you a roofie. He didn't give a shit in 1984 in the park with his family and he doesn't give a shit now.

I don't know if the brownies are working or not. I think they might be. I have eaten them every day for a week now. I think my left side is a little weak. Nurse Kimmie seemed concerned. That pleased me.

Maybe soon I can give Bernard a piece of my fucking mind. Or maybe there'll be nothing and I can rest.

DENISE

Denise is upstairs in her room working on her painting of Ashley. She's making one of him as a skeleton, and it's not working. Well, it's working, the cardigan and the afghan with the patches his mother keeps crocheting in and he keep picking out, they look good. The television has the beginning of *Family Ties* on, right at the end, the painting, except they're skeletons, because that's what he was watching one day, and the theme song is haunting her. Sha-la-la-la! She sang it for Egypt and Julia, when Julia didn't believe she sang as one of her pageant talents. *Sing, sing something! I'll bet we've been together, for a million years.*

There's something about the skull, though, there's something about the teeth. They're too. Alive. It seems like there's still too much Ashley in his mouth, even though he's just a skeleton. Not right, something's not right.

She finishes it, but starts another one, one of him full bodied. Starts the sketch. The head. Still, not right, not right.

Just the teeth, the teeth in space. Nothing else, just his teeth, the living part of him. And the television, because that was working. And his hand, holding the remote.

She needs some sleep. Too much work in too few days.

*

ASHLEY

I wonder if he'll recognize me. Will he still want me? Would we even be compatible? He was a little kid when he died. And that was kind of the ultimate breakup. Maybe we aren't supposed to be together, if there really is a heaven. Maybe we wouldn't even meet. Or maybe it would be like bumping into someone you used to know and being so happy for them now, so glad you made it in publishing, but I won the lotto, so I'm not even jealous.

*

DENISE

Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert is suspicious this morning around Denise in the kitchen. She is wearing a buckskin dress with turquoise beadwork, a headband, a black wig braided into two pigtails, and moccasins.

"What have you been doing, Denise?"

"I'm sorry, Mother?"

"Every day you leave here. I don't see you for hours."

"I've been spending time with Ashley."

"When you're not with Ashley."

"I met some girls at the gallery. They're nice. I might move to Austin with them. Do you know the Lundtons? Egypt Lundton?"

“The Lundtons are a very fine family.”

“She is a very nice girl. Her breeding shows.” For a moment they are quiet, then Denise decides to put it out there. “I met Lily Smith-Gilbert the other day.”

“She’s a horrid little beast, isn’t she?”

“Awful person. And not so little,” Denise says.

“Well, it has been some years. Was she cruel to you?”

“Unintentionally.”

“Your father?”

“My brother.”

Miss Virginia First Runner Up 1982 Lucia Gilbert leaves the room.

When Denise leaves for her aunt’s house, her mother gives her a letter. It is addressed to her father, *Professor Gilbert*.

“Would you run this by the post office, please? I want to make sure he gets it. I don’t want another day to go by without his daughter knowing about all of the charm schools in the area.”

Ashley doesn’t look good, but he doesn’t look like the clay is killing him. Clay can’t kill someone, can it? Denise didn’t look it up, because she didn’t want to know. It would be unintentional if it killed him at all.

“Did you finish?” So much tamer than when they first met. It makes her a little sad.

“They came out kind of. Twisted.”

“It’s okay. I looked at all the stuff Patrick put up on his website. You should really make your own.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Really?”

“With a couple of friends.”

“You have friends?” He must be really sick. He hasn’t narrowed his eyes at her, or tilted his head back to look down his nose at her.

“I met them at the gallery.”

“Are you sure they’re legit?”

“Not at all.”

“Fair enough. Let me see.”

She brings the skeleton over to him first. He starts to touch it, then draws back.

“It belongs to you. Touch it as much as you want. Lick it. Rub your balls on it,” she says. He chuckles weakly.

“What else did you paint?” he asks after a few quiet minutes.

Denise shows him the watercolor of him alive.

“Jesus, is that what I look like now?” He touches his own face, his chest, puts his fingers around his wrist. “There’s no meat left.”

“You’re not as skinny as my mother. You’ve still got at least a size to go,” Denise says. She’s joking, but she still thinks her mother might be smaller.

“I don’t know. I don’t think you’ve seen my legs. What’s the last one?”

Denise shows him the teeth in space.

“My teeth always were my best feature. Mama says I have my daddy’s teeth.”

“You’re not creeped out by this one?”

“It’s the least creepy of the three. I can see my teeth right now. I’ve seen them my whole life. Nothing unnatural or wrong about that. Although it is a little like a bad *Sesame Street* bit, one of those ones they shouldn’t have shown to children.”

“Well, they’re all for you.”

“Thank you. And thank you for the brownies.

*

ASHLEY

Mama is looking at the portraits with me.

“I think I like them better than my sister’s. Don’t tell her I said that.”

“I look like shit, Mama.”

“You have cancer, that’s all. You’re still prettier than I am.”

“I like the teeth one best.”

“I like the one with your face.”

“Well, soon they’ll all be yours. They’ll be worth money someday. Right now they’re selling for over a thousand dollars.”

“Do you want me to sell them?”

“Do whatever you want with them. I don’t really give a shit.” I am so thin, and kind of gray. She could have been more flattering. I look so hopped up. My lips are all cracked. If they ever want to do a *Faces of Cancer* thing like they do *Faces of Meth*, I’m your man. Maybe that means I’m going to die soon.

“Can we talk about my arrangements, Mama?”

DENISE

Denise almost forgets to drop the letter at the post office, remembers to get it there before the last pickup. There is money waiting for her at the gallery.

“Hello.” Patrick is not so nice to her since she has taken up with Egypt and Julia and Ian got called a piece of fuck.

“Hi, Patrick. You said there was some money here for me.”

“Yep. You’re really in demand. A lady came by here wanting to know if you had anymore paintings showing.”

“Oh? What did she look like?”

“Blonde, thin, a little older, prettyish, moneyed, you know the type. Country club. Strange she was into your stuff. Or anything we’d have here,” he says, picking up the fumble. “She seemed more like she’d want a Picasso, or a Warhol, or something that all of her friends would know the name of. Nothing risky, nothing new. I showed her the photographs of the paintings you’d shown and she left. Didn’t leave her number or anything. She seemed satisfied.”

When Denise gets home, her mother is there. She is wearing a yellow terrycloth romper with a zipper down the front. She is barefoot.

“I mailed your letter, Mother.”

“Thank you, Denise.”

That night, Denise dreams. She has not dreamt since she can remember. She dreams of running away from home with her brother. She is packing and he is yelling at her to hurry, hurry, and she runs down to the car to find Ashley sitting shotgun. She is mad; she thought she would be sitting in front. She's the twin. If she doesn't hurry and get in the car, she'll be left behind. Hurry, hurry. She tries to get in the car, but there's only room for her in the trunk. She can't fit. She tries to hold on as her brother pulls away, too fast, and falls off the car as her mother comes rushing out of the house.

*

ASHLEY

I am sorry I have nothing special left to give you. To give anyone. I'm so sorry.

DENISE

Ashley's funeral is a strange sort of an affair. Family who didn't like him but do like his mother have come. Denise is glad Lily Smith-Gilbert is not there. She very much hopes her mother's advice about charm school was really taken to heart. Graceless boor.

Three weeks later, she and Egypt and Julia are in a new apartment in Austin. Denise likes it there. Enough of home that she doesn't feel so out of place, but not so much that she feels underneath a couch cushion all day. She has just given her mother her forwarding address a couple of days ago and didn't expect a package already.

"I don't know what it is," Egypt says. "I didn't try to shake it, but it rattled when I signed for it. I marked that it was damaged on the receipt. Keep the wrapping, because you might need to take it up with the package company."

Denise thanks her and takes it to her room. It is from her aunt.

A box inside a box. A note. *From your cousin. He asked for you to have these special. Keep in mind, please, we needed an order from a judge to make it nice and legal. Hope you are holding up well in Tx. XoX, Lucy*

Inside the box is another box, still Kraft paper. Whatever rattles rattles inside there. She knows, she knows what it is. Yes: a peek. All there. She pours them out onto her table to count.

Thirty. He had thirty teeth when he died. Carefully, carefully, she puts them back in the box and looks for a good place to put them.

Text begins here.