

6-2022

Relief Is the Thing with Teeth

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RELIEF IS THE THING WITH TEETH

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

June 2022

BY

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VERA

June 9th, 1972 | Day of the Camping Trip | Vera's House

Today, Relief is mired in the kind of heat that makes you feel like you're trapped in a mason jar: it's airless and muted.

Cat and I have been trying to focus on *One Life to Live* before local news starts, but we're sweating. Cat's baby hairs are glued in little twists on her glossy forehead, and no matter how many times I stretch back into the couch to air out my armpits, I can't dry the *stickiness*.

Cat still hasn't explained why she didn't show up at school today. It's becoming something of a habit, but I'm pretty sure she's feeling a little messed up by that postcard she got a few days ago. I try not to push her on topics like that because it never goes anywhere, and it just makes her crabby.

She was sitting on the front porch wearing a pair of her mama's short overalls when I got home from the bus stop. Cat stood up and brushed the dirt from the backs of her legs as she waited for me to unlock the door.

I'd said, "Hey, you."

And she'd muttered: "Dang cicadas gonna blow out my eardrums."

They *are* awful loud this afternoon. I can still hear their high, tinny whine from outside. On the porch, I barely resisted the impulse to tell Cat about cicadas, how only the boy ones sang. Mama says it's because of their tymbal. They vibrate from the inside out. Mama taught me how to treat ringing in a person's ears with all the dead cicadas that litter every gutter, sidewalk, and yard by the end of an Ozarkian summer. You shuck them and then you boil their skins. The extract they leave behind is supposed to still vibrations in your inner ear.

I could tell Cat wasn't in the mood for weird healer knowledge.

No matter how we contort ourselves, if we stay put for longer than 30 seconds, the backs of our thighs turn into a Slip 'N Slide. We both smell generally sour, but it's okay because there isn't a single person in all of Missouri right now who doesn't smell, too.

Marshall, my brother, is supposed to fix the window unit, but I haven't heard any sounds from his bedroom since we got here almost 2 hours ago. I'm certain he's passed out. My toolbox is limited to mending human bodies, unfortunately, not metal ones.

Mama is out attending a difficult birth in Peoplesville. I'm not allowed to go to those yet, not before my Conversion is complete. It didn't stop her from hurling rapid-fire questions at me as she prepared her kit at 4:30AM this morning, though. ("Pain options?" Or: "And if she's allergic?" Or: "Baby is breached, Vera—what do you do?" And: "Stitching procedures for 1st and 2nd degree tears?" And then she'll throw in for dessert: "How do you stimulate latching in a finicky baby?")

I've got a good imagination when it comes to learning about healing. I've never had anyone to practice on, save Cat who has scuffed her knees a few times and had a cavity once or twice. The worst I ever fixed on her was a badly bent pinkie when it got caught in the storm door at my house.

Cat lets out a long moan as she unfolds her legs from beneath her, stretching her arms up to the ceiling and arching her back off the couch. I hear her spine pop pop pop as she does. She's been grinding her teeth, like Otis does. I can hear her jaw clicking. I could fix it for her. But she doesn't like me ambushing her with offers to heal things that she's never told me about. She tells me that it freaks her out, that I can tell these things without her ever opening her mouth or showing me.

I remember the look on my second-grade teacher's face when I told her that I could shrink the growths down on her feet if she'd take off her shoes and stockings. I got sent to the principal with the entire class cackling as I walked out of the room.

The principal called my mama and she picked me up. We walked home because Mama doesn't drive, and Daddy was back in jail by then. I told Mama that all I had wanted to do was help her, my teacher, because she limped around in her too-tight shoes all day. Her toes couldn't uncurl right so it was cramping up the bottoms and running up the backs of her calves. Mama had been impressed, I remember, that I could tell these things without even touching her, but she told me not to invade anyone else's privacy again.

Or at least not tell them that I know what I know.

Mama told me then, and I never forgot, that I can't go shocking people with a laundry list of their ailments. People's bodies have a lot of problems because they're like books with chapters and scenes and plots, but a lot of people don't want to read ahead—it spoils the ending—or else it just reminds them that they're unhappy.

Even if you can fix what's physically hurting them, you can't do much else.

Still, even eight years later, sitting on this damp couch with my best friend, I have to remind myself to close my own mouth.

It's opened, automatically, to tell her that I can make her jaw stop clicking like a pair of tap shoes every time she opens her mouth.

She doesn't notice my mouth opening and closing like a guppy.

“Hey, can you fix this stupid jaw thing? It's all clicky. It's giving me a headache on top of the heat one I already have.”

It's a relief. I really, really wanted to fix it.

I'm cupping the bottom of Cat's face, just for a few beats so that I can see where it tendrils out, this anxiety. I slide my fingers downwards so that now they're just tenting her chin, and I imagine the way everything flows outwards until I hit those gnarls. I won't be able to untangle it entirely, not without extra help, but I can relieve it enough that she forgets about it for a while.

This is what I'm doing when my brother comes home. I hear my brother before I see him. His jean pockets are always jangling with loose change, and he thuds around in his work boots like he's trying to dislodge every speck of gravel and dried mud he can, leaving a little trail. I wouldn't be surprised if that's what he's actually doing. He likes to make everyone else clean up after him, which is almost always me. Mama doesn't have time for junk like that.

"Checkin for cavities, Vee?" Marshall says. I frown at Cat's jaw. He thinks he's funnier than he is.

Cat gently pulls her face away from me. "I brush pretty good." I did fix that cavity for her before, though.

"Maybe you can give my brother some hints," I say. I grin.

"You girls hot in here?" He looks to Cat and raises his eyebrows almost to his hairline, which really isn't that far up. He needs a haircut. "Wanna play some strip poker, Cat? Fraid that window unit ain't gonna be resurrected any time soon."

I open my mouth to tell him not to say gross things to my best friend, but Cat cuts right in front of me. That isn't surprising because she doesn't really need my help sparring with people.

"You've never fixed anything in your life, Mars." Cat smiles, paired with a little head tilt. She's got a sweet-tea smile that can lull you into complacency right before she clubs you over the back of the head. "You wanna play strip poker with your sister?"

Marshall ignores her. “Wanna take off for a few days?” He asks.

“No,” Cat says.

“Ain’t talking just to you. Don’t flatter yourself. Besides, Connie’s coming.”

“Oh, Connie,” I say at the exact same time that Cat sticks her tongue out and says, “Ugh, Connie.”

“Nothin wrong with Connie. Don’t be jealous, Cat.”

“She hates me.”

Marshall smirks then, because he doesn’t like to grin on account of the gaps in his teeth.

“Well, I intend to keep her so busy she don’t even remember you exist.”

We both make faces.

Before I can tell him that we aren’t interested, Cat says: “Okay, we’ll go.”

I’m maybe a little mad at Mama, only because I think she’s been really hard on me over the last week, and I don’t think there’s any reason why I deserved that. Nothing has changed! I wake up at 4:30 every morning to get the tea going and to start prep, and I go to school, and I earn excellent grades, and then I come home every night and study the properties of herbalism, and when I’m done with *that*, I help with more prep.

The Des—I mean *Desmond*—thing is silly. It doesn’t mean anything, and yet Mama’s been angry with me for a week straight.

“Yeah,” I say. I nod my head. “We’ll go.”

**

June 6th, 1972 | Three Days Before the Camping Trip | Vera’s Front Porch

Des—I mean, *Desmond* McAlister is standing on my front porch.

Desmond McAlister hasn't stepped foot on this porch for eight years. And now, here he is, stooped some at the shoulders, hands stuffed in the pockets of his ripped-up jeans. It's one of the first real muggy afternoons, and his curly hair a frizzy cloud around his head. The cicadas are trilling, and Dusty the mastiff mix is barking in a very frustratedly behind Mr. Allen's privacy fence.

Already, Desmond is dredging up memories I'd prefer stay smothered.

"Desmond," I say.

He makes a face.

"That's your name, isn't it?"

He stares at me.

"*Ain't it?*" I press with a smirk.

"I just got here and you're already starting shit." He's taken his hands out of his pockets and now he's trying to force his fingers through his hair. He's got sweat stains on his Pink Floyd band tee that he ruined with a bad tie-dye job.

"You're just sensitive."

I grimace at what I just said, but I'm instantly annoyed by it. You aren't supposed to react to anything you do, that's what Mama always says. Especially in our line of work, you say a thing or you do a thing, and you're supposed to say and do it with resolution. With a metaphorical palm slapped on a metaphorical table. Folks are always looking to question, Mama says. Town gossip and lore have made them wary of us. They watch us like—not like hawks, because they ain't predators—they watch us like starving dogs. They're scared of us, but they need us, so they don't plan on going anywhere, they just plan on scuttling back if we move too quick or they'll bare their teeth a little bit if they are having a good day.

But, Preserve, if their backs go out or their baby is breached or they've knocked a few bones loose, they come creeping back with their metaphorical tail between their metaphorical legs.

And then we help them. We help them because that's our calling; that's what we're meant to do. We just have to do it like we know everything about everything.

They need us. I know we need them, too, but I haven't had the guts to say it out loud.

I think I sound bitter sometimes. I don't know if that's just the aftertaste of Mama's teachings or it's because of something I really feel. That's hard to know when it comes to Mama. I spend all of my time with her, when I'm not with Cat, and it's sometimes hard to tell where she ends and I begin. (Marshall says he can't fart on me without Mama smelling it, which saves me some headaches but also makes me anxious when I realize that the only time I've spent by myself on some days is when I use the bathroom or take out the garbage to Marshall's truck.)

In an attempt to shield my grimace, I duck behind the pleated curtain that blocks the window carved into our front door. Preserve, I sound like Mama—but in a bad way. I fumble with the chain lock because I'm thinking about how I sound like Mama.

Des leans forward, balancing on his toes for a moment, trying to peer through the opaque curtain. "You okay in there? Did I lose you? It was the cussing, wasn't it?"

Memories are fluttering around my head, brushing their wings against my brain. I silently tell them to cut it out, but I laugh anyway, which I don't mean to do. A quick little exhale—missable. But I don't think he missed it. He must've heard because he grins in a way that makes it seem like his teeth should glint.

I'm surprised Desmond remembers anything about what we used to be like together, but I'm dismayed to know I like that he does.

I squeeze my eyes shut and scrub my face clean of any amusement. He isn't funny—not anymore. I peek my head out from behind the door, my face blank. “What do you want?”

The smile shrinks from his mouth. I hate that

“I need to see your mama.”

“Come to give her back what you stole?” I dramatically check my watch. “Only eight years late. Better now than never, I suppose.”

He sighs. It's the kind of sigh teachers give kids who ask what they're supposed to be doing 30 seconds after they finish giving directions. “I didn't steal anything.”

“Yeah, and Janis Joplin is sitting in my living room.”

“What? She died two—oh, I get it.”

“So, if you aren't here to make amends for being a filthy thief, what do you need her for?”

He kicks his dirty sneaker at the door mat. “Not really any of your business, if I'm honest.”

“Why can't you tell me?”

“Well, you aren't a doctor, are you?”

“Mama ain't a doctor.”

“Vera, c'mon.” He tilts his head backwards, his Adam's apple bobbing when he swallows. He stares straight up at the porch ceiling where cobwebs clouded the corners and where they veiled the porch light like Victorian skirts, bits of bug shell, tree dander, and house flakes adorning it like bows or frills. Des's hands are stuffed in his jean pockets. He's balling his fists up. I watch them work a little in the interior, tight against his thighs. “You know what I mean.”

While other kids had mamas who knelt beside them to blow air on skinned knees or held their hair back from the toilet bowl when they ate too much sweet stuff or else the chicken was off, my Mama placed me in front of her stores and told me to divine what I needed. How can I fix myself?

What's wrong with being sensitive? With listening to what a person says or doesn't say about you and deciding it doesn't feel nice?

I watch him fidget. Whatever the problem area is, he's clearly embarrassed.

"She's gonna have to take a look at it, you know."

"Why? Why can't I just describe it to her?"

My look is deadpan. And then it dawns on me.

"Oh, Gods, Des. It's on your dick, isn't it?"

"It's Des, yeah, thanks..." Horror floods over his expression. "*What?* No, I mean, *no*. How could you even get a rash on your..." He flails for a second, and he looks like an oversized bird, confused and caught in traffic. "I mean, theoretically, you know? How could you get one on you? If we're talking in...theories."

I raise an eyebrow and scrunch my face up like I'm thinking hard. (I'm not.) I stroke my chin, and finally curl my hand beneath it, hoping I look like Rodin's *The Thinker*. (I can already hear Cat saying: *The what? Who? Why?*)

"Pissing outside."

"How?"

"How should I know? Brushing your hands on poison ivy or rubbing them on poison oak before you take it out and...do your thing. Answering nature's call, or whatever."

“No. I didn’t stroke any trees before I—I mean, historically, I’m not the type of guy that does stuff like that.”

“Not that kind of guy who pees or not the kind of guy who forgets to watch what he’s grabbing when he stumbles out into the brush to piss?” I raise an eyebrow. “While a bit wasted, I’m going to guess.”

“Vera,” he says, and it’s a whine. I think there’s a red tint coloring the ledge of his cheekbones. I remember, looking at him, that he has freckles. They’ve darkened some since he was little.

I smirk but oblige. I know he won’t like the next possibility.

“Could be a soap or lotion you’re allergic to.”

He suddenly coughs—chokes, more like, and bends at the waist for a moment.

“Have you used a weird soap lately? Maybe something from your mama? Those lotions at the A&P are real bad for you. If your skin is dry, you need to see mama about her lotion. It’s good for sensitive areas, you know.” I keep the door open with my tilted hip and tick off the ingredients one-by-one. “Aloe vera, beeswax, some almond oil...”

“Vera, please. Please, *please* stop talking about my dry...skin.” He cleared his throat, again. “I mean, my really, really *theoretical* dry skin.”

I shrug. “I’m just troubleshooting.” If I talked to him first, Mama will expect I come bearing information—the right kind of information. And she’ll test me, too. I don’t have any plans to look ill-informed and thus dumb in front of the likes of *him*.

“Like I said, you ain’t the doctor around here—”

“No,” I cut him off. Slice right through his ignorant words. “I’m not yet, but when I turn sixteen, I start joining her on her meetings, and—” I stop. And I undergo my Conversion, but I

know he won't understand that, and that's okay. It wasn't his—or the town's burden to bear. They wouldn't know what to think of it, which meant only fear. The raised heckles on the traumatized dog. Not that I had a real great working idea of what it meant, either.

Des looks at me expectantly. I'm a little surprised he's listening so well. That's annoying.

“Mama will ask the same stuff, and she won't be so respectful about it, you know. She gets right down to it, and if you think you're blushing now...” I giggle, then, and almost blanche.

Giggling Vera, really?

Des notices. It's enough to disrupt his own humiliation.

His mouth quirks a little in the right corner and I can almost see the blush receding like the flipside of a tide. This is annoying. The metaphorical winds have shifted. I think quickly, not wanting to give him the chance to germinate any ideas.

“You're gonna have to drop trou, is what I'm saying,” I say. And it's cold.

He laughs, though, which I think is also annoying.

I step back, pushing the door inwards with the flat of my palms. I dip my head and give him a little ta-da gesture. Like, welcome to our grand double-wide. My house is nice, though. It's cozy and full of old things. Mama always says that she didn't have much of her own growing up. (Nothing is probably grand to Des, except for maybe Cat's daddy's manor that sits like a gigantic, peeling thought bubble above Relief. Des' house is smaller, but it's new-new in a place where “new” normally means anything patched up after 1950. His daddy has that mayor-money, I suppose. Though I can't really imagine mayoring little town like Relief came with a hefty check, like those comically over-sized one you get from Publishers Clearing House.)

“If the rash—if it *is* a rash—and it was on my dick, then maybe.” He stuffs his hands in his pocket and ducks his head a little when he walks past me like the rafters are low or something. (He isn’t tall. He’s got maybe half an inch on me, but I’m a little big, I guess.)

“You can’t come with me, right?”

I nod my head.

“Good. It’s not on my dick. And I don’t have a rash.”

I make a face at his back.

He walks into the kitchen. I hear him say hello to Mama. He’s put on an unnaturally guttural voice, like he’s trying to look bigger and sound older than he is. I know Mama thinks he’s silly. I stand poised beside the threshold of the kitchen, the door still open enough that I can see a Des-silver and the sway of Mama’s long cotton skirt. I wait for Mama to poke her head out and ask me for the information I’ve collected—not at all like she taught me, because I didn’t ask the right questions and spent most of the time...teasing him, but I know enough to fake it the whole way.

Mama comes to the door, but it’s to shut it tight. I hear it click. And that’s my cue to make myself scarce.

CAT

June 6th, 1972 | Three Days Before the Camping Trip | 2nd Floor Girls Bathroom

“What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted in fair colours!”

Malleus Maleficarum or *Hammer of Witches*

I'm sitting on the toilet in my favorite stall on the second floor of Lick Creek High. I like the second stall from the end because it has the most graffiti and girls keep it pretty updated. It's like ten minutes before the bell rings and I'd rather *lick* the bathroom floor than go back to Mr. Allen's history class. I asked to use the bathroom, and he gave me that look that says he knows I'm just going to run out the clock squatting in a stall, and he's right. I do it all the time. Before he could fight me too hard on it, I told him that it's *that* time. He squinted his eyes. That time? Yeah, I said. She's visiting. Visiting? He repeats. He was echoing me like we were in a cave playing a weird call and response game. From Aunt Flo, Mr. Allen. She's visiting me right now. *Right* this very second. Mr. Allen opened his mouth and then closed it. He eyed me. He was definitely trying to decide if he could call me a liar. I beat him to it. Pretty sure you aren't allowed to check if I'm lying, Mr. Allen, I said.

And now, here I am, on the toilet in my favorite stall on the second floor.

On my lap is the *Malleus Maleficarum*. On my copy there is a dip-dyed man with a big ass riding a human-faced cat the size of a horse. The top of him is red and everything below his waistline is green. He's using the cat's tail like a rudder and his hair is blown back like the cat is

sprinting around crazily, but really, the cat looks befuddled and sullen with its hooked nose and wide, thin mouth. This man is not riding the cat correctly and the cat knows this.

He should look like Santa Claus, but he doesn't. He looks like that old man with wild hair on the edge of ancient maps blowing clouds and sea monsters about. Vera, my best friend since we were eight years old, says he "represents the proverbial 'four winds'" and I must've given her a weird look because she shrugged and said he's the Greek god of wind. I asked her why she knows such weird stuff and she shrugged again and said Mama. Then she nudged my book with her knuckle and asked why I stole it, anyway. I didn't want to tell her that it had to do with me trying to understand her mama. That would've invited more questions and I didn't feel like answering.

I don't know who the dip-dyed man is supposed to be, but because this is an old-timey book about scary witches, I'm going to assume he's supposed to be the devil. He's a really dumb-looking devil, but maybe that's the point. He can't even figure out how to ride a cat, like the four horsemen never introduced him to their beasts.

Beneath the dip-dyed man, though, are two witches burning to death on stakes. It seems unfair that the devil is trying to ride a cat like you'd sail a boat and it's the witches passed out from smoke inhalation, their burned hair like a barbed wire cloud around their heads.

But I guess that's how it goes.

I checked it out from the public library in Barren Fork. When I asked our school librarian (I don't remember her name, honestly. And also, who cares?) about whether or not she'd heard of the *Maleficarum*, she'd tilted her head like a dog, her gold glasses chain clinking. "Speak English, girl. Do we have *what*?" I'd been practicing pronouncing the funny name in my head for at least fifteen minutes before I walked in there and then I lost all of my nerve to continue

messing it up and sounding like an absolute moron, so I shrugged and told her to get her hearing aids checked, ma'am, and then I strutted off as cool as I could. It's Latin. Who the hell speaks Latin in Ozark country?

Vera's mama, probably.

So, I went to the public library and just asked for history books. I spent about an hour and a half walking up and down the aisles, squatting and stretching up and down the shelves, running my fingers down the backs of like 3,000 books till I found a ratty copy with spine strings hanging off the bottom like dust mites were trying to repel away from them. I didn't feel like waiting in line to sign up for a library card, so I just looked both ways and then shoved it into my bag and walked out with it.

It's mine now, I guess. My very own *Malleus Maleficarum* (the *Hammer of Witches* in normal English) written by a Catholic church guy named Henrich Kramer in 1486. It's supposed to be some kind of guide for identifying demons and witches—that's why I need it.

See, Vee's mama is the town herbalist, which is an old-timey thing that people around here still say. I guess she'd be a doctor, but we don't call her doctor seeing as she never went to medical school, so maybe it's not legal. But people in Relief have never given a fuck about the legal-ness of anything.

People have the tendency to visit Vera's mama before they made their trek to the clinic in Burnsville. She helps birth babies and zap off lice, starve worms gorging themselves in people's intestines or numb angry muscles. She even spooked nerves back to life, like Daddy's restless feet. (Some mornings they are so cold he can hardly make them twitch. He stays mostly in his wheelchair nowadays.) She'd even set Joe Jones's leg after he tripped backwards with that

carburetor in his hands. But she doesn't use a stethoscope or write anything down. She doesn't wear a white coat or hand over white slips with tangly signatures.

She just knows.

I'm in love with her, I'm pretty sure now.

Outside the bathroom, the bell rings.

**

June 6th, 1972 | Three Days Before the Camping Trip | School Parking Lot

Showing up to school today was a joke. It's always a joke. I need to stop being surprised. I walk out of school. The busses are lined up like yellow ants. I'm about to cross the parking lot when Jay almost hits me with his truck.

"Hey, dude. Want a lift?"

I eye him from the sidewalk. "No, *dude*. I'm fine. Thanks."

"Thought I'd ask."

"You didn't even come to school today."

He shrugs.

"Got bored, huh?"

"Hard not to around here, you know?" He says.

"You're just not trying hard enough."

"Oh, yeah?" He leans out his truck window. It's a manual. You can't wind it down any more than he has it, so it's this half-moon of glass that he's got wedged beneath his armpit. I remember that from the last time I was in his truck.

It looks really uncomfortable, but I know he's trying to be impressive and sexy. He's growing his hair out some and it's flopping down in his face. He's going for that shag. The kind

of hair that looks like he slept on it for 50 straight hours and then walked around in a rainstorm for a mile.

Anyhow, who does he think he's impressing? I skip school all the time, too.

We aren't sexy. We're lame. And stupid, probably.

It's an invitation to say something back, a nudge to build off the flirting or whatever. I don't do that. Instead, I stare at him.

"What's it that Catriona McAllister gets into around here?"

"Fuck, Jay—really? You've been here like, sixteen years, same as me."

"I ain't that young."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Seventeen years. Hate to short you a year."

"Eighteen, actually. Just last week."

I wrinkle my face. "Failed some grades, huh?"

I failed second grade right after Ma skipped town and had to repeat it, which wasn't so bad because that's how I met Vee. Right now, though, I'm failing Algebra I, American History, and Earth Science, but it doesn't matter. I'm dropping out anyway. It's just the motions. It's only been motions for months and months. I'm just dancing, dead-eyed, dead-eyed like those mannequins they pose all over Famous-Barr. I'm always looking over my shoulder whenever I convince Mel or Jay to take me, pretty certain that I'll catch a blank, white face peeking at me from around one of those mirrored pillars, their weird rigid, fused hands leaving no fingerprints on the glass. We go for the air-conditioning, which feels mostly worth it. It's the only store in Burnsville that's got one.

He narrows his eyes at me. "Not recently! I failed first grade." He leans further out his window. The more parts of his body that clears the ledge, the more desperate he looks.

Looks like Connie's taken a break from him. She gets bored, like I do. Well—I don't get bored. I get bored with Jay, maybe. And the fact that we both get bored of him says more about Jay than either of us, but I mean that I get bored...I mean that there's times where I'd really just like Mel to kiss me, because her mouth is always really soft and cushiony, where Jay's is wire-thin. Sometimes I feel one way. Or maybe the problem is nothing's enough anymore and everything is empty because there's a gaping hole at the bottom.

I'm thinking about Vera's mama all the sudden. She's got that cute gap between her front teeth.

Jay is still angling for that sexy and cool thing. We left that territory a long time ago.

I sigh. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. I'm taking the bus."

"C'mon, it's Friday. I got a six pack."

"So what? Daddy doesn't lock the liquor cabinet. I can have all the White Satin I want."

"With me?" His eyebrows raise.

"No. I want to be alone." I'm not drinking anything tonight. I don't really drink, honestly. I don't like feeling floaty. It doesn't feel honest.

Jay sighs. He knows he's lost. Once I decide a thing, I've never in the history of my whole life gone back on it. "Why have you been such a bumner lately?"

I turn sharply on my heel and throw the bird over my shoulder.

"Call me, okay?"

He's predictable. They're all predictable. Every last one of them.

I don't get in the truck with him this time, but I probably will next time. I'm human, you know? And just bored enough, always.

**

June 6th, 1972 | Three Days Before the Camping Trip | Cat's Driveway

Mel is sitting next to the mailbox when I walk home from the bus stop.

I can't catch a goddamn break. They're everywhere. Swarming me.

I roll my eyes, which she sees. I start cramming my hand into my front jean pocket, looking for my keys. I don't keep my keys there. I'm trying to look like I'm in the process of doing something. I can't be bothered by ex-girlfriend who were never officially girlfriends showing up in front of my house uninvited. (Daddy doesn't lock the front door, just the back door. Grandmama never escapes out the front. And, you know, that thing everyone says about living in small towns.)

I make a show of switching my backpack from one shoulder to the other. I pull the scrunchy out of my hair. I know she likes it down. Better to shove her face down into it, you know? Eat your heart out. All that bullshit. *Cosmopolitan* tells you to do stuff like that.

Mel's bad at reading the meaning of literally anything, though. And she came here for a reason. She doesn't like to move past things.

She looks okay, though. She's wearing her jean jacket with the collar popped up around her ears. Her curly hair is spilling down her back, and she's got those combat boots on she found at the Army Surplus Store in Barren Fork two weeks ago, which doesn't bring back great memories seeing as that was the last time we hung out. She said fuck war, and then put them on her feet. They fit her, of course, and cost only a couple of dollars. I liked them, and I let her know by slipping my fingers in hers and tugging her into the closest round-style rack.

"Cat, c'mon," she'd murmured, looking past my shoulder into literal hangers of clothes because no one can see a damn thing. "We're gonna get caught."

"Not if you just shut up and kiss me a little."

I'd only managed to kiss the side of her mouth, which wasn't really what I'd been aiming for. She'd struggled against me like I was trying to give her a shot, and I let her go, because I wasn't going to force someone to kiss me—I've never *had* to force anyone—and it was bumming me out. I said: "Sick shoes. You should keep them." And then I left the circle. She stumbled following behind me and pulled off half the rack, the surplus fatigues splashing down around her feet like waves.

She said, loudly: "Just because your daddy forgets you exist doesn't mean the rest of us have parents who do. I can't just go around doing *whatever I want*. Folks notice stuff about me."

That's when everyone looked over.

I flipped her the bird and left the shop. She must've bought the shoes anyway.

Mel springs up. She's athletic. We don't have like, any girls' sports teams except for track. She plays club volleyball. She's after one of those fabled college scholarships. I'm not going to college, obviously. She runs track, too. She just runs around and around and around on those bark chips. It's mind-numbing. It's a snooze. I came to exactly one meet and left before she even had her race.

She was pretty pissed at me after that—like, so pissed that I even felt bad for a little while.

"Ro! Where've you been?"

I feel too much at once, hearing her call me that. My whole body heats up like someone turned up the gas. I'm mad and I'm pleased, all at the same time. That's annoying. Nobody on the face of this planet has ever called me Ro—nobody but Mel.

I stare at her. "At school. Where the Man says I have to be."

She rolls her eyes. "You know what I mean."

What she means is that I haven't been showing up at our spot at the wooden footbridge over Possum Walk Creek. I'm trying not to think about how nice it is to listen to the birds and stick our toes in the water or how she does that one thing to my neck. I remind myself of what happened after we left the Army Surplus Store.

I hitched home, which ended up being more difficult than it needed to be because Mel just slowly rolled her truck down the street behind me, leaning out the window and asking me again and again to please get in the cab. "C'mon Ro, this looks weird! Don't make me follow you like a creep."

I stopped walking. She hit the break. I turned my head to look at her and tilted it. I smiled at her in a way that was very mean, but I knew I looked heartbreakingly pretty when I did it: "Difference between me and you, Mel, is that I don't give a fuck about people. I don't have anything to lose." She opened her mouth to argue with me, but I rolled right over her. "We're almost done. Get on your dumb Honor Roll, get your stupid volleyball money, and get the hell out of here. You're not going my way."

And then I kept walking.

She finally hit the gas and peeled out when a little old lady pulled off onto the shoulder and let me in. The lady clutched her chest and said: "Oh! Teenagers these days." I agreed with her. I said: "Yeah, *teenagers*."

I got tired of it. I get tired of it. I am just tired. Besides, I'm distracted with someone else.

"I've been around," I say. "I go where I want to go."

Mel sighs and pushes a hand through her curls. They look honey-tipped in the afternoon sun. My eyes are burning. I look away, grabbing at the front of the mailbox.

"You're still mad about the thing I said?"

“I wasn’t even mad,” I say.

Mel slips a bottle from her jacket pocket, pops the lid one-handed—which is kind of cool, but I won’t admit that—shakes a pill-shaped thing out and takes it.

“Are you chewing that?” I ask.

“I don’t have any water.”

“That birth control?”

“Who cares?”

“Why do you need birth control? You aren’t having sex with any guys.”

“You still take birth control.”

I stare at her.

“Why are you being like this, Ro?”

This conversation is stupid, and I resume riffling through the mailbox. Bills. Burlington catalogue. LIFE Magazine—which my daddy hasn’t cancelled yet, even though it was only ever for Ma—and a weird postcard. I pull out the LIFE and the postcard, leaving everything else there.

I’m looking at the front of the postcard. A woman in a bonnet is chopping wood in front of an old-style log cabin. A man is lounging looking a little drunk or a little dead next to a hound dog. It says: OZARK LIVIN’ HILLBILLY STYLE. On the back, all I see is the word “Kitten” and I feel like I’m going to pass out. The world is in flashes. Mel is still talking at me.

“I’m going inside.” I walk past her.

“Ro!” She says. I don’t look back at her. I can hear her voice clotting up. “Ro, I’m not doing this again.”

“So don’t,” I say over my shoulder. It takes a long time to walk up my long gravel driveway. About halfway down, I hear Mel’s truck door shut, the engine sputter to life, and then she’s gone.

VERA

June 6th, 1972 | Three Days Before the Camping Trip | Vera's Living Room

I'm watching *Maude* when I hear the front door shut kind of, and then shut again. The deadbolt is a little sticky. I decide to get a glass of water, and definitely not because I want to see if I can play Nancy Drew and figure out just what exactly my mama helped Des with. If she hasn't cleaned up yet, I could probably figure out by sight what's in the tinctures, baby food jars, or Tupperware containers, so long as they aren't the ones that Mama paints white on the outside to protect its innards from sunlight damage or else because it's gross (like royal jelly, which is a secretion made from worker bees, or the container she uses for her maggot therapy) or kind of illegal (like water hemlock or deadly nightshade, which is kind of in the name). Anyhow, it may take me awhile and I'd have to consult my notes, but I could figure it out. It's really a fun kind of puzzle—about a private part of Des, I suppose. Which probably isn't any of my business. At least until I turn sixteen. So, in 2 months, three days, and four hours, whatever is happening in there will finally be my business.

Preserve, that doesn't sound like I meant it to.

But, as I walk by the front door, the pull string for its window still swaying some from the unnecessary force Des used to try and slam it shut after the first failed attempt, I decide that knowing something else is more important—well, more interesting, maybe—than whatever unfortunate business Des is dealing with downstairs.

I pivot hard and yank the door back open. I scramble to the edge of the porch, barefoot, and peer down the road. Des is walking along the gravel shoulder, head bowed, hands shoved in his pockets again. He appears to be trying to avoid the little divots of rainwater. He stopped for a moment

“Hey! Des.” He doesn’t hear me, so I have to scamper down the three steps to our yard, knowing precisely where my foot has to land to avoid the rusty nail with the curled head that’s been praying on our front stairs since I was a little girl, and also the section about midway across the second of the three steps where it had splintered, at some point, from a massive weight or some massive violence (Marshall can supply those sometimes.) and has since warped upwards like it’s pregnant.

“Des—Des! *Desmond!*”

At the sound of his Christian name, he froze.

“I want to know something.”

“What?”

“Does your daddy know you’re here?”

He sighed, and ran a hand through his hair, which was coiffing a little in the afternoon humidity. “Does it really matter?”

“Are you seriously posing that question?”

“I—no. I mean, yes. But, no.”

“Preserve, Des. Do I need a translator?”

“Yes, I meant to ask that question because I’m trying to avoid talking to you about something that will definitely piss you off, and no. He doesn’t know I visited.”

I open my mouth, then I close it. We’re silent for a moment, staring at one another on the side of the road. Mrs. Palmer drives by in her sun-razed red AMC Rambler. She squints at us as she rolls by, and it isn’t the first time I’ve questioned whether she should be driving. I know her cataracts are beginning to make everything a bit frothy around the edges. Mama didn’t even violate anything by telling me about it. You can just tell by looking at her.

The cicadas are really kicking up a racket.

“You aren’t wrong,” I say, finally. “It does piss me off.”

He makes a wide gesture. His turn for the ta-da.

Ta-da: I know you, still. It’s been eight years, but you ain’t changed much.

Ta-da: Adults are stupid and chew off their noses because they forgot how important their faces are.

Ta-da: You’re too sensitive, though, if we’re being honest.

Ta-da: How are you ever going to take on *this* responsibility, the responsibility of helping, healing, birthing, coaxing, teaching the folks or Relief if I can’t file something bad that happened to me in the cabinet of my brain and move on.

Ta-da.

Okay, that second-to-last Ta-da was me.

“He ain’t changed much, then.”

Des smiles, a little sadly, and shrugs. “Not much. You’d still recognize him.”

“Remind me not to stop by any time soon then, I guess.” It’s a joke, but it makes me feel sad, which it shouldn’t.

“Maybe I’ll see you around somewhere else, then.” He raked a hand through his hair.

“My daddy doesn’t wipe my ass anymore, I’m happy to report.”

I said that to him once. It was really clever, and everyone laughed. Well, except for Des. It wasn’t kind, I knew that even then. If anyone knows what it feels like to take ignore gossip or shoulder nasty, gross remarks about members of their family, it’s me. (“I heard your mama is actually 150 years old and she drinks blood to keep looking so young. I heard she’d shrivel up like ol’ boney-legged Babs if she doesn’t stop harvesting drifters and stuff.”)

I look down at the berm. I poke a rock with my bare toe.

“Yeah, sorry about that. Wasn’t nice.”

He does something weird next. I lift my head just as Des reaches across the space between us, fingers curled into a gentle fist, and he nudges that hollow space near my shoulder, right below my clavicle. He’s given me a knuckle bump on my shoulder.

I feel like I’ve been zapped with something. It’s a jolt, something light and quick. I blink. Des is frozen, his hand still kind of hanging in air like it’s about to take flight. Whatever zapped me, seems to have zapped him, too.

Finally, he says: “Uh, yeah. No big deal. I’ll...see you around, okay?”

My mouth is really dry, like I’ve been sucking on ginger and now everything is horribly, horribly clear, so clear that it’s begun to hurt.

I manage a nod.

He gives a half smile. It slides off his face as he turns and throws a little wave from over his shoulder. I wave back, which is stupid because he isn’t facing me anymore. He’s walking further and further away. He’s getting smaller.

“See you around,” I mutter.

I want to say that I hadn’t known Desmond was a thief, but that would be a lie. I knew he liked to swipe things. Whenever we went into the E-Z Relief to buy Pepsis and some Ding Dongs, he’d wait till I was at the counter chatting to Ms. Marjorie about her plants out back in her scrubby little yard and how she can try to resurrect her Ozark sundrops she’d planted along the outskirts before he’d duck away and start snooping around the store, quick hands swiping whatever seemed most at risk.

He always walked away with the weirdest haul, but he never got caught. I didn't ever participate in it, because it wasn't right, but I wonder if me just knowing that it was happening counts as helping him do it. I mean, I knew talking to her kept her attention on me, just as much as I knew that when Des got sparse, he was busy emptying shelves. (That's a little dramatic, just making a little space where there didn't use to be.)

We'd walk across the circle and past the Killing Tree, and then through the crumbling parking lot of South Baptist Church, and then we'd stop and squat on the crappy little bench that'll give you splinters if you slide the backs of your thighs across the seat, and I'd pop open my Pepsi and start tugging on the plastic wrap of my Ding Dongs, and Des would busy himself emptying his pockets of his horde.

I'd watch with some interest, though I always felt sort of bad, as he laid them out between us because Ms. Marjorie is a really nice lady, and she always asks me plant questions because she thinks I'm smart and have a special sort of knowledge. That made me feel really good. Mama had a tendency to make me feel the opposite, but that's always because her standards for me were so high. (I say "had" like it isn't the same way now that it was then.)

One time, he pulled out a pack of screws, a Hershey bar (which was good), a packet of matches, a thing of baby wipes (which I wasn't sure how he'd managed to squish that into the kangaroo pocket of his windbreaker) and a pine-tree shaped air freshener that you dangle from the rear-view mirror in a car. We were seven. We definitely didn't have a car. (I still don't have one.) The last time I went with him, I remember that I made a face, and when he asked me why I was messing my face up like that, I said: "That's all garbage. You don't need that stuff."

"Sure I do. My ceiling fan is wiggly in my room." He pockets the screws. "I need matches for when I go camping next week." He palms the matches. "My hands will get messy

when we eat this Hershey's chocolate bar together." He tosses the bar at me. It bounces off my knees and falls to the ground. "And," he takes the air freshener and flicks it around in the air. I can smell its fakey pine smell made by people who've never smelled a real one before, "have you *smelled* my bathroom?"

And then he burst out laughing, his curls springing around, and I remember that we were seven and I thought he looked like an angel just then, even though he'd made a gross bathroom joke. He looked just like those little porcelain babies that Mrs. Palmer keeps locked up in her cherrywood curio cabinet.

So, in other words, him swiping something from Mama wasn't a big leap for me. It sounds bad, but it didn't even bother me, really. He didn't steal anything from me, he took it from Mama. She'd be real mad if she knew I felt that way. [He stole something from her that she'll discover later on.]

"Pay attention when folks show you what they're willing to do," Mama always said, "because they'll do it to you if opportunity strikes." I know she's always right, but Des always made me want to believe that maybe she smudged a few things.

**

June 6th, 1972 | 4 Days Before the Camping Trip | Vera's Front Porch

When I get home, Cat is sitting on the stairs in a thick white peasant skirt, the fabric bunched up her thighs. The skirt used to be whiter, but now it's taken on a grayish tint. It's her mama's. She's compulsively opening and snapping shut a small silver (Chanel?) compact. It's also her mama's.

"Where you been?"

"Just down the street."

She doesn't appear to know who I was talking to. She must've come over by way of the creek. We've travelled that way since we were little kids. Big Toe runs downhill from where Cat's daddy's property sits like a castle overlooking its feudal lands. So, Big Toe is kind of like the moat, circling around maybe 3/5s of his property, cupping the bottom half of the fields Cat's granddaddy and great granddaddy used to grow oats and You can either get there fast, or you can take your time. Watch the tadpoles make their little tidal waves or look for turtles sunning themselves on exposed rocks. It's our own little roadway.

“What's with the face?”

“What face?”

“You know what face.”

I shrug. I tell myself to play it cool. Be cool. The problem, of course, is that I'm not cool, and I'm also a really bad liar, and one top of that, Cat is eerily good at reading people She cracks you open like a book. She doesn't read many physical books, but she's a pro at reading the people ones.

I turn my head and cough into my blouse, trying to use the opportunity to un-compose the face she says I'm making.

Cat sees this, immediately.

She pivots her legs until she's facing me. “Why are you blushing?”

“I'm not!”

“And Jim Morrison is sitting in your living room, right?”

“Janis Joplin.”

“What?”

“I say Janis Joplin! Not Jim Morrison.”

Cat rolls her eyes but she's smiling. I watch it dissolve, though, when she holds out what looks like a postcard. "Look."

It's just one of those offensive Ozarks postcards you can pick up at a Standard Oil gas station. I flip it over, and I see: *Kitten*.

I look up at Cat who looks like she's chewing on her own tongue. This isn't good news. It doesn't make sense. I thought maybe Cat was over all of this—or as over as you can be, but now it's like rending open a just-scabbed over wound.

"Lemme tell Mama I'm leaving."

I casually wander into the kitchen, pausing for a moment to peer out the window into the side yard, where the And, admittedly, Mama is real neat and tidy with her workspace.

"So...was I right?"

Mama tilted her head to the side, just far enough that her plaited hair swept over her shoulder and rested against her chest. She lifted her eyebrows.

"The rash, right? It was on his—uh, his privates." I'm smiling, but the longer Mama stares at me, the quicker the air chills. My smile shrinks.

Now, Mama rolls her eyes. She turns sharply on her heel, back towards the sink. "You aren't a child, Vera." She turns on the water and starts to scrub something, viciously, with steel wool.

"I know that. I'm just—"

"In five months, you will undergo your Conversion. In five months, you will join me during appointments, and this is how you show me that you're ready?"

"I'm sorry. I *am* ready. I didn't mean—"

“I still think you are failing to understand the gravity of this. What’s expected of you until you train your own child, and even then, you aren’t done till you’re dead in the ground.”

“I understand! At least, I think. You haven’t told me about how it works, the Conversion—”

“From now on, you will take your calling seriously.” She looks over her shoulder, now, her eyes flashing in the falling dusk. Sunlight weakens through the kitchen window. “Show me that I didn’t make a mistake stopping with you.”

She means having another baby. Marshall is the oldest, but boys don’t get chosen for the Conversion, and they aren’t trained in healing. Maybe the ability passes over them. [Should see Marshall healing?] She stopped with me because I’m a girl and showed enough aptitude as toddler that she took the chance on me.

Marshall would’ve made a terrible healer, his gender notwithstanding. Patience runs through his fingers like water. He spits venom before anyone even asks him for directions. Before anyone even figures out how best to look at him wrong. And, already, I can see daddy’s vices peeking out when Marshall hauls out the trash from his bedroom and it tumbles against itself with the unmistakable clunk of aluminum against aluminum.

You can’t heal if you need to be healed yourself. (It also doesn’t work so well on us, blood kin. Set bones take three times longer to heal. Bruises cloud our skin for twice as many days. If Mama cuts her finger or burns the underside of her arm, she can’t use a cold compress and a touch of aloe to massage it closed. It stays open. I wonder if it stays open even longer than it would if we were normal.

“The boy does not have a rash on his privates, he has a rash on his penis,” Mama continues. My good mood is gone, leaving a hollow in my chest. “It’s caused by a cloth irritant. He likely wears his briefs too tight, but he also got himself into some poison oak.”

I feel embarrassed. I nod, though she can’t see me.

“What did I give him, Vera?”

I think. “Witch hazel, maybe? Because of the tannins?”

“Allergic.”

“Man, he’s allergic to a lot of things.”

“Vera.”

“Sorry.”

“You would’ve poisoned him all over again.” She’s still scrubbing whatever is in the sink. She’s scrubbing so hard that I doubt it has skin any longer.

“Colloidal oatmeal?” I try. I’d ground up the oat kernels myself. “For baths?”

“Yes. And something else.”

“*Jewelweed*,” I say. I can see them in my mind’s eye, the flowers little bursts of orange. They’ve a pouch-like structure with a long spur, which gives it a fancy, complex sort of look. “You gave him some of the soap, right?”

Mama’s arm stills. “Good.” She’s quiet for a few moments. She seems to be watching something out the window. She still hasn’t looked at me.

“I’m sorry, Mama, but Cat needs me. Can I go over to her house for a little while?”

There’s so much silence, save for the rhythm of a nearby woodpecker.

“I expect that you’ll realign your priorities before your Conversion. It isn’t about you, and it isn’t about Cat. What is it about?” She turns her head to look at me. The light lowering

itself past Mr. Allen's house casts shadows down the side of my mama's face, making her eyes look blacker than normal.

"The town," I say. "The town."

"Be back by dusk," she says, and turns back to the sink.

CAT

June 6th, 1972 | Three Days Before the Camping Trip | Cat's Bedroom

KITTEN
YOULL FIND ME N FRANCOIS
XX OO

“Found it in the mailbox.”

Vera raises her eyebrows at me. She flips it front to back, front to back. We're sitting in my bedroom.

“Who's it from?”

I'm mad, even though it isn't fair.

“It's from *Ma*, Vee. Who the hell else would just send me stupid, random postcards?” I claw at my hair a little.

“Okay, okay. It's from your ma.”

“Yeah, it is,” I mumble, viciously. I didn't know I could make something so soft sound so much like gravel. “It's uh, actually the second one I've gotten.”

Vera blinks. “The second?” She's quiet for a second. “When'd it come?”

I shrug. Act like I hadn't memorized the exact date: March 25th. A Wednesday. I remember that I hadn't planned on making it to school the next day. Mr. Gibson had a math test planned that I was definitely going to bomb, and the idea of feeling the bus window rattling my skull all the way up to Burnsville made me want to punch someone (which would probably be Bus Driver Cathy Lee) and then go to sleep.

But then that first one showed up, sticking out of the mail pile like a dog-eared page.. I thought maybe I could try harder. She'd be pissed at me if she comes back and finds out that I've sawed my name into all fifteen desks in detention hall.

“Two months ago.”

Vera’s eyes widen. She opens her mouth and then closes it. I want to tease her about looking like a guppy. I don’t, though. She’s hurt.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I know it’s from her—” I repeat, “from Ma.” I make an effort to lighten the weight of my voice. “It’s just like Ma, y’know. She does her own thing. Like, everyone does XOXO, but not Ma. She likes to fuck with stuff. Make it different and better.” I flash it at Vera again. “Make it mean more.”

Vera is watching me closely. She pushes her thick braid over her shoulder. She scoots her bare toes across my bedroom carpet. They burrow a little. I know I feel mean when I want to tell her to stop.

“And check it out—there’s this brown smudgy stain right here.” I lean forward and point at the upper corner, where the return address was meant to go, but never showed up. “Looks like coffee or something, right? Maybe espresso. Maybe she wrote this in some little café in Europe. Like maybe Italy or France or something.”

A memory: I’m hunched up like a little gargoyle on Ma’s side of the bed, arms wrapped around my knees, watching her sweep around the room like a duchess. I’m perched, waiting for her to say something to me. She held an old copy of *LIFE* to her chest.

“Oh, look at this Kitten!” She flashed the magazine at me. It was a night shot of the Eiffel Tower, taken like the camera was craning its neck way up.

“One day, Kitten. We’ll get the hell outta Dodge, huh? See the world.” She smiled. I nodded hard; I nodded a lot. I watched her. Back then, I stared at her all of the time. She’d done herself up that afternoon, even though I knew she wasn’t going anywhere.

She had a lot of things you couldn't depend on, but some things stayed the same, like her makeup routine. I wanted to try the lipstick she's wearing. Astral Wine. Ma used to dot the center of her bottom lip with Pot o' Gloss Frost. Her mouth glimmered from halfway across the house, especially in low light.

She leaned towards me, smiling. I can still smell her Goya perfume—*Aqua Manda*. It had made her smell spicy and mysterious. I've smelt stuff similar in Vera's kitchen. Vera says it's probably coriander, parsley flowers, some kind of citric oil.

Ma took the bottle with her when she left. Daddy had gotten it for her 29th birthday. It was a small, dusky brown bottle, the same color as suntan oil. But it looked like a miniature of one of Daddy's bourbon bottles. A big orange sticker, ringed in shiny gold, made it even fancier.

She pecked me on both cheeks, the proper French greeting, and then she was fluid, disappearing from my side and reappearing near her vanity. She had a little gold box, inlaid with purple velvet. Whenever I opened it, I felt like Alice, staring down ravenously at the silver coils of necklaces, the brooches studded like beetles, the chunky rings, thinking *eat me, eat me, eat me*.

Ma bent at the waist, leaning into the mirror, carefully separating a clump of eyelashes, dabbing flat a gathering of powder. She straightened the polka-dot scarf she'd tied at her neck.

Through the mirror, she said, "Sashay down the *Avenue des Champs-Élysées* and see what Louis Vuitton has on offer? Do cartwheels around *Place de la Concorde*, and then cool our tired feet in the *Fontaine des Mers*. What do you think, Kitten?"

The accent poured out of her mouth like a fountain, like a movie star. I remember trying to mimic it, the sounds jumbling up in my mouth. It was just gibberish, though. It always was. I

could never untangle my tongue enough. She had told me to keep trying because one day I was going to need to know how to say it.

Ma smiled at me, again, through the mirror.

It was the last time she ever talked to me about France. The last time she told me about what we'd do once she splurged on passports, tickets, and matching silk scarves. It had been a refrain for a long time. I could've mouthed it along with her: Avenue des Champs-Élysées. Louis Vuitton. Place de la Concorde. Fontaine des Mers.

I don't even remember how to say them right. (I never could by myself, anyway, not without her leading me by the hand, syllable-by-tongue-twisting-syllable.)

She was gone by the next Christmas—got the hell outta Dodge. Winter body ice-boxed Relief right after she left. We were snowed in for a while. We got like, a million days off school, which, ordinarily, would've been the best time ever for a nine-year-old kid. Instead, it meant that I just sat there for days staring out the window, waiting for her.

I like to think prevented Daddy from searching for her, from trying to win her back. Convince her to try us again. I like to think he didn't already know it was going to happen.

I kept waiting for the kind of taxi I'd only ever seen in the movies to pull up. I kept waiting for her to step out in high-heeled Louis Vuittons boots with the red bottoms stark against the snow, a scarf sheltering her pixie haircut, Dior butterfly-framed sunglasses on her nose, just like Oliva Newton John.

But she didn't emerge from a yellow taxi. She didn't emerge from anywhere. So, I sat behind the dirty window of our front room for years, like an idiot, till I finally grew up and got smart. Now I don't wait for anybody. I just wait for my exit.

**

“It says ‘Greetings from Osage Beach,’ Cat.”

“But this second one says she’ll see me in France—look at that! She probably just picked up a few of these on her way overseas.” I say it to her like she’s stupid, and I know I need to rein in the thing inside me that’s threatening to bubble up and over. Like I’ve been left on the stove for too long.

Ma wouldn’t leave me for Arkansas. Maybe France, but not Arkansas.

“Okay,” Vee says. “Maybe she did.” She’s talking to me gentle and slow, like I’m one of Mr. Hill’s horses, spooked by a jet overhead.

“I should show Mrs. Dawson this, y’know. Ma’s scraggly chicken-scratch, like you can barely read it. Mine looks exactly like that. It’s obviously hereditary,” I laugh. It comes out wheezy, like I’m having trouble catching my breath.

Vee smiles, but it’s pasted on her face.

“You know that every single thing you’ve ever thought is written all over your stupid face, right?”

Her smile morphs into a different one. Her eyes crinkle. It’s a real one—it’s a grin.

“Good. So, you always know, even if I can’t tell you, you always know.” She stretches her leg out and nudges my knee with her big toe.

I want to put her in a chokehold on the floor of my bedroom as badly as I want to cuddle up against her on the couch, under Ma’s crochet blanket, and watch *Charlie’s Angels*. (Daddy doesn’t like us watching it. Says no one knows how to tell a goddamn story anymore. Says it’s “Jiggle TV” and that we’d wake up one day, turn on the television, and it would just be pornography, that’s how fast America’s falling. I like the Angels for a lot of reasons: they’ve got

money, they get to drive fast cars, they solve crimes and destroy every asshole who gets in their way—but also, they wear bikinis. And sometimes you can tell that they aren't wearing bras.)

I like to pretend that one day me and Vera will walk out of our beachside mansion and argue about who gets to drive our cherry red Lamborghini, and I'd always win unless I felt like being nice on the day, and we'd be wearing matching bikinis.

I don't tell her that I think these postcards are going to ruin my life.

VERA

June 6th, 1972 | Three Days Before the Camping Trip | Vera's Kitchen

By the time I'm home from Cat's, the sun is gone, but still buzzing warmly just below the horizon. The front door hasn't even clicked shut, the curtains still clanking against the window, before Mama is telling me to come to the kitchen. I made her angry today, so I know I'm about to get quizzed, and she'll be a real stickler for details. All I want to do is go sit by the creek and think.

Tonight, it's about tonics.

"In our practice, names are important. Names *mean* something." Mama says, chopping licorice root. She isn't even looking at her hands. She'd yell at me for that. They almost blur, her hands, they're moving so fast. "It's more than just a method for categorization, it's a designation that marks a thing in the tapestry." I could mouth along with what she's saying, I know it so well, but I would never.

She starts out by asking me what a "tonic" is.

"Tonics, in herbal preparation, are meant for maintenance, not the treatment of a disease. So, when folks come for treatment of something, we have to make sure they leave with tonics, too, to keep everything steady." I pause. "Helps that they buy more, too, I guess."

"It is in the early stages of Spring. What should we do to begin moving the slow blood of Winter from our visitors?"

"Tonics, of course."

"And the two classes of tonics?"

"I call the first 'tasty tonics,'" Here Mama flicked her eyes, briefly, to the rafters, but I plunged on anyway. She doesn't often question my memorization strategies. "Because they're

made from all kinds of sweet herbs, like sassafras, spicebush, cherry bark, and black or sweet birch.”

“And the second?”

“Tart tonics.” In spite of myself, I grin. I thought it was clever. I think something twitches on Mama’s face, but she doesn’t stop me. I number them off on my fingers: “Dandelion, burdock, poke, wild onion, nettles...red clover blossoms in tea, yellow root...they’re all full of minerals and liver support. Because people drink a lot around here.”

“Sassafras?”

“The ‘root’ in all beers—or at least it used to be. It’s got a really unique leaf shape, known botanically as heterophylly, which just means that it has multiple leaf shapes on one plant. The leaves kind of look like mittens with their two lobes. But we use it as a medicinal beer, one meant to help with diet, so it aids digestion and prevents scurvy.”

“Which is called?”

“Uh...” I tap my nail against my front teeth. “Anti...scorbutic?”

Mama doesn’t smile, but her eyes aren’t as black.

“Oh! It also builds red blood cells. It helps virtually everyone.”

It’s an hour before she releases me outside to rinse rags in the back.

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June 6th, 1972 | Three Days Before the Camping Trip | Possum Walk Creek

You’ve got a lot of time to think when you’re rinsing out rags. I think about Cat, opting to avoid thinking about Desmond for the rest of the night.

I can’t say that I’m happy about this postcard business. It’s a fluke. It won’t pan out into anything at all, and Cat will have to mourn the loss of her mother all over again. I don’t consider

myself to be a pessimist; I consider myself to be a realist. I probably got that bred into me by Mama.

Life around here is simple. I don't mean that it's not hard, I just mean that it's mostly steady. You put one foot in front of the other. People trip, like anyone does. They find a hidden divot and turn their ankle a little bit, jam their toes. Sometimes they end up sprawled on their ass, but that's to be expected along the trajectory of any kind of life.

It ain't easy, but it's simple.

Most folks don't mind the plodding. They like knowing that $1+1=2$ and will continue to equal two until their death rattle. Even if life is unhappy, it's a known quantity.

But some folks, folks like Cat, it makes them itch. She can't sit still, ever. During sleepovers, I'll usually make a bed up on the floor because I hate sharing a mattress with her. She rolls and flails in her sleep. She's elbowed me in the nose, once, and somehow managed to punch me in the gut another time. She balls her fists, and her body swings them like it's clawing its way through some dream world, fighting tooth and nail, just trying to stay asleep. Or stay alive. I don't know which one it is.

But anyhow, after the black eye that took ice and a generous application of witch hazel, I decided that the threadbare carpet felt safer—and less likely to leave a mark—then trying to curl up beside Cat when she's destined to enter another sleep-frenzy.

The first time I laid my sleeping bag out and fluffed my pillow on my hands and knees, Cat's head poked over the side of the bed. She eyed me.

“You hit when you sleep.”

She seemed unsurprised. “It's not you I'm hitting, if that makes you feel better.”

“Well, just...get them good, but up there.”

“Sure thing, Chief.”

I’ve never met someone who moves so much, but half the time doesn’t have a clue why.

It’s something inside of her—something in her blood, at least that’s what Mama says. I try to see what she means, but it mostly makes me sad. About four years ago, Cat’s mama left for the proverbial milk and never came back. She left Cat, her daddy, and Cat’s gran in her wake, barely treading water.

Cat’s daddy’s stuffed full of hot air, with more fire and brimstone opinions than there are hairs on his head. He’s the wealthiest man in the region, even if that wealth is dusty as hell now. He’s still handsome, in a wind-worn granite sort of way, but Preserve, the wheels fell off when his wife skipped town. He stopped getting his hair cut and roped it into a silvery tail down his back. His arthritis really sank into his joints, and even with Mama’s help, he’s mostly using his wheelchair. Mama says it’s a choice he’s made. Her methods work, and when someone is telling her it ain’t, or she’s seeing that it isn’t, she always has ways to explain around it. Or maybe it’s true. Mama has a gift that no one understands, not even me, and I’m supposed to receive it next.

I don’t understand how someone can choose to feel like that, so I don’t think it’s true. I would never tell Mama otherwise. She doesn’t like second-guesses.

She wasn’t the first girl to do that. Not even the first wife.

Cat got smaller after she left. She got thinner. But she grew thorns. She became a whip. She’d soon cut you across the knuckles before she tells you what she’s feeling, except for me.

I love her more than my own brother, if I’m honest. (That isn’t a good thing to say. Maybe I don’t mean it.)

I'm not out here for 10 minutes before Otis—the Maddener to everyone else around here that isn't Mama—shows up and starts quizzing me again. “Is that an Eastern Whip-poor-will or is it a Chuck-will's-widow?”

When I was little, Otis told me that nightjars only come out at night and roost during the day, but they roost right there on the ground. They don't dig their own holes like burrowing owls or take over tunnels made from prairie-dog, ground squirrel, or tortoise labor. They don't fly up to sink themselves among the branches and the leaves or take control of some poor woodpecker's hole—no, they get their shuteye right there on the ground, in the brush, wherever they feel like it. I'd convinced myself I'd stomp on one of them, unknowingly, and crush them to death. Just accidentally grind the sole of my sneaker into their stout chests and silence them forever.

I spent a few weeks tiptoeing my way through the woods along the creek and driving Des bonkers because it was taking like four times as long to get to the E-Z Relief for some Pepsis or our weekly joint delivery service where we bring Mrs. Palmer her regular order of pork butts from my uncle's butcher shop and cheese poofs from the very same E-Z Relief we'd return to 40 minutes later for said Pepsis. Sometimes she had us run by the South Baptist Church and pick up the old service programs from the pastor because she likes to make collages with them, or something.

He'd pretended to pound his forehead against the nearest tree while I did the sting-ray shuffle over the brush. (Which, when I utilized the very same method but with bare toes, searching for worms after a summer popup, Cat told me that it was called the “sting-ray shuffle,” which if you didn't want your toes zapped numb by their tails, you scrunch your feet along the sand near the ocean's edge. She told me she had learned that when her mama took her to Florida,

not long before she took off. She also said that if you find yourself zapped, someone needs to come and pee on your wound. I told her at the time that she was full of it, but I looked it up later at the library and confirmed it.) Or, when we left the church, he'd sink down to his knees right at the entrance, his hands clasped in front of him, head bowed in prayer, and ask sweet baby Jesus that he keep two Pepsis safe at the E-Z Relief for when we return to town because it was going to take Vee two hours to use the shortcut back to Mrs. Palmer's.

I listen. The night hunkers down over us, but it's alive with croaking and rustling, the wet little plunks of turtles, frogs, and fish slipping back into the creek water. I feel like we've slipped into it with all the rest of them. It's very fluid, nighttime around here. Damp and warm. If you move around too much, it's hard to breathe. Ozarkian humidity. But, if you take your time, and just float in it, it's real nice. I think louder after nightfall. Everything does.

They chant their namesake, the Whip-poor-will. They say it quick and high, piercing. "Chuck-will's-widow" are similar. They say their names. It's continuous and repetitive, a vibrating middle note between two shorter notes, and they sound like they're saying "Chuck-will's-widow" or "chuckwuts-widow" or "Chip-fell-out-of-a-oak" lower pitched and slower.

I'm about to say "Eastern" but Otis cuts me off because he's finished with the testing.

"Has Jonquil yet shared with you the terms of your...she calls it 'Conversion,' yes?" He pivots on his bare feet, the bottoms thicker than the soles of shoes, and spits on the ground. Actually *spits*. Like in the movies. "It's a gesture of respect," he says.

He's never called her "your mom" to me. She's only ever been Jonquil, not even Jonnie like my uncle calls her or like my daddy did. Maybe it's because he raised her. Maybe he's so familiar with her that anything more dear seems inappropriate.

I nod my head. "She says that discovery is part of the process."

He makes a noise that I think is a grunt and turns his back to me. I don't think he's dismissed me, not yet, anyway.

"What do you call it?" I ask.

He makes the exact same noise. Spending time with Otis is always like playing a deranged game of charades. He will periodically break the rules while also getting really snippy if I try to get too creative or push the purpose of the conversation before he's ready to supply it.

He's very bossy, is what I'm saying. I'm surrounded by very bossy people.

"Did you know that this mountain stayed dry when we were but a warm shallow sea?"

I shake my head. He can't see me, but he can see me. I've never done anything behind his back that he didn't know had been happening. I'm listening, but I'm distracted. The Maddener doesn't even wear shoes, but a lot of the time he knows things that people only know from school or reading books.

"What do you call it?" I ask him again. Sometimes asking the same question twice will remind him to answer it if he didn't answer it the first time because he forgot.

"This little mountain, hardly a mountain, bared its throat against the primordial sky while everything else frothed and pruned."

I'm annoyed. I don't want to talk about ancient dead seas.

"Otis," I say.

I wait five minutes. I can see the hands on my wristwatch ticking away like time doesn't matter, just like the old, old man humming to himself beside me, my question still hanging in the air like all the humidity around us. His hums always seem to come from somewhere deep inside of him. He's busy humming and squinting across Big Toe Creek.

His head snaps over to be so suddenly that I let out a little *eep* of surprise and accidentally bite my tongue. It's bleeding. He shouldn't do things that surprise me anymore, because his surprises are so predictable, but I'm distracted.

I kick a rock with the toe of my sneaker. It flings over the edge of the bank and plops into the creek water, which is moving so slow that it smells like decay.

"You are unprepared," he says.

"But surely Mama has taught me skills that I'll apply to whatever problem I run into, and it'll be like solving puzzles. I'm very good at puzzles."

"If you fail, she tries again."

"What?"

"If you fail, she will try with a different child."

"*What?*"

He's becoming irritated with me. I'm buzzing around him like a particularly annoying horse fly, and I know I'm testing his patience. I don't like how this threat feels so familiar. I always thought Mama flung it at me to get me to shut up and try harder. But then, I can't remember a time Mama has ever said a thing that wasn't true. She doesn't lie or coddle or manipulate. I feel panicked because it's like I can't even keep my own facts about my own mama straight anymore.

He turns his head. From beneath his wide-brimmed hat, he blinks his good eye. It glows like a snow-blue piece of coal. He's looking at me like I'm a moron.

"What is unclear, child?"

"She'll try again! You mean, have another baby?"

"Jonquil can't very well pluck one out of the ground now can she?"

“But—how! My daddy’s in prison for like, fifteen years, and by then...” Even as I’m talking, I realize how silly I sound. How naïve. I’m just a little kid. I’m almost sixteen, and just this small, silly, scared little girl. Cat would’ve elbowed me in the gut right now. She would’ve signaled me before I got to this point. I’m quiet, in agony, thinking about this.

The Maddener is waiting for me to finish my sentence.

“I see.”

“Ah, she sees!”

“I don’t need you to make fun of me, too, Otis.” I feel something sting at the back of my eyes and I realize that it’s tears. When was the last time I cried? I whip my braid back over my shoulder and start pulling at it. “Mama already makes me feel dumb enough.”

We’re quiet for a long time. All I hear are cicadas. “I call it a pact forged in blood,” he finally says, stepping back from the bank of the creek. He leans towards me. He smells like earth and the river, and a little sour. “But it isn’t as catchy.”

CAT

June 8th, 1972 | Two Days Before the Camping Trip | Cat's Bedroom

I'm pretty sure Grandmama has stayed in the house the last few nights. [MOU3] My room is all the way up on the third floor, so it's hard to say. Grandmama has been getting out at night and disappearing back into the woods behind our property. Daddy didn't even notice till warty Henry Williams showed up on our back porch after midnight last Sunday. He'd been late-night angling for blue catfish when he saw her, my grandmama, floating down Big Toe on her back.

Daddy cussed up a storm so bad that it woke me up. Or maybe it wasn't his cussing, maybe it had been Henry Williams' pounding like a heartbeat that knocked me loose from sleep. I'd been dreaming about grandmama, weirdly enough, she'd been scampering through all the hallways of our manor tossing stuff back at me like vases and my old stuffed animals and it was just as she turned and chucked the grandfather clock from the foyer at me that I started awake because Daddy was saying you gotta be fuckin kidding me how the hell did she get all the way out there ma what the fuck is wrong with you you're gonna die out in the woods and where the fuck's that gonna leave me?

I was sweating, I remember. Like I'd actually been flying after grandmama for the last four hours trying to impress her with my catching skills or else making sure she didn't shatter all of the stuff in the house that still cradled a little piece of mom-memory for me. Anyhow, I went downstairs. It's usually cemetery-silent in our house, so all of this cussing and commotion was something interesting in a town that feels more and more like I'm wading through a sandbag.

Daddy didn't even notice me when I came down the stairs with Ma's crochet blanket wrapped around my shoulders like a cape. He doesn't notice me very often anymore. It's like I

flicker in and out of existing around here. Pretty much everything flickers in and out for Grandmama nowadays.

Daddy was cussing loudly at Grandmama and the wind and the night and Henry Williams, too, for some reason even though he was the one who soaked himself wading into the creek to pull Grandmama dripping and floaty from the water. Henry Williams was waiting patiently for his chance to spin his yarn of bravery, but Daddy was never the type of man to give air to another.

I saw Grandmama hunched over a little step stool in front of the pot-bellied stove, a wet towel bunched like a shawl at the crooks of her arms. Her hair was a dripping tangle over her shoulder and she shivered and shivered. It seemed as Grandmama's face got older, the inside of her got littler and littler. I went over to her and draped Ma's crochet blanket over her shoulders and used the towel to gently squeeze out the rest of the water from her hair.

She was wearing her long-sleeved lace nightgown with the high collar. She'd put on make-up. I could see her floating down Big Toe on her back like Ophelia in that painting, lipstick-smearred mouth in a crescent smile, her aquiline nose like a tiny child under a sheet, skimming across the water.

Grandmama had been running amok after midnight for a while now. Daddy kept himself tucked away in his office from sun-up to sun-down and I started doing extra chores just to quiet the high whine of silence that flooded the house like live wires on a cold day. I did laundry and smacked the dryer lid shut or scraped knives down crusty plates to clean them until Daddy finally noticed and rolled out to tell me to shut the fuck up. But Grandmama had stopped wearing shoes a long time ago, and I had watched her translucent, blue-veined feet toughen up over time.

She'd gone from gingerly padding around the house (I'd also removed at least two splinters from the bottoms of her feet and it felt so odd, holding her bird-bones in my hands.) but I started noticing how dirty her feet had gotten. I'd spent more than one breakfast watching her feet push and pull her rocking chair while she hummed and embroidered loose pieces of fabric in odd patterns that exploded with just this kaleidoscope of colors but didn't make much sense beyond that. (I'd also started wrapping her fingertips in band-aids because she'd gotten real clumsy with needles.) The bottoms and between her toes were always crusty with dirt, more than just an unwashed floor—it was outdoors-dirt. One morning she had had mud caked all the way up past her ankle bones. I knew she was out scampering around, but it didn't occur to me that she could find herself in some trouble. As far as I knew, none of the drifters Relief collected in its netting ever trekked this far up the hill, so I didn't think anyone would hurt her.

I suppose maybe she'd hurt herself, but I don't think that's what she was doing.

I open up my stolen copy of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, because it always seems like good 2AM reading, and with Grandmama in a little cocoon next to me, I start to read. I'm at the part where the church guy describes how witches can fly and how they keep men's penises as pets. Flying requires killing babies in their cradle and making it look like they died naturally, smuggling away their bodies, and then cooking them in a big cauldron till all the baby meat falls off their bones and then they drink them as a soup. I guess the leftover gristle is used as a flying ointment or something. The other thing is that witches steal men's penises all the time and keep them in nests up in trees to pluck down whenever they liked, or else they keep them like hamsters, and house them in a box where they feed them oats and corn and laugh or coo at them whenever they want.

I realize that this seems like a dumb book to use while I'm trying to figure out what's happening to me. Most of it is just proof that this guy really didn't like women. Like, women really, really frustrated him.

I fall asleep thinking about Vera's mama and her robe and her hair in a towel and what it looks like right when she pulls it loose and lets it fall down her back, and then I wake up 30 minutes later with the same image in my head. I'm so tired. I feel like I'm dumping cups of water into a well that won't ever fill back up, no matter how many times I go back to it. I want to scream. I'm so fucking hot.

I decide to go for a walk.

I can't see Vera's mama's hands because she's got her back to me, but her elbows look like she's knitting something. It's just air, because I know she didn't have anything in her hands when she swept around the side of the First Baptist Church. Her fingers had been freely fluttering down the length of her plait and wrestling strays behind her ears. At least, I think. I don't have cat-eyes or anything, but I've gotten pretty good at figuring out what her mama is doing all of the time. Well, what she's doing in public enough spaces that I can see, at any rate.

I hear a word somewhere in my head: succubus. I know I'm in trouble.

She opens her shirt.

And it's like wings unfurling.

June 7th, 1972 | One Day Before the Camping Trip | Vera's Kitchen

I'm going to school today. It's 6:30 in the morning. The only reason I'm up is because I was already up all night thinking about Vera's mama, and the only thing I want to do now is the thing I did a lot more when I went to school more consistently: I'm on Vee's front porch, waiting for her to let me in for morning tea.

All of us kids go to school 13 miles up the road in Barren Fork. Bus driver Cathy Lee won't even circle the Killing Tree—muttering about how it's bad luck to go round' it 10 times in a week. She always says this while she's sucking on her teeth and spitting out chew into a Mountain Dew bottle nestled between her legs. So, we get picked up in a clump on the edge of town near Vera's house. I like to get there early so I can knock on the door and Vera's mama will answer with her long black hair piled into a towel on her head, still wrapped in her towel. She always smells like a forest bouquet—like the bank of the river, earthy and damp with the cottony sweetness of dogwood trees and something that smells tangy and animal-like. That tint of sweat which makes me wonder if I could taste it if she'd let me.

I spend the 30 minutes before the bus comes at Vera's little scuffed Formica table, sipping flowering tea which is a kind of art that Vera's mama does for fun, I guess. She hand-sews tea leaves into rosettes or peaches or mushroom shapes and they've got this webbing imprinted on their bodies from drying in cheese cloth. When she pours hot water from the kettle into the decanter, they open up into garlands. Sometimes they burst open with the violence of corn kernels over an open flame. She likes hibiscus, marigold, and carnation. I like rose the most, especially when she scents it with jasmine. Those are my favorite mornings, with Vee's foot pushing on the leg of my chair and her chattering away like a wren and Vee's mama taking her wet mass of hair down from her towel and sipping her own tea, listening to us with a tiny turn of her mouth. She has a habit of running her long pointer finger around the rim of her time-stained porcelain teacups. I watch it while it glides and again wonder what any of her would taste like.

Vera and her mama are talking about healing tea.

“For fevers, Vera, and chills, what can we give our visitors?”

“Boneset or center weed, drunk as a tea. Black pepper in brandy, maybe, if they’re over eighteen, I guess. Ginger tea, too.”

Kids used to make fun of Vera when we were younger. I used to get in scraps for her all of the time. Most of the kids have forgotten about it by now, since we’re in high school with more pressing things to think about than the witch girl with stained hands and the mama who dances with the devil, but they’d use to ask her if she was going to have a spot of tea, always in terrible British accents, always pretending to be James Bond. The joke wasn’t that Vera was cool like James Bond—they were cool like James Bond. Vera was treated like someone’s slightly off backwoods grandma.

Vera is still talking. “Smoke can sometimes move the phlegm in people’s throats, so I could offer them dried mullein leaves, or just some good old fashion sage.”

I’m not sure I can stay here, in Relief. I don’t know what’s here for me. What’s here for anybody but that old Maddener? Him and his Killing Tree. Come to think of it, he does look a little like the dip-dyed man on the cover of the book I stole.

I try real hard not to think about Vera’s mama, because I’m not sure it’s right. Not even about Vee’s mama being a girl, but more the *mama* part. But that’s the funny thing about thinking things like that. You tell yourself not to think a thing, and then that’s all you think about. Even when you’re trying to sleep or when you’re pouring cereal or calling after the dog out in the bramble because Grandmama thought he was looking at her wrong (or maybe right) and she let him loose.

When you try really hard to do the opposite of something, it seems like you’re just destined to do it exactly the wrong way.

VERA

June 9th, 1972 | Day of the Camping Trip | Marshall's Truck

We're an hour into our two-hour trip. I'm trying not to panic.

I was mad at Mama, and now I'm not anymore. When I was mad, it made my choices a lot more slick, like they were coated in oil. Quicker to slip down the slope of bad choices, you know? When I was mad, I didn't even bother imagining what she'd look like when she figured out I wasn't going to show up for lessons. Or for dinner.

I'm a little scared now, but I feel more ashamed. Again.

I'm not driving. I don't know how to drive. Mama doesn't either, she says. I can't imagine Mama not *knowing* how to do anything, let alone something that twelve-year-old kids have been doing around these parts since the beginning of time. I think she told Marshall not to teach me. Whenever I ask if he'll let me try in the South Baptist Church parking lot, he laughed at me in a mean way, not too far off Mama's laugh, that says it isn't funny, you're just stupid. He laughed and said I was going to need written permission from my lord and savior before he did something like that. He means Mama.

At any rate, I'm not driving, so it's out of my hands.

Desmond is here. When Marshall pulled back into the driveway, me and Cat trundled out with our satchels and sleeping bags, plus a cooler of salami sandwiches I pre-packed and some sausages from Uncle Ford's shop—which is fortunate because there is an extra person I hadn't known about.

We opened the back door of the cab, and I immediately smacked my shin against the tire well because Desmond was sitting in the front seat. He was looking at me over his shoulder and turned his torso enough so that he could prop one elbow on the center console and his knuckles

resting against his mouth. Inanely, I noticed that his eyes looked more green than hazel in the afternoon light. Not that *that* matters.

I said: “Uh, hey Des?”

Cat said: “Ugh, Connie.” She was referring to the girl in red lipstick and a red crop top lined in bright yellow.

“Little hot for corduroy, don’t you think Vera?” Connie said. She tilted her head like a cocker spaniel and smiled.

I instinctively pressed my palms against the legs of my brown shorts. I hadn’t worn them yet, but it was hot, I—

“Oh *no*, Constance,” Cat interrupted, bodily stepping in front of me to shove her satchel down into the space between the driver’s seat and the back passenger’s, “it looks like your shirt shrunk in the drier! Or is that your kid sister’s?”

“Hi, Catriona. So great to see you.” She hadn’t meant it.

Right now, Connie is sitting between me and Cat. I don’t know how she got there. Cat should’ve been smack in the middle because she’s the skinniest, but also because Connie likes to take up space. With her voice, with her hands, with her legs. Her clothes, even. She teased her hair into a storm cloud above her head.

We started out heading in the general direction of several destinations and have just nailed down our campground, but I feel prickly. I’m sweaty, I’m worried about what’s going to happen when I get back home, and now I’m annoyed because we aren’t going to Lake Lure like I wanted.

I don’t know why I was expecting Des to just agree with me. I don’t know why I thought he’d just be easy about something in his life, but that would be me completely ignoring

everything I know about him. Apparently, he hasn't changed since he was seven years old. He's arguing with me about where we should go, and I'm still not understanding why he was invited at all. I think Marshall is just siding with him because he wants to punish me for the other day. He's vindictive like that. Cat can be, too.

It's not that I thought he'd suddenly be a noncommittal person or that he'd tucked away the part of himself that runs his mouth about everything constantly, but I thought maybe...I thought maybe he'd care about what I wanted. I feel stupid even admitting that.

Des has a real strong opinion about the body of water we'd be cooling off in. I'd said Lake Lure, and I actually watched Des's lip curl like he'd caught a whiff of something off. "That lake ain't natural. They don't ever smell right, man-made lakes." I know how I'm feeling is slapped across my face because his cheeks turn red like I actually did slap him across the face, on both sides.

"I just mean that, you know, the banks are these concrete shelves and you're always kind of sliding into the water with all the algae. Like sinking your toes into a blanket of snot."

"Okay, Des, we get it," Connie says.

I know I'm eyeing him like he guessed my birthday wrong, though I don't know why he'd remember a thing like that anyhow.

So, he threw his support behind the waterfall option, which is called Skinny Dip Falls, something I'm sure played no role in his decision whatsoever. I'm feeling unreasonably upset right now. I close my eyes.

When I feel overwhelmed by too many people or too many feelings, I look around for something that I can recite facts about. Most of the facts I know concern plants, herbs, flowers, and to a lesser extent, most native insect species and fish. Well, lake fish and river fish. I've

never seen the ocean, just seen pictures of it from my textbook or some of Cat's *National Geographics*. (It's a subscription her mama started and then nobody ever stopped, even seven years later, and now Cat's grandmama has taken to filching them from the mailbox and ripping out all of the pages so she can wallpaper her bedroom windows so thick you could cut out a piece of it like a pizza.) I know this whole region used to be submerged beneath a warm sea thousands of years ago, which is why you can see imprints of sea creatures in the rockfaces of the plateaus. All of us have at least one ancient frond of gigantic pill bug-looking fossil on our dressers or in a curio cabinet, collecting dust and next to no interest. It isn't so exotic now, but it's home. By the time I was 10 I could list off 50 different medicinal herbs and flowers and supply at least a general property, or at least what differentiates it from something else. I'm trying to do this now and not be irritated with Des or pissed at my stubborn brother or self-conscious because of what Connie said about my shorts, and not frustrated with Cat who could've backed me up—but she didn't. She had no opinion at all. I try to remind myself why that's okay.

Money is supposed to fix a lot of things, even with a daddy who always looks like he's just taken a bite out of something gross or with a grandmama who is dancing down the slopes of dementia. Money is a good salve if it's anything at all. Cat is always reluctant to have people over. At first, I thought it was because she didn't like bragging and didn't want to be treated differently, even though we all know who everyone is most of the time before we ever even meet one another, before we even step foot into kindergarten we've got a pretty clear map of everyone's family tree. We know who's Granddaddy destroyed the back of the Pool Hall's bar after he got cut off for the first time and we know that if anyone ever notices a ding on their car that wasn't there the day before, it's probably Patty's mama who's vision in her left eye is pretty much nothing. So, we all knew she was the rich girl who lived up on the hill that overlooked

everyone else, even overlooked the mayor. I thought that's why, that she just wanted to keep it all secret as long as possible (but how couldn't we know when we heard her whole name:

Catriona McMullin)

But when I finally showed up in the fourth grade to work on a history presentation with Cat, I started to understand. The long, winding single-lane road I took up to the manor had been mottled with potholes, fractured with weeds. The manor was white from far away but a sickly yellow from close up, like it had gotten soaked in nicotine. Its bones were still good (which made the manor exactly like Relief, the bones part, anyway): a symmetrical face, evenly-spaced windows, a gabled roof. Four columns decorated with ivy and fleur-de-lis, a cupola thrust up into the sky. It felt weird inside, though. Like the air sort of hefted itself around. The decorative wood accents in the foyer were dull and strung with spiderwebs. The glass panes where the ceiling vaulted into the domed cupola were streaked with old rainwater and the scat of birds and squirrels. The corners had long since become the home for tree seedlings and the flaking of nature—discarded feathers, acorns, and katydid shells.

I closed the door behind me because Cat had already walked off. I slipped my shoes off and just had to stop for a moment. I closed my eyes. The silence rang like a bell. That's what it felt like, a funeral home. So, Cat doesn't offer opinions. She lets the wind throw her side-to-side until she doesn't anymore.

One time, some kid said, trying to get under her skin: "You're just some rich asshole."

I remember Cat laughing. She wasn't mad. She said, "It should make me a lot happier, shouldn't it?"

I open my eyes and catch Des looking at me in the rear-view mirror. We look at each other. It's bad how fast I forget about Mama. He's only been around one whole week, and he's

really starting to take up headspace. Which is stupid because his family—his daddy—hates Mama, and by extension, he hates me.

Des would be smart to keep hating me, too.

CAT

June 9th, 1972 | Day of the Camping Trip | Marshall's Truck

The truck cab smells, which was mostly the empty Bob's Big Burgers bags and empty beer cans but could've also been his sneakers he wears when he goes fishing on Big Toe. I tell him that it looks like Godzilla took a dump on it and then it sat out in the sun for thirty years. I can tell he agrees and that he thinks it's funny, but he won't give me a laugh because that would be admitting that I'm a funny person. He gives me a lot of leeway though, if I'm honest, because I'm a girl and I'm cute enough. Other people aren't ever very lucky.

Marshall is compulsively chewing sunflower seeds. We still have a half hour left. He's alternating between eating the entire seed and shucking it with his mouth. Sometimes he spits it out of the open truck window, and sometimes he uses the red plastic cup he has nestled in the inside console. It's grossing me out, but it's also fascinating.

I don't know why he does the things he does—like why is this one a whole seed mouthful, but the last one had been a shucking?

We've settled on a campsite in Graveyard Fields mostly because Skinny Dip Falls is only a quarter of a mile off. Vera argued for Lake Lure for a while. I know why; she's told me before. She likes how thick and voluminous the trees are and how they reflect so perfectly in the blue-green water. The sharp land-trees and the shimmery water-trees. The discussion had been long and involved, but it had mostly been a battle between Marshall and Vera who somehow both act like firstborn siblings sometimes. I didn't back her up when they got into it. Maybe I should have, but I don't really care where we end up.

I don't offer my opinions. I spend the whole conversation examining the tips of my hair and feeling generally a little sad. I think I need a haircut

“Why’s it called ‘Graveyard Fields’ anyhow?”

“Windthrow.”

I make a big show of understanding. I throw my arms up some, enough to knock Connie in the side of the head because she’s decided that she has to sit in the middle because she wants both boys to be able to see her when they tilt their head towards the center console of the truck. I’m still unclear why Des gets to sit up front, anyhow. They buds now—Marshall and Des? I keep looking at Vera out of the corner of my eye, trying to figure out how she feels about our extra dude. She’s nervous, but she’s trying to act like she ain’t. She can’t fool me, anyhow. She has it written all over everything, and she’s pretty easy to translate for me, even when she’s pulling out all of her tricks like examining the ends of her braid or pretending she’s thinking about something really smart by staring up at the ceiling.

I’m kind of surprised I haven’t heard her say anything shitty to him yet. In fact, neither of them have said anything, but I keep seeing Des looking back at us from the rear view mirror. He ain’t looking at me, though, and god knows he ain’t looking at Connie and her stupid fluffy hair.

“I don’t know what the means.”

“When the wind throws the trees, Cat. Exactly what it sounds like.”

“Shut up, *Desmond*. Sorry I’m not as big of a dweeb as you are.”

“What?! Vee...ra is the one who used the term to begin with! I’m gonna assume she knows what it means.”

“She’s not a dweeb. She’s a genius.” I reach over Connie’s stinky floral ass to lovingly squeeze Vera’s knee.

“Not really sure what the distinction is,” Des mutters.

“Uh, could you *not*?” Connie’s lip is curled. She looks like a French bulldog.

“I like that perfume, Constance. Where’d you get it? My grandmama smells just like you. It brings back good memories” I smile very sweetly. “Oh, but her hygiene has really started to decline since the dementia got bad. You remind me of her.”

“You suck so bad, Cat. Like, I really hate you.”

“Do you?” I gasp and clutch my chest. “I couldn’t ever really tell.”

Marshall is laughing. He grins at us in the mirror. “Kind of mean, Cat.”

I’m about to literally launch myself over the center console to throttle him until he blinks six times to tell me that he understands how messed up that criticism is coming from him.

I notice Vera shaking her head at me. She’s the only person that ever has any hope of stopping me from doing things that I really want to do.

“What! I love my grandmama. You know, she’s like, my favorite person.”

“Well, you don’t have much left after your mama up and left, huh? You’re like, half an orphan.” She nudges me with her shoulder, and I want to sink my nails into her arm and rip them through. Give Vera a reason to stretch out her healing skills. Give her some practice before her big exam.

“Knock it off, Connie.”

I’m surprised because it’s Marshall who says it.

Immediately, I can see her bristle. Her shoulders rise up towards her ears and her spine straightens. Her mouth is a tight line. “I’m not comin out here to get bit up by mosquitos just to watch you try and get—”

Marshall is grinning at her through the mirror. “Steady, girl.” It’s a shit-eating grin that’s very annoying to me but I admire his ability to pull this charming stuff out of his ass. You really wouldn’t know just by looking at him with his too-long mullet and ratty band tees that he could

probably convince a girl to take some stuff off. I'm watching it right now, in real time. We have that in common, honestly. The ability to work clothes off people—Me and Marshall.

The look evaporates her anger. Like, I can almost feel the steam that comes off of her. She smiles herself, a syrupy simpering thing. “I hate you,” she says. And I roll my eyes, because even though she said the exact same thing to me, they both have very different meanings.

It's very quiet in the truck, aside from the roar of the hot wind. A minute passes before Vera and Des take a deep breath at the same damn time and say, I kid you not, “So, windthrow—” They both stop at the same time. I can almost feel the heat radiating off of Vera in a cloud overhead and I can see Des lean his chin on his palm and stare at himself in the side mirror. He is outrageously red.

I'm starting to feel suspicious. I look between the two of them. I can only see the side of Vera's face, and she's now also turned her whole head to look out the window, but I can see the blush raging like a freaking rash all over Des's face. It would be cute, his blushing, if he wasn't an annoying dweeb who's father is almost the literal worst, and who made Vera feel like garbage for seven years. Not just garbage, but like she was a freak. Like she was some kind of witch, like—Well, Vera isn't those things. I'm not so sure about her mama. At even the merest mention of Vera's mama, she just bursts into my mind's eye. I close them for a second, and she's leaning against the door frame of Vera's kitchen and I'm standing by the stove, staring at her. (I think. I don't know if I have a body. Maybe I'm just floating.) She's wearing her floral robe that hits mid-calf and her toes are bare, like they always are. Her black hair has a sheen in the low light, and her eyes are glinting, and I'm watching as her fingers trail down the front of her robe where the two halves cross and—

I'm stabbed in the gut by an elbow and lose half my breath. I gasp a second, eyes flying open. Connie is staring at me, her stupid black eyebrows heavy with annoyance. "You're literally the only one who gives a shit about this information, so can you listen to her so that she'll shut up about it?"

Vera is talking really quickly. She's nervous. I can tell that she feels out of sorts—but why? "It's a name that kind of suits it really, because it's a sort of graveyard. Graveyard Fields is a grassland covered in these ancient, downed trees, kind of like our Killing Tree. They're just everywhere. No one knows when the storm was, I guess, but it snapped all of the trees or completely uprooted them and just flung them around."

"I mean, I've been there before," I say, blinking away the vision of Vera's mama, but it's like she's imprinted herself on the back of my eyelids. "Looks pretty grassy to me, still," I say.

"Maybe not grassy enough," Marshall says, and I see a pointed look at Des. Vera doesn't notice the exchange because she's too busy trying to focus on picking at her nails. She's still telling her story: "Yeah, it's grassy. Everything grows regular now, except there's these old dead trees jutting up everywhere, just the stumps of them. Or like wooden teeth. A lot of them."

Now Vera turns her head towards the open truck window. The hot wind flings the long, loose black hairs of her braid behind her. I notice that Connie shivers as they tickle her neck and cheek. She rubs her palms up and down her arms. She has goosebumps, I just now notice. I feel her shift towards me. I want to elbow her in the gut and tell her that she'd be too fucking lucky to have a friend like Vera.

"It's spooky," Vera says, against the roar, "whenever you've got time lying dead in front of you."

When Vera says stuff like that, people really do think she's a witch. I love her, but she says weird things sometimes.

**

June 9th, 1972 | Days of the Camping Trip | Still in Marshall's Truck

We're allegedly 10 minutes out, but the truck is having a collective meltdown. We've been too close to each other for too long.

"Marshall, man, c'mon. Reading is fundamental," Des says, and I think he has an actual death wish. I'm surprised at how—well, no I'm not. Des has always been a know-it-all ass. I just don't think I'd ever seen him hanging around Marshall before. They don't really run in the same crowd. (I don't think that Marshall has a crowd, honestly. He's maybe one of the loneliest people I ever met. [This will go later, probably.])

"I could clock you, dude. Seriously." He's white knuckling the steering wheel. I don't blame him. Des is annoying. "This ain't reading, Des, you fuck. These are 10 different kinds of squiggly lines."

"Let me tell him where to go!" Connie says. She lunges between the front seats and tries to swipe the road map from Des, who reflexively jerks back from her, and I hear the long rip of a big piece of paper getting pulled in half. Vera is clutching at her knees. She's pushing her fingers into her thighs.

Marshall glances up in the rear-view mirror. We meet eyes. I slide my eyes towards Vera and then back to his.

"Connie, give it to Vee. My daddy taught her how to read a map." He mutters something, then, and I think it sounds a lot like: "Taught *her* something, anyhow."

It's not the first time I think that Vera's daddy is a real piece of work. Jay's daddy beats the hell out of him and so he lives mostly on his uncle's couch, and Mel's parents want so badly for her to cream everyone at everything all of the time that she doesn't ever have a smooth forehead. She's always worrying about some assignment or the next race or if she's worked enough at E-Z. And we all know about my own daddy and my ma who skipped town. I wonder if anyone in this whole damn town has parents who aren't all kinds of work rolled all into one.

And Vera gets us there, because she knows how to read a damn map. She don't even drive, but she laid it out on her knees and murmuring to herself, found where we were after Des said we just passed County Road 203, and then with her long, elegant fingers with the nails cut close, she traced our way through all those squiggly lines that confused her brother.

It's a lot of swearing, rolled eyes, and a bunch of sighs that say you're all dumb and I'm the only smart one in this truck cab by the time we find Lick Creek Campground. Marshall had dramatically thudded the back of his skull into the headrest about six times, if you're keeping count, and the map, unfortunately, did not survive the journey. Vera seemed particularly distressed by this. I told her we'll just have to bandage it with masking tape later. She wasn't teary, but she was upset. It was my daddy's, is all she said.

We pull into the hole-pocked gravel parking lot and it isn't until I'm slumped against the side of the truck, my bag between my legs, my arms squeezing my sleeping bag against my chest—even though it is so hot, too hot—that I notice the sun ricocheting in a blinding sort of way off another truck I know very, very well.

Mel's here. At the campsite.

For half a second, for just a fraction of a beat, she seems confused. I'm probably more confused.

“Mel?” I jog over to her. I must miss her because I don’t jog. I haven’t seen her since I was such an asshole outside my house last week. I thought she’d stay away from me for a little longer, punish me for being a jerk. But she’s here! Maybe she followed Marshall’s truck out here?

**

June 9th, 1972 | Day of the Camping Trip | The Campfire

It’s nighttime now. Lick Creek Campground is a shithole. Like little mushrooms, we’ve rooted ourselves in various places around the campfire. Our rented little patch of dirt costs \$10 for two nights, and it’s pretty obvious why.

Marshall barely gets the campfire going before the sun slips back behind the mountains. He eventually had some help with lighter fluid after getting shitty with every suggestion from the rest of us. I mean, I didn’t have one and neither did Mel, but both Des and Vera know a lot of things, so there was a long exchange of Marshall ducking and dodging suggestions while punching back with shitty insults like telling Des that he’s a pigeon-toed little fuck or that Vera breathes too loud when she’s thinking and that she needs to take a step back. (Which Vee snapped back that starting a bonfire doesn’t require advanced thinking skills. I did notice her stiffen a little when Marshall launched into Des, but I could chalk that up to her just not liking how Marshall naturally is—a dumb jerk.) Des didn’t defend himself, he just pulled back and went and sat on one of the stumps bent over at the waist, cradling his chin in his palm, his elbow knocked up on his knee. I mean, I don’t think I ever noticed him walking weirdly, so he shouldn’t be too worried about it. I could’ve warned Vee that stepping into help her brother—because Vee always wants to help, no matter who it is—would snuff out any kind of good mood we’d managed to encourage in him, not unlike a little bonfire, I guess.

When the fire sparks and catches, Des leans back, extending his legs out. “Never needed no lighter fluid, myself. Crutch.” Marshall didn’t hear him, which was fortunate for all of us. Marshall just turned eighteen and he’s angry about a lot of things. He doesn’t have a lot of friends—or any, really. Like, I can’t name any. But that’s mostly because he is apt to brawl with a person before he ever got to know them. That’s not to say that he sucks all of the time, because he doesn’t. Sometimes he’s genuinely funny, and he knows how to do plenty of stuff, it’s just that those things always get snuffed out the minute he thinks someone is looking at him funny.

Marshall is infamously bad at taking jokes.

Me and Mel have our legs tangled together. I’m sitting in a fold-up chair and she’s snug against the side of it. I tried to make her sit in it with me, but she won’t. She’s sitting on a log and seems comfortable enough. I’m still suspicious about Vera and Desmond. Vee is sitting alone. Connie and Marshall are stacked inside of each other like nesting dolls, but I can tell that Marshall is sweating and growing irritated. Marshall, like his sister, have everything they’ve ever felt scrawled across their face. And they feel a lot of things.

Vera’s pulled her legs up to her chest, her knees splayed out, and she’s staring intently into the fire. Des keeps looking at her. I thought at first I was making that up, just being paranoid, but I’ve seen him stealing looks. He’s more subtle than I’d normally give him credit for, but he’s propped his chin up on his palm and is mostly staring at the crackling fire, but I keep seeing the whites of his eyes because he’s sliding them towards her again and again.

The pond isn’t far off. The cicadas are really kicking it up.

I keep thinking that Marshall is casting looks our way, and I don’t think it’s because he’s hoping I’ll catch one and throw it back. Me and Mel are clearly together, and it makes goosebumps erupt down my arms and up my legs. This is the first time she’s let us be next to

each other like this in public. Maybe she changed her mind—for me. I feel a surge of good stuff for her and I tangle my hands in hers where they sit close and squeeze.

Desmond brought beer because he is friends with the kid who runs the liquor store in Burnsville, which is a pretty convincing reason to let him hang around.

Vera isn't so sure.

“We close enough to Oklahoma, ain't we? It's 18 there.” Marshall doesn't really care. He drinks beer more and more like a fish, meaning he needs it to breathe as much as he needs it to keep himself hydrated. He'd soak in it if he could. I know that Vera's mama is already furious at her, let alone the consequences for getting herself arrested for underage drinking.

I can imagine the heat of her mama's anger from here, which makes me—Mel is here. There's nothing else worth thinking about.

I know what Vera is imagining, though: both of us, handcuffed, handed off to her uncle and the way he'd be shaking his head and clicking his tongue and telling her that he always thought she'd be different and better than my daddy or my brother. He will imply my mama, too.

“Or Kansas. Take your pick.”

“I don't think ‘close enough’ counts.”

“Horseshoes and hand grenades, right? Add getting wasted at shitty campsites to the list”

Marshall has disentangled himself enough from Connie that his hands are free and he can use his pocketknife to clean beneath his fingernails.

“Let's play a game.”

I think Marshall is mean—which maybe doesn't mean much coming from me because I'm pretty mean, too, but I think he gets off on it. He likes to make people uncomfortable or see what part of them he can bruise if he gets his timing right or the words lined up.

**

June 9th, 1972 | Day of the Camping Trip | Campground

Everyone is either mad or uncomfortable, so we go to bed. When I finish laying out my sleeping bag, I realize that Mel isn't beside me anymore.

I find Mel there. Fog plumes off the lake. She's sitting on the very edge of the dock, her feet dangling over the edge, her toes licking at the water. I want to tell her that there are fish in there and they could nibble. I've never seen the ocean, but I have this ridiculous belief that there's stuff lurking in the pond weeds and algae that are just waiting for the opportunity to sink their teeth into a calf or slip their huge mouths over the front of our feet. I don't think anyone could ever convince me to get into seawater—but, as I'm watching the back of Mel's head, looking at the wave of her copper hair, and the little nubs of her spine, I think she could probably convince me to do a lot of things. (Something moves just out of my periphery, and before I can catch it, all that's left is an outline of something that isn't there anymore, though the bushes are still disgruntled and resettling. I'm sure it wasn't a floral robe. I'm sure it wasn't the glint of augite eyes.)

I approach her from behind, the old dock creaking under my weight. It's got a few nails unstuck and it's a white-ish gray like docks get when they make it into old age. This isn't the kind of place that reseals their stuff. This is the kind of place that lets the years grow into a coat around their property. It's part of the charm, maybe. I step over a board that's bowed up from its proper spot and step to Mel's side. I slip my sandals off and sink down beside her. She draws her legs up from the pond and wraps her arms around them. Her chin fits in the perfect triangular

space. I sink down beside her, letting my legs dangle off the side. The hot air tickles the bottom of my feet. I'm surprised to feel the coolness wafting off the surface water.

I'm struck, again, by Mel's scent. It's different than normal. It's earthy and damp. It must just be the woods. That's what we all smell like right now. I resist the urge to sniff at my own arm. I'm trying to impress her again. I'm trying to get her to decide to waste time with me again. I wish I could make up my mind.

"Hey, you." I say something because she hasn't looked over at me yet. There's something really interesting to her somewhere out in the pond, though it's so misty that I can't see the bank on the other side.

A long time passes. It's quiet out here, aside from the crickets rubbing their legs together and the frogs playing music on their throats. There's a little plunk of water every now and then as a turtle slips into the water or whatever else uses the pond like that.

I almost repeat my 'Hey, you.'

"Ro," she says quietly.

"I went down to our spot the other night, just for a little while," I admit. It's hard for me to do, but I want her to know. She drove all the way out here for me.

"I know," she says.

Maybe we were both there at the same time. I left my bag of gummies there. They're her favorite. I told myself that I just didn't feel like carrying them back, but that wasn't it. I wanted to leave them there in case she showed up, too. She must've found them.

"I wanted to ask—how'd you find me? I didn't tell Daddy anything...which, I don't ever tell Daddy anything, and I didn't bother to mention it to Grandmama because she'd just forget

anyway. Old Dog was really bugging her today, so she was busy laying traps for him around the house.”

I’m just running my mouth. I’d be embarrassed if I wasn’t so worried that I’d finally done something I couldn’t take back. But she wouldn’t be here if she didn’t want to see me, right?

“I’ll always find you, Ro,” she says. She’s still so quiet that I can barely hear her, but what she says tickles the underside of my stomach and all I want to do is touch her. “You can’t hide from me, really. Even when you want to.”

“Sorry for being such a jerk,” I say. It feels weird in my mouth, an apology. “I don’t really want you to leave me alone.”

“I know.”

“So, you’ll stick around?”

She hasn’t looked at me yet.

“I’ll be around for a little while longer.” Because of college, yeah. She’s getting the hell out of dodge like Ma. “You should follow me Ro—when I go.”

I touch her wrist and almost pull back. Her skin is clammy and cold.

“Are you feeling okay?”

She tilts her head towards me for the first time. She smiles just a little, like she normally does, where the tops of her teeth stick out, but most of them are still hidden by her full lips. In the darkness I can barely see her face, just a ghostly outline, even so close. Her eyes are black. They’re a dark brown in even the best light. A deep brown, like a mahogany. I want to kiss her, but I don’t move.

“I’ll tell you when I go, and you should follow me. We could go together.”

I laugh, but there isn't much humor in it because there's nothing funny about her leaving me to go somewhere brighter and cleaner and with dreams on the horizon instead of somewhere so far above our heads that we won't ever glimpse them. They're as inconsequential as the planets in our solar system. You can't see them without a telescope, and who the hell has the money for a telescope? But it's not even just about the money, it's about where you go about finding a telescope. Where do you even buy a telescope at?

She doesn't react to my laughing; she just continues to watch me.

"You can leave, Cat. We can leave. Nothing is holding us here, nothing ever was."

"I mean, no? Not physically, but we're kids. It complicates things."

"It doesn't." She says this with finality, and I don't even open my mouth to argue with her.

**

CAT

June 10th, 1972 | Day Two of Camping Trip | Campgrounds

I wake up. Someone is saying my name.

I hear my name, but it sounds different. It sounds like it's outside my head, distorted like someone jammed the volume button, and it got too loud, too fast so that the music came apart at the seams, and it was a wall of noise, mouthing the microphone.

It's a hot, still night. I'm shivering, especially because Mel isn't against me anymore. I can see heat lightning stabbing across the sky. We aren't far off dawn, I don't think.

My dream had been loud, (it's always loud) with me yelling after Grandmama as she whipped vases back behind her head. It was the same dream as always, Grandmama pitter-pattering down an endless hallway, with side tables sprouting up like weeds just in front of her,

the wallpaper whipping past us, faster than we were running, some delicate-looking thing already poised on the tables like pearls in oysters, and she'd grab them with both hands and then fling them back over her head like a water balloon toss on blacktop and I'd dip and dive, making catches that were humanly impossible half the time, and missing the other half, leaping over porcelain explosions or dodging glass bombs that whizzed past my ear—but then something weird happened, something different than usual.

Grandmama is always Grandmama in these dreams, minus the Muhammad Ali float-like-a-butterfly-sting-like-a-bee thing she has going for her in my subconscious.

But that isn't what was happening when I got woken up by my own name.

It starts out like it always does. I push through a set of French doors, the ones with the windows that are stacked like the imprints in eggo waffles...

My dream is going bad.

This is...not a good dream, but it's my *familiar* dream, like when you turn down your driveway or hear your daddy cough in the other room. This thing is here like it's *always* here. My Grandmama Dream is a stressful one, mostly because, even though sometimes it occurs to me mid-dream that this is a dream, I still sprint after her. I still try to catch what she wants to break. I still follow behind to make sure she doesn't trip and fall.

**

The next morning, I'm up early, mostly because I didn't really fall asleep again after Mel left. I had my eyes closed, but all I managed was a hazy sort of drifting. I hear Vera up, which isn't surprising. She's up four hours before anyone even stirs in the tent. I decide to clean. The air already is sluggish, even near dawn. I crack open an eye and she's muttering to herself as she cleans up the camp.

I decide to study, at least, so that I can say to Mama, in my defense, that I hadn't wasted the whole 48 hours, just most of it. (Nothing will matter. She'll be furious at me for days, and her method of being angry is a coldness that would chill the devil himself.)

"This is like, \$5 worth of cans," I mutter, to no one, because no one is around and no one cares. I toss them into the plastic E-Z bag I found in the back of Marshall's truck.

No one is naked at Skinny Dip Falls.

Marshall appears disappointed by this, even though I know that Connie was very naked with him last night, so I'm not sure why he's being such an ass right now. He's currently trying to negotiate me out of my bikini top, which isn't hard for a certain kind of person, and he just ain't that kind of person. He should just take this on the chin like a good sport, but I'm not sure he's ever done a thing like that in his whole life.

[Cat overhears: "I pawned off the last half of my cigarette pack to pay for this rental, man. You think you could chip in? Or, I don't know, share?" Marshall says.

"I can't. Not here. I also don't just like, carry it on me," Des responds.]

VERA

June 13th, 1972 | 8 Days Until Conversion | The School Bus

It's Tuesday morning when we first hear that Melissa Miller's gone missing.

It comes to me on the bus.

Like most things in high school, it starts out as a murmur. Something that strings along from person to person. A game of telephone. She ran away. She took off after her granddad beat the shit out of her and she beat the shit out of *him*. She had some bad hash and wandered off into the woods, trying to climb up St. Francois barefoot so she could fist fight the Martians. She was picking up trash on the side of the highway for her probation and she got side-checked by some psycho bad driver and now she's probably dead. The Manson family indoctrinated her into their cult and now she's trying to impress Charlie, just wait for the next big news bomb delivered by John Chancellor on NBC Nightly News.

None of it's true, probably. Or maybe, like a puzzle, pieces of each wild story could be shaped into some semblance of a coherent picture.

Before long, it becomes a cloud hanging over top the hallways where we stream along below. We're a small school, even with three towns all smashed together. (Relief and Peoplesville are the little auxiliaries drawn into Burnsville's orbit.) It's usually something you notice—if another kid has been absent for a time, even one that people don't really hang around with.

It comes to me on the bus.

Cat's half asleep beside me, in the window seat, like normal. She likes small, tight spaces. I can do without. She's got her forehead resting against the window that rattles and thuds with every shallow divot in the concrete. I don't know how she can sleep like that, either.

I get this hunch. Like a camera flash, or a lightening encased in a thunderhead. It all just lights up, all over, for just a moment across my memory, and I suddenly remember something. The space Melissa left behind in school had been bristling against me all day, something badly textured, almost sharp, rubbing over my knuckles or rasping across my bare upper arm.

And it's this!

I'm attempting to get a head start on my history homework, because I've got actual Mama-style homework to tackle tonight—which almost never feels like homework if I'm honest. It may be a weird thing to think with my fingers stained yellow from preparing marigold flowers for glaucoma tinctures or extracting ant venom for psoriasis or swelling from arthritis (which basically just involves several stages of disintegrating ants till everything has stripped away and all that's left is their venom) or even the mind-numbing task splitting seeds from pods—but it's like you have this little box full of natural tidbits of things and in that box you can solve almost any problem a person is having, medically of course. You can affect people's moods. Pain or discomfort makes waking up and falling asleep harder, obviously. You can make them happier by just relieving some of the physical pain they're in, but Mama doesn't have remedies for emotional masses. If she did, I would've secreted some to Cat by now.

It's that she isn't the first girl in Relief to go missing—not the first girl, *girl*. There had been someone before her, I'm pretty certain. I get intuitions, just like Mama, and I get them for reasons. There's a kind of cut-out in the shape of the girl in my mind's eye. I decide to keep the thought as active as I can.

I turn back to history, but there's the shadow of her casting itself on my textbook pages.

**

June 14th, 1972 | 7 Days Until Conversion | Vera's Bedroom

The dead girl occurs to me from behind my eyelids—kind of like a projector screen, the sort people use to watch old family videos. I don't know where the projection is coming from. She flickers, unsure of the boundaries of herself, the circumference of her face, but she's there. She exists. She's more than a thing. She's more than just "that missing girl." She's bodily.

Her hair is feathered and fine. It floats some before settling back onto her scalp, and then something ruffles it again, and like a wet bird, her head twitches from side to side, and her hair resettles itself once more. Her eyes are the color of pitch, which I don't think is accurate to their color from when she was alive. They glisten like polished stone. Her eyes aren't like that, though, it's just that they're fake. They aren't her eyes. I wonder if you lose your real eyes after you die, if all you're left with are these glossy stones of the approximate shape.

The girl's lips are gone. I see, now, that she looks more like a corpse than anything alive. She's been missing for too long for this to be the current state of her body, she'd just be bones by now. Her mouth isn't a perfect oval. It's snarled at the edges, puckered, like the skin has shrunk in death. I don't know why she's presenting herself like this. Unless this is a different girl? A newer girl? The idea slips cold fingers down my back. It isn't Melanie. I couldn't perfectly picture Melanie, if I'm being honest, but I'd recognize her face. This shade isn't hers.

She's real. Her skin glistens. Her eyes are pebbles, but they aren't blank. She's come to me to show me who she is. I don't think she has a tongue, otherwise she'd tell me her name. She has russet-colored hair and pierced ears where small silver hoops hang. Her nose is still intact. I can see that it's long and thin. I think she was very pretty.

I don't know how long I've laid here, awake, with my eyes closed, staring at her.

**

I see her, still, when I finally open my eyes. She isn't in the room with me, though in the night it looks like I fought something. My bed looks like it does after Cat's slept in it. (Is this what she's dreaming about?) My sheets are in a knot, twisting off the side. My comforter looks like it was cast off the bottom of my bed like a net into the sea. My pillows are pushed up the side of the wall or are on the other side of the room. I'm shivering because I'm damp from sweat, but my blood stopped pumping a long time ago, when I was still asleep.

One thing about me is that I don't dream. Maybe I do, but I've never remembered them, not once. I only know about dreams from listening to other people or reading about them in books.

What scares me, though, even with the imprint of her face floating in front of my eye like those squiggles you get after staring into something too bright, is that I can see my breath. It's the first week of June. I shiver. The skin on my arms almost ache from how tight my goosepimples are. It feels like something was here.

I'm still in my bed, rubbing my arms, looking around like I've just emerged from a cave, when I hear my mama climbing the narrow staircase. She's light on the balls of her feet. Marshall punches his heels downwards like the floor is trying to hold him back. And it wouldn't be Marshall, anyhow, because it was 6:30 in the morning. Our uncle requires him to show up at the shop by 4AM, and I think he's doing some work for him right now. It's one of his "on" periods, though he flips the job on and off like a light switch.

I hear Mama pause, though, once she hits the hallway. I imagine her, still as a deer in the thicket, her nose twitching. We both hold our breaths together.

I hear the creak of her weight shifting forward again, and she is at my doorway.

"What's happened here?"

It's not what I expected her to say. I expected her to tell me to get up because we have things to do. My mama isn't much for niceties. It's a waste of breath. She thinks things like "good morning" is implied by her being my mother.

"I just woke up."

"Yes, Vera, clearly. But what's happened?"

"Nothing! I mean, I don't know. I woke up and it felt like it's December and the radiator's gone."

Mama's eyes are shifting around my bedroom. She looks keen, now, a predator instead of a twitchy-nosed deer, sizing up the landscape. She stands at the threshold of my bedroom, lifting herself ever so slightly on her bare toes. I don't know what's happening. I don't know why she's acting like something is hiding somewhere in my bedroom. I know the girl isn't there. I don't think she was ever here. I think it was some kind of broadcast—or maybe a proto-dream. A waking one. But Mama is kind of freaking me out.

"Mama?"

"What," she says. It's mostly a statement.

"Do you remember...I think I remember, a long time ago, a girl going missing from town. She was older than me, but I feel like I remember..."

"Perhaps," she says. Her attention has waned. The mystery seems to have dissipated. I notice now that the room has warmed back up. I still have goosebumps on my arms, though.

"You need to stay focused, Vera. You have so little time till your Conversion."

"So, you think there was one?"

She sighs in that way she does where you feel like you've asked the dumbest question on the planet. You feel like you've asked her what the wet stuff is that falls from the sky.

“After spending all your years here, Vera, you should know that it’s hardly ever the case that a girl ‘goes missing’ who wants to be found again.”

I think about Cat’s mama and I nod. My mama turns on her bare heel and disappears back down the stairs. I can barely hear her the weight of her as she descends.

One thing I know, as I rake a comb through my sweat-and-sleep-destroyed hair is that I need to learn her name. It’ll be the key-shape I need to unlock some of this mystery. But I need to ask around and see if anyone else can corroborate my memory. This memory that seems to have materialized from nowhere. At least I think it’s nowhere.

**

June 14th, 1972 | 7 Days Until Conversion | School Lunch Room

I know there was another girl who went missing when we were little kids. I can’t remember her name. It’s the next day, and Cat and I are eating lunch in the cafeteria. I ask Cat, and she stares at me like what I’m saying doesn’t make sense.

“I don’t remember that. I feel like I’d remember that?”

She’s all disjointed, but I’m not sure how unusual that is anymore.

“I don’t think I’m making it up,” I say. I’m picking at a Ding Dong Cat gave me for free. I didn’t have anything worth trading her. I never do, my mama is a horrible cook. I love Ding Dongs, but today, they taste dry. I chugged my milk and then chugged Cat’s, and it’s still like it’s disintegrating on my tongue.

Cat’s staring off somewhere over my left shoulder.

“Um, hello?”

“*What?*”

I'm surprised. I'm not hurt, just surprised. Cat is all sharp edges, but it's never deep enough to really bleed, which is really saying something, if you've ever taken off the first layer of skin on your finger. That bleeds and bleeds, and it bleeds for even longer with me, because of my whole good-at-healing-others, bad-at-healing-myself problem.

Cat blinks, her eyelashes fluttering. She's blinking like she's just woken up and is trying to clear the sleep from her eyes, or else blinking like she's about to faint and is trying to chase away the darkness seeping into her vision.

"Sorry," she says. Cat only says sorry to me, I'm pretty sure. I've never heard her apologize to anyone else, not even her grandmama.

"Are you okay? I've got some Pizza Spins, do you want some? Mama wanted me to drop off something for Reba before school." Cat doesn't share a lot right off the top. Sometimes you have to massage it out of her, and the best way to do that is gently. Luckily, I have a sort of Mama-way about me. Which makes me good at getting information out of people, but it also makes me not very cool. Cat's cool enough for the both of us. "You know, ol' Mr. Gibson was already rocking away on the front porch at like, 6:15 in the morning. I'm starting to think he just sleeps there. All night. Maybe Reba puts a blanket on him when she leaves for the night."

That earns me the smallest of smiles on Cat's lips. It feels like a win. I don't think I've seen one for a while. I should know how long. It means I haven't been paying close enough attention to her.

She opens her palm for Pizza Spins. I pull the package from my bookbag and hand it to her. "For the Ding Dongs," I say.

Cat rips the top open, a few spiraling out and onto the cafeteria floor. She peers over the side of the table like she's looking out over a lake. "Bummer," she says. Her voice is almost a

whisper. When she raises her head up, they're glossy with unshed tears. I'm starting to feel kind of alarmed.

"It's okay," I say. "They're like, 20 cents."

Cat nods like it relieves her.

"You really can't remember?" I ask.

"About the missing girl?" She's pulling one Pizza Spin out at a time and licking each side. I think it's a gross habit, but she does it with everything. Toastettes, Tuna Twists, Oreos—even pudding cups, it's like she doesn't believe in spoons. I'm used to it now, though.

She shakes her head. Her hair is falling into her eyes in blond drifts. I want to ask her if she needs me to cut her hair. I'm coddling. I know I need to control myself.

"We were in second grade, I think, the year we became friends," I say.

"I don't remember anything about that year, only you." I know she's lying. Second grade was the year her mama left town, but maybe she doesn't remember that right now. It's like a haze has settled down over her, or a light frost.

"She was older than us, I'm pretty sure. It's weird because I have this really strong image of her in my head."

"Maybe you dreamed it," Cat says. "Dreams are..." The front half of her sentence dangles in the air. I wait, patiently, as Cat negotiates something in her head. "Dreams can be weird." Another pause. She sets her hand, now covered in cheese dust on the lunch table, and then flicks a Pizza Spin across the aisle. It skids over to the other table and comes to a rest next to the plastic wrap of a girl's sandwich. She swings her head over to where we are sitting and glares, before swiping it on to the floor like it's radioactive. Cat gives her a two-finger wiggle wave. She turns her head back towards me, suddenly serious. "But they aren't real."

I don't know that that's true. Cat seems to read this on my face. She starts gathering her things. "They aren't real, Vee. We'd live in a real fucked up world if they were." She sucks on her cheesy fingers while stands up and throws her backpack over her right shoulder. "I'm out. I'll see you later, okay?"

She means she's leaving school for the day. She does that. She isn't the only one. Nobody here does anything to stop them. I think the faculty operate under the guiding principle that if you don't want to be here, don't be here. It's an easy way out. A lot of kids just need to be given reasons to stay. But one thing you learn around these parts is that most people can't be bothered. They've all got problems of their own.

I know Cat will be okay. I don't know that I've found a problem—with this missing girl—it's a ghost of a problem, just an outline I can barely make out, like seeing a figure down a darkened street that's only vaguely darker than everything else around it.

Something's there, I think. I need to figure out what it is. I know my next step is to research, and I know who I need to ask for help. I'm feeling fluttery as I gather up my lunch things and pick-up Cat's trash. (She's not one for cleaning.) It's only because I know Mama will be furious with me if she finds out. And, also, he may decline to help. It's in his rights. Yes, I tell myself, that's it.

June 14th, 1972 | 7 Days Until Conversion | School Library

I go to Des to ask about the girl. I want to know if he remembers her.

I find him in the school library where he's busily shelving a cart full of books. I don't know when he developed such an affinity for them. It must've been after we were friends, which makes me sad. It's this whole swathe of him that I'm not familiar with. I couldn't even place

exactly where it sprouted from, except that Des had always been good at telling long-winded, dramatic stories paired with dumb voices, and he's also always been good at explaining things.

I'm struck for a second by this weird vertigo of growing up.

Des must've felt me standing behind him, a little bit hidden by the first aisle of the fiction section, because he turns his head and looks at me from over his shoulder. "Stop lurking."

My forehead crumples. I narrow my eyes. "I'm not lurking! I'm here for a reason."

"I'm busy. Go ask Mrs. Lloyd to help you find whatever you're looking for."

Mrs. Lloyd hears him. She lifts her head from where it was bent over a crossword puzzle. She's staring at us over her bifocals. Her glasses chain clinks. "I'm busy, Desmond. Stop being rude." She looks back down at her crossword. "I'll fire you and you can go back to washing off lunch tables."

"Yeah, *Desmond*," I snicker.

"Old people have a weird thing against nicknames," he mutters. He sighs and continues scooting his little cart down the aisle and replacing books. I've noticed the movement has become a little more violent than before. He pushes books aside and shoves in the new one. The bookshelves sway. He's wearing a short-sleeve Pinball Wizards shirt that looks too clean to be cool and bell bottoms. We'd convinced Dodger, who owns the pool hall, to let us come inside before his early evening rush and play some pinball. We had change, so that was normally enough. I wonder if he still plays, or if he's just really into The Who.

Des tries to move on like I'm not here. He returns to his task with vigor. I'm only a little confused because I thought we'd His brow is wrinkled and he's talking quietly to himself, his lips barely moving, probably chanting the alphabet. Or maybe not, maybe he's singing a Who song. He reaches above his head, standing a little on his toes, to shelve a book. He isn't very tall.

I think I might have a half inch on him. When he stretches, the sleeve of his tee draws back and I see the cloudy green and yellow of nasty-looking bruise in the late stages of healing when, truthfully, it looks the worst.

He comes back down on his heels and looks over at me. “What?”

“You’re gonna knock down the whole shelf if you keep on like that, all dramatically. It’ll be like playing dominos. Then you’ll *definitely* get fired.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

I’m so surprised by the venom in his voice that I almost bodily step backwards.

“What? Why would I like it if she fired you?”

“Just like you’d like it if I had a rash on my—” he waves his hand around and then proceeds to shove another book into its place. This time, it’s hard enough that he punches out the books on the other side of the shelf and all of them fall through the opening. Des and I both stare through the new hole.

“Damnit,” he says.

“I heard that, Desmond.” Mrs. Lloyd says. But she doesn’t look up from her crossword.

Des swears more quietly and abandons the cart, circling around to the other side of the shelves. I follow him. He nearly collapses to the ground like a puppeteer cut his strings. He starts collecting the books into piles. I don’t know why he’s so tense, but I feel bad for teasing him because it wasn’t a shared thing—a back and forth. I think that just makes it bullying.

I squat down next to him and join his book-gathering. We’re very close. Our heads are almost touching. I forgot how curly his hair is.

I thought we’d had an okay time camping. The signals he’s smacking me in the face with, though, seem to suggest otherwise.

Our faces are close. He smells earthy, like lemongrass. I recognize his aftershave, because Marshall wears it, and he always leaves it on the edge of the sink where it falls off and threatens to break and suffocate us all in bergamot and clover. It's Grass Oil.

At some point, Des had matured enough to shave. That's such a silly thing to think. I've had my period for three years and we all have to wear deodorant. So, yes, Vee. Time is a thing that moves forward, even if it sometimes seems to stall around here.

"I don't want you to get fired."

"Did you tell my dad that I stopped by your mama's?"

I stare at him like he's grown an additional head. When I speak, it's very slow and deliberate. "Did I tell *your dad*?"

Des grimaces. "I-I don't know how he found out, but he did—"

"Did I tell your dad?" I repeat.

"You don't have to repeat it! Never mind—"

"I'm sorry, do you think I ran into him on my walk home from school?"

"I—"

"Do you think we have a standing lunch date at Madge's?"

"Vee—"

"Or do you not remember how *your dad*, the mayor, sent Sheriff after my mama and tried to run us out of town?"

"Yeah, I do—"

"But you can't run us out of town because we've been there for decades and decades and

"Okay, Vee, damn. I got it."

"That's not even why I'm here!"

“Oh, you aren’t here, in the school library—my place of work—to yell at me about your important family history?”

“No.”

“Now I’m interested.”

“I mean, I think my showing up at all should’ve been interesting enough,” I mutter.

He shrugs and continues adjusting book spines, but I can see a little smile at the corner of his mouth. He’s waiting for me to continue.

“I’m here—do you remember…” I decide to phrase this ask differently. I don’t want to poison his recollection like I probably did with Cat. I don’t want to lead him to the answer. Even if, more than anything, I want my memory to be reenforced, to prove to myself that I didn’t make it up, I need to know that I arrived at that discovery cleanly.

“Do you remember anything weird happening around Relief when we were in second grade?”

“Besides my dad and your mama getting into a fist fight?”

I sigh. “That’s not what happened.”

“Were you there?”

“No, but neither were you.” It’s derailing again, this conversation. I push forward. “No, I mean…like, crime. *Not* between Mama and your daddy.”

“What kind of crime?”

“I don’t want to say yet. Just think.”

He scratches at the back of his head for a little. I ask him if he has lice. I tell him that I just made up a whole new jar of almond oil. That’s the best way to get rid of them, suffocation.

He'll have a very oily head for like a week, though, because we'd have to do it every day. An oilier head than usual, anyhow.

He glares at me. "Are you done?"

I smirk. "You shouldn't challenge me. I can *never* be done. Is that what you want?"

He rolls his eyes, but there's the tiniest ghost of a pull at the corner of his mouth. I might be imagining it.

"No, I don't have lice. That's just what I do when I'm thinking."

I think that if he keeps that up, he'll have a bald patch back there by the time he's thirty.

"Well? Have you thought long enough?"

"You're annoying, you know that? Like, I thought maybe you'd grow out of it, but I don't think it's looking good if you haven't made any progress by now."

I grin. I realize I'm grinning and try to scrub it off. This isn't why I'm here. It wasn't an excuse to spend extra time with him. I'd had enough of it out in the forest. So, I'm trying to wipe my face clean, and then I'm worried that I look like I have to run to find a restroom like, stat, or else I'm smelling something really gross. None of those potential faces sound cute.

Why should I care if I look cute around Des?

Preserve, I'm too self-aware for this.

"No."

"No what?"

"No, I don't remember anything. That was a long time ago."

"No, it wasn't! It's not like we're 50 or something, Des."

He shrugs. "Why? What do you remember happening?"

This isn't the outcome I'd hoped for. Maybe I did dream her up. Maybe she never existed at all.

"I think somebody went missing. Somebody like Melissa."

"People leave town all the time, Vera."

I shake my head. "Not like this. People were upset about this one."

"Have you asked around yet?"

"I asked my mama this morning, but she..." I don't want to tell him about my visitation, about the state of my bedroom, about the way my mama entered my room like a deer and then slowly curled into a predator looking to protect. "She doesn't remember. She says...she says a lot of girls around here 'go missing' because they don't want to be found."

Des gets the meaning. He sighs and pushes a hand through his hair. "Oh," he says.

"Not here, though," I insist. I know.

"Well, if asking around isn't getting us anywhere right now, we could try microfilm."

I noticed the "us." I do a bad job of containing my grin.

He notices immediately. He rolls his eyes. "It's just because I like mysteries—and, I mean, I like messing with that machine. It's fun."

June 15th, 1972 | 6 Days Until Conversion | Vera's Bedroom

I'm standing in front of the mirror I hung over my desk, trying to drag a brush through my hair. I feel like her name is burning the tip of my tongue. I'm not really sure why because I don't think it's probably possible that I could remember a girl's name I last heard eight years ago, especially if this girl was older than me, which I feel certain she was. I decide to start playing the alphabet game. It's a little sleep-trick my daddy taught me when I was little. I always had a hard time shutting my brain down. Now I know that part of that was because I was

convinced I'd wake up in the morning and he'd be gone again, taken away by my uncle, the sheriff, sometime in the night. I don't know if he recognized that the fault lay with him, but he gave me a method anyhow. He told me that when I needed to still my brain, that normally meant capturing it like a butterfly in a net, and then focusing it down onto one task. So, he told me to think of a category: vegetables, animals, movies, songs, and try to name one example per letter of the alphabet.

Me being me, I chose a really difficult category for no reason the first time around. I think I selected flowers and got stuck on "E." Now, I've got it. I can pull flowers from their Latin names or their common ones: English Bluebell, Eustoma, Echium, Evening Primrose... but not when I was seven.

Anyhow, I think the problem is that I'm trying too hard to remember. I need to clear my mind, do something repetitive—like brushing my rat's nest—and then play the alphabet game with girls' names. Maybe my stream of consciousness will snag grab something useful from my memory banks. I murmur the first letter: "A."

Audrey, Anna, Abigail...Nothing feels important. I move on to "B," and continue pulling my brush through my hair.

Barbara, Brittany, Bethany, Beula...

Beula? It's not Beula.

I start my brush back at the crown of my head and go again.

Caitlyn, Caroline, Cara, Clarissa...

I return my brush to the top. I start dragging again.

Deanna, Dorothy, Deidre, Donna...

Brush to the top, and down we go again.

Eudora, Ellen, Eleanor, Emma...

Brush up, brush down.

Felicity, Flora, Francine, Fi...

My eyes are glazed because all I see is me and my bed behind me. All that's moving is my hand guiding my brush through my hair. I've unfocused, till something dark shudders over my left shoulder. I immediately un-smudge my eyes. I don't turn around. It seems important that I don't, even though I really want to scramble up and away.

The dark thing, a fog or smoke, slowly draws itself into the general shape of a person. It's a few feet back behind me, hovering near my bed. It's shrinking itself down and becoming darker as it does. My bedroom is already dark, but the blackness of this creature looks like it was punched out of deep space. It's airless in here. The night outside seems to be pushing against the windowpanes. There's a pressure. If someone flicked a pilot light, I'm afraid we'd all combust.

And then her face emerges like an unseen hand is carving it into existence. It's her. The long, thin nose. The russet hair. The two silver hoops in her ears.

I wonder if it knew the name I had half-formed in my mouth. I decide that I am going to say the full thing. I don't think it's evil—I think it's oppressive, but it's because of sadness, because of fear. It makes me sad that someone who has left this life still leaves with all the worst of human emotion. It makes me sad that you can still be afraid, even when nothing can hurt you anymore. At least, I don't think anything can.

But it occurs to me that I know nothing about the spirit world. It isn't something my mama spent any time teaching me about. I'd gotten hints of it growing up. Fleeting glimpses. A wayward chill or a blink-and-you'll-miss-it movement out of the corner of my eye. A white face ducking behind South Baptist Church during me and Cat's summer night-walks. Relief is a

haunted town. There's plenty of folktales to scare the skin off little kids, mostly to prevent them from making buddies with the vagrants that float or whip or cruise through town. A lot of them stick around for a while.

Felicity, Flora, Francine, Fi—

It's gathering like too much spit on the tip of my tongue. I open my mouth to say it but stop because I'm surprised. Marshall is standing in my doorway. He's in his boxer shorts and a shirt I know he stole from daddy, though he'd tell me I'm wrong. He's wearing mismatched socks and I can tell he's been sleeping hard because he has pillow and sheet-lines across his face like slash marks. He's got a beer gripped in his hands. I can see the condensation collecting around the part where his skin meets the tin.

He's staring at the girl. He sees her, too.

I want to confirm. "Do you see her?"

He doesn't look at me, but he's chewing on the fingernails of his free hand. It's a bad habit he has that's always a tell. He gets mad at me when I tell him it's a tell. He doesn't answer me, but he doesn't stop staring. My brother hasn't spent this much time in my bedroom since we were little kids building blanket forts together. Finally, he says: "C'mere, Vee."

"I don't think she's here to hurt me."

She ripples like she's a reflection in water.

"It doesn't matter what she's *here* for."

It's like he's poured cold water down my back. The goosepimples on my arm tighten. I want to itch. I want to move. I'm starting to wonder if I'm sitting this still because I want to, or because I have no choice. I don't know what he means. I don't know how he knows something that I don't know, especially when this something has to do with Mama's area of knowledge. I

realize that's bad of me to think. We're of the same blood. We share the same mother. Maybe Marshall is more special than Mama knows. Maybe Mama already knows that. I'm learning, as I get older, that my family is a cat's cradle of intersecting, crisscrossing, knotted-up strings.

She's shivering beside me, her dark, stringy hair plastered to her forehead. I think about how awful it is that she's spending eternity damp, chilled to the bone.

"Let her go," Marshall murmurs. He's gazing, now, unblinkingly at the girl, but I don't know if he's talking to me or talking to her. There's a noise, suddenly, in the kitchen. It sounds like the window on the sink swinging open like it does on windy days. A clattering of pots. I hear something metal hit the floor with a clatter.

But Marshall's right. I don't know because Mama has never taught me.

"Vera. Let her go." It isn't a murmur anymore, it's a growl. "*Hurry.*" He's not jumpy. He's very calm, but I get the sense that it's starting to fray a little. I don't know my brother to ever be so even-keeled. He's normally so sensitive.

That scares me even more.

I don't want her to get lost again, but now I'm not so certain she's here for my help. Or at least not here for the kind of help that I'd normally be willing to give. I don't have a lot of interest in making my body some kind of vessel for her to hide out in.

"I-I don't know how!"

"Yeah, yeah you do. Vera, I'm not fuckin messing with you." He's talking through gritted teeth. I can see him from my periphery. He hasn't moved, either. Am I the reason? Am I holding him there? Or is he worried for me? "We're gonna be in the shit if it makes it up here."

"If what does? What are you talking about?"

Something shatters. I jump. I almost break eye contact with the girl, with Fiona.

“You can’t protect her, Vee. You can’t even protect yourself, not yet. Let her go.”

Where’s Mama? I almost gasp at the realization, but I dare not move. She’s gone. She’s not here. She’s gone out into the night, like she does. To see the Maddener, I think. She does it so much in the summertime. Either that, or she’s attending a birth. It doesn’t matter, though, because either way, she won’t be home any time soon. It’s just me, my brother, the dead girl, and the thing smashing and deforming and writhing around our house. It hasn’t made it down the hallway yet, down the skinny shoot that leads up to our second floor, where our bedrooms are, but it’ll figure it out soon. I get a weird sense that it’s gaining its sea legs. That it’s figuring out how to use its energy. I realize, with a shudder, that I’m giving it ample time to do so.

She’d handle this if she were here. I believe she knows how, without her ever proving it. I think that’s one reason why she didn’t want to go see daddy, or at least I tell myself that, because the prison is like a cup filled to the brim with anguish and fury and hopelessness. The slightest of jostles caused it to overflow, soak the whole place in emotions too temperamental to last. I left and never wanted to go back, not even to see my daddy. I came home and slept for hours and hours. Mama woke me just to feed me broth and bread and then let me go back to sleep.

It sounds like an animal now. The walls are shaking somewhere in the house, like it’s trying to scabble up them. It’s growling. I can hear it now, a sound so low that it vibrates your stomach, scratches at the bottom of your eardrums.

“I can’t step into your room, Vee. You have to do it yourself.”

She doesn’t want to leave. She doesn’t want to go back from whence she came. I can feel her fear frosting my bones, spiking itself through my heart. My eyes start to prick with tears. I can’t remember the last time I cried, but I feel like she’s mining me. Taking out whole chunks and leaving open pockets. I want to cry, very badly, for the first time.

“Vee, fight her. She’s going to get you hurt.”

“But...but what about her?” I narrow my eyes. “Her name is Fi—”

My brother’s beer explodes right next to my head. I’m sprayed with lukewarm beer. I squeal, and almost rocket to my feet, but I stop myself. Or I can’t. I really don’t know which it is.

“*Vera!* For fuck’s sake, don’t say her name.”

I’m startled. I know names are powerful. The things we make, the tinctures and the pastes, the potions and the sprays, I know they’re imbued with more strength when they’ve been labelled. My Mama labels every single one of them. Names are powerful, and she’s in pain. She’s trapped. She’s frightened. I want to say her name so that she can ferret away some of the power, use it when she accrues enough to escape whatever terrible prison she’s in.

But my brother seems so certain. I want to know how he knows. I want to know where he learned these things. I want to know how he knows and I don’t. I’m to take the mantle in just over a month. 45 days. And Marshall? He butchers animals all day and then comes home and sleeps for six hours before killing a 12 pack of beer, by himself, in that hovel he calls a bedroom. What has he done to earn this knowledge?

I’m angry, all of the sudden. It grips me by the neck. I want to absorb it inside of me. I don’t break from the mirror, but I know my brother can sense a shift.

“What’s wrong with you? Why are you angry? Vee, get a hold of yourself. You’re feeding her, don’t you understand? She’s like, sipping off you. She’s a sponge. What aren’t you understanding?”

“How do you know all of this? Who taught you?”

“That’s what you care about right now?”

“How? Did she teach you? Did Mama teach you?”

“So what if she did? Why would that bother you?”

“Because,” I say. I’m plowing forward, though a small, nagging part of my brain is trying to hold onto the coattails of what I’m about to say. “I’ve *earned* it. All you do is get drunk and shoot up and drop out of school and you only have a job because everyone feels so fucking *disappointed* by you—”

I hear something shuffling down the hallway, and then it becomes a scurrying, barefoot, around the circle of our house. They’re clumsy, though, big—maybe, making the furniture rock, thudding hard against the wall. I’m feeling very anxious. It’s hard to detect just what’s out there because the weight of it, the power of it, seems to shift on a dime.

Marshall doesn’t look over his shoulder to see what it is. He stares at me. “You’re lucky I won’t leave you to It even though it sounds pretty fuckin nice right now.”

I’m scared for him, because this large, blocky thing is pulling itself towards him, and he keeps his back to it.