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A Time of Greeting

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A Time of Greeting

“Planting Season” – “The Auguries” – “Homecoming”

Senior Thesis by Allison Yilling

April 28, 2011

Alli Yilling

Senior Thesis

28 April 2011

Commentary on Creative Thesis: "A Time of Greeting"

Introduction

I've been a short story writer for most of my undergraduate studies. For my senior thesis, I wanted to experiment with a longer narrative, but having no experience with stories above twenty pages, I was hesitant to dive into a novel project. Instead, I decided to tackle a linked story project, three stories connected by place, hoping this would ease me into writing longer works. The linked story project allowed me the challenge of a larger work while still producing stories short enough to be published in a magazine.

The first linked story collection I read was *I Am One of You Forever* by Fred Chappell. The collection of short stories, ranging from domestic sketches to tall tales, was linked by the same narrator, the same location, and the same group of characters. I was blown away by the beauty of the collection, rereading the book as soon as I finished it. I loved the format of the linked story collection, a series of related but separate tales that together presented a deeper picture of a family, town, or person. I wanted to write my own collection and began to study the ways that Chappell linked his stories and played with time over the course of the book.

When I decided to undertake a linked story project for my thesis, I prepared for the work by reading other collections, like *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* by Daniyal Mueenuddin and excerpts from *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson. *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* is a linked story collection that takes place in Pakistan. Upper class and lower class families are linked by location and bonds of servitude, but characters from one story rarely feature

prominently in any other story. In the excerpts from *Winesburg, Ohio* that I have read, the characters are not only linked by location but sometimes by George Willard, a young resident of the town and hopeful reporter who appears in various stories throughout the novel. In the excerpts I read, most of the characters keep to their own stories.

Ultimately, after considering my goals and the rough outlines of stories forming in my head, I decided to approach the project like Daniyal Mueenuddin. The stories I was forming were very different from each other, to the point where a single narrator, like Jess in *I Am One of You Forever*, would not be practical. My characters formed cliques, mostly keeping to their own stories without much physical presence in the other two stories. Three distinct character groups formed around the three stories: Amy, Luke, and Diane from “Planting Season”; Chris, Dr. Morrison, and Ashley from “The Auguries”; and Emma, Aaron, and Patricia from “Homecoming.” However, to further connect the stories, I let the characters wander in and out of the other story lines. Dr. Morrison is Amy’s boss and appears physically in “Planting Season” but never speaks. Emma is the woman who wanders through the rain and waits at the stop sign in “The Auguries.” Originally, Emma and Amy saw each other in “Homecoming,” but that section was cut in later drafts.

Like *Winesburg, Ohio* though, my characters were linked by location. My inspiration for the location was a set of three ranch houses in rural Maryville. The tiny parcels of land were surrounded by large family-owned farms, and I was struck by how out of place the homes seemed. I wanted my characters to reflect their location and chose to focus on stories where the character felt isolated or out of place. For the sake of the project, I exaggerated the location, making the houses seem like the only speck of development before the farms and then wilderness. This also made the distance of the neighbors seem more unusual. They are miles

away from other people, but they are so absorbed in their own worlds that they never interact with their neighbors, never really get to know them.

Because the stories do feature different groups of characters (a father and future son-in-law, a husband and wife, and a grown brother and sister), I decided to take the opportunity to experiment with point of view. Each story in the collection has a different point of view, varying between first person, to third person limited, and finally third person omniscient. The rationale for each point of view will be explained in future sections.

Finally, why “A Time of Greeting” for a collection about an isolated stretch of land in the middle of the country? In Methodist church services, the “time of greeting” is when congregation members stand up and greet each other before the first hymn. Usually, the gesture is empty; the most people say is “Good Morning,” with no question after family, friends, or even names. In the three stories, characters all encounter problems with their family members, but few greet the problem head on. They cannot really “greet” their own family members, let alone their neighbors.

Planting Season

“Planting Season” began with a comparison between birth control pills and seeds. Both are about the same size and come in pocket-sized packets with very specific instructions. However, both have very different effects on life. I wanted to build a story on this comparison and worked for a few months coming up with a plot and characters built around this small idea.

Ultimately, the idea of a husband’s garden paralleling his wife’s womb sprang up. It was a risky comparison because garden and agricultural imagery is so often used as a metaphor for a woman’s fertility. Whole cults of ancient religions linked fertility and the earth so an original

take on the issue was unlikely. My first attempt at the comparison failed. I relied on the metaphor to carry the story, turning Luke into a mere tool of the metaphor rather than a character in his own right. Michael Knight suggested that I show Luke away from his garden throughout the story, pulling him away from that metaphor. In later drafts, Luke is absent from the garden during his morning with Amy and then later when he comes home from work. Pulling him away from the garden=baby metaphor really allowed me to develop him more as a character rather than a plot device.

The most important element that I wanted in the story was for Amy to love her husband. I didn't want her hesitation for a baby to spring from Luke's laziness or cruelty. Instead, I wanted Amy's love for Luke to conflict with Luke's desire for a baby, which is complicated by her mother's support and then later Diane's hesitation.

Diane, though, is one of the more difficult characters in the story. In the original drafts, Diane had a much smaller role: a stock character who uses her family, seemingly without remorse, for her academic research. She struck the interest of both of my readers though, and in later drafts, she was softened. The biggest danger of Diane was creating a stereotype, the liberated, West Coast liberal, who escaped her roots and now preaches the gospel of feminism. I added the scene where she has lunch with Amy to soften this image and took out some of her crueler descriptions in her introductory scene in Mom's apartment.

I chose to use third person limited for this story because I wanted a direct line to Amy's thoughts, but I still wanted to maintain some distance from her. "I" has a lot more closeness than "she" so I opted out of first person. Mostly though, I wanted to use third person limited to see the world through Amy, filter characters through her consciousness. At some points I feel I

succeeded, and at others, I need to keep working, but forcing myself to write as Amy would see the world was a challenging and helpful exercise as a writer.

In terms of point of view, the biggest influence of this story is the short story “Miss Brill” by Katherine Mansfield. “Miss Brill” is a third person limited story where the narrator’s voice is also the main character’s voice. The diction and syntax fit Miss Brill’s character, and the reader sees the fictional world as Miss Brill sees it without the help of first person. Ever since reading this story in Dr. Allen Wier’s fiction workshop, I was fascinated by Mansfield’s technique and wanted to emulate it. Throughout writing this story, I kept “Miss Brill” in the back of my mind when I considered point of view.

“Shiloh” by Bobbie Ann Mason was also a later influence on the structure of “Planting Season.” When I struggled with the garden/birth control pills metaphor taking over the story, Michael Knight recommended I reread “Shiloh” to get an idea of how to handle metaphors more deftly. Once I read the story again, I was struck by how well Mason juggles the metaphor of the log cabin. Leroy building the log cabin is not only a great metaphor for his desire to rebuild his marriage to Norma Jean but also represents the way he wants the marriage to be rebuilt: with traditional gender roles. Although Leroy does obsess over the log cabin, he is separate from the project, preventing the metaphor from becoming too overwhelming. “Shiloh” ended up being a large influence on my revisions and later drafts of “Planting Season.”

The Auguries

I knew in advance that I wanted to write “Homecoming” in third person omniscient so I decided to experiment with first person in “The Auguries.” I have written a first person short story before, but the narrator was a woman only ten years my senior. Even Amy, who was

written in third person limited, was female and close to my age. However, Dr. Morrison is a fifty-something year old male doctor who has little in common with me. His point of view was challenging because it was foreign. I often worried about the authenticity of the voice while I was writing and rewriting. Initially, I wanted to make Dr. Morrison an unreliable narrator, his own biases clouding the reader's view of Chris. In my first drafts, I was nervous about making Dr. Morrison unsympathetic so I softened him. His narrative voice ended up in the confusing place between reliable and unreliable. Ultimately, I leaned his voice back towards reliable but biased.

Chris's behavior in the drafts also made Dr. Morrison's credibility as a narrator confusing. In first drafts, Chris was in a very small part of the story. There was so little information or interaction with him that it was impossible to tell if Dr. Morrison was justified in disliking his daughter's fiancée. The reader knew almost nothing about Chris's background or his career, details that Dr. Morrison probably would have mentioned, Dr. Hoffer pointed out. When I focused on the fence building as the heart of the story, I expanded Chris's character, adding in background and making his reactions to Dr. Morrison less static, more emotional. The stakes of the pissing contest are just as high for Chris, who risks losing his fiancée or condemning himself to years with a resentful father-in-law, so I let Chris show more rage at having the fence project taken from him.

Because Dr. Morrison was biased and resentful about being replaced by Chris in his daughter's life, I worried about how sympathetic he would be as a character. In response to this fear, I softened Dr. Morrison in later drafts, adding lines where he begrudgingly gave Chris credit for his achievements. However, the effect was jarring. Dr. Morrison didn't seem serious about his hatred of Chris or serious about reclaiming his daughter's attention. Michael Knight

advised me to remove those softened lines, and when I did, Dr. Morrison's motivation and feelings became clearer.

The motivation behind Dr. Morrison's anger is losing his daughter to another man. Because the issue was emotionally charged, I didn't want Ashley to appear physically in the story. I was afraid that if I allowed her into the story, her interactions with her father and fiancé would distract from the two men building the fence. I also declined to include any other prominent female characters in the story (mothers, wives) to up the stakes for Dr. Morrison. Because he isn't married and seems to have no other children, Amy is his only source of female companionship. When she chooses Chris over her father, Dr. Morrison loses his special connection with his only child and the only woman in his life.

Structurally, the narrative originally hinged on flashback to Dr. Morrison's army days. After outlining the story, I felt that there was not enough action so I tried to combine the exciting Army story my father had told me with a story about building the fence. The flashback was supposed to give background on why Dr. Morrison disliked Chris. It was risky because the flashback and the present-day story were so different, but I tried combining the stories anyway. However, the flashback took the story away from the backyard and the fence building. Michael Knight suggested coming back to the act of building a fence in future drafts, and when I focused on building the fence, the tension I wanted in the story came out again. The flashback was removed from the final draft.

The end of the story was originally softer, a truce between the two men. Michael Knight said the ending was jarring; it seemed unlikely that a conflict as deep as losing a daughter would be solved in one afternoon, and after rereading the story, I agreed. In later drafts, I ended the story on an uneasy truce, then later with Dr. Morrison losing the match. Dr. Morrison's character

needed to be humbled before any progress could be made in his relationship with Chris. Perhaps a future story will settle the issues in their relationship, but “The Auguries” was not the right story to do that.

Whether I succeeded with Dr. Morrison or still have a ways to go, working in first person on “The Auguries” taught me to not be afraid to write what I don’t know.

Homecoming

While driving very slowly over the icy roads during the January 2011 snowstorm, I had a lot of time to look at the changed landscape and, of course, pay impeccable attention to the road conditions. I thought back to the Jack London stories I’d read as a child, *White Fang*, *Call of the Wild*, but most of all, the short story “To Build a Fire.” While *White Fang*’s ending is fuzzy in my mind, I’ve never forgotten “To Build a Fire,” the story of a man who arrogantly sets out in the Yukon alone while the weather is seventy-five degrees below zero. He knows that building a fire is the difference between life and death, and when he fails to get warm, he recognizes his arrogance and dies. Using the landscape I saw in East Tennessee, hardly the Yukon in winter, I wanted to write a story that emulated London’s man vs nature tales. I wanted to force a character to survive in the forest, and if she won the contest with the elements, I wanted it to be out of luck rather than skill. The setting of the story, East Tennessee, is not exactly an unconquerable wilderness so a naturalist story set in the developed eastern mountains would read differently than Jack London’s stories. However, there was still the wilderness of the Great Smokey Mountains National Park to contend with, and if the main character is unprepared, I knew that any adventure into the wild was a risk.

Because of this, the plot of Emma in the woods was the cornerstone of the story, the first section that inspired the rest of the “Homecoming.” Aaron and Patricia arrived as later characters and were originally relegated to sub-sub-plot in the first draft. After a revision, I fleshed out Aaron, and then Patricia, and grew fonder of them as characters. Still, by the first draft I’d submitted, Aaron and Patricia were mostly just connective tissue, a way to give Emma background and get her into the woods. They later developed into more important characters when I lingered in Aaron’s point of view. At this point in the revisions, I made the story third person omniscient to accommodate Aaron’s growing character and to delve deeper into both sides of the conflict between the siblings.

The chronology and point of view of the story were linked during the revisions. Originally, the story was chronological, starting with Emma’s arrival at the airport and going through her abandonment of her brother at the end. This left endless scenes where the characters were driving, observing each other, or observing their surroundings without doing much for the themes or even the plot of the story. In a chronological story, I needed those sections to get from one place to the next, but they slowed the story down. Additionally, Aaron, whose point of view colors the entire first half of the story, disappears once Emma goes into the woods, making the two halves of the story seem unbalanced. By draft two, Aaron either needed to be cut or expanded. Michael Knight suggested that I read the story “Corpus Christi” by Bret Anthony Johnston to help me restructure the story. “Corpus Christi” also uses third person omniscient point of view, but the story isn’t told in chronological order. The story begins in the middle of the timeline and then ends at the beginning. I loved the story and studied how Johnston divided his sections and shifted between point of views. Johnston’s characters didn’t pop in and out of

different perspectives randomly. Each character was given at least a paragraph before the point of view shifted.

When I contemplated taking the story out of chronological order, I was worried about confusing the reader, but I was more worried about boring the reader with endless car rides and waiting in the airport, so I spent two days taking out unnecessary material, adding to the more the “lost-in-the-woods” sections, and taking the story out of chronological order. I started with the part Michael Knight felt was the strongest, the crash scene, and then alternated sections between the past at Aaron’s house and the story of Emma in the woods. I tried to start and end each domestic section in Aaron’s point of view to balance the sections in the woods, where Emma was the only point of view. Rather than end at the beginning like “Corpus Cristi,” I wanted the story to end with Emma leaving her brother again so I let the two narratives meet towards the end of the piece and then continue towards the finale in chronological order. Taking the story out of chronological order was the best revision done to this story. It allowed me to cut filler paragraphs and gave Aaron more space to develop as a character. I was also able to expand Emma’s adventure in the woods.

Special Thanks

I want to thank Michael Knight, my first reader, for all the work he put into this project with me, especially when my drafts took longer than I expected. I also want to thank Dr. Laura Hoffer, my second reader, who helped me polish up the later drafts of each story. Finally, a big thank you to my fiancé Robert, my roommates at the Wesley Foundation, and my family for their support and patience during this project.

Planting Season

The seed packets were spread over the kitchen table. Rhubarb, tomato, green beans, watermelon, her husband's new hobby. When they'd lived near the airfield, it had been model planes, above the gym, nutrition. Now that they had just moved to a ranch house with two and a half acres, he was a farmer. Let him do what made him happy. Amy's interests stayed steady at yoga videos, romance novels, and smoking.

Luke came through the screen door, carrying his weathered spiral notebook, as always.

"I've observed the sun every hour for six hours now, and for these plants, the back corner is best. Next month I'll observe again."

"Why?" Amy opened a Tupperware container filled with fried rice. "They'll already be planted by then."

"It's good to know for next year. The sun shifts with the season." Luke picked up the tomato seeds and pointed to an image of a half-sun in the corner. "If plants get too much shade, they die."

"I think you're making this more complicated than it really is."

"There's a science to it, Amy."

She kissed him. "Everything is a science for you."

He squeezed her shoulder and went back to his garden plot.

Amy stretched out her arms and breathed in deep, smelling the first warm day of March. She'd opened the windows of the new house to let out the dust and the smell of cat that still lingered from the previous owner. Dead leaves blew in throughout the day, littering the corners behind the moving boxes. There was no traffic on the country lane, just the bark of the next door neighbor's dogs. In the apartments she'd always lived in, the sounds of hairdryers, muted bass,

and the couple who fights (there's always one) provided the soundtrack to her days, like a fan that has been left on so long you can't hear it anymore.

The microwave beeped. Amy heaped hot rice into the only unpacked bowls and filled two Styrofoam cups with ice water, half full. She was still wary of wasting well water, knowing that all the water the three neighbors would ever use was buried underground, a quiet lake that could be holding a thousand gallons or no more than five.

Luke and Amy ate on the front porch, balancing plates on their knees and being mindful of the cups at their feet. The hayfields across the street were still dead from winter, showing off the creases of the hills that would be covered in weeds come April. Hopefully some flowers would grow there, anything other than the tangled wall of kudzu that was the view from her last balcony.

"I've decided to plant them tomorrow," Luke said. "If I start early, they'll harvest in the late summer so we'll have vegetables in the fall."

Amy sucked on a piece of ice. "What do we do with them then?"

"Eat them."

"All of them?"

"As many as we can. Then we can the rest."

"I don't know how to can."

"It can't be that hard."

Amy studied a chip in her bowl, wondering if it had always been there or if the move had damaged it. She worried that when they unpacked the boxes, even the boxes filled with broken and used junk, all of their things wouldn't even fill the living room. They deserved that house, she knew it, but having a half empty home didn't prove it to anyone.

Luke set down his fork. Amy reached to take his bowl, but he wasn't finished yet. The neat piles of rice, peas, and chicken were still sorted on opposite sides of the bowl. Her husband looked out at the hills.

“What do you think of having a baby?”

Amy laughed at the suddenness. Luke's mind moved too fast for his mouth sometimes, jumping topics without transition or connection. She was pleased though that they'd been together long enough for their minds to sync up.

“The empty space is getting to me too, honey. Don't worry. We'll unpack, then get some new furniture when the money comes in.” She reached for his empty cup, but he took her hand.

“We've been married four years now. My job is good, we have this house.” Amy waited for it. “And they say a woman's most fertile years are in her mid-twenties.” His arguments always ended with science.

“Who told you that? The internet? My mom was having babies into her late thirties. There's plenty of time.” She laughed again and headed inside to trash the plates. Her husband could be impressionable sometimes, poor thing; smart as he was, he didn't have sense. What would they do with a baby, especially since things were already going so well? A new home she still wanted to paint and organize with beautiful, fragile things and clean white carpet.

When Amy stepped back on the front porch, she was still chuckling, but Luke hadn't moved, his eyes focused on some distant spot in the hayfield. He tilted his head as if engaged in some inner conversation, and when she whistled, he didn't glance her way. Amy pulled back. She'd never mocked his ideas before, not in four years of marriage, and his reaction made her stomach twist. She touched his hand. He jumped but didn't look at her.

“I just don't want to miss our window.”

Amy wanted to say “yes” immediately, to snap her husband back into enthusiastic calculations and listen patiently to his plans for cribs and work schedules and college funds. She dreamed of a man who wanted children, a tender father was a tender husband, but the screaming of her little sisters came back to her, her mother swearing, Tim, the current boyfriend turning up the TV. The scene deafened her mind. She tried to smile at her husband.

“Can I think about it?”

Luke kissed her. “Of course. Think about it as long as you need.” He rubbed her hand. “But not too long,” and then he transitioned back into his plans, talking about acidity and the proper way to get the juiciest tomatoes.

Amy didn’t know why she stopped at her mother’s house the following week. It was out of the way, and they had fought they last time they’d spoken over the phone, but her hands had driven her to the worn out apartment complex while her mind was elsewhere. She didn’t entirely realize where she was until she pulled into the guest parking spot at the end of the row.

Amy knocked, expecting her mother to peek through the curtains before letting her in, but the door opened almost immediately, and Diane stood behind the storm door in a loose skirt.

Amy had been certain her older sister wasn’t due for another visit until Easter. She must have a new book in the works, otherwise why bother to make the trip all the way from her university in California? Diane always arrived with a notepad filled with uncomfortable questions and a microphone. Every family gathering from a nephew’s birthday to Grandma and Grandpa’s anniversary was an opportunity to get the family’s opinions on being poor and white, something most of the members didn’t like to be reminded of. Amy had participated in her sister’s studies out of loyalty until she received a copy of Diane’s last book, *Legacy*. Amy had

been described as “a desperate waif of a girl, jumping from man to man in an attempt to verify her own self worth.” She made Luke burn the entire book in the grill and never interviewed with her sister again.

Diane hugged Amy tight. “It’s been so long. I tried to get in contact with you the last time I was in town, but you and Luke must have been on vacation. So good that you two are able to take trips now and then, get a break from all this.” She gestured to the inside of Mom’s apartment.

Amy brushed past her sister. “Is Mom home?”

“In the kitchen, Baby,” her mother called. “Make yourself at home.”

Amy found Diane’s laptop with the microphone and moved to the opposite end of the room. Mom lumbered in, carrying a stained coffee mug and wearing her pale blue slippers. She lowered herself towards the couch then let her weight carry her to the cushions, her chest heaving underneath her worn-out bathrobe. She had put on weight again, depression she said, lingering from a fight with Amy’s younger sister Erin, who had run off and moved in with some worthless son of bitch from Cocke County. They were living out there now, Erin only seventeen and seven months shy of graduating high school.

“So what brings you to see a poor old thing like me?” Mom asked.

“Just wanted to talk.”

“About what?” Diane spoke, not Mom. Amy tensed. Diane reached for a pen. Amy looked to the door and considered calling the whole thing off, lying about a recipe or some other excuse, anything better than asking her mother for advice within an earshot of Diane’s book.

But why hesitate? She had no reason to be ashamed of appearing in Diane’s books now. Much as her mother loved her oldest sister Clara’s beauty and Diane’s brains, Amy had all the

girls beat; she was married. Married to a man with a real job, no useless drunk from Cocke County or one of Clara's in-and-out boyfriends. When the invitations for the wedding had been printed, Mom sent one to every mailbox in the apartment complex: "Mrs. Dortha Norman announces the marriage of her daughter Amy Leigh Norman to . . ."

Amy straightened her back. Diane clicked her pen.

"Luke wants to have a baby."

Mom shrieked and clapped her hands. Diane eyes widened, but her pen remained still. Amy just smiled, giddy that she had finally stunned Diane out of her note taking.

"It's about damn time you gave that man a baby," Mom said. "Four years? I was beginning to think there was something wrong with one of you." Amy hugged her, smelling the familiar detergent on her dress. Mom offered Amy a cigarette, and they filled the room with comforting smoke as Diane read over her notes. Amy breathed in deeply and settled back into her chair.

"So what brought you to this decision?" Diane said. "I mean it's a big decision. You and Luke have talked about it, I'm sure." She didn't reach for her pen, but Amy had no idea if the tape recorder was on.

Amy cleared her throat then coughed. Mom was watching. Amy felt her face and ears grow hot, and she stubbed out her cigarette early.

"Well actually Luke . . ."

Diane nodded. Amy could already read the entry. "Oppressed by the male-centric culture, A. feels obligated to fulfill her role as a wife and mother, bending to the will of her demanding husband, who wants a son more than his wife's opinion." Amy couldn't do that to Luke.

“Luke and I decided together.” She tried to smoke the cigarette she’s stubbed out. “Like you said, Mom. Four years.” She laughed, her throat dry from dragging on the dead cigarette. Diane took a drink then set her pen down.

“And I’m absolutely right, Amy,” her mother said. “You’re not getting any younger. You’re already twenty-four. Girls these days wait too long. Selfishness. All selfishness.” Diane cleared her throat.

“Mom--”

“Oh don’t start with your feminism, you know I didn’t mean you.”

Amy looked around at the walls, and she could hear Diane shifting on the other side of the room.

“I’ll be sure to call the family,” Mom said. “They’ll be thrilled, especially Clara’s boys. They’ve been wanting a cousin for so long.”

It was too late to retract.

“Do that, Mom.”

Amy stood up. Diane and Mom begged her to stay, but Amy insisted she needed to run errands, even though her grocery list consisted of brownie mix and frozen peas. She left her mother and sister alone in the dark living room, her mother talking, Diane writing, and the family photos scattered over the carpet.

Amy found Luke in the garden, soil already clinging to his best pair of jeans and streaking his forehead. The tilled plot was now organized into rows of small mounds. A clean white string measured out each row and dripped with water from the hose. The property was freshly mowed back to the acre of untamed brush and pine trees. In the next yard, six beagles ran

wild. They snuffled along the fence to bark at a squirrel that chattered from the largest oak in the yard. Amy watched the entire world, remembering it as it was.

“We should have a baby,” she said.

Luke dropped his spade and hugged her without remembering to wipe his hands. Fresh, wet dirt smeared over Amy’s arms, but Luke didn’t notice.

“I’ll make lists of all the things we need, formula, clothes, and we should start a savings plan for daycare unless you want to stay home, then we’ll put it into a college fund and I--” The woods at the back of the property were still wild, the dogs still barked, the squirrel still chatted, but it was already growing dark as Luke wrote his ideas on the back of one of the seed packets. Amy was relieved to hear him planning again.

“The pill, you’ll have to stop taking it, but not all at once, that might make it harder. How many days do you have left?”

Amy wanted to lie, months, years, but she pulled out a small blue packet from her purse. Inside, neat rows of pills covered the sheet, two lines of pink, one line of white.

“Three weeks,” Amy said.

“We start in April then.” Luke hugged her from behind. She placed a hand on his cheek, but instead of seeking out her breasts or her belt, Luke’s fingers rest on her stomach, stroking her until the shirt rubbed her skin raw. Amy retreated into the house to make dinner.

Amy had met Luke when she was nineteen and fighting with her high school sweetheart at a gas station. She was chewing Matt out for lying about his ex. The texts Amy had found weren’t anything sexy, just some innocent catching up, but she had felt ignored recently, and a

fight provided the attention she craved. Matt drove off while she was buying cigarettes. She left one shrieking voicemail on his phone then cried on the curb.

She looked up only when Luke touched her shoulder. He was twenty-three with oil-stained coveralls and freckles that covered his cheeks and the backs of his hands. Amy would see how much more they covered seven months later, but the first day at the gas station she just clumsily lit a cigarette without meeting his eyes.

“Do you need a ride?” he said. “If you don’t live too far away, I’ll drive you.”

Amy wiped her nose on her arm and looked over Luke’s shoulder towards the garage. The other two mechanics were elbowing each other, snickering. Her stomach ached when she thought of how the fight looked to the other customers.

“I’m not easy.”

“I didn’t say that.”

She looked him over closer. He was covered with oil, and his face was peeling from a bad sunburn. The sky was getting dark, and she was still a good fifteen minutes from home by car. If Matt saw her pulling in with another man, Luke was good looking enough, in a rough sort of way. Not handsome or athletic like Matt, but a grown man, a man worth being jealous of.

“As long as there isn’t oil on your seats.”

Luke was driving the blue camry at the time. The seat material was stained, but there was no food in the floor, only junk mail, no unpaid bills. Amy spent the car ride complaining about Matt, trying to sound more angry than sad. When Luke dropped her off, she kissed him without thinking. He pulled away but asked if he could see her again.

The next week, she was at the garage five to six every night, flirting aggressively with Luke whenever Matt pulled in to fill up his mustang. By Friday, Matt had stopped coming by,

and Amy knew they were over. She was more tired than sad, but she gave herself one night to rest before reinvesting all her energy in Luke, who got off at six then took her to dinner each night.

She tackled him as she'd always tackled men, as her mother and oldest sister had taught her. She demanded attention and gifts in return for clingy loyalty and sex on demand. When a man pulled away, she wore him down until he gave in, and they returned to an unsteady truce. But Luke never pushed back. He gave into her every demand, rode her every mood swing with careful planning. When she felt she deserved a new car, just a bored suggestion one day, Luke presented her with plans for a new savings account. The spreadsheet was titled "Gift for Amy."

Amy ripped up the paper and begged Luke to never think about the car again. She called herself "selfish" and held Luke's hand while she cried quietly. It was the last time she used her mother's way on Luke. His gentleness had worn her down, and she became gentle too.

When he spoke of his calculations and experiments, she listened and soon realized his endless facts came from a gifted memory rather than a towering intellect. She was relieved because she loved him and wanted to deserve him. She encouraged his every thought, plan, interest, and in return, he was kind and spoke quietly, carefully. When he brought her flowers on their nine month anniversary, she asked him to marry her.

Luke frowned. "The man is supposed to do that."

"It doesn't matter. Will you?"

"But I had a plan."

"Then go ahead. Just know I'll say yes."

He asked her the following week while they watched the planes land outside the private airport. They married in the church when she was twenty, and he was twenty-four.

“And now descend into downward facing dog, and breathe.” In, out.

Amy’s muscles ached as she struggled to keep her eyes focused on her video Yoga instructor, whose eco-friendly yoga slacks hung much looser than her own. In, out. The video woman twisted herself then smiled.

“This pose will work your core muscles, keeping that tummy toned and tight.” In, out, in. Amy’s arms trembled before she collapsed onto the living room floor. She dragged herself into a sitting position and switched off the TV, wiping the sweat from her upper lip.

“You all right?” Luke called from the kitchen where he fixed his sack lunch, peanut butter and honey as always.

“Fine.” The move had interrupted her early morning Yoga and getting back into the familiar positions made her feel like an old woman. She stretched and headed to the shower. The loose shower head squealed whenever the water ran through the old pipes, and Amy struggled to review her Monday schedule over the noise. Diane had called Sunday night to say she was leaving Tuesday morning.

“I thought we could meet near the office for lunch tomorrow. I’ve spent time with Mom, Clara and the boys, but not much with you. Can you spare an hour?”

Amy wanted to say no, Dr. Morrison’s office was incredibly busy during Monday morning lunch hours, and she just couldn’t leave the front desk. But her sister began to tell a joke she had heard from one of the boys, and Amy couldn’t say no. She agreed to meet at one of the chain sandwich stores at eleven the next day.

A hand reached through the shower curtain and grabbed Amy’s butt. She shrieked and slapped Luke’s hand away. He peeked through the curtain, already shirtless.

“You’re going to be late.”

“So?” He tried to step into the shower. Amy held up her hand

“Tonight.”

“Amy--”

“Tonight.”

“Promise?”

“No.” She pushed him away but smiled, breaking the distance she’d tried to keep between them since her pink pills began to dwindle. She stepped out of the shower and shook her hair. Luke had already laid out her work scrubs and was selecting a pair of clean coveralls for the garage. He made another grab at her, but she dodged and ducked into the closet to throw on her underwear before he could reach. She could hear him laughing outside the door. Amy emerged fully dressed.

“I’m heading out early,” she said, grabbing her purse.

Luke zipped up his coveralls.

“Have a good day. Be sure to check your sister for wires.”

Amy laughed. They kissed, and Luke held her for a long moment.

“Tonight. Promise?”

He touched her stomach, but Amy pulled away and said goodbye. She snatched her keys from the dresser and took the stairs to the garage two at time.

The dogwoods beside the driveway were finally flowering. Amy wiped the petals from her windshield but pressed a few of them between the pages of the novel she’d just finished, *The Billionaire Playboy’s Catch*. Already Amy could see a difference in the light, much softer than the harsh sunny days in winter. As she backed down the gravel driveway onto the road, she

surveyed the three homes, neat, shaded, and identical except for the yards. Their next-door neighbors had pines, the third neighbor was mostly grown up brush, and Amy's yard was cleared out with thinly spaced oaks and a view of the mountains in the distance. She turned right towards town.

The clinic where Amy worked the front desk was a good thirty minutes from her new home. After she'd married Luke, the energy she'd always spent on finding a husband was redirected for herself, and she traded her pharmacy cashier job for night school and then a job as a medical transcriptionist. She liked Dr. Morrison's office more than any job she'd ever had. The mostly elderly patients were polite, and the staff got along well. Dr. Morrison called her by her first name and remembered to always ask after Luke.

Amy parked in front of the fresh bed of tulips beside the staff lot. It was still early in the office. Amy and one nurse, Sandra, were the only assistants on staff thirty minutes before the first patient. Amy peaked into Dr. Morrison's office. He was asleep in his chair, a sweater draped over his eyes.

"He was on call last night," Sandra said. "Couldn't sleep apparently."

"When's the first patient?"

"Thirty minutes."

Amy clucked her tongue. All that education and not a decent life to show for it.

"I'm planning a small party for Dr. Morrison later this afternoon," Sandra said. "His daughter recently got engaged."

"He never mentioned that."

“I’ve just heard it through the grapevine. Anyway I need to run and pick up the cake.” She handed Amy a file. “Once you get settled, would you take this to Dr. Green, the gynecologist in building B?”

Amy tucked the file under her arm and waved goodbye.

The waiting room of Dr. Green’s office was still empty, except for a few parenting and women’s magazines. On the wall was a small timeline with pictures of different fruit. “Baby is as big as a raspberry” it said below Week Eight. Size ranged all the way up to a watermelon at Week Thirty-Seven.

Dr. Green and her nurse practitioner, Jan, were drinking coffee in the break room. They waved for Amy to join them.

“I brought a file from Dr. Morrison.”

“Thanks, Amy. Ah Mrs. Henson. Drew mentioned he would be transferring her to me.”

“Mrs. Henson is our Biblical Sarah,” Jan said. “Fifty-five and pregnant. No fertility treatment.” She took a deep sip of coffee. “Don’t envy her, that’s for certain. Hard enough to be pregnant as a young woman, let alone as an old one.”

“Before I forget,” Dr. Green said. “Drug rep came in the other day and gave us some samples of oridoxin. They’re marketing them for premenstrual pain, but the pills are really better for arthritis. Think Dr. Morrison would be interested?”

“I’ll take a box back and ask him.”

“Good. They’ll just take up space here.”

They talked for a while until the rest of Dr. Green’s staff started to arrive, and Amy knew she should be heading back to the office. While the nurses took their coffee in the break room, Amy went to the supply closet in the back corner of the office. She found the oridoxin easy

enough. What caught her eyes was the package behind it. Libersum. Low dosage birth control pills.

Amy closed herself in the supply closet and opened the box lid. Hundreds of untouched sample packets shaped like white compact mirrors. Twenty-eight day cycles that could go on and on and on. Infertility was tragic but not uncommon even in young women. Luke would be no less of a man as long as Amy was the one who struggled, and then when she was ready, a miracle, like Sarah, and as long as the gynecology office didn't miss the pills and who would at just one packet a month?

Amy opened one of the compacts, peach colored pills spiraling down into a white center, the end of the month. She hesitated, looked around, then slipped it into the pocket of her scrubs. The closet door opened, and a nurse jumped .

“Sorry.” Amy picked up the box of oridoxin. “I was just taking this back to Dr. Morrison.”

She waved at Dr. Green and her staff as she left, feeling the compact pressing against her thigh.

Diane had already saved a booth when Amy arrived at the sandwich shop. Her older sister was wearing a university sweatshirt and playing with a smart phone. She rose to hug Amy and admired her scrubs.

“The medical field. I'm proud.”

Amy sat across from her sister. Diane tucked a stray bang behind her ear and scratched her arm. She carried no notebook or pen, but Amy's couldn't shake Luke's comment about the wire. They started some small talk about jobs while they waited for the sandwiches, and once the

food arrived, they were too busy eating to talk. Only after they finished did Diane clear her throat and lean forward.

“I’m glad you met me,” Diane said. “I wanted to talk to you before I left.”

“About what?”

“I just want to make sure you’re happy.”

Amy’s stomach lurched.

“I just want to make sure this is what you want, Amy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everything.”

Now Amy was certain she was recording, trying to catch her in a lie, something to bring back to California for her students to dissect.

“Don’t you say a thing about my husband.”

Diane held up her hands.

“I didn’t mean it that way, I promise.”

Amy wiped her mouth then took a long sip of her drink. She crushed the cup and stacked it on top of her tray. Diane reached out to her.

“I just want you to know you have other options.

“I like my options right now just fine.” Amy began to scoot towards the edge of the booth, but Diane caught her hand. Amy had expected her sister’s hands to be rough and dry, but they were smooth. Her nails were even painted with a clear gloss.

“I know someone that can help you before you get pregnant.”

Amy’s mouth was dry. She wished she hadn’t crushed her cup already. In the pocket of her scrubs, the pill packet pressed hard against her side.

“What about Luke? How do I convince him about all this?”

Diane rubbed Amy’s hand.

“Luke doesn’t have to know, honey.”

Diane wanted her to lie to her husband. Amy didn’t know if it was procedure or a pill distributor that Diane was prepping her for. Either way, Luke would be duped by this clean, confidential, modern procedure just as he would suspect for months that Amy’s white compact held a mirror and some messy powder. He’d never open it, not once, until he needed a mirror, and she wasn’t home. What would he do then?

“Luke wants this baby bad,” Amy said.

Diane nodded, took a breath, then stopped herself. Amy braced for the next comment.

“If Luke wants children, and you don’t, that is something a marriage can’t survive.”

Amy pulled her hand away. For a moment she imagined a life without Luke, no, not without, apart from, an ex-wife, childless, a new beginning, alone. The roar of a plane heading for the nearby airport interrupted her thoughts. The lettuce must have been bad. She was feeling ill and needed to go home, to her new home, with the garden and the half-empty living room.

“I have to get going.”

Diane rose. “If I said anything--”

“No.” Amy hugged her sister. “No, you’re fine. I hope you have a nice trip back. Please call me when you’re in town again.”

Diane handed Amy her new phone number. Amy put it into her contacts list in front of her sister, then waved goodbye. As Amy pulled out, Diane was still sitting in front of the café, her hands in her pockets, her smart phone laying idly on her lap.

Luke was waiting at home when Amy arrived. He'd washed his face, put on clean clothes, and was watching the Discovery Channel, something about top predators. He held out his arms, and Amy slipped into his lap. She'd made it through the full work day but barely. Not even the office engagement party had been enough to shake off the sickness from lunch. Dr. Morrison had been genuinely surprised. He hugged all of the nurses, did a brief thank you speech, but wouldn't accept any cake. He had a busy afternoon and had to get back to his patients. He hoped the nurses would celebrate extra for him, and they did. Amy personally celebrated with three pieces of cake, and the taste of artificial sweetener still coated the inside of her mouth.

"Well, do you get your own chapter in Diane's next book?" Luke said.

"Don't joke." Amy leaned against Luke's chest. He stroked her head.

"What did you talk about then?"

The television showed an eagle's nest, then a cheetah, then an alligator snapping at the camera.

"Nothing important."

Luke didn't press the issue. His rough hands rubbed her scalp in small circles, frizzing patches of her hair. Luke un-muted the television, and the British announcer dramatically detailed the hunting tactics of African wild dogs. A pack of the animals swarmed a water buffalo until the animal disappeared.

Amy closed her eyes and breathed in the smell of oil that still clung to her husband's skin. Her stomach ache subsided slowly.

That night it rained, the first hard storm of the spring. In between dozing, Amy felt Luke rise every few hours. The curtains rustled, and then, a few minutes later, he would return to bed, his hands cold from the window glass.

When she finally woke up the next day, Luke was already outside, standing over the garden in his pajamas. The clean cut stakes and white string had been washed away, along with most of the tenderly tilled top soil. A few spouts wallowed in mud-puddles, but everything else was gone. Amy opened the bedroom window.

“Luke,” she said. He didn’t answer, just like that first night on the porch, but his notebook was under his arm, and a ruler stuck out of the pocket in his robe. From the bedroom she couldn’t hear his muttering, but he bent down and measured the edge of the garden, made a note, moved down twelve inches, made a note, and slowly began to make his way around the entire edge of the garden plot.

Amy went to the bathroom. She had hidden the pink compact in a tampon box, someplace her husband would never look. Her current pack was down to the day’s pill, then one row of white, then nothing. The screen door in the other room slid open.

“Amy, come see. I have a new plan. ”

Amy popped the last pill out of its box and put it on the back of her tongue. As she filled up her glass, the pill’s flavored coating began to dissolve, and by the time she swallowed, there was a bitter taste in the back of her throat. She tossed the old pack of pills in the trash. Her period would come without the placebo pills’ help, and she no longer needed the habit of taking pills.

Amy rubbed the compact between her hands then slipped the full package into the waste basket, intact but deep enough below the tissues where no one would ever notice.

She would take out the trash that afternoon, the garbage man would come the next morning, and she would hand over Mrs. Henson's file to the newest nurse to deliver to Dr. Green's office from now on. Things were always easiest when there were no other options.

"Amy." She could hear Luke climbing the stairs inside. "Amy, can you hear me?"

"Coming." Amy smiled in the mirror and adjusted her hair to look nice for her husband. Then, putting on her slippers, she headed for the screen door and Luke's garden, preparing her praise before she stepped outside.

The Auguries

I found the dead bird on my way to get the paper. Rigid, eyes open, wings held tight to its sides. A blue jay and a bad sign if I believed in those things. Rigor mortis had already set in, but its still glassy eyes made it look more like one of my ex-wife's Christmas ornaments than a real animal.

I shuffled to find the gardening shovel and scooped the bird into the grove of liriop beside the driveway. It would have made no difference if I'd thrown it over the fence to be eaten by the neighbor's cat, but the thought made me sick.

At the breakfast table, I opened the paper, July twenty-fifth. I recognized the date, but its significance wouldn't stick. It was the same as the dream I'd had. Every detail was clear in my mind until my thoughts wandered to Chris and the stupid fence, and by the time I'd thought about how long I'd be stuck at his house or whether he'd remember the augur, even the last fragment of the dream had vanished. The date was the same way, rising and falling back into my subconscious.

My daughter's fiancé had inherited a house; Ashley called to tell me of the grandfather's death and of Chris's good luck in the same breath. They would live in the house next summer when they got married. I wouldn't let myself show any enthusiasm, just responded "Really?" and "Oh." I knew she was disappointed when she hung up.

I dressed in clean work clothes. It was all I could do to not show up in my doctor's coat and name badge, just something to intimidate Chris a bit. He would try to spit out some bio terms or worse, tell me about every ache, foot ailment, and sinus drainage he'd ever had. I was tempted to say he may have fibromyalgia or describe the symptoms of plague. I just hoped that Ashley wasn't there with him. I knew my daughter rented an apartment near campus for her senior year,

but I remembered being young with a college girlfriend. The cost of a good reputation was only a twelve month lease.

The directions I printed up took me out of the suburbs along back roads until shopping malls disappeared into farmland and the occasional subdivision sign then open fields. There were no cows out, and the grass had grown tall, but the light seemed too bright against the overgrown fields. Even the buzz of insects sounded more mechanical than natural. Heat rose from the asphalt in front of me before the road turned off into a small tunnel of trees.

Hidden inside the grove were three homes on thin strips of land, all identical brick ranch houses. It looked like one drunken son had sold off his ten acre parcel of the inheritance, and a small-time developer had bought it with big dreams. Only an idiot would place three suburban homes in the middle of nowhere.

Chris lived in the first home, 3800. A wall of scrubby trees hid the house from the street. At the top of the gravel drive, there was a station wagon filled with moving boxes. Chris was in the process of carrying another two boxes to the car when I pulled in. The house was nothing special to look at, just a plain brick home with a covered porch and an old rocking chair out front.

Chris smiled and waved. He was plain and not very bright, but what he lacked in intelligence he made up for in enthusiasm. Ashley said he worked in consulting, whatever that meant.

“Just packing the rest of Grandpa’s stuff,” Chris said. He looked over the house for a moment, then wiped his nose on his sleeve and reached to shake my hand.

“Mr. Morrison--”

“Dr. Morrison.”

“Of course. Thank you again for coming to help with the fence.”

“It’s no problem,” I said, shrugging my shoulders. “If my daughter wants a fence, I build her a fence.”

Chris laughed, an annoying nasal sound. “I know what you mean.”

I wasn’t convinced he did.

“Let me show you the place.” Chris led me up the wheelchair ramp into the living room. The carpet was rust colored shag with indents where furniture once stood. Now there was only a green card table with chairs, a weathered love seat, and an inflatable mattress.

“Spartan.”

“I’m trying to live frugally now so we can get some new furniture before summer.” He looked back at me, as though his brilliant savings plan would gloss over his partially deflated air-mattress. I just nodded. Everyone saved up before the wedding; it was after the wedding that counted.

Chris kicked aside a pile of dirty clothes as we walked through the living room. Amongst the old boxer briefs and a pair of swim trunks was a delicate lavender bra, a small flower sew into the middle of the supports. I faltered but managed to nudge the bra underneath the couch with my foot. Chris hadn’t noticed, and I didn’t even want to think about my daughter and air mattress so I concentrated on a stain running down the living room wall. It would have to be fixed. Ashley deserved better.

The back bedrooms of the ranch house were empty except for a few hanging strips of wallpaper. In the kitchen, where there should have been a fridge, there was an exposed ice chord. A mini fridge sat in its place, barely covering the stained spot on the linoleum.

When I'd asked my daughter about the house, she'd been cheerful but vague. "It's just different from your house, Daddy." Yes it certainly was. The house's only positive quality was its location. "I'll just be twenty-five minutes from the hospital," Ashley had said when she brought her lunch to the doctor's lounge. It was the first comforting thing she'd told me since the engagement.

Chris walked out the screen door to the backyard, an overgrown hay field that extended all the way to a chicken wire fence at the rear of the property. The clouds were coming in, and the only spot of blue was a small square of light that shifted positions but never seemed to close. Chris was already at the perimeter, rechecking a small post near the house. Stakes connected by strings encircled the entire yard.

"To save time," Chris said as I looked at his plans. I rubbed my chin.

"The spacing seems a bit far. You're going to need some long boards if you're going to reach from post to post."

Chris smiled. "That's the nice part." He went to the front of the house, and when he reappeared, he was rolling a mass of metal wire. I tried to smile.

"Of course, chicken wire."

Rednecks used chicken wire to keep in their half-starved dogs, and farmers used chicken wire to keep a bull out of the cow field. Respectable people did not use chicken wire unless they were composting, and even then, it was kept in the back corner.

"The posts will be the hardest work," Chris said, pointing around the house. "Once we put those in, we unroll the wire and tie it to the fence." He put his hands on his hips. "Easy."

That was the problem.

“Yeah, it’ll be no problem at all. Tell me, Chris.” I put my hand on his shoulder. “What would you think about an entirely wooden fence? Keeps the dogs in but still looks real professional? Something like the one around my house in Friendsville. You’ve seen it.”

Chris sucked in through his teeth, surveyed the yard, then smiled weakly. “It’s something to think about in the future, Sir, but I’ve already bought all the materials for my fence. Besides, taking into account the slope of the yard and--” He rattled off all of the reasons why a white picket or log fence was “not a good fit” for the piece of property, sprinkling in a few Sir’s for effect. I tuned him out halfway through. Other than the wasted time, Chris’ decision didn’t bother me much. Once my daughter got tired of looking out at a farm fence, I’d hire someone to come out and build her something nice, something white that bright flowers could creep up in the summer time. She’d like that.

Before Chris could explain his master plan, I went to fetch the augur, my most important contribution to the project. It was lying against the garage door, bright red with the mangled box still beside it. Chris must not have assembled it until that morning. I’d seen it on sale at Lowes and bought one for myself, brought it home, assembled it, and realized the deal was too good to pass up. I returned to the store and bought a second one for my daughter. The same cashier checked me out, and we joked together about impulse buys, but I hadn’t once regretted it. I knew Chris didn’t have the money for it so it was my gift to the new house. Chris was shocked when he’d opened the wrapping at the housewarming party, and I later received a thank you note from my daughter, signed with both their names.

Chris removed the first stake, and we dragged the augur to the spot. I tried to position it over the center, but Chris kept dragging it left. I finally gave it a quick tug and pressed it into the ground. Chris stumbled forward and didn’t try to reposition the machine again. Once everything

was settled, we revved the two-person augur, the drill rotating slowly. I nodded to Chris, and we turned on the full power. The drill lurched under us, but we both braced and forced it down. It fought until it was deep in the wet earth. Chris looked to me and nodded, the signal to pull up the drill, but I shook my head. He frowned, and we kept digging for a few more seconds until it was ready. I gave the signal. We pulled the machine from the ground, letting the wet earth spin loose from the threads and splatter against our jeans. We pushed the augur back into the earth, forcing it deeper until the ground nearly covered the top of the drill. I wasn't expecting the machine to shake quite so much, and even with Chris's help, it was a struggle to pull the auger out of the ground. Chris flipped the switch, and the drill choked, sputtered, and then spun slowly to a stop.

“Didn't I tell you this would go faster?” I said, surveying the work. “Much better than digging by hand.”

Chris nodded.

“You ready for the next one?” I said, dusting dirt off my pants.

“Whenever you are.” We carried the augur to the next hole, but as we started to set up, I decided that the second post was really too far away from the first. I took the stake from Chris once he'd pried it up and moved it to a better spot.

“Why don't we dig here instead?” I said.

“I've already measured it out--”

“We'll just re-measure it. It'll only take a moment.” I untied the string and readjusted the stake until it was perfectly in line with the first one, only closer. I pulled the augur to the spot myself as Chris wandered over. He grabbed the handle on my signal, and we dug again. We continued this way all round the yard, working in complete silence. By the time we finished, repositioning and digging all the holes, I was actually beginning to enjoy myself. Chris and I

took a water break together, leaning up against the pile of posts we would put into the ground. Chris poured some of the water over his head, shook out his hair, and then looked back at the house. I followed his gaze and wondered what he was thinking about it. Ashley mentioned he'd been close to his grandfather and had taken care of him in the old man's last years. Maybe he was thinking over some memory they'd had together. Then again, maybe he was reviewing Monday's work schedule, undressing my daughter with his mind, or just digging holes, planting posts, digging holes, planting posts. You never knew with young men.

The sky was growing darker, but the one square of sunlight still hovered over the yard. Chris suggested we get back to work. Together we dragged the posts to each of the holes, and I began to look for the concrete to anchor them.

"I didn't buy concrete," Chris said and held up a few steel anchors. "They won't be deep enough to warrant that much work."

"You're only going to want to do this once, trust me. Concrete is the way to do it. That's how my fence is built, and it's been there for twenty years, not a single post lost." If the boy didn't have concrete, we'd have to stop for the day. Besides, the sky was looking dark. Probably a good time to quit anyway. I stretched out my back, which ached from unfamiliar physical labor. Chris still held onto the steel anchors, the roll of chicken wire at his back.

"I've been thinking about this fence, and we really ought to wait until we get some horizontal posts or maybe some lattice." I looked out over the yard.

"Then we've done the digging for nothing," Chris said.

"Not true. With the augur, the work will be easy to complete again, once we have the correct materials."

"No."

Chris clutched the steel anchors and did not turn away when I faced him. The look in his eyes made me uncomfortable, then angry.

“Sir, I think I would prefer to do the fence my way.” The wrong way.

“Of course, of course, and you should be allowed to do that. I was merely suggesting that my daughter might not like this idea. I think she might prefer--”

“Ash and I agreed on this design together,” Chris said, using the nickname that grated on me the most. “We discussed it when she came over the other night.”

I wanted to tell him about the clothing on the floor, I wanted to call him out, lording my daughter over me like he was the only man in her life, the only influence over her. But as hard as it was, I held my tongue, because my daughter would never have approved of the design. She’d looked out from my picket fence or through her mother’s lattice her whole life. Chris was lying.

A large bird flew across the square of sky. It looked like a vulture or maybe a hawk, but it was hard to tell from the height. As it flew over the tree line and disappeared, the hole in the sky closed. Thunder echoed first far, then close. The neighboring ridgeline disappeared into mist, and a line of rain came up over the hayfield and drenched the yard.

Chris ran for the porch, forgetting the augur in the mud. A perfectly new piece of equipment doomed to rust, money I had spent well. Chris didn’t pay a dime. I grabbed the machine and began to lug it towards the house. My back was sore, and the farther I dragged the augur, the slower I went. For a moment, I saw Chris through the rain, safe under the porch, watching. I clenched my teeth, pulling the augur harder and harder, letting my anger give me the last bit of strength to get the machine under cover. Rain turned the grass to mud, and the machine sunk down into the earth, stuck in the middle of the backyard. I tried one more tug, but slipped in the wet grass and fell to one knee. I swore, at the rain, at the augur, at Chris, even at my

daughter. I wished it was ten years earlier when I was barely forty, and the augur would have been no trouble, and Ashley would be playing in the grass behind my proper fence in Friendsville.

Chris came from the side, his soaking hair and T-shirt plastered to his body. He grabbed one end of the augur and began to drag it through the mud before he also slipped. I snatched my end and pulled, and together we lifted the machine off the ground and began to lug it through the rain, pausing every few feet to rest our arms until we were under the porch. We laid the augur beside the moldy armchairs.

The rain thickened, separating the porch from the outside world with a curtain of water. The entire world moved slower behind it. Water dripped from my hair down into my eyes and mouth. Chris removed his soaked shirt, rung it out, without looking at me. We didn't speak. I preferred it that way, listening to the rain that backed up into the leaf-filled gutters and spilled over the edges of the house.

In the yard next door, a woman walked out through the curtain, focused on the fields and mountains in the distance. She walked steadily to the end of the yard, hopped the fence then disappeared into the rain.

My knee still ached from the fall in the yard. I had a patient like this once, I remembered. Fell off his roof at ninety years old, broke his right kneecap. He was still living alone, needed his knee, he said. He didn't make it through surgery. Strange. I hadn't thought of him in years.

"I've watched a lot of people die," I said. "More than I can count." Chris stared at me then turned back to the rain. I saw the crease of his back, marking the ridge of his spine. He was a thin guy, too thin to ever really bulk up, but it looked like he was trying. Then I saw my

daughter touching his back, laying on the floor of the living room, and I felt sick. I eased myself into the moldy deck chairs. My knee popped.

I remembered my daughter at three, sitting in the garage with me, the smell of clay pots and wet planting soil. “What does this do?” “You use it wind up the hose.” “And this?” “To make the soil soft.” “And this?” “To dig the holes.” I told her everything that was in that garage, taught her to wind the hose and stack the pots. I missed my shift that day entirely, the only time I ever let myself do it. Those days had been too few.

“When kids are little, those are the happiest times of your life. The present is good too, of course, but when they’re little, you can’t beat that.” And as I said that, I knew Chris’s children would be my daughter’s children would be my grandchildren. Genetics would run together in the course of one marriage, and Chris and I would be inseparably linked for every generation that followed. It was a tough pill to swallow. Chris still didn’t respond.

The rain was letting up a bit, but the ground was running in rivers. Mud from our project washed over the grass and down into a drainage ditch. A few post holes had collapsed and filled up with water, a series of small wells that dotted the property. Chris turned to me.

“Is this about me not asking your permission?”

“What?”

“Not asking your permission to marry Ashley.”

I bent down, wiping mud off the augur, but I managed to smear it, more than clean it. The rain reduced to a warm drizzle, the sun already edging out the dark clouds on the horizon.

“She was going to say yes anyway,” Chris said, tensed.

He was right, but I wasn’t ready to let Chris know that. I put on my work gloves.

“Should we try again?” I asked. “Now that the rain is finished.”

Chris squinted at the sky. “Not today. I think we’re done.”

“Think you’ll finish it up later this week?”

“Yeah, I’ll take care of it.”

We shook hands.

I backed down the gravel driveway, watching the house recede as Chris stepped into the backyard with a shovel. I looked over my shoulder to check for traffic then back at the house. Chris passed over the first hole then took a shovel full of mud and dumped it back into second post hole. He skipped the third hole, then began to fill in the fourth.

I turned towards town and stopped at the only stop sign in the area, an intersection of two empty roads. The woman from the thunderstorm was waiting there, soaked to the skin, long strands of hair hanging over her eyes. I flashed my lights, signally her to cross, but she waved me on, never once looking at the windshield. I pulled forward, and in the rearview, she crossed the road, already forgetting our encounter at the sign.

Homecoming

The night of the writer's guild Aaron got home early and took Mom off Emma's hands. There was some ice on the roads, but Emma had handled worse up North and assured her brother she'd be fine.

The guild was nice, very talented, but they had history with each other, and Emma was the newcomer. She sat on the outskirts, laughing at jokes she didn't quite understand. The meeting thankfully ended early because of bad weather, and Emma was able to head home.

It was the first time Emma's world had looked familiar since arriving in Tennessee from New York. The snow fell heavily, coating the roads and trees. Cars pulled over to the sides, their taillights flashing, but Emma didn't slow down. She rolled down her windows to let in the cold and snow. Flakes stung her face and disintegrated against the car heaters, but the rush of the wind made her heart race. She accelerated around a curve. The car skidded, but Emma skillfully corrected the imbalance and kept driving, the speedometer needle moving in a steady arc to the right. The headlights were her only glimpse into the world, and until she saw the trio of homes nestled in the woods, she had no idea if she'd taken the right turn.

In the middle of those three homes, Patricia and Aaron were waiting. Only Aaron probably though. Mom would still be engrossed in her animals, unaware that Emma had left until she arrived back home. With the rate of the snow, her brother's work would be cancelled tomorrow, and they'd be at home together, the three of them, snowed in because Aaron would refuse to drive. Then Emma would spend the day, as she spent all her days, wandering the familiar halls of the house or maybe walking out to the edge of the woods for exercise. She always trudged back without ever stepping inside the tangled underbrush.

The headlights illuminated the first driveway, the second driveway, the third driveway, then there was nothing. No lights or homes just more fields hidden by unkempt hedges. Emma had never taken the road away from town, afraid of getting lost in the unfamiliar area, but when she passed the house where Aaron and Patricia were sitting, Emma wasn't thinking about anything except the sting of the cold that goaded her on. She accelerated, and the wind howled over the heater.

She took each curve in the road with confidence, easily correcting the strain of the car. She had taken harder roads in New York, roads filled with fearless drivers, black ice, and pedestrians darting in and out on streets with no street lamps. There were no street lamps on the one lane road either, and only the headlights revealed when the hedges grew into dark woods on either side of the road. The grade of the road climbed, and the curves grew sharper, but Emma never slowed until the road forced her hand.

She missed a yellow warning sign, the arrow bent at ninety degrees, and when she tried to take the upcoming turn, the wheels locked. In slow motion, Emma felt the back of the car swing behind her. Against all her good judgment on icy roads, she panicked and pushed the brake pedal into the floor. The tires squealed, a sharp note against the dull rush of the wind, and the car slammed into the guard rail, crumpling the metal beams. For a moment, the car hung suspended over the shoulder, the front tires still clutching onto the asphalt, but as the tires spun, the snow melted, and the car lost its grip. Emma watched the road rise higher and higher above her, her seatbelt the only brace that kept her weightless body from floating away.

Aaron hadn't been in the airport more than an hour, but already frost flowers had formed on the windshield. The AC defogged the front window, vision creeping in slowly from the

bottom corners. Emma sat beside him for the first time in seven years, eyes closed, head leaned against the passenger window after the red eye flight from New York. His sister was beginning to gray young, like all the women in their family. It didn't fall in an elegant streak like their aunts' but crept up from the roots at the back of her head. This sign of age made him realize how much he'd missed her, and his bitterness began to melt.

Two days earlier, six boxes had arrived at his house. They were filled with books. That was the only way Aaron knew his sister was coming home for good. Years of hinting that their mother's dementia was growing worse wasn't enough to drag Emma back to Tennessee. No, the writer's life up North was too grand, Aaron supposed, paying rent for an expensive flat, living paycheck to paycheck, thirty-six years old with no savings to her name. Everyone had to grow up sometime. Better late than never.

Emma glanced out the window when the car finally rumbled to a start. Tightly packed suburban homes around the airport grew into strip malls and used car lots along the state highway. She closed her eyes again, breathing in the scent of dog that lingered over the seats. She felt Aaron watching. Every time his eyes would shift the car would drift right then overcorrect. The movements made her sleepier, the car lulling her with white noise. She knew Aaron wanted to talk; she sensed it from the moment he embraced her in the airport, but once the questions came, they wouldn't stop until Aaron had dissected every aspect of her story. He was always that way when they were younger, like each conversation was the high school frog anatomy lab. If you just cut deep enough, you'd find the inner workings, the life energy amongst the gore.

"Why'd you decide to come back?" Aaron asked, when he caught Emma peeking through her eyelids. She stretched to make her sleeping act seem more believable.

“It’s just until I get back on my feet.”

“Your last e-mail said things were still going well.”

That was the problem. They were still going well. For years and years, still going well, without going great, without getting any better. Emma had come to New York fifteen years earlier, high on the success of an undergraduate career and the phone number of her professor’s literary agent. Jacqueline read Emma’s work, agreed instantly to represent her, spoke about two book deals, interviews for the New York Times like they’d already been arranged for the following Tuesday. Twenty-two with a literary agent. Emma bought the most expensive bottle of wine she could find and celebrated in her crappy studio apartment in the Bronx, where mold like salmon scales grew on the pipes.

Emma completed a short story collection in under a year. One book down. The first company Jacqueline showed it to agreed to buy it. It was a small publishing house but up-and-coming. They wanted a second book too, a novel. Emma struggled to come up with a premise during the next year, in between Christmas ice-skating in Central Park and listening to the voicemails of her family back home, Aaron, his wife Maggie, and Mom.

Three years after her first short story collection, she published her second book, not a novel like the company had hoped, but three novellas. They were very highly reviewed by Publisher’s Weekly, a handful of Indie magazines, and even the New York Times gave her a nod, with one paragraph naming her “A Writer to Watch.”

And then it stopped. Not all at once, though. Emma still mused on the idea for her novel, jotting down outlines, character sketches, but soon the secretary job took up more and more time, and she was tired in the evenings, or she had to buy groceries, or pay bills, or a million other things that weren’t writing. Ten years surrounded by the distractions of New York went by

quickly, but at the end, she had her novel, rough as it was, and took a copy to Jacqueline. After the standard rounds of revisions, her literary agent went to the publishing companies.

No responses, no interest. Two more years of trying but still nothing. Meanwhile, Emma revised and revised and revised, with each new copy sending more of herself to Jacqueline and the world. Finally, on a winter morning, two weeks before she landed in Tennessee, Jacqueline set the clean manuscript back in front of Emma at their monthly lunch meeting.

“There’s just not a market for it,” she said. “Do you have anything else?”

No, that manuscript was the last she had, Emma realized. The only proof of ten years of work. She felt like a shell after the mussel had been sucked out.

Emma cried on the subway ride home, staring into the wall of the car, sniffing, pretending she had a winter cold. When she reached her studio apartment, she sorted everything she owned into two piles: keep and throw away. The books were boxed up, along with clothes. Toiletries, decorations, furniture, and linens were given to people as they passed and what couldn’t be given away was thrown in the dumpster at the back of the parking lot. After shipping her boxes to Aaron’s address and giving her notice effective immediately, Emma bought a ticket and left New York. She didn’t even open the window when they flew over the famous city.

“New York is for young people,” Emma told her brother as the car turned off the state highway. “Not for me anymore.”

She had said it aloud, the password, and like a vault, Aaron opened up to her. He squeezed her hand, feeling the scar across her palm from their bike accident as children.

“I’m glad you’re home,” he said. New York had never been the place for her. Aaron had told Maggie this for years in the quiet moments before they fell asleep at night, his wife’s head on his chest. She was being irresponsible, wasting the best years of her life on frivolous

expenses. Maggie always agreed, and Aaron felt uplifted. But it had been months since he'd found Maggie in the driveway, her car packed, silently crying. She couldn't take it anymore, she said. No other explanation, and Aaron didn't ask her to elaborate. That was his biggest regret, but he was so shocked that he let her drive away with barely a word, watching her clip the mailbox as she turned onto the country road.

Emma was back though, and that was something. Another adult in the house since Mom could barely be called that any more. Aaron settled back in his seat, feeling sweat under his heavy coat run down his back.

"I think you'll be happier here," Aaron told his sister as they stripped off their coats at a stop light. "Fresh air, lots of room. New York just isn't the way humans are meant to live."

"Of course, of course."

Emma rested her head on the window and folded her arms. She was glad for the silence. She didn't open her eyes until the car slowed at a stop sign. The suburban houses were gone, replaced by empty fields that stretched back over distant hills, all bare from winter. They'd grown corn that year, and dead stalks jutted up over the yellow ground. Emma closed her eyes again.

The tail of the car landed first, sending a shock through the front that deployed the airbags and shielded Emma's face from the dash. The front end crashed a half second later, and the weight of the impact strained all metal parts to breaking. The car groaned then collapsed on itself. A fine layer of snow covered the cooling parts.

Emma was motionless in the front seat, eyes staring straight ahead, her breathing heavy. Her hands had been thrown from the steering wheel by the force of the airbag and lay limp at her

sides. The whole world was dark and quiet. Emma's first thought was that she'd gone blind, until she noticed the green glow of the car radio clock, the only light as the airbag in front of her slowly deflated. Her next thought was paralyzation. She turned her head to see the time, and the clock was flashing 12:00 then 12:01. She shrugged her shoulders, an aching pain moving up her neck and spine, but the muscles followed her directions as always. She raised her arms, twisted her wrists, wiggled her fingers. The gas and brake pedals were locked down to the floor, giving her plenty of room to test for broken bones in her legs. Other than soreness, nothing. She twisted her hips to look out the rearview mirror. Darkness, not even enough light to see the snow growing thicker over the trunk.

Her mind restarted slowly then sped up as worry after worry was crossed off the list. She was fine, neither dead nor injured, and she just had to get back to the road. She reached for the ignition where her keys still dangled, clicking like a wind chime. She turned the ignition switch, nothing. She tried again, futilely pushing in the gas pedal. The car clock restarted at twelve, and on the third try, the time flickered and died. No other attempts would bring back the green light.

Wind and snow blew through the open driver's window and out the smashed passenger's side. Snowflakes stuck to the dashboard and gearshift. Emma shivered, checked her cell phone. No signal. She wasn't surprised. Her cellphone didn't even have reception between tall buildings.

Emma had no idea where she'd driven, but there were no streetlights, no houses, not even moonlight through the storm clouds. The car had fallen, but for how long? Minutes? Emma assumed she was in the ravine. She remembered hitting something, not another car, but maybe a guardrail, something that would give physical evidence of the crash. If she waited by the car, a passerby might look down, and when she didn't come home, she knew Aaron would call the

police. Emma just had to wait long enough. She tried rolling up the window, but the automatic switch was dead. All the other windows, including the trunk were smashed open. She looked for a blanket in her brother's car but only found a car jack and a half-frozen bottle of water.

When the door wouldn't open, Emma crawled out the back, surveyed the vehicle, then rubbed her arms to keep warm. The woods were darkness mixed with gray stalks of trees. She remembered falling, and when she felt her way past the nose of the car, her fingers sunk through snow down to rock, the slope of an embankment. She tried to climb towards the road, but after a few steps, she slid back down. It might take hours to find her at the car, but if she found the road and went back the way she came, she could walk towards her own rescue. Sitting still at the wreckage would freeze her quicker than it would save her.

She followed the slope of the embankment with one hand, her other hand outstretched into the darkness. At first she stumbled over roots and rocks, her legs aching when they hit the icy ground, but eventually she learned to feel with her feet. At the prick of a pine needle, she brushed away snow covered saplings before they struck her and could nudge a rock out of the way with her toes before she tripped.

If she was in New York right now, Emma would be back at her flat, drinking wine, maybe listening to jazz, even though she didn't really care for the genre. When she stepped onto the street, she never saw the stars, which bothered her while she lived there, but at her new home, there were too many. They overwhelmed her eyes and called her fashionable agnosticism into question.

Her nostalgia and the hillside carried her through the heaviest part of the storm. Snow flakes, so light when they first hit, weighed down her coat with water. She wetted her lips until they cracked and bled, tasting copper on her tongue, the only taste she'd had since the hors

d'oeuvres at the writer's guild. Still, she walked, waiting for the road to level out so she could wander back to civilization. Aaron would be getting worried by now, she was sure. She saw him at the house, pacing, kicking cats out of the way, and writing phone numbers down on the notepad with the coffee stain. She felt sorry for him.

The edge of the ravine ended abruptly. Emma couldn't explain it, but she knew she was in the open again, and when she tried to find the embankment, she brushed a tree trunk. She swallowed her excitement. The end of the ravine meant the road was on her level again. Emma stumbled forward, tripping over scrub brush to find it. She staggered into the first open area since she'd left the hay fields near Aaron's house. The snow had stopped falling, but the clouds still covered the sky. There was enough ambient light to see the field in front of her. Across the open space was the tree-lined spine of a ridgeline. The legion of trees rose gray above the black hills, shifted in and out of darkness as Emma's eyes struggled.

As far as she could see in all directions, there was no road. Emma panted, walked in one direction, then another, then forced herself to stop. She had followed the ravine for what felt like hours and was farther from the road than when she started. Emma breathed in deeply to calm herself. She would cross the field, just in case it was a farm, and if she still saw nothing, she would wait until daylight to find her way back to the road. Her throat tightened, but she fought back tears. Her feet were freezing, even in the snow boots, and the wool coat was already soaked through. One more stretch, and then she would rest. She walked out into the field.

Her vision was much better out in the open, and for the first time, she had a sense of where she was. The field was surrounded on four sides by woods, no signs of houses or roads, but knowing what was around her was the first comfort she had felt since the accident. She reached the middle of the field before she heard the voices.

At first, they sounded like children, a little bit of laughter or a garbled word. Emma gasped and stepped forward. Only after she paused to hear the direction did she realize it wasn't human. Something, somethings, moving through the underbrush, arguing, teasing. Emma froze, trembling, with no sense of what animal was gathered or how large the group was. At last, when the creatures reached the edge of the field, there was a quick yip, then silence. Emma braced herself. Somewhere in the darkness, five pairs of ears listened for the crunch of snow. Emma waited for a low growl and strained to see into the dark mass of woods in front of her.

Finally, her ears caught something to the far right. A small yip, a paw stuck on an icy log, and then a reproachful growl as they moved along the edge of the field, circling Emma like a diseased creature. When the pack reached the far side, there was one chuckle before they disappeared. Emma refused to move until the woods had been silent for minutes. Then, she broke into a run, darting away from the coyotes, away from the ravine and the direction of her car, towards the strange ridgeline with its rows of dark trees. She tore through the underbrush, ripping out dead thorns by the roots. The soft rush of a creek was drowned out by her noise until she tripped down the embankment into the shallow water. Emma's hands cut open on the rocks, but she forced herself up, felt her way quickly through the creek, and scrambled up the other side. She had been alone until that field, and in her solitude, secure. Now every noise was a creature better equipped for this world than she was. Emma scrambled through the woods to find the light, headlights, streetlights, flashlights.

At last, she tripped hard, her foot lodged under a log, and she fell face down in the snow. Soft powder and ash were lodged loose and floated for a moment in the air before settling back to earth. Emma's cheek felt warm as she dragged herself up. The log she had tripped over formed the ring of a small campsite, completely covered in snow but with a few embers still

glowing in the fire pit. Emma laughed and wiped her eyes. It was her first human contact since she'd left the city, proof that her people had made some headway into this wilderness.

“Hello?” she shouted, no longer afraid of the others hearing her. “Can someone help me?” The echo rung then died through the trees.

The fire had burned throughout the storm, but it was very weak, and one of the red embers was beginning to grow black. Emma dug through the snow, uncovering a small pile of sticks, then larger logs frozen together. At first she put a large pile of kindling on the embers, expecting the fire to reappear in a rush. Steam rose from the twigs, but nothing caught until Emma put the sticks on one by one, waiting for each to catch flame before adding another. Within the hour, Emma was still alone, but she had a fire large enough to take the bigger logs. She tucked her knees under her coat and watched the flames, barely caring that her night vision was being erased by the light.

Aaron watched his sister's face when their mother appeared in the living room door. The interior was dark and littered with old magazines and unwashed dishes. Two cats looked up lazily from the loveseat while a third darted out of the armchair and dashed into the kitchen. When Patricia appeared in her bathrobe and old slippers, she was cradling a frightened cat. Their mother had always been meticulous about her appearance; she once wore an Italian cameo necklace to clean out cages at the animal shelter, but now her gray hair hung to her shoulders, uncombed. She wore no makeup, and the cotton terry robe Emma had sent from New York a dozen Christmas's ago was covered in stains and animal hair.

Her mother gasped when Aaron brought his sister and her bags inside. Emma opened her arms, but Patricia recoiled, touching her hair and face.

“Aaron, you didn’t tell me we were having company.” The old woman quickly straightened a pile of greasy newspapers that were covering the rings on the coffee table. So much to do. Shower first, no, straighten up, vacuuming, there would be no time. Jeremy yawned, and Patricia’s mind refocused. First Jeremy.

She bent down over the loveseat. “Jeremy. Jeremy, sweetheart.” She pulled the cat out by its hind-legs. Jeremy hissed, slashed at Patricia’s arm, and dashed into the bedroom. He missed, as usual. The little fellow never meant any harm. She turned to her son and his guest, laughing a bit so they wouldn’t be frightened.

“Such a crabby boy,” she said and followed the cat into the bedroom to pull him from his familiar spot under the dresser.

Aaron could have chosen a more delicate way to break the news of his mother’s condition, a slight warning in the car, but it was better that Emma see how things really were. Once the dementia became noticeable and Aaron took Patricia’s keys away, their independent mother, who raised them both as a single parent, fell apart. She talked with animals more than people, a trait she’d always had but kept to a minimum until her disease.

“She has good and bad days,” Aaron said, trying to comfort his sister.

The living room felt a thousand miles wide, and Emma was alone in the center of it. Had she been away so long that her mother didn’t even know her? If she had known it was this bad, she surely would have come home sooner, at least visited, or wrote. Her own mother. Emma had to hold back tears, but a soft sob choked her throat, moving up into her mouth where she managed to stifle most of the noise. She hoped it sounded less pitiful to Aaron than it sounded in her own ears. Aaron touched her shoulder and led her down the hallway to her new room. By the

time they reached the last door on the left, Emma got a hold of herself, rubbing her eyes with her palms and breathing in deep to keep her voice from cracking.

“What does Maggie think about all this?” she said.

Aaron pulled out a set of keys and fumbled to find the lock’s match. After a few wrong tries, he swore, realized he needed to calm down, and then took one deep breath.

“Maggie and I are going through a rough period right now. You won’t be seeing her while you’re here.” He found a small brass key and slipped it into the lock. Emma had noticed, Aaron knew, when birthday cards arrived in his handwriting or didn’t arrive at all. Emma asked about Maggie more and more in her e-mails. “Send my love,” “Tell her I miss her.” Aaron had tried not to give up anything that would confirm his sister’s doubts, but now that she lived close, she deserved a degree of honesty. As if the news wasn’t surprising, Emma nodded and squeezed Aaron’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry.” She meant it.

“Let’s not talk about it. Here.” Aaron opened the back bedroom. The room was pristine, a double bed tucked into a corner with a reading chair and a chest of drawers. Aaron had spent the previous Saturday getting it ready, cleaning out the dog stains in the carpet and kicking the cats off the comforter. A quiet space for his sister to write.

Emma stepped inside. The room was almost half the size of her flat in the Bronx. There was a comfortable chair, the kind she’d never been able to make room for, and even an empty corner for a desk. She set down her duffle and peeked into the closet. Plenty of space, storage for shoes, winter clothes. She nodded.

“Thank you.”

Aaron smiled and kissed Emma's cheek, his lips chapped against her skin. "I have to go to work. Call me if you need anything."

"And Mom?"

Aaron hugged her. "It'll come back. You've been gone for so long; it'll just take some time." The dogs in the living room barked as the screen door creaked then slammed shut behind him.

Emma watched Aaron drive off from her window then closed the blinds, letting the yellowed light creep in beneath the cracks. Emma's books had already arrived, and all five boxes of them were stacked neatly in a corner. She wanted to save those boxes for last, a treat to get her going through the rest of her unpacking. She was tempted to leave her clothes in the suitcases, like she had on holidays before, but the flat in the Bronx was probably already rented out again to some college student fresh from Virginia or California. She wasn't going back, and there was no point in wearing wrinkled shirts.

Unpacking her two suitcases took minutes. Her socks fit into the dresser without bulging, and her shirts, winter and summer, barely filled a fourth of the closet space. From the clothes, she moved onto the books, rereading the underlined parts of each, then stacking them neatly on the chest of drawers. When the top of the drawers ran out of room, she stacked the books by the reading chair with a promise to buy a bookshelf later in the week. With her bags and boxes stowed in the closet, the room felt empty, a sensation she'd never had in New York.

What now? Emma wandered into the living room where various dogs and cats lounged on the sinking furniture. From the hallway bathroom, Emma could hear the shower running, her mother's voice, singing like it was twenty years ago, and nothing had changed. Does a person keep writing after something like this? Emma leaned up against the wall, listening as her mother

switched between tunes, mixed words, tacked one chorus onto another. She tried to breath in the sound like she breathed in the steam that crept from below the door. Fifteen years away from all this, and what did she have to show for it? Two books published, then out of print. A novel no one wanted. A mother who couldn't remember her daughter's face or name. Would it have been better if she'd listened to Aaron all those years ago, stayed close?

Mom's voice stopped, and the shower turned off. Emma allowed her mom some privacy and wandered through the living room, back to the sliding glass door that overlooked the yard. Beyond the dog houses and patches of mud, Aaron had picked out a beautiful piece of land, narrow, but with a little bit of everything, open yards, shady trees, high land, low land. He seemed happy here, and Maggie was probably happy here too, for however long she stayed. They had always been of one mind about things, from the moment they stubbornly announced their engagement a year before they graduated at twenty two. At the engagement party, Emma, then only seventeen, had looked on the smiling couple as a lost cause. Years of domestic drudgery awaited them, while Emma, free and unhitched, perused travel books for the cheapest European hostels. Twenty years later, seeing her prediction realized wasn't quite as satisfying as she'd expected it to be. Her heart ached for her brother, even if the outcome had been predicted. They were quite a pair now, Aaron and her.

Emma pushed a beagle back inside and stepped out into the bleached winter sunshine. The patio was cracked and filled with dried weeds. Emma plucked a few of them, leaving the rest littering the patio stones. Past the doghouses and a shed where cat eyes peeked in and out of the glassless windows was the center of the yard, where Emma went to stand, clutching the stems of the weeds. There was the quiet rush of a car on the road out front, then silence. Emma realized

it was the first time she had heard any traffic since arriving. Her half conceived daydream of Central Park faded without the hum of traffic in the background.

When Emma opened the sliding door, an army of animals barreled out into the sunshine. The smell of dog was again overwhelming, and Emma coughed a few times before she stepped inside. The living room was lighter now. All of the blinds had been lifted, and the windows were thrown open. A current of cold air blew through the entire house. Down the hall, the bathroom door was ajar, steam rolling up towards the light fixtures.

Patricia sat on the toilet seat. She wore black slacks and dress shoes, but the worn terry bathrobe was still draped over her shoulders. She'd put on foundation, half of her mascara, a smear of pale lipstick. She stared at the damp bath towel crumpled on the floor. Emma approached her mother cautiously.

“Mom?”

Patricia started, as if someone had touched her in a dream. Her daughter was standing in the doorway.

“Emma.” She rose, wet hair falling across her cheek. “When did you get here?”

“Just a little while ago.”

Patricia went to her daughter, touched her face, fingered the strand of gray over her temple. How long had she been lost this time? Long enough for her daughter to grow old without her noticing.

“Where have you been?”

“New York, Mama. Since college.”

“That’s right. I remember New York, Aaron saying that.” Patricia watched the birds at the feeder outside the bathroom window. Hungry cats lurked below. The fog had cleared for

another few minutes, and she was in the present, hanging onto the rocks to keep from being swept back into her mind. Emma took Patricia's hand, an anchor Patricia hadn't felt in a long time.

"I am glad I got to see you," before I forget myself again, Patricia wanted to add, but there was no need. Patricia watched a dove land clumsily on the perch; the cats tensed then relaxed, always watching. Emma cried in her mother's arms. Patricia tried to keep her mind in the present, her daughter's quiet sobs, the draft through the house, the birds teasing each other over a sunflower kernel.

Emma awoke at daylight without ever realizing she'd fallen asleep. The entire world had stripped off the darkness and now was white, a new reality that dripped off the tree branches and coated the rocks that ringed the clearing. The campsite was smaller than Emma had envisioned at night; there were no signs of a tent, trails or footprints. Whoever had left the site, abandoned it before the snow grew heavy, and there was no indication of the direction they went.

Emma cried, listening to her sobs echoing in the woods. She sucked cold air into her lungs until they ached, and the lines of tears chapped her cheeks. When she finished, she felt almost whole again, though she was nauseous with hunger. She took a handful of snow from a rock, not the ground, and sucked on it before she remembered hearing something about snow dehydrating the body. Another handful held out to the fire. The snow melted slowly, dripping out from between her fingers. Emma wasn't sure how melted it had to be before it was safe again, but she sipped from her cupped hands to keep from losing all of the water. Two handfuls, three handfuls, four handfuls, anything to keep the hunger at bay. She stopped only when she felt sloshing inside her stomach, then leaned back, feeling sick. She thought about her brother. No

doubt he'd called someone by that time. Then she thought about Maggie, back to the time when she ignored her brother's and Maggie's pleadings to come down for a week. Could it have saved their marriage, that one week?

When the fire threatened to die, Emma ventured off into the woods, hopeful that civilization was within walking distance but afraid to wander away from the warmth of the fire. She scouted the area in larger and larger circles, keeping the fire within sight, then set off in a perfectly straight line. All she needed to do was turn around to get back. That was the theory, anyway.

Daylight was not as helpful as she had hoped. The trees were identical, covered with the same amount of snow. There were a few rocks that Emma stood beside and memorized before moving on. In the late afternoon, she saw a deer through a cluster of rhododendrons, their frozen leaves curled tight. Emma would have missed the doe entirely if she wasn't looking at the animal head on. From the front, deer were too comical to be real. A tiny head with huge ears fanned on top and the whole package supported on beanpole legs. Emma laughed aloud, and the deer bolted back into the undergrowth.

When she felt she had wandered enough, she turned around. No new snow had fallen, and Emma stepped in her own footprints all the way back to camp. She celebrated her only victory with two more handfuls of snow then fell asleep curled beside the flames.

By the second day, Emma felt like she was drifting outside of herself. Being still kept up the illusion of fullness so Emma remained in the same spot, slowly losing feeling in her butt and thighs. She moved only to gather more wood for the fire, but when she stood up, her vision swam, and her head was heavy. She saw colors too bright for the winter landscape, heard voices, and awaked every few hours as if she'd been asleep. The sun moved across the sky, warming

Emma's shoulders. She knew night had come only because the cold returned. Her head and neck pounded from the strain of shivering.

Her body hurt too much to feel sad about this turn of events. Emma laid her coat beside the fire to dry, folded her arms, and curled into a ball like she'd seen a squirrel do early that morning. Or was that a dream? A chill slipped under her skin, curled from her hands up to the arms then to the shoulder and back.

Aaron called Emma's cellphone for the ninetieth time but was sent straight to voice mail again. He hung up and made himself another cup of coffee, staying within reaching distance of the home phone, his cellphone in his pocket. He should never have suggested the writer's guild or at least encouraged Emma to wait until the next meeting when the weather was more manageable. He'd been so grateful to have Emma at home throughout the Christmas season. Not only did he have lucid company when he came home at night, but his lunch breaks at the bank could be spent with co-workers rather than rushing to check on his mom for thirty minutes. When he'd found the writer's guild website by accident, he sent the link straight to Emma.

They talked about the idea while cooking together that night. Emma seemed more interested in cutting almost see-through slices of carrots, the kind she used to eat at her favorite sushi restaurant she said, than restarting her writing career.

"They'll already have their own dynamics. I'll just be intruding."

"They have to get new members somehow. Besides, I've read both of your books, twice. You're wasting your talent if you don't get back in there."

Emma laughed. A large chunk of carrot rolled off the cutting board and onto the floor. "Twice? I guess that makes you my biggest fan." It felt good to see his sister happy again.

Patricia wandered through the kitchen, grabbed a can of cat food, and then wandered out without making eye-contact. Her children watched her then returned to their tasks. Aaron smoothed the flour off of a full measuring cup then washed his hands before cutting the celery. Even though it was headed for the same bowl, his mind rested easier knowing he touched each new ingredient with clean hands. Emma's chopping was a counter rhythm to the kitchen clock which was always just a few beats faster.

"I'm sorry about Maggie," Emma said suddenly.

Aaron wasn't surprised; he was actually glad she said it, and he didn't shrug it off as he usually did, but let the weight of his sister's sympathy hang off his shoulders. He put the towel back on the rack.

"Thank you. I should have told you sooner, back when you were still in New York."

"She's gone then?"

"Not yet, I think. I hope anyway." He didn't tell his sister about the e-mails Maggie sent him now and then. More like business e-mails than love notes, but she didn't stop sending them and neither did he. She was at her parents' house in Bristol, but she was thinking about coming back down where there was more work. That had been her last e-mail, and Aaron hadn't yet thought of a way to respond.

"Don't worry about me. It'll work out," he said to both Emma and himself. "Just focus on making us rich with your writing."

He pointed a meat cleaver at Emma's laptop which was open to the recipe they were following. Emma smiled and closed the computer's cover out of playful spite, but by the end of the night, she had agreed to visit the guild.

She just hadn't come home. He waited past midnight without a thought (writers were late night types, he supposed), and didn't start to worry until 1:30 AM. He called. When she didn't answer, Aaron drove all the way into the city at twenty miles per hour, hazard lights flashings. Emma's car wasn't in the parking lot of the coffee house where the guild met nor was it pulled onto the shoulder of any of the roads along that route. He'd called the police, but they wouldn't file a report within twenty-four hours. They would call him if they found her among the many stuck cars that littered the highways and advised Aaron to stay at home until the icy mess could be sorted out. He'd hung up, tapped his pen, and tried Emma's number again.

Patricia wandered in, her hair half up in rollers.

"Do you think she's killed herself?" Patricia asked. The thought hadn't occurred to her until just that moment, but it made sense in her mind. Not knowing where a person was sounded worse than knowing they were dead. She took comfort in this logic.

Aaron started. "Don't say things like that, Mom."

Patricia opened the screen door and a half a dozen animals darted in, shaking snow from their fur. The house was immediately filled with the smell of wet dog. It was suffocating. Aaron tapped his pen harder, picked up the phone, and tried Emma again.

Sometime in the middle of the third night, Emma changed. She stood up that morning, cracked her bones, then added more wood to the fire, in case she came back or another traveler wandered across the field in better light. She felt hunger but didn't pay it much mind. She knew she had to get moving though, didn't matter where, just keep walking.

Emma left the campsite heading east, she thought. She'd never been good at directions, but with forest all around her, one direction worked just as well as the other. She didn't think about New York, or Aaron or Patricia, just about how the forest looked so different by sunlight.

Even though her body still ached from the crash, she moved with ease over the steep ground, picking over floodplains and flat ravines to continue her journey. Food was Emma's only remaining concern. If it was summer, she mused, she would eat whatever green leaves she could find, sampling them like an appetizer platter. Mushrooms she wouldn't touch, and berries so long as they were black, she promised herself. But white was the only color of food in this world. Her theories did her no good unless she found something to eat in the moment, not months in the future.

In the upcoming grove, the tree bark was stripped off of thin saplings, their trunks bare until far above Emma's head. She examined the small marks around the tree, like children on stilts had stolen the bark. Emma found one untouched sapling hidden behind larger trees and dug her fingers underneath the bark until her nail cut the outer layer. A long strip of tree unraveled like silk.

She nibbled the tattered end of the bark. It was bitter, but Emma wasn't picky, and quickly rolled the entire strip into her mouth. The plant was stringy and tough, like celery. She chewed until her jaw muscles were sore and only then was it soft enough to swallow. She pulled another strip and another until the tree was as bare as the ones in the grove. Emma's stomach was uneasy. She tried to swallow the bitter taste with a cupped handful of snow, but it still lingered in the back of her throat.

Emma walked on, climbing diagonally up steep slopes, sliding down into ravines, never stopping except to sip the melting snow. In a small grove, a herd of deer watched her, deathly

still. Four does, one spike buck, and one four pointer, their necks stretched, ears swiveling back and forth. Emma nodded in their direction, noticing the bark dangling from the spike buck's lips.

She wandered for the rest of the day, snow clouds still hanging heavy over the tops of the trees. It was nearing dark, and Emma knew she had to find a place to spend the night. She promised to walk to the next clearing and camp on the edge there, giving her a clear view of her surroundings. She would have to find more food, though she clearly remembered the trees she'd eaten from earlier. And there was the fire she needed to keep warm. The embers had been provided for her earlier, but now she had to start from scratch. She remembered the rumor from childhood cartoons, rub two sticks together to create a spark, but she had failed at that exercise too many times as a child to have any faith in the method. Emma took comfort in the simplicity of things though. If she built a fire and found food, she would live another night. If she grew too cold or too hungry, she would die. An easy dichotomy.

She pushed forward towards the next clearing, stepping out in the clear sunlight. Her feet touched asphalt and ached as the pavement refused to give. In front of her was the road, a strange cut through the forest, and along its edge a solitary building, where two men watched her like the deer and the coyotes, backs straight, eyes alert. A car passed by, the wind rushing in her ears and hair.

There had been a report in the newspaper: "Search for Local Woman Continues." The police had Emma's picture, and the first story on the six o'clock news was an update of the most exciting story the county had seen in ages. They'd found the car, totaled at the bottom of a shallow ravine, no body. Dogs were loosed on the cold trail, but in the bitter weather, there was little hope of finding her alive. The interview with the missing woman's brother made the story

appear in the prayer request section of every church bulletin in the area. He said how much he regretted any angry thoughts he'd ever had towards her.

The news eventually made it to the gas station along the almost deserted road through the national forest, a halfway mark for those driving in the wilderness. The old man who ran the store and lived in the second floor of the building was shoveling snow when a woman emerged from the woods, her face scratched and hair filled with twigs. He watched her for a moment, unsure of whether she was in her right mind. When she tried to turn around, he dropped his shovel and rushed forward, along with another young man filling his car at the pump.

She resisted, but they pulled her back, crowding around her, pulling twigs out of her hair and examining her cuts. The young man shouted towards the building, while the old man rubbed her shoulders, fussing in a language the woman struggled to remember.

Aaron saw it the moment the police brought Emma to the front door, wrapped in a wool blanket. He hugged his sister and kissed her cheeks over the dogs unceasing barking and his mother's sobbing. Emma smiled at her brother as he told her about his search and fixed her a turkey sandwich and a warm cup of tea. The dogs occasionally ran in to sniff Emma's legs, but they mostly kept their distance from her. She didn't want to shower so Aaron put her to bed, leaving the back bedroom door cracked in case she needed anything.

But he had already seen it. The look in her eyes that Emma once had the day after graduation. Twenty-two years old, accepted into grad school, a nice boyfriend, and she decided to leave everything behind to go to New York. This life wasn't for her, she wasn't ready, there was something else waiting for her. Aaron had known what she was going to say before she told

him, and he remembered gripping Maggie's hand until her diamond wedding ring had cut into his palm. How could she be so selfish?

Aaron managed to hold Emma until summertime. In the meantime, they fought, shouting matches in the kitchen over Emma's decision to head out West, leaving him with Mom, alone.

"You don't understand. Those nights in the woods--"

"Fuck, your spiritual quest. How am I supposed to do this alone?"

But Emma hadn't yielded. She packed up some of her books and clothing, but said the rest could either be donated or thrown away. By the middle of summer, they'd stopped speaking.

In late July, the morning was clear and humid, but by afternoon, gray clouds were settling over the backyard. Emma was outside, standing in front of the sliding door with Patricia who had kept vigil with her daughter for over an hour. Aaron couldn't tell if it was a rare moment of clarity or if his mother was just displaying the blind devotion that she developed for Emma as she declined. Change was supposed to be a death blow for those with dementia. Aaron wondered how Mom would take Emma's absence when his sister left in two days.

When Aaron stepped out on the porch, Patricia kissed her daughter and wandered back inside. The two siblings were alone for the first time in weeks. Aaron wanted to let Emma leave without a goodbye, wanted her to feel that she had alienated her only living relatives. He had become so angry that the situation slipped out into his bland e-mails with Maggie. His estranged wife said she would come down the day after Emma left. She was planning on staying at the house. Aaron was taking a week off.

"You're really going to do this?" Aaron asked his sister, more as confirmation that his anger was justified.

"I have to."

“And what about me?”

Emma didn't know. She tried to remember that moment in the woods, blocking out any hesitation. This was her chance to try again. She wanted a starting point out West, to wander and find the spot farthest from the old man and his gas station and then go farther.

It started to rain. Aaron stepped back under the ledge, but Emma stepped forward, letting the rain soak down into her scalp. She started walking across the yard, passing by the half-finished remains of a fence the neighbors were working on. Two brave beagles followed her to the edge of the woods then stopped and watched her climb through the brambles and poison ivy alone. Aaron's woods were much scrubbier than the ones Emma had fought through in winter and revisited every week since then. There were no deer or turkeys to clear out the forest floor, and the undergrowth grew unchecked, but Emma easily made it across the two acre forest to the chicken wire fence that stretched across the back of the three homes. Water ran down her face, into the creases on her mouth, and she tasted the rain, like tap water left too long in a cup. Emma turned towards the house. Aaron was still watching her from the porch, but when she caught his eye, he went back inside.

Emma pressed the chicken wire down, leaving a small valley to climb over. Rain dripped into her eyes as she surveyed the next stretch of land. For a moment, she felt a wave of nausea, of regret at leaving Aaron behind, but she had to keep moving. Emma walked away from her brother and his home at a steady pace, wandering into the neighboring fields.