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SUICIDE PELICANS

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AMANDA A. McCOY

ABSTRACT

The suicide pelican lives in Costa Rica. You may not believe me, but I've seen it with my own eyes. Blindness is common for these birds, mostly caused by their form of fishing: dive-bombing into the water at full speed and spearing fish with their beaks. This head-first diving damages the eyes over the years. Once blind, some of the pelicans intentionally crash into rocks to avoid an unbearable, unnatural existence. These birds and their surprisingly beautiful, graceful suicide plunges influenced this collection of short stories aptly titled *Suicide Pelicans*. Though my collection is mostly about women and not actual pelicans, I hope you will make some connections between the two.

The three stories present in this collection are works in progress, unfinished pieces that I need to carry around in my head longer before they culminate into complete final products. However imperfect as this collection is, it serves as the representation of my work for Cleveland State's Master of English program; *Suicide Pelicans* aims to present my development and maturation as a writer, my potential, and the possibility of promise for my future.

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I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost once said that he looked out his window, was inspired by a beautiful scene, and feverishly wrote “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening” in the hours that followed. When he was asked how he was able to write such a beautiful poem in a short amount of time, he laughed. He responded by saying that he’d been writing that poem for years in his head, but it took that moment, that epiphany he encountered while looking out into the snow, to elicit the words. I understand what he means, as I am constantly writing in my head. This thesis titled *Suicide Pelicans* consists of three short stories that I have written over the past few years, but it is difficult for me to say when and how each story began because much of my writing takes place in my head. Over the past year, through guidance from writing professors and thesis members, these stories have deepened and evolved from the germ of an idea in my head to words on paper.

The stories in this collection fit under the category character-driven realism. I am fascinated by relationships, with the complexity of relationships, and with what makes us human; therefore, my stories tend to be more about character than anything else.

Typically, my stories center on people trying to understand themselves and those around

them. My characters are hyper-aware of what is happening in their little worlds—something that is most certainly evident in this collection. Also, my characters exist in real places that occasionally overlap within the stories (“Swing” takes place in Costa Rica and it is also where the suicide pelican lives).

Aesthetically speaking, I typically begin with an image or a memory and build from there. “Swing” was born from the sailfish’s evanescent, colorful dying moments and the image of a young girl swinging; “Animal Grace” stemmed from the damp linen drying in the sunlight and the panther pacing in her cage; “Suicide Pelicans” started with the closing image of the beheaded dandelion and the pelicans crashing into black rocks. Characters develop next, and finally I create a plot, or a place, for these characters to live and breathe in. This method can work...but it can also be quite troublesome. Because I prefer images and lyrical language, I often struggle in developing an interesting, effective plot. I find that I prefer to write about the interior world, that I struggle with external action. Sometimes I feel as if nothing actually *happens* in my stories. “Suicide Pelicans” is a prime example of this problem; the current plot is drastically different than its original. Prior to working with my thesis director, the story’s action was almost completely internal, and I felt as if the characters weren’t moving. Thanks to excellent advice, I placed my main characters into a new setting, created a new situation, and drastically improved the story.

In addition, I use metaphor and symbol to help convey each story’s message and significance. One of the aspects that unify this collection is the use of animals as metaphors or symbols to the underlying motif. I am drawn to animals and see connections between their lives and ours; yet, I also believe they possess elegance, a certain grace that is foreign to the human species. Most importantly, the animals in these

stories—slain sailfish, caged panther, suicide pelicans—symbolize the female protagonists within *Suicide Pelicans*.

This collection also is connected by subject. It is apparent that these stories are about women, particularly women who struggle to conform to and resist the traditional female identity. Suzanne (“Suicide Pelicans”) epitomizes the type of woman who wishes to break away from monogamy, motherhood, and domesticity. Similarly, Claire (“Animal Grace”) chooses a dancing career over motherhood, and Iris (“Suicide Pelicans”) would rather rescue her sister than build a romantic relationship.

There are several common themes entwined in *Suicide Pelicans*. Isolation is present in these stories, as each of the women find comfort in solitude: Suzanne needs to spend time alone on the beach; Claire prefers to dance alone and has spent much of her adult life alone; Iris likes to be alone with her thoughts. Addiction, in some form or another, is another shared thread that holds these stories together. Some of the characters are addicted to substances, others to attention, and others to people. This addiction consumes the characters, affects the way they live their lives. Accompanying addiction is guilt, regret, and resentment, which influences the next theme: resistance to change. The characters in this collection suffer from an intangible sense of loss, ineffable, consuming grief that forces their immobility. Though the characters realize what they *should* do in order to better their lives, they hesitate to do so, and only change once they realize they must in order to survive. The life or death of an animal often plays a role by affecting and influencing the characters’ life changes: the sailfish’s death causes Suzanne’s contemplation regarding her relationship with Andy; the panther’s caged existence encourages Claire to build a new family; killing the deer makes Iris question her addiction and influences her sobriety.

These stories show my influence from these writers: Dan Chaon, Amy Hempel, Laura Van den berg, and James Joyce. I fell in love with Chaon's Nora from *You remind me of me*, as she is similar to my female characters (particularly Suzanne) in this collection. Nora does not fit the traditional domestic mold, struggles with her identity as a mother, isolates herself and hesitates to change. In addition, Chaon's writing blends fiction and poetry, a weaving of genres I admire. He often ends with a memory or an image, which is clearly seen in Nora's flashback of watching a balloon fly away, provoking her realization that things really can be lost forever. Like Chaon, I tend to end with an image, with lyrical language.

Though our craft greatly differs, Amy Hempel's short stories tend to be character-driven, and she tackles difficult subjects and themes that are similar to ones present in this collection. In particular, I see a connection between *Suicide Pelicans* and "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried." This story focuses on a relationship between friends that is similar to Iris and Coral in "Suicide Pelicans." Hempel also incorporates animal metaphor: she bookends the story with the haunting, poignant metaphor of the mother ape with the talking hands. In fact, the closing line from "In the Cemetery" influenced the title of the middle story in this collection: "And when the baby died, the mother stood over her body, her wrinkled hands moving with animal grace, forming again and again the words: Baby, come hug, Baby, come hug, fluent now in the language of grief." Where Hempel succeeds and I believe I struggle is in the balance between the sentimental and reality; her stories are evocative and sometimes sad, but do not include sentimentality, while mine tend to possess the latter.

I read Laura van den Berg’s “What the World Will Look Like When All the Water Leaves Us” after writing the first several drafts of my stories in *Suicide Pelicans*. After reading van den Berg’s short story that reveals a complicated, intense relationship between mother and daughter, I revisited my work and attempted to achieve the type of tension present in her story. Like two stories in my collection, van den Berg’s short story is set in an exotic location, Madagascar, and I was influenced by her ability to provide adequate atmosphere in her collection. Last, van den Berg includes animals as metaphors and symbols within her collection and balances these themes with the relationships in her stories in a way that I don’t think I have completely achieved in *Suicide Pelicans*.

For a recent course, I studied James Joyce’s *The Dubliners*. Most of the stories in that collection include the use of epiphany, or as commonly called now, the characters “come to realize.” I tend to include epiphany in my stories, and, like Joyce, my characters’ epiphanies often occur in quiet moments and unsuspecting places. Many of the stories within *The Dubliners* end without complete resolution, and I prefer this method—none of the stories in this collection possess neatly-tied endings.

When I juxtapose the stories’ origins to the present, I am surprised by how much I have edited and changed. Like many writers, I often feel as though my stories are never finished, as if they never will be finished. For example, “Suicide Pelicans” went through the most drastic changes; the first complete draft was twelve pages, and now it is thirty-one. When I examine that story, I wonder if there is more to be said, if I’ve only touched the surface of Iris and Coral’s entwined history and complex relationship. I wonder if the stories are unfinished, if they contain loose ends that need to be sewn. Specifically, I am concerned with the second story “Animal Grace” because it is the newest and I haven’t carried it around in my head long enough. I believe it is evident it is the weakest of the

three (hence why I sandwiched the story between the two stronger ones) and needs the most work. Overall, I am not completely satisfied with this body of work, but question if any writers are ever entirely pleased and content with their work.

My future as a writer is slightly uncertain. I have always labeled myself as a fiction writer, but this changed when I took a poetry course. Currently, I write both fiction and poetry, and both, I believe, are present in *Suicide Pelicans*. Now, when looking at what I believe are the best parts of these stories, the lyrical sections (particularly the endings), I wonder if I am indeed more of a poet. (I'm not entirely sure it matters which "type" of writer I am.) Only time will tell.

II

SWING

The sand burned Suzanne's bare feet. She and her fiancé Andy lugged their scuba diving equipment toward the water, and she silently cursed herself for not wearing her water shoes as he had suggested. Once they were close, Suzanne sprinted and breathed a sigh of relief as the water cooled her feet.

"You shoulda worn the water shoes," Andy said. "As I suggested." He motioned to his own feet, which were safely encased in black water shoes.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're right. That's what you wanna hear, right?"

He nodded. They rinsed their equipment in the water and sat down to put it on. Andy helped her secure the heavy tank to her back. He pulled his on effortlessly.

The day before, Suzanne had interviewed for a one-year residency at the Tamarindo Veterinary Hospital that would begin in about six months. As a recent graduate from veterinary school, Suzanne decided she needed more training before she joined a vet practice, and she decided a short residency was the best option. Though Costa Rica was not her top choice, their program was competitive and the location quite beautiful. She and Andy had decided they needed a break from their usual routine so they

planned a trip around her interview. Now that Suzanne's interview was over, they were free to spend the next few days doing whatever they pleased.

Suzanne spit into her mask and rubbed it around with her finger. She felt Andy staring at her. "Quit staring," she said. "I'm tired of it."

"I'm only staring because you're beautiful, babe," Andy said. "Can't I look at my fiancée?"

"Enough."

They had been together for almost three years, but it felt longer. Andy showed up one day during college, breezed into her life like he'd always belonged. Although it took her six months to actually call him her boyfriend, she fell for him as quickly as his grin flashed across his face. They had a very strong physical connection, and she felt differently about him than about past boyfriends. The first year had been blissful, easy. After the physical, intense first year, he pulled back a little, gave her space, maybe even too much space, and this pulled her to him, forced her to long for him.

But this changed in the middle of the second year when Suzanne realized Andy was watching her. The first time she caught Andy stalking her was the night she cheated on him with his friend Darius in the back of her car. It had been stupid, she knew. She didn't even like Darius. But she needed to feel wanted; she needed the secret excitement. Darius was one of Andy's best friends so she saw him often at parties and out at bars, and he always found a way to touch her when Andy wasn't looking. He often looked at her from across the room and bumped into her when it wasn't necessary. Once, while they were alone on the porch smoking, he kissed her. She had loved the attention, loved the way he wanted her. When Darius suggested they meet in a dark parking lot, she agreed without much hesitation.

After she slept with Darius, Suzanne went to the beach to be alone. A Florida-native, Suzanne always enjoyed relaxing on the beach, particularly at night. She loved to sit on the damp sand in the dark, alone with red wine and occasionally a joint. She hated that she didn't care—hated that it didn't bother her that she cheated on Andy. She sat on the sand, stared at the water, and knew she would do it again. She remembered cupping her hand around her lighter to shelter the joint, but the wind blew out the flame. She turned around so her back was to the wind, and then she saw him— Andy stood near the stairs that led down to the beach. Though it was dark, she knew it was him by the way he stood: erect posture, feet slightly splayed, head titled. Suzanne paused, then lit her joint and sat down. She blew out a cloud of fragrant smoke and wondered if he had watched her and Darius fuck in the car.

After she finished the joint, she walked to the water blackened by night and stood at the water's edge, watched the dark waves roar over her feet and ankles. She could feel Andy watching and it excited her. Impulsively, she waded into the water. She dove in and held her breath for as long as she could. When she emerged, she looked for him. He stood, still and cold, against the staircase. She had hoped he'd come down to her, but he didn't; Suzanne hated him in that moment.

When she arrived home that evening, sandy and wet, he didn't say a word about what he had witnessed. She climbed into bed without showering and flopped onto his side before settling into hers. She felt him whack the sheets to force the sand off his side of the bed. Within moments, he had been sound asleep, snoring loud enough to keep her awake.

Suzanne knew Andy still followed her, still watched. She caught him at the grocery store, in the mall, and the gas station. She felt his eyes on her all the time.

Suzanne never told him she knew he followed her; they never discussed his stalking. At first, she liked it and put on little performances because he was there. But now, she felt as if he was always staring, always watching, and she was tired of his constant presence.

“Babe, this location has the most sea turtle sightings,” Andy said. “Pretty cool, huh?”

Suzanne fitted her mask to her face, secured her flippers, and scooted back into the water. “See you out there,” she said. She thrust her regulator into her mouth and dove under. Earlier that morning, they discussed how to spend their last three days vacationing in Costa Rica: diving had been Suzanne’s suggestion for the day; fishing was Andy’s request for the following day. This would be their fourth diving trip in four days. He assumed she wanted to see more marine life. She did not tell him that she loved diving because it was the only time she was somewhat free of his incessant chatter and annoying presence. She loved that he couldn’t speak to her, that she could be alone with her thoughts without his relentless interruptions. She loved the stillness of the water against her ears, the methodical, mechanical sound of her breathing through the regulator.

She swam slowly and watched a school of rainbow-colored parrotfish swarm the coral. When she listened closely, Suzanne could hear the parrotfish bite the coral—it was a funny little crunching sound that made her laugh. As if sensing her presence, an ugly grey eel slithered out of its hiding spot and stared at her with its beady eyes.

She moved away in search of the sea turtles that were said to populate this particular area. Suzanne had been fortunate to work on a wildlife team in Costa Rica the summer before. The team’s goal was to assist an endangered species of sea turtles by protecting the eggs buried in the sand. She remembered how astonished she’d been the first time she witnessed the process. The female turtle lumbered up the beach and found a

suitable spot to create her nest. Using only her hind flippers, she created a big, deep hole where she laid her eggs. Once she laid all the eggs, she filled the nest with sand and methodically smoothed the surface until it was nearly impossible to tell she had been there. Then she moved toward the water and disappeared into the ocean. Sometimes these mother turtles were a little forgetful. They didn't always watch over their eggs so the wildlife team's main job had been to protect the hidden nest from predators. Turtles were endangered nationwide and they hoped to increase the survival rate.

After about twenty minutes, Andy caught up with her. He reached for her, his limbs thrashing, disturbing the striped clownfish Suzanne had been watching. Oblivious to her disgust, he reached for her hand and ran his fingers over her left ring finger, a habit he'd developed since they'd been engaged. She yanked her hand from his and swam off to take a closer look at the cluster of purple sea fans. Luckily they were stuck to the coral so Andy's flailing had not disturbed them. While she examined the fans, a small yellow seahorse floated past her. Suzanne had always been fond of seahorses because they swam vertically instead of horizontally. Even more impressive and appealing, the male seahorse was the one responsible for carrying the eggs and taking care of the offspring. Suzanne wished that existed in human life.

After about an hour of diving, they surfaced and decided to head back to grab some lunch. While making her way to shore, Suzanne encountered the most beautiful, surprising sight. Suddenly, appearing out of nowhere, there were hundreds of starfish dotting the ocean floor. She had never seen anything like this blanket of starfish and swam down to get a closer look. The starfish, each bigger than her hand, were vibrant shades of purple, orange and, yellow. Suzanne tried to count them but lost track at seventy-two. She realized she'd been holding her breath.

Andy thrashed above her, breaking her fleeting moment of peace, and waved frantically to get her attention. Then he motioned toward the starfish, as if she had not noticed them. He swam down to her and pointed his finger to his chest, to his heart. Two years ago, on their first dive as a couple, Suzanne told Andy she loved him for the first time by pointing to her heart while they were underwater. It had been her way of saying “I love you” with a regulator in her mouth. Ever since that time, she and Andy had done so while diving together and it had become a ritual. He pointed again. She could see his eager blue eyes beneath his mask, and she knew he was waiting for her reciprocation. She turned away from his gaze, and she knew. She knew that if she could not love him in the presence of such unexpected beauty, then she could never love him. Never.

She had trouble forcing herself to swim away from the beautiful sight, but her growling stomach reminded her of her hunger. As she drifted away, she longed to become one of those soft creatures, to float away from her body and cling to the ocean floor.

The next morning, they woke early for a sport fishing trip that would take up most of the day. Their Jeep bumped along the dirt road and the orange sun blazed in a cloudless sky, but it could not lift Suzanne’s mood. Though an avid fisher, she dreaded the long day ahead of her. The last thing she needed was to be stuck in a small space with Andy.

Andy threw the car into park and they hopped out of the car. Suzanne expected the marina to be crawling with fishermen, but it was surprisingly quiet. She knew from her previous trip that this area could be bustling with both tourists and locals. But she had forgotten this was their off-season, as they’d been told, and some restaurants and

businesses were only open during the busy months. Boats bobbed in the water, unused and lonely.

“Tell me something,” Andy said. “Something interesting.”

She thought a moment. “The albatross performs elaborate, ritualistic mating dances to determine which partner is its match,” Suzanne said. They approached a long line of boats and a fishy smell invaded their noses.

“Oh gross,” Andy said. He pinched his nose with his thumb and pointer finger.

“Seriously, the albatross dance is kinda cool. I can tell you aren’t listening. I don’t know why you ask me questions if you don’t want the answers.” They settled onto an old wooden bench that overlooked the marina.

“No, babe, I’m listening. Go on,” Andy said. He squeezed her hand.

“So the albatross usually spends a few years perfecting this dance and tests it out with many partners before settling down with its chosen mate.”

“Kinda like us.” Andy grinned at her. “You had to make your way through lots of losers before you got to this gem,” he said, flicking his thumb toward his chest.

Suzanne rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I guess.” After a moment, she said, “Are you sure you got the time right? He said he’d meet us at eight, right?”

“Yeah. He said eight. He’s probably just running late. You know how things can be...island time!”

“If I move here for that residency program, it’ll drive me nuts.” Suzanne tapped her feet impatiently.

“If *we* move here. We, not just you. This is my decision, too.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well I’m the one who has to survive their grueling program,” Suzanne said. “After the interview, another applicant told me that more than fifty percent of their vets drop out in the first month or two.”

“Yeah, but you’re a smart cookie with lots of marine experience already. Plus, don’t you think it’ll be worth it?”

“True. You know, it’s only a one-year internship. You wouldn’t have to move with me.” Suzanne rolled her neck to crack the vertebrae, a habit she knew Andy hated.

“Nice try, babe. Of course I’ll come with you. We’ll be married by then.”

A teenage boy walked by with a cooler and yelled “Gallos!” He approached them and grinned at Andy. “Gallos para la chica?”

“Uh, I don’t speak Costa Rican,” Andy said.

“He’s asking if you want to buy some food,” Suzanne said. “That’s what he has in his cooler.”

“What kind of food is it?”

“Probably a tortilla stuffed with various beans,” Suzanne said.

Andy looked at her like he was confused.

“It’s like a bean burrito.”

“Oh! Why didn’t you say so in the first place? Do you want one?” Andy asked.

She shrugged. She wasn’t particularly hungry, but the boy was looking at them so eagerly. She assumed he didn’t make much money this time of the year. “Yeah, why not?”

“How much? Can you translate for me?” Andy fumbled through their bag for his wallet.

“Cuanto cuesta?” Suzanne asked.

“Un dinero,” the boy replied.

“One dollar for each,” she told Andy.

Andy handed the boy two dollars, and he walked off, yelling down the empty marina. As Suzanne unwrapped the burrito, a stray dog limped over and begged at her feet. He was friendly, she could tell, and she set down her burrito to examine him. She pulled up his lips and examined his teeth. She could see the fleas jumping in his matted fur.

“Ew, babe, what are you doing?” Andy stopped devouring his burrito to watch her.

“I’m examining him. What’s it look like I’m doing?”

“But he’s filthy. Look at his fur.”

She ruffled his fur and patted his head. She fed the burrito to the dog in pieces so he couldn’t swallow the whole thing in one bite. “Here you go, boy. There you go, that’s good isn’t it?” Once the burrito was gone, the dog looked up at her and wagged his tail. “No more,” she said. “I know, I’m sorry. I’ll buy you another one later.” The dog settled his head on her knee and looked up at Andy with big brown eyes. Suzanne laughed. “This is what a professional beggar looks like. Andy, look at him. I think he’s trying to work you right now.”

Andy looked over and rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe you’re letting that mangy thing touch you.” He continued eating his burrito.

“He can’t help it he’s mangy.” She rubbed his head and scratched behind his ears. Once the dog realized he wasn’t getting any of Andy’s burrito, he limped away.

“Damn that was good,” Andy said. “Who knew a bean burrito would be good in the morning!” He licked his fingers once he was done.

“You could have given some to the dog. He was so skinny.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know you wanted me to.” Andy touched her arm. “You should have told me.”

She pulled her arm away. “Hey, maybe we should walk down the dock to make sure he isn’t waiting for us somewhere else.”

They walked toward a blue and white boat with chipped paint and a faded swordfish decal. A gull, comfortably perched on a wooden post, eyed them wearily as they approached. When they were within an arm’s reach, the gull threw its body into the air, flapped its wings and flew off, screeching all the while.

Finally, a man with caramel-colored curly hair popped his head out of the boat’s cabin. He wore black sunglasses and blue shorts. He was shirtless, revealing a muscled, tanned chest. Suzanne guessed he was in his mid-thirties. “You must be Andy and...Susan?”

“Suzanne,” Andy corrected.

“I’m Rafah, the captain.” Rafah’s English was excellent, with only a hint of an accent, but his voice was cold, unfriendly.

Andy held out his hand, but Rafah looked away. After a moment, Andy dropped his hand and shrugged. “I’m going to head into the cabin to use the john.”

“Go ahead,” Rafah said without looking up.

Suzanne watched Rafah untie the ropes from the dock. He flung the heavy wet rope into the boat and toward Suzanne. He stared at her for a moment—his dark eyes moving up and down her body. For whatever reason, the way Rafah looked at her had the opposite effect of Andy’s stare. Her cheeks reddened and her stomach fluttered. For a

moment, she wondered what his skin felt like. Just then, Andy popped his head out of the cabin.

“Hey, you gonna go sleep or what? I don’t want you to be grumpy all day,” Andy said. “Suzy here is not a morning person,” he said to Rafah.

“Yeah, I guess I should try to take a nap,” Suzanne said. She grabbed hold of the ladder to squeeze past Rafah, who was blocking her path to the front of the boat. As she tried to move past him, Rafah turned his head so their lips touched. Startled, Suzanne jumped back and laughed.

“She’s clumsy,” Andy said.

Rafah smiled. “Yes, clumsy.” He cocked his head and suppressed a smile.

Suzanne felt her face redden; she laughed nervously. She moved away from Rafah and stepped up onto the ledge and carefully made her way to the front of the boat. She spread her fluffy yellow towel on the seat and leaned back into its warmth. Glancing up, she saw Rafah enter the fly bridge above her and sit in his captain’s chair. He gazed out across the water, one hand resting comfortably on the gear shift, the other on the steering wheel. A lazy half-smile slowly stretched across his face. Suzanne’s cheeks flushed when it occurred to her that he didn’t know she could see him, that she caught him in a rare moment of contentment, and that he might be thinking of their brief kiss. Not wanting to disturb whatever private thought provoked this brief satisfaction, she looked away.

The engine purred and hummed as Rafah shifted into reverse and slowly eased the boat away from the dock. Suzanne wondered if Andy would mention her little encounter with Rafah when they got home later that evening. She doubted he would. She enjoyed the sting of her hair whipping across her face, and wondered if she could be with Andy,

or anyone for that matter, forever. She often dreamt of herself older, five years down the road maybe, and she always saw herself the same way: standing bare-footed at the window, gazing out into the Florida rain, pressing her palms against the window dripping with condensation, longing to run, run, run away.

Lately, Suzanne had been pacing around her apartment, restless, agitated. Two nights before they left for vacation, while in bed alone, she couldn't take it anymore. She had thrown back the covers, raced down the stairs, flung the door open, and ran out into the street. When she got there, she stood in the middle of the street in her underwear and t-shirt and screamed at the top of her lungs. She had screamed until her stomach ached and only stopped when she ran out of breath. She had stood silently for a few moments, her arms at her sides, her chest heaving. Then she headed back inside, ignoring several strangers' concerned looks. She climbed back into bed, her rage briefly quieted.

Suzanne felt like screaming right now, screaming like she did then, into the empty water. Instead, she allowed the purring engine to lull her to sleep.

An hour later, Andy woke Suzanne and dragged her toward the back of the boat. The poles were baited and Rafah explained that they would be trolling the lines for the next hour or so. Suzanne frowned when she heard the word "trolling" because of course she knew that wasn't really fishing since there wasn't much effort involved. One of the things Suzanne loved most about fishing was casting the line, listening to the clean, sharp snap the line made as it whipped through the air before it plunked into the water. In this kind of fishing, trolling, the lines simply dragged behind the boat.

Andy stripped off his shirt and tossed it onto the floor. He flexed for her, and despite her annoyance with him, she smiled. Her physical attraction to Andy was

undeniable—sometimes she wondered if that’s all she had left. He helped Rafah carry buckets to near the edge of the boat, and she enjoyed the way the light hit his bronzed body, admired his muscles flexing under the strain.

“I bet she is going to catch more than you,” Rafah said to Andy. “In my experience, the women always catch more.”

Andy laughed. “I wouldn’t be surprised. Suzy has a knack for fishing. She found me didn’t she?” Suzanne rolled her eyes. Her attraction toward Andy vanished the moment he opened his mouth.

Rafah reached into a blue plastic bucket filled with what looked like hacked up fish parts and launched a gooey, smelly handful into the water. Andy wrinkled his nose. “It’s called chum,” Rafah said. “It’s chopped up fish and squid and anything else that will attract the big fish. That’s what we’re here for, right?”

Suzanne leaned against the boat and breathed in deeply—the air smelled of sunscreen, the squid Rafah used as bait and gasoline from the boat’s engine. She could feel the salt crusting on her face and tasted it on her tongue. She closed her eyes and tilted her face toward the sun.

“Babe, I’m going in to the bathroom,” Andy announced, breaking her serenity.

“Fine.” She closed her eyes again and enjoyed the sun’s warmth. She didn’t hear Rafah move across the boat to stand next to her. But she didn’t need to open her eyes to know he was there; she could feel his presence; she could feel him looking at her body. She wasn’t surprised when Rafah pulled her to his chest. His hands, warm and strong, lingered on the small of her back and she leaned into them. Just when she wondered if he was going to kiss her, she opened her eyes and noticed that his eyes, inches from hers, had flecks of gold in their brown. He kissed her, hard, on the mouth and she reciprocated.

Roughly, he pushed her head to one side and kissed her neck. His lips were chapped and his hands were rough and callused. There was nothing sensual about the way he touched and kissed her, and immediately it reminded her of how Darius had handled her. Rafah continued to hold her tightly and kiss her neck. When they heard the bathroom door creak open, Rafah pushed her away and she stumbled, almost fell into the cabin. He walked to the other side and continued baiting the poles. Suzanne stood, stunned, and exhilarated.

Andy's large feet slapped on the dock, announcing his return. He looked at Suzanne and said, "What's wrong? You look weird."

"Nothing. Just feeling a little sea sick, that's all."

He hugged her and she shrank away from his touch. Rafah motioned them toward the poles, instructing Andy to hold one, Suzanne the other.

While she held her pole, Suzanne's heart raced. She wanted to be alone with Rafah, wanted to continue kissing him. She imagined her big dumb fiancé tripping over his pole and falling into the ocean. Instead, Andy stood next to her, tall and happy, and grinned down at her. For half an hour, they stood side by side as they waited for a tug on either line.

Just when she thought she'd head back to the front of the boat to take a nap, she saw her line slacken. "Oh, oh, you got one! You got a tug!" Andy yelled to Suzanne. She grabbed her pole.

"Look at how that's bending...we better get you into the fighting chair," Rafah said.

"The what?" Suzanne struggled to hold her pole. Rafah pulled her toward the center and pushed her onto the white plastic chair that sat in the middle of the cockpit. Andy grabbed her pole while Rafah strapped her in with a large black Velcro belt.

“Listen, whatever you do, don’t let go of the pole. Keep pulling up, like this,” Rafah said, showing her how to yank the pole up while reeling in.

“You can do it, Suzy! Pull, pull!” Andy yelled even though he was standing right next to her. She looked down at the reel, intent on pulling and reeling as hard as she could. It took all her concentration just to reel it in a tiny bit.

“Pull up! Pull up!” Rafah yelled.

“I am!” She grunted and pulled. Suddenly the line jerked and she heard them gasp in unison. “What?” she said.

“Holy shit, Suzy. It’s huge. It just jumped out of the water,” Andy said. He looked to Rafah. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s either a swordfish or a sailfish. Both great catches.”

Suzanne struggled for another few minutes but didn’t feel like she was making any progress. Her back and arms ached from the strain of reeling and she felt like letting go. Finally, the fish was close enough that she could see its magnificent shape beneath the water; she cried out when she realized how large it was. Suzanne contemplated giving up and dropping her pole when she saw something metal and shiny fly into the water. She felt the line slacken.

“I got it!” Rafah said. “Do you see? I got it! You can stop reeling now.”

She heard Andy murmuring, “Oh no.” Then he said, “Suzy, don’t look.” She yanked the black Velcro belt off in one swift motion and stood up. Suzanne peered over the side of the boat and saw that Rafah pierced the beautiful creature with not one, but two giant metal hooks. Blood curled through the water like red ribbons and lapped at the edge of their boat.

“What is wrong with you?” Suzanne screamed at Rafah. Haven’t you ever heard of catch and release?”

Rafah stared at her but did not speak.

“You didn’t need to kill it.” She pushed Andy’s reaching hands away and glared at him. The men reach over the boat and into the water. They struggled to lift the giant bleeding fish into the boat before dropping it roughly onto the ground.

“It’s a sailfish,” Rafah said. He grinned at Andy. “See that huge fin that stretches along most of its body? That’s the sail fin, which is where it gets its name. When it swims, the fin stays down so it can go faster. But when it’s upset or excited, the fin comes up and stays up.”

“How much do you think the dang thing weighs?” Andy said.

“About a hundred and twenty pounds. Give or take a few.”

“Holy shit!”

“No, no they can grow to be almost two hundred. This one isn’t as big as we’ve seen. Good thing, too. If it had been any bigger, your girl may not have been able to reel it in.”

Suzanne looked at the beautiful fish and thought that it looked more like a dolphin or a shark than a fish. Its mouth opened in pain and its tail flung from side to side in desperation. It opened its mouth again and again as its gills heaved against the boat’s floor. The spines of its massive fins flexed and its body arched in agony. Then, abruptly, light blue iridescent stripes appeared along the sailfish’s body and it stopped writhing from side to side.

“Wait, what’s happening?” Andy asked.

“Lots of fish change colors when they’re agitated or dying,” Rafah said. “Some fish, like this one and the Mahi, are the most beautiful right before they die. It’s almost gone.”

The sailfish’s gills slowed, then stopped, and its gigantic dorsal fin relaxed. Suzanne watched it die and marveled at the massacred creature’s silent, graceful last few moments.

Rafah asked her to pose for a picture with it and at first she refused. Eventually, she agreed and clenched her jaw, staring into the camera while Rafah snapped a picture of her and Andy holding the dead sailfish. They set the fish down and Suzanne stomped to the front of the boat to sit in the sun. She wiped her slippery hands on Andy’s blue towel but doubted the metallic smell of blood and fish would go away any time soon.

She wrapped herself in her towel and hugged her knees to her chest. Andy plopped down next to her. “Suzy, it wasn’t your fault.”

“They mate for life, Andy.” She looked at him and repeated, “For life.”

He was silent for a moment. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry.” She pressed her hand lightly against his chest, pushing him away from her. He sighed and retreated.

Years ago, for her marine biology final class project, she researched marine species that mate for life. Much of the project focused on marine birds; Suzanne read that when one mate died, the living bird cried out in search of its partner and may spend days circling high in the air, calling out for its loved one. Unable to live without the other, the living bird often gave up and died.

Of all the species she studied, her favorite was the sailfish, with its massive fins and vibrant blue color. The pair swam and fed together, never leaving each other’s side.

She admired these creatures for their dedication to one another—a dedication she hadn't been able to surrender to.

Suzanne was reminded of this when she looked at her naked finger on her left hand, the circle of skin pale where the ring would be. That morning she told Andy that she didn't think she should wear it on the boat in case it slipped off while they were fishing. Suzanne wiggled her finger and thought of how free she felt in its absence.

Looking out at the turquoise water that shimmered and produced a thousand tiny reflective sparkles, Suzanne tried not to think about the murdered sailfish. As the orange sun climbed higher in the Maldivian sapphire sky, Suzanne squeezed her knees and thought of the beautiful lifeless sailfish resting at the back of the boat. She closed her eyes. Her heart ached for its mate; she suspected that underneath the boat, in the deep, dark water, the sailfish's mate was swimming at incredible speed, its fins fluttering incessantly as it searched for what it had lost.

Later, after they returned to their villa, Suzanne told Andy she wanted to be alone. She walked to the nearby beach and plunked down in the damp sand with a bottle of red wine. Suzanne considered burying her engagement ring so she wouldn't have to wear it anymore; the thought made her laugh. Instead, she drew in the sand with a twig and drank the wine straight from the bottle.

No matter how hard she tried or how much wine she drank, Suzanne could not remember the last time she felt happy. She finished the wine and slumped back against the small dune. In this moment, Suzanne only knew that she did not know, that she wanted time and space and to be alone. She stared up at the dark sky punctuated with stars. The sheer number of them reminded her of the starfish that covered the ocean floor.

Suzanne no longer felt the cold hard sand underneath her back; she felt the gentle, swaying, rocking motion of a boat. The ground was gone and there was nothing but sky, stars, moon. She swore the stars were pulsing, moving, across the vast nothingness of black sky. The wine coursed through her, made her feel as if she was moving, swinging up and away from herself.

Inexplicably, Suzanne thought of how, as a child, she had loved to swing: her legs pumping, bending, pulling her forward; arms clutching the metal chains, forcing, propelling her body upward; arched back, swing up. It wasn't the height that she had loved. Not the breeze whistling through the thin silver hoops in her ears. Not the speed or her beating heart. It was the split second after she'd reached the peak—the moment when she wasn't moving forward or backward but instead was somewhere in the middle. In that moment, she'd always pictured gravity's large skeletal hands grabbing her, pulling her back to the earth. And then there it was—the brief freefall. The ecstasy of the freefall, the feeling of being weightless, of being free—that was what she loved most. Yellow dress billowing. The scent of fresh-cut grass. Bare feet swinging, swinging up, then plummeting like the ebb and flow of the ocean tide. Eyes closed, falling, falling back before moving, moving up. Belonging to nothing, to no one, but herself.

Suzanne heard someone coming down the beach. Without looking up, she knew it wasn't Andy. This person's walk was refined, delicate, soft. This person walked with grace. She was too tired to look up to see the approaching person, but she hoped it was Rafah. Clumsily, she rubbed her lips to remember their fleeting kiss on the boat. Suzanne imagined his rough hands on her body.

She closed her eyes and felt someone lifting her shirt. Fingers danced across her bare stomach and sun-chapped lips moved across her neck. Suzanne's eyes were so heavy

she could not look up, could not catch a glimpse of whatever it was that was causing her stomach to drop.

III

ANIMAL GRACE

The girls scuttled around Claire like blind cockroaches, clamoring, falling, moving with anything but grace. “Stop, girls. Stop.” Claire, their ballet instructor, clapped her hands. She had hoped the girls would behave during their field trip at The Central Park Zoo, but they continued to ignore her instruction. They did not believe her when she said that they could become better dancers if they learned to move like the animals. “Pay attention. This here is a black panther named Kadence.”

A few of the girls giggled upon hearing the panther’s name.

“Her name is unfamiliar to you because she is from South America, but ‘Kadence’ means rhythm. Possessing rhythm separates good dancers from bad dancers, remember? Pay attention now. Look at how she moves. Her paws hardly make a sound.”

Kadence, a ninety-eight-pound female black panther, stared at the girls through the glass then flicked her large eyes to Claire. After a moment, the sleek creature looked away and began to pace her cage. On big, black paws Kadence moved from one side of her cage to the other, and then back again. Claire could not take her eyes away from the graceful creature.

Bridget, a slightly chubby brunette, yanked on Rachel's braid, causing her to scream. The startled panther stopped pacing and stared at them through the glass. Her green eyes bore down on the screaming girl. Claire stifled a smile. Several of the older girls went after Rachel, who ran toward the concession stand.

While the girls shrieked and smacked each other, Claire noticed Abigail, one of her youngest students, standing off to the side, silently observing the graceful cat. Immediately, Claire noticed that Abigail stood like a dancer—erect posture, feet slightly apart, pointing away from one another. Claire observed her for a moment and saw the girl point her toes in her shoes—a subconscious action that Claire knew quite well.

Before they moved to the next exhibit, Claire placed one palm against the glass. The cat stopped, stared at her, and then blinked her eyes twice, very slowly. Claire had read that slowly blinking the eyes was a form of affection in the cat world. She left her palm there for a moment longer, then withdrew it and followed after her noisy girls.

Later, after returning all sixteen dancers to their parents, Claire boarded the crowded subway. She found a window seat and sat down, relieved to be off her feet. This trip had not gone well. While viewing the seals, two girls had decided to throw their gum into the water. The zoo personnel had not been happy and reprimanded the girls. Most of her students didn't appreciate these animal lessons. They usually didn't understand why she took them to zoos, parks, or the circus. They viewed animals as beasts, scary creatures, and not elegant, beautiful beings. No matter how many times she told them, they did not believe her that it was imperative to possess animal grace. It had been a little over two years since she had quit her job teaching at Julliard, and she missed it on days like today when her young girls misbehaved. Her superiors at Julliard were shocked when

she asked to leave; she didn't tell them that she felt as if she had failed her students, particularly her best pupil, Dominique, and that it was best for her to go.

Dominique was one of her only students who understood the importance of moving with grace. While shutting off the studio lights one night, Claire had found Dominique practicing at night in the dark studio, her satin feet making no noise as she rippled across the wooden floor.

"You're too stiff," Claire said from the doorway.

Startled, Dominique dropped her arms and looked toward the door. "Oh, you scared me, Miss Claire."

"Remember what I told you."

"Yes, I know," Dominique had said.

"Let go of your center. You must in order to execute that move."

"I'm trying."

"There's your first problem. Remember the birds flying above the lake? Remember how close the wings came to the water? Its body carried it through the motions. Your body knows what to do, but you must surrender. Your mind is stopping you. Let go." Earlier that year, she took some of her best dancers to the lake to watch birds in flight. Dominique had been fascinated by how close the birds' wings came to the water without touching while they swooped in graceful, flawless plunges.

Then Dominique closed her eyes and began to move. Her arms floated up, her back arched, and she spun on one toe elegantly, beautifully.

"There, my darling. That's it."

Dominique bounced up and down excitedly.

Two weeks after that night, Dominique missed several classes. One of her classmates told Claire that Dominique had gotten pregnant. A few weeks after that, Claire received a hand-written letter—the girl promised to return after the baby was born. It bothered Claire to see her best student leave, and she felt responsible, as if she'd failed the girl. Hadn't she taught them they only had so many years to dance before they'd be considered too old? Children were not an option at Dominique's age, not if she wanted to be a dancer. Claire regretted not reaching out to her in the weeks that followed, and she quit her job shortly after. She didn't expect to see Dominique again, and she certainly didn't expect her to show up on her doorstep.

A month ago, Claire was reading a book about panthers when someone knocked on her door. She walked toward the door, assuming it was a neighbor's friend who had misread the apartment numbers. Claire unbolted the door and swung it open.

A pretty, young African American girl stood in the doorway. Rain dripped from her coat, her face, and her thick braided hair. A young girl clutched her hand and looked down at the floor.

“Can I help you?”

“Miss, Claire, it's me. It's Dominique.”

It took Claire a moment to recognize her former student. “Oh my goodness! Dominique, what a surprise.”

“We have nowhere to go, Miss Claire,” Dominique said. She had been crying. “Nowhere.”

“Come in, come in. You're drenched.” Claire opened the door and the pair walked in and stood awkwardly at the door. “Here let me take your coats.” Claire hung their

coats on her hall tree and escorted them into the living room. She clicked on the fireplace and heated water for tea.

“Thank you, Miss Claire. I didn’t know where to go.” Dominique arranged the young girl on her lap. “This is my daughter, Harmony.”

“Hi, Harmony, it’s nice to meet you,” Claire said.

The little girl smiled and then hid her face behind her hands.

“She’s real shy,” Dominique said.

“How old are you?” asked Claire.

Harmony held up two fingers.

“Two! Wow you’re a big girl,” Claire said.

Harmony grinned and giggled. She pointed toward Matilda, Claire’s orange tabby cat. “Cat,” she said.

“Yes, that’s my cat. Her name is Matilda,” Claire said. “You can go pet her if you’d like.” Matilda glared at Claire from across the room as if she resented the invitation.

Harmony tottered over to Matilda and plunked down on the floor next to her. “Be gentle, Harmony,” Dominique said. “Remember how I told you to be gentle?” She sighed. “Miss Claire, I don’t know what to do. We were living with Harmony’s father and he just left. Two weeks ago, he just left and I haven’t heard from him since. I don’t have a job and I couldn’t pay for the apartment.” She toweled her sopping hair and then tied the towel around her head like a turban.

“I’m sorry to hear that. No relatives?”

Dominique shook her head. “My parents live in Alabama, but they don’t support me since I had Harmony...without being married. They won’t even speak to me. My

sister goes to school in Florida, but she's younger and has no money either. I'm so sorry for barging in here, but we had nowhere to go." Dominique started to cry.

"Shhh, don't cry. You can stay here until we figure something out. Don't cry."

Claire rubbed her back.

Matilda let out a howl. Claire looked up and saw Harmony clutching the cat's tail in both her hands.

"Harmony, come here." The little girl walked toward her mother, slowly, deliberately, as if she had recently learned to walk. "Good girl. Now leave that poor kitty alone for awhile."

"Oh, what a bad host I am," Claire said. "Are you hungry?"

"No, no. We ate right before we came. I am pretty tired though."

"Why don't I help you get settled in the guest room?" Claire said. The guest room was a small bedroom that was sparsely furnished—a small bed, nightstand, lamp, and rocking chair. Claire and Dominique put fresh sheets on the bed and tucked Harmony in. "I'm sorry I don't have a crib," Claire said. "Never had any use for one."

"Oh no, it's fine. She likes to sleep with me," Dominique said. "Thanks again, Miss Claire. You have no idea what this means to me." She hugged Claire and then shut the door quietly.

Claire remembered settling into bed that night and staring up at the ceiling. As a little girl, she used to look for patterns in the plaster. She'd find faces, animals, and random objects, and imagine they danced across the ceiling with the shadows. She'd never had any visitors to her apartment and did not know what to do with them. To her surprise, she was not upset; she did not feel strange when she realized there were two people sleeping in the next room. She rolled over onto her side and felt oddly comforted.

The subway lurched forward and Claire clutched the railing in front of her. She couldn't believe how much her life had changed since Dominique and Harmony moved in a month ago. It was nice in some ways to have a family. But it also reminded her of what she had missed out on—she was past the point of having children and she often felt envious of Dominique for being a mother. Claire thought the big city would be good for her—it would encourage her to make friends, and form relationships, but somehow she felt more alone in New York, as if she was a mere number. She found that it was easier to keep to herself, to avoid significant interactions in a city that was bursting with sounds, smells, people and sites. There was so much going on that no one paid any attention to the quiet woman who walked softly like a dancer, and Claire's days slipped by without much activity.

She watched a young couple across the aisle from her. The boy held the girl's hands and kissed her knuckles. Claire blushed, embarrassed by their open intimacy and longing for one another. She tried to remember the last time she'd had sex. Ten years ago? Maybe more. Claire had had lovers, but none of her relationships lasted very long. She had fallen in love with a male dancer when she was twenty-one. Adrien had high cheek bones, a French accent, and the bluest eyes Claire had ever seen. The only night they had made love, he lifted her like she was made of paper and pulled her to his chest. Even their sex had been a dance—lifting, spinning, falling, breathing in unison. Afterward, exhausted, they rested on the bed, their toned limbs pretzeled together.

As the subway rattled on, Claire closed her eyes. She'd give anything to be young and a dancer again. She fondly remembered returning home from a long day of practice to soak her bloody, bruised feet in warm water. When she'd been a dancer, Claire had

been good. The best. Part of it was natural talent, but the rest was work. She observed everything, taught herself to be more graceful. To be a ballerina, one must be light on her feet, lean with long lines, and that part had to be inherited. Bridget, for example, would never make it in the ballet world. Never. Not only was the girl chubby, but she was a klutz, an utter disaster in the studio. Claire had been blessed with tall, slender parents who passed on a lithe physique. She'd seen shorter, stockier girls try to make it in the ballet world; she always pitied these girls. It didn't matter how good the girl's feet were, she wouldn't make it very far with a sturdy, short physique.

Years ago, when she was a star principal dancer, Claire received excellent reviews. One writer said that often it seemed as if she was the only dancer onstage, as if all eyes were constantly on Claire. But that was the point, right? She had always needed to be stared at, even as a child. She'd thought that if that many people watched her that she could transform into someone else, spin her way into another existence. Maybe she danced because it was the only thing she *knew*; the only thing she could lose herself in.

She'd been a dancer even as a young girl, back when she'd been a big sister. She remembered prancing through the yard, moving with surprising grace for a seven-year old. She had been light on her feet even with her clunky red rain boots on. On that particular day, the day she'd never forget, her father videotaped she and her younger brother Danny in the yard. She remembered repeatedly running up to her father, thrusting one wet, muddy leg at him, and demanding: "Did you get my boots on tape, Dad?" It was imperative that he capture her new, bright red rain boots on film. After he'd confirmed he'd zoomed in on them, she danced off, twirling and floating through the rain.

Claire still held her seven year-old self responsible for her brother's death. If she hadn't demanded so much attention from her father that day, if she hadn't needed to be

noticed all the time, he would have realized Danny was missing. Her father would have seen Danny wander around the side of the house, alone, and he would have known he was going to the pond that perpetually pulled him like a magnet. If she hadn't insisted that he videotape her, her father could have grabbed him before he went into the water.

Across the aisle, a man a few years younger than Claire read the newspaper, his face pulled together in concentration. *He might look a bit like him with that wavy brown hair and blue eyes*, she thought. The subway hummed and she closed her eyes. She'd always wondered what her brother would have looked like. He'd been blonde back then, but time may have darkened his hair like it did hers. Would he have looked like their father? Would he have been tall and sinewy like her? She guessed he would have been a swimmer.

The subway stopped and passengers exited, heading home to their families. The young man whom her brother may have resembled slid past her and out the door. Her words ricocheted in her head: "Did you get my boots, Dad?"

Later, after her nightly bath, Claire settled down onto the sofa with green tea and a book. Dominique and Harmony were at the grocery store so Claire had a rare moment alone. She wrapped her hands around the steaming and thought of Kadence, the poor, beautiful, caged panther pacing. She wondered what Kadence was doing in that moment. She could only move so far without circling right back to where she started. Claire wondered if Kadence dreamt of running through an open field, her muscles flexing, paws thundering as she ran. Claire had always been skeptical of zoos: animals in cages—pacing, panting, anxious, restless, full of smothered rage—yet, she visited often because

she loved watching the animals. She had always envied their natural, elegant movement that was foreign to her species.

Suddenly she thought she'd break into the zoo and rescue Kadence. She would sneak in and bust her out, free her from her prison. Kadence trusted her; she'd have no problem coaxing her from her cage. She imagined it—sneaking past the security cameras, breaking into the cage, freeing the panther. Matilda flicked her tail, as if in disapproval of the unspoken plan.

“You piss me off, Matilda. You think you know everything.”

Claire stood and looked into the full-length mirror. She wrapped her long brown hair into a knot at the nape of her neck and touched the gray hair that had begun to sprout at her temples. Claire lifted one leg, pointed her toe and flexed her muscles. Her leg muscles were defined but not like they were when she was younger. *I'm growing soft*, she thought.

She moved up onto her toes and didn't wince when she felt the painful contact of the wooden floor with her naked feet. Claire enjoyed her solitude, preferred to dance alone with no distractions. She lifted her arms above her head and stared at herself in the mirror. Matilda watched and flicked her tail in disapproval. Claire pulled in her stomach muscles and exhaled slowly as her arms drifted back down. She relaxed her toes and stood flat-footed.

“I've still got it, girl,” she said to Matilda.

The cat eyed her suspiciously.

“Don't look at me like that. You saw that just now. I have more skill than you, old girl.”

Matilda flicked her tail again, and then settled down into her armchair.

“Fine, you sit there and grow fat. Me, I’m dancing.” Claire danced through her small apartment, flitting on bare feet, thinking about absolutely nothing but her body moving with utter precision from habitual practice.

Just as Claire finished her impromptu dance, Dominique and Harmony came home.

“We’re home!” Dominique announced.

Claire toweled off and helped Dominique put away the groceries. She was surprised that Dominique already knew her way around the kitchen. Little Harmony was singing softly as she colored on a sheet of white paper.

“Well, Miss Claire, I think I should try to get back into Julliard,” Dominique said. When Claire didn’t respond, she continued, “What do you think my chances are?”

“I’m not sure. When I taught there, they frowned upon leaving the program. But there’s a new director so I’m not sure what she’d say.”

“I was thinking we could practice and get me back on track.”

“We?” Claire said.

“Well, you’re the best. I learned more from you in two months than I did from any other instructor. I was hoping you’d work with me. If money is an issue, I’m not sure how I’d repay you, but someday…”

“No, no. Money is not an issue.” Claire thought for a moment. A single woman who lived a very simple existence, she had plenty of money in the bank. She looked down at Harmony, watched the little girl doodle and scribble on the paper. “OK. I’ll help you. But you’ll have to practice quite hard to get back into a school like Julliard.”

Dominique threw her arms around Claire. “Miss Claire, you’re the best. I promise I’ll work really, really hard. And somehow I’ll repay you. Someday.”

Another month passed quickly, mostly because Claire and Dominique spent their evenings and weekends dancing. It didn't take long for Dominique to become a dancer again—within weeks her body was lean muscle. Little Harmony loved when they danced; she watched every movement, every routine in complete silence. For an unknown reason, grouchy Matilda had taken to Harmony and followed the girl wherever she went. The fat cat sprawled near Harmony on the sofa and gave herself a bath.

Dominique flexed and stretched her bruised feet. “Do you think I'm ready?”

“Well, I think you're getting there. They won't expect you to be perfect, but they will expect you to be damn near close to perfect. I think we need another week or two. Then you might be ready for an audition.”

Just then, Harmony looked up at Claire and reached her arms up to her. “She wants you to hold her, Miss Claire. You don't have to if you don't want.”

Claire picked her up and wrapped her arms around Harmony's body. She carried Harmony into the spare bedroom and settled into the rocking chair. She rocked Harmony, hummed a song she remembered her mother singing to her as a child. Soon, Harmony was asleep, her right thumb in her mouth. Claire watched the little girl breathe and realized why women became mothers—for moments like this.

Claire tucked her into bed and walked out of the room.

“Miss Claire, can I talk to you about something?”

“What is it?”

“Well, there's this guy-”

“Absolutely, not,” Claire interrupted. “You can't start dating if you plan to return to school. I forbid it.”

Dominique giggled. “Let me finish, Miss Claire. This guy, he’s not for me...he’s for you.”

“What?”

“I think you’d be perfect together. I kind of already told him about you.”

Dominique bit her lip.

“Dominique!” Claire quickly covered her mouth; she did not want to wake Harmony. “How do you know him? What did you tell him?”

“His name is Richard and he’s friends with my uncle. I bumped into him at the grocery store. He mentioned he was single and hadn’t been on a date in a long while.” She shrugged. “I figured you hadn’t either. I think he’s about your age.”

“No, absolutely not. I don’t date.”

“Why not? He’s cute, Miss Claire.”

Claire shook her head. “No. But thanks. I’m going to make dinner. Why don’t you practice that routine again?”

Her hands trembled while she prepared a chicken casserole. Claire couldn’t fathom going on a date at her age; how silly. She looked up to see Dominique stretching in the living room. Dominique spun through the room effortlessly, her arms floating and falling gently, gracefully. It occurred to her that Dominique was a better natural dancer than she, that the young girl didn’t have to train or try nearly as hard as Claire had had to. She expected to be jealous, but as she watched Dominique glide across the wooden floor, she felt something else, something foreign that she didn’t understand: parental pride.

A week later, Claire realized she had been humming to herself as she exited the subway. Even though her pupils had been difficult and whiny in class that day, she felt

content. It occurred to her that couldn't remember the last time she'd been this happy. She stopped at the grocery store on her way home. She and Dominique had made a list of ingredients to cook together for the rest of the week. On a whim, she picked up a purple stuffed teddy bear to give the little girl. It was outrageously priced, but Claire had never had someone to buy anything for. Well, unless you counted Matilda, who was never particularly appreciative of gifts.

When she got home, Dominique was dancing; Harmony and fat Matilda were watching. When she saw Claire, Dominique stopped dancing. "Miss Claire! You better get ready. Richard will be here in an hour. You remembered, right?" Claire had finally agreed to go on the date with Richard that evening, and she was nervous.

"Yes, yes. I just stopped at the store for some things for this week."

Dominique laughed. "You were stalling. Go get ready!"

After her shower, Claire changed clothes four times, before finally settling on dark pants and a cashmere sweater. She felt her hands shaking as she secured her hair in a bun. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been on a date.

She heard a knock on the door and then a deep male voice. Claire smoothed her hair and listened to Dominique laugh at whatever Richard was saying.

Finally, Claire walked into the room. Richard looked handsome in a tweed jacket, tie, and glasses. Like her, he had a little gray speckled throughout his dark hair; she figured he was about forty.

"Miss Claire, this is Richard. Richard, this is Miss Claire," Dominique said, sweeping her arms from one to the other.

"How do you do?" Claire asked. For an inexplicable reason, she curtsied. Immediately, her face flushed.

Richard laughed. "It's nice to meet you." She saw that he was holding flowers in his hands. "Here, I brought these for you." He thrust the flowers at her.

Involuntarily, Claire recoiled. "They're lilies."

He shrugged. "Don't know much about flowers. The girl at the store said you'd like em."

Claire stared at the flowers but did not move. Finally, Dominique grabbed them from Richard. "How sweet of you, Richard. Thank you. Claire, why don't you help me put them in a vase?"

Claire followed Dominique into the kitchen.

"Miss Claire, what's wrong with you? He brought you flowers and you just stand there! Are you allergic or something?" Dominique raised her eyebrows.

"No, no. I don't know what's wrong with me." Claire leaned near the faucet and splashed cold water on her face. "Thank you for that."

"Well, you better go back there. And relax. Try to have fun." Dominique patted her shoulder. "You look pretty."

Claire walked back. "Thank you, Richard. The flowers are beautiful."

"Glad you like them. I hope you're hungry." He grabbed her hand and led her out the door. They yelled goodbye to Dominique as they walked out.

Two hours later, Claire returned from the date, alone. The evening had not been pleasant. Once Richard discovered Claire was not a dancer anymore, he quickly lost interest. In fact, it appeared he was much more interested in Dominique than anything else. To make matters worse, he blatantly hit on the waitress and Claire thought he might have asked for her number while she was in the restroom. After dessert, after he asked if

Dominique was currently single, Claire told him she'd prefer to walk home. She thanked him for the dinner, folded her napkin and walked out.

The restaurant was only three blocks away and cool night air invigorated her; she felt wide awake. Claire stood outside her apartment building and listened to the city noises. She'd always thought it was quite bizarre that she could feel so lonely in such a crowded place like New York. Somehow in this huge city she'd always felt like a caged animal—alone, pacing in her small space, restless and uneasy. But for the first time in her life, she had someone to come home to, and it both frightened and comforted her simultaneously. She was aware of the sense of loss she would feel when Dominique would eventually move out. Yes, she knew how empty her apartment would feel after the girls left, but she also knew that this moment, this present, felt wonderful.

Finally, she went inside. Claire leaned against the door, relieved to be home. She peeked into the girls' room and saw little Harmony fast asleep on the bed sucking her thumb. In the next room, Dominique was asleep in the chair wrapped in a blanket; a mug of tea rested next to her on the table. Claire realized she must have been trying to wait up to hear about the date.

She wasn't sure if it was the wine she had at dinner, or her refreshing walk home, but Claire felt something she couldn't explain. She thought of little Harmony breathing in the next room, looked at Dominique asleep in the chair, and all she knew was she was happy. For the first time in a long time, she felt content.

The following Tuesday, Dominique took the train to Julliard for an open audition. Claire reminded her to remain confident, even if she missed a step or didn't execute a skill perfectly. Claire offered to babysit Harmony and decided to take her to the zoo since

she'd never been there before. The real reason she wanted to go though was because she'd been dreaming of Kadence lately and needed to see her.

Claire unbuckled the little girl from her car seat and strapped her into the stroller. First, they went to see the elephants who were stuffing large quantities of hay in their mouths. After a few minutes, Claire could tell Harmony was bored so they moved on to the giraffes; they, too, were eating. They flicked their tails and chewed in rhythmic, circular motions; their purplish-black tongues were impossibly long.

“Look, Harmony, so you see their long tongues?” Claire held her up and pointed with her free arm. Harmony giggled.

Half an hour later, after they visited the monkeys and the seals, Claire headed toward Kadence's cage. To her surprise, Kadence was not alone—three baby cubs curled up to her belly. All were sound asleep.

“Harmony, do you see the babies?”

“Kitty,” Harmony said.

Claire understood why Harmony thought they were Matilda's kin, as they were only slightly larger than kittens. The single clear indication that they were not kittens was their paws, which were far too large for their bodies. As if sensing their presence, Kadence woke and nudged the cubs. Two of them began to feed at her stomach. She pulled the third cub toward her face and began to lick its fuzzy brownish-black fur.

Harmony beat a small fist against the glass. Upon hearing the sound, Kadence turned her head and looked at them. Immediately, Claire noticed a difference in the cat's large green eyes. She no longer looked angry; in fact, she looked blissful, content. She blinked her eyes at Claire and then turned back to bathing the cub. They stood there for a

while longer, until Harmony grew cranky, and then finally moved on to the see the rhinos.

When they left the zoo, Harmony was sound asleep in her stroller, and Claire thought of Kadence, of her new family. You could still possess grace, she suddenly decided, even if you couldn't move the way you wanted to. There were other ways, other forms of grace.

Claire had been teaching Harmony how to play patty-cake when Dominique came home a few hours later. Her cheeks were flushed. "Miss Claire, I think I did really well! I think they'll call me back."

"That's wonderful." Claire didn't tell Dominique that she had made a phone call to her former employer to stress what a beautiful dancer Dominique had been. She'd told the director that Dominique was one of the most gifted, natural dancers she'd ever encountered.

"Yeah, but the only thing that worries me is who will take care of Harmony if I return to school."

"Don't worry. We can figure something out. One step at a time. Let's wait to see what Julliard says and we'll go from there."

"You are the best, Miss Claire."

"Harmony, honey, let's go take a nap, ok?" Dominique scooped her up and disappeared into the bedroom.

Claire walked into the kitchen to make water for tea. She saw Richard's lilies on the table. She touched the flowers, ran her fingers along the cool, soft petals. Whenever she saw or smelled lilies, she was reminded of her brother's funeral. Her brother's casket

had been so small, too small, and she hadn't been tall enough to see into it. Her father lifted her up so she could see her brother lying there with his eyes closed. He had looked like a doll--a fake, plastic boy. She remembered her father's arms shaking as he held her up; he set her down quickly because he was sobbing. Claire was young when he died, but she knew what his death meant. She knew he was gone.

She looked at the lilies for a moment, then pulled the head off one of the flowers in one clean yank.

The next morning, on the way to work, Claire tossed the decaying, pungent lilies in the garbage can near the subway entrance. She sat down and settled into her seat; the subway began to move forward. Claire stretched her legs under the seat in front of her, flexed her muscles to ease her stiffness. She felt restricted, restrained in the small car, and she thought of Kadence, of her forced passivity, her intangible loneliness that Claire understood. At least now she had company, her babies; yet, Claire wondered how long they would stay, how soon the cubs would be plucked from her and shipped off to other zoos. How sad that day would be for Kadence. It made her wonder if it was worth it to let people in, to love them despite knowing you could not keep them. She wasn't sure if the fleeting happiness trumped the emptiness that would follow. Claire vowed to visit the graceful cat soon, to press her palms against the glass, to remind her she wasn't alone.

The subway rattled through the run-down neighborhoods in Harlem. Claire swore her hands smelled like orchids. Or maybe she imagined it. She looked out the window and watched an elderly woman drape her laundry over an apartment balcony railing. Maybe it was the smell of the orchids, or the woman hanging sheets that brought her

back. She closed her eyes and saw two children running through damp grass, heard sheets snapping in the wind.

The day before her brother drowned, the day before her parents bought her the red rain boots, she and her brother had been running through the damp linen drenched in yellow sunlight. She often found herself trying to imagine their last happy memory together, but she could never see a clear scene—tiny fragments of a snapshot that never formed a complete picture. It was like peeking through fingers covering the face. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remember what his laugh sounded like or which side of his head had that ridiculous cowlick. She saw him grin, but then the sheet billowed in her face. He was there, but he was not, his feet hardly making a sound on the soft grass as he scurried away from her.

She remembered reaching her hands through damp, fragrant sheets to clutch nothing but air. He was too fast for her—an evanescent presence, this fleeting memory. Claire ducked between the sheets to catch him off guard. But even when she jumped out from her hiding spot underneath, he dodged her easily, laughed, and scrambled away.

As time passed, all Claire knew was yellow sunlight, sheets snapping and billowing in the wind, the scent of grass and linen. Round and round—an endless game—she knew she would never catch him.

IV

SUICIDE PELICANS

I heard laughter in the hallway and opened my door. Coral staggered down the hall in a filthy oversized fur coat that engulfed her small frame. She wore sunglasses and held a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag. An older man wearing cracked black sunglasses and a blue pinstripe suit clutched her arm and laughed loudly. They smelled like body odor and something faintly familiar, something sweet. Marijuana, I guessed.

I hadn't seen my sister for almost a year. The last time we saw each other was when I picked her up at the police station. Coral had been pulled over for drunk driving and somehow managed to convince the police officer to drop the charges. That was my sister—a charming disaster. On the way back to our apartment that night, I told Coral I'd found us a sponsor, that I was determined to get clean. She laughed at me and said she wasn't interested before vomiting in my car. Coral took off a few days later without telling me where she was going. Eventually our mother tracked her down; she had moved to California. Almost a year later, here I was, attending regular AA meetings, sticking with my plan, feeling sober and...bored.

“Hey, big sister! How’s life? Long time no see. This here is Artie.” Coral motioned to the grimy man next to her. Now that they stood in my doorway I could see that Artie was much older than Coral, at least mid-fifties.

“How do you do,” Artie asked.”You may call me Arthur, if you wish.” He grabbed my hand and kissed it. His fingernails were long and grubby.

“Come in. What are you doing here, Coral?”

“Boy, don’t seem so excited to see me. Artie and I came from LA for our friend’s funeral. Our buddy OD’d on something.” she said.

Neither of them removed their sunglasses and I assumed they were high. “So...how did you get here? Did you fly? Why didn’t you call to let me know you were coming?”

“Whoa, whoa, big sister, one question at a time please. Artie drove us in his car. I didn’t call you because I don’t have a phone. Too expensive,” she said.

“But you could buy a fur coat?” I asked.

Artie laughed.

“Don’t egg her on, Artie. You asshole.” She smacked him. “We got your address from our sponsor. Or I should say, from *your* sponsor since I never needed her.”

“How is Cheryl?”

“She’s fabulous. Lectured me about my ‘habits’ as she calls them,” Coral said.

“I bet she wouldn’t be too pumped about what you’re holding in your hand.”

“Fuck off, Iris. I didn’t come here to be babysat. I was hoping you’d give me a place to crash. We do have a funeral. Have some goddamn sympathy.”

Artie cleared his throat. “Excuse me, doll, where’s your bathroom?”

I pointed down the hallway. “Only door on the left.” Once he had firmly shut the door, I said, “Coral, how old is he? He could freaking be our father.”

“He’s fifty-five.”

I sighed. “When is the funeral?”

“Tomorrow. Nice place you got here, Iris. You’ve cleaned up real nice.”

I couldn’t tell if she was being sincere or not. For some odd reason, her comment annoyed me. I should have been happy to hear reinforcement that I wasn’t the drunk I used to be.

Coral asked, “Do you mind if I take a quick shower? We’ve been in that car for days.”

“No, that’s fine. Let me get you a towel.” I grabbed a fluffy towel from my closet and handed it to her. “Don’t you want to wait for him to get out?”

“Nope.” She grinned.

“You better not do any drugs in there, Coral. I mean it.”

Her grin faded. “Jesus, Iris. What the hell happened to you? I’m going to take a fucking shower.” She went in and locked the door.

The running water muffled their laughter. The apartment buzzer went off again—I had forgotten Greg, my boyfriend, was stopping by. I buzzed him in and contemplated how to deal with this situation. I’d met Greg at an AA meeting six months ago, and I believed part of my recovery was influenced by his rigid, sober lifestyle. He helped me find a job, checked up on me, and constantly reminded me that sober living was much better than being an addict. I opened the door. He was wearing a blue polo and freshly ironed khaki pants. His hair, as always, was rigidly combed with a perfect part. When I first met Greg, I found it hard to believe that he had ever done anything wrong in his

life—he was so sweet and perfect. He looked more like a preppy college boy than a recovering cocaine addict.

“Hey, babe,” he said. “What’s wrong?” He asked me that question more often than not.

“Coral is here. With a creepy older guy.”

“Oh.” Greg knew all about Coral. In his opinion, Coral was detrimental to my sobriety. He had lectured me on bad influences more than once. “What’s she doing here?”

“She’s going to a funeral tomorrow. I had no clue she was coming.”

“Can you handle this?”

“Yeah.” Shrug. “Sure.”

“What is that on your shirt?” he asked.

I looked down at my shirt. “Um, I think it’s mustard.”

“Why don’t you put on a clean one?” Greg always said that personal appearance was very important for recovering addicts.

I marched to my room and threw on a clean shirt. “Happy?”

He nodded. “So, where is she?”

“In the shower.”

“Where is he?”

“In the shower.”

“Oh. That’s a little weird, don’t you think?”

“Everything about Coral is weird, so no, I guess it’s not weird.” I was surprised to find myself sticking up for her.

“Can I meet her?”

“Probably shouldn’t. I think they’re getting high in there.”

“You let them get high in your apartment?” Greg sat down on the sofa and touched his hair to make sure it wasn’t sticking up. “You’re gonna slip, Iris. You’re gonna slip because of your junkie sister.”

I turned to look at him. “Don’t call her that.”

He threw up his hands. “Whatever. I still think this is a horrible idea.”

“She’s my sister.”

“You should put your sobriety first.”

I laughed. “Clearly, you have a lot of faith in my sobriety.”

“It’s just that I’ve been clean a lot longer than you. I know how hard the first year is, and you haven’t even made it there yet.” Greg stood up. “I’m a realist. You know that.” He walked toward me and reached in for a hug.

“What is this? An AA meeting?” I pushed his hands away. “Stop. Why don’t you just go?”

“Fine. Call me later?”

“I don’t know. I might be too fucked up to call you, right?” I knew I was acting childish but couldn’t help myself.

He sighed and walked toward the door. “Please call me later, Iris. I’m sorry I upset you. I’ll be worried about you.”

I closed the door and knew he was still standing there in his perfectly ironed, spotless clothes. After a moment, he said, “Remember the steps, Iris. And remember you can call your sponsor any time.”

I was so furious I didn’t know what to do. I needed something to do with my hands, something to occupy myself, something to prevent me from drinking Coral’s

booze. Lately, I'd been obsessed with cleanliness—vacuuming, in particular, soothed me. I enjoyed its loud roar as it moved over the carpet. They were still in the bathroom after I finished vacuuming the apartment so I filled the sink with water and dish soap, threw in clean plates, and scrubbed them as if they were filthy. I thought of Greg's past, of the stories he told me about how he used to get high and shoplift at grocery stores. How he'd been caught twice but couldn't stop himself from doing it again. He told me that his addiction to coke nearly killed him, that he'd gone to rehab three times before he finally kicked his addiction.

As I scrubbed the plates, I wondered what Greg looked like back then when he was an addict. I doubted he wore clean, ironed clothes and parted his hair. I laughed. It had occurred to me before that I was attracted to Greg because of his past not because of who he was now. I preferred the addicted shoplifter to the sober robot and probably always would. Once I was done, I rooted through the refrigerator to find something to make Coral and Artie.

When they stumbled out of the bathroom, dressed in new clothes with wet hair, I stood at the stove, spatula in hand, and flipped bacon and eggs in a frying pan.

“Sissy, was somebody else here or were you just talkin to yourself?” Coral's pupils were huge and black.

“Yeah, Greg stopped by. He's my boyfriend.”

“Ohhhh, you got a boyfriend? Where is he? I gotta meet the guy who puts up with your shit.”

“He left.

“Why?”

“He only stopped by for a minute. Actually, he wanted to meet you.”

“Oh. Well hopefully another time.” Coral combed her fingers through her wet hair.

“What was your name again, doll-face?” Artie asked.

“Iris.”

“That’s right. Iris. What a pretty name,” Artie says. He grinned, unabashed that he was missing his front two teeth. The remaining teeth were close to rotten—brown and yellow, caked with residue, typical of meth addicts.

“Iris was a goddess, Artie. Did you know that?” Coral said. “In ancient mythology.”

“Noooo, I sure didn’t,” Artie said. “That sure is interesting.”

“Artie, don’t you think that my name is pretty?” Coral asked. She stumbled into the kitchen and sat on one of the wooden stools.

He nodded. “Sure is, darling.”

“Did you know that coral is one of the softest stones?” Coral asked.

Artie shook his head. Coral loved to talk about our names, particularly her name, when she was drunk or high. I had a feeling that Artie, like myself, had heard this before.

“See, look,” Coral said, thrusting her tiny hands in front of him. She was wearing three oversized coral rings on each hand. “I collect coral rings. But I have to be really, really careful with them because they are one of the softest stones so they can be damaged easily.” She spoke to him slowly and dramatically, like he was a child.

Artie reached out to touch the biggest ring, the one with the piece of large orange coral.

She yanked her hands back. “No Artie, don’t touch. You might hurt it.”

I'd never been sober around Coral when she was high, and suddenly she reminded me of a younger version of herself. It was her expression, her voice, and the giant rings on her small fingers that made her seem like a little girl playing dress-up with her mother's things.

I thought of her obsession with our names, with what our names meant. Sometimes I wondered if our parents chose her name because somehow they'd known she would be delicate, unstable. When I was a teenager, I asked my mother why they'd named me Iris, and she had said it was because she loved pretty purple flowers, but I liked to pretend that they named me Iris after the Greek goddess who had wings.

Artie offered his bottle of vodka to me, which he had now removed from the brown paper bag.

I hesitated. "No, thank you," I said.

"That's her chosen poison, Artie. Pretty impressive that she can turn it down, don't you think? She's become quite the goody-goody since she decided to clean up." Coral stared at me, and I knew she was angry or jealous, or both. Or maybe it was me who was angry or jealous—I was having a hard time identifying and distinguishing my emotions in the presence of my sister and alcohol.

He shrugged and took a huge swig before passing it back to Coral.

I ripped it from her hands and dumped it into the sink. "I'm serious," I said.

They stared at me for a moment and then both burst into laughter. "Iris, you're fucking crazy," Coral said.

"I'm serious. No drugs, no booze or you find somewhere else to stay."

"Loud and clear," Artie said.

I buttered two pieces of toast and plunked the steaming plates of eggs and bacon in front of them. “Eat.”

They devoured the food. Coral said, “Man, Iris, that was good!”

Artie nodded. “Do I have bugs on my neck?” He scratched at his neck with his long, filthy fingernails.

“For Christ’s sake, Artie!” Coral said. “He has this weird feeling all the time that bugs are crawling on him.” She pulled his hands away from his skin. “Stop scratching.”

I knew Coral wasn’t naïve enough to believe that it was simply strange. We’d seen addicts claw at their own skin because of drugs. “Are you guys tired?” I asked.

“Yeah. A nap would be nice.”

I pulled the hide-a-bed from the couch and threw on fresh sheets. They snuggled up together and I retreated to my room.

Three hours later, Coral knocked on my bedroom door. For almost six months I’d been working as a web writer and editor. My current project was to edit a rubber engineer’s web page, and, in order to do so, I taught myself all kinds of things about rubber that I found oddly fascinating. For example, that terrible squealing sound a car can make while rounding a corner in a parking garage could be caused by a faulty anti-squawk rubber hose. And if rubber window gaskets are engineered incorrectly, the windows in a car or bus could shatter and injure the passengers. The company I was working for engineered the rubber gaskets that securely held bullet-proof windows in military tankers. Who knew rubber could save lives? I sure as hell didn’t prior to this job. I visited the site often, probably more than necessary, and liked watching the workers with their big gloves and plastic goggles. I had even begun to like the smell of rubber.

“Come in,” I said.

“Hey.” She sat down on the edge of my bed. “Wow, your room is so nice. Artie’s place is a hell-hole compared to this.”

I nodded and continued typing on my computer.

“Whatcha doin?”

“I’m working on a website about rubber for a company that is based out of Painesville.”

“Cool. So you work from home now?”

“Yeah. But I go onsite a lot to interview people before I write or edit their websites. It’s a pretty cool job. Not bad. Are you working in LA?”

“Nope. I’ve been trying to model but all the places say I’m too short. I did some nude stuff a little while ago though. That paid pretty well.” She ran her fingers through her short, bleached hair that looked as if a child had cut it.

“Coral! Naked photos? Were they published somewhere?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care.” She shrugged. “They paid me good money. Artie is trying to convince me to get into porn. He says he knows somebody. I don’t think I can do it though.”

“Please don’t.”

Coral laughed. “Relax, I won’t.”

“What the hell do you see in him anyway? I mean, he’s old and kinda nasty.”

“Well for starters, he’s rich. He bought me that coat that you made fun of. And he’s pretty good to me, actually. I think he loves me.”

“Oh please, spare me the bullshit. Where’d he get his money?”

She paused. “You can’t tell him I told you. He’d be pretty pissed if he knew I told you.”

“I won’t say anything. I swear.” I held out my hand and we locked into a pinky swear.

“He’s a dealer.”

“What kind?”

“Coke. Meth. Weed. Hmmm I think that’s it for now. But he’s a pretty big dealer on the West Coast. I know what you’re thinking. But it’s nice to have money. Real nice, Iris.”

I shook my head. “You gotta get out of there.”

She was silent for a moment. “Can we go somewhere? I’m stir crazy,” Coral said.

“That’s because you’ve been high all day.”

“Ok, enough. You act like you’ve never been high.”

“My group says I shouldn’t be around people who are high.” I realized that I had begun to sound like Greg, that I was turning into an AA robot.

“What group?”

“My AA group. I go every week. Talk about you a lot. About how bad we were. They think we brought out the worst in each other.”

Coral laughed. “Oh so you blame me, then. You’re such a loser. What the fuck, Iris? You think you’re better than me now because you go to ‘group every week’?” She raised her voice to mock me. “I’m not the one who killed that deer and left it to bleed to death. I’m not the one who slept with my best friend’s husband. Home-wrecker. Does your new boyfriend or your precious group know about any of that? I bet they don’t.”

She laughed, hard and cold. “Say whatever you want about me, but I don’t hurt people. That was you.”

I couldn’t speak. Finally, I said, “You’re right. But who was my accomplice in all of that? And you know what, you do hurt somebody when you’re high. You hurt yourself.”

“Is that what your ‘group’ tells you? That you hurt yourself when you’re high? Well that’s a load of shit because I feel fucking amazing when I’m high.”

I wanted to hurt her. The impulse to slap or shake her was so strong that I had to clench my hands tightly together in my lap. We were silent for a moment; neither of us knew how to come back from where we’d just gone. “Where’s Artie?”

“He went to see some friends,” Coral said.

“You wanna go somewhere, or what?”

She nodded.

“Fine, let’s go.” We walked into the living room and I grabbed my keys.

“Where you gonna take me, Momma Iris?”

“Don’t know.” We took the elevator down to my garage and got into my car. “Put your seatbelt on,” I said.

“Oh, I know where we can go! Let’s go to the bridge? Please, Iris?” She clapped her hands like a child.

“So it’s like that? We’re buddies again?”

“I’m sorry, big sister. I didn’t mean it before. I didn’t. Pretty please!”

“Being with you is like being with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” I muttered.

She giggled. “Sorry. You know I don’t mean it. So can we go?”

I sighed. “Fine.”

I drove and she leaned against the window and closed her eyes. Within minutes, she was fast asleep, drooling, the way she had since we were little, on the sleeve of her sweatshirt. I glanced at her resting her yellow head against the cool window with her eyes closed and swore that she was smaller than the last time I saw her. As children, I always felt inferior to Coral even though I was the older sister. I never possessed her vibrancy. She had silky blonde hair and shockingly green eyes, and she was constantly moving, constantly talking, emitting this frantic, contagious energy. But now, she seemed to be shrinking, slipping farther into addiction. Or maybe now that I was clean I was finally seeing her clearly.

Coral was right about one thing—I had been a monster when I used drugs or alcohol. I often thought about how I killed that beautiful deer the night I drove us home drunk. It happened about three years ago when Coral and I had decided to leave our friend's party when the keg was gone. She had been singing "Tempted by the Fruit of Another" along with the radio. Suddenly the large animal appeared on the road. It just stood there and stared at the oncoming car, its eyes large and frightened. I swerved but it was too late; we heard a sickening thud as the car made contact with its muscular body. Coral and I got out of the car and found the deer sprawled across the road, its legs splayed at odd angles, blood flowing from several gashes. We watched the animal wheeze for breath. Blood bubbles formed at its mouth and nose. I puked in the grass while Coral petted the deer.

"Good, girl," she said. "Good, girl. You'll be at peace soon." I assumed the deer was in complete shock because it didn't jerk away from her touch. I swore it even looked at her and leaned into the caress. "Look what you did, Iris. You fucking killed it."

"What do we do, Coral? What do we do?"

“We have to put it out of its misery. Otherwise it’ll slowly bleed to death.”

Coral’s voice had sounded surprisingly calm.

“How do we do that? I feel so sick.”

“You should feel sick. Look how beautiful it is. Maybe hit it over the head with a rock.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I can’t. You do it.”

She looked at me and continued stroking the deer’s head. “I’m not a murderer.”

I paced and realized I was walking through puddles of blood. “Let’s just go. We gotta get out of here. If the cops drive by, I’m fucked.”

“We can’t just leave it in the road.”

“Fine. Let’s drag it into the grass.” We pulled the deer as gently as we could into the grass on the side of the road. It was still gasping for air.

As we drove away from the site, Coral placed her palm against the window and said, “Bye, bye pretty deer. Bye bye.”

Sometimes I dreamt that I saved the deer, that it miraculously recovered and bounded out into the woods. And sometimes I dreamt it exactly the way it happened and I woke drenched in sweat. It was after that that I decided enough was enough—I had to get clean. Back then I got on high on anything I could—booze, drugs, married men. Now I vacuumed and edited websites.

When Coral woke, she looked over at me sleepily and yawned. She cracked her knuckles one by one and each one emitted a loud pop.

“I hope Helen doesn’t kill me,” she said. Coral had called out mother by her first name for years now so I hardly even noticed. Her shrink told her that it’s a detachment thing, a way to distance herself from our mother.

“Why?”

“I didn’t tell her I was here, that I was coming to see you.”

“Shit, Coral. She is going to be pissed,” I said. “Should I call her?”

“No, please, please don’t. I honestly can’t handle Helen right now. Later. Just don’t tell her I was here. Artie and I will be gone in two days. Plus, since I moved to LA, I hardly hear from her.” Coral wove her thin, bleached blonde hair into a small braid at the nape of her neck. As she braided, her sweatshirt slid up her skinny arm and I could see the thin, splintered scars on her wrists that were souvenirs from her first attempted suicide.

I drove fast through the empty streets; the trees blurred into glorious bursts of orange, yellow and red melting together. “I hate fall,” she whispered, though she knew I didn’t share her distaste since it was my favorite season. I relished the crisp coolness, the whisper of the chill that was approaching, the colors erupting and igniting everywhere.

We sat in silence for a few minutes and the trees flew by us, isolated in the quiet, cold car. She wrapped her arms around her thin body and I turned the heat on for her even though I was sweating in my black t-shirt. She broke the silence and said, “The new shrink in LA says I need to start talking about my problems if I want to get better.”

“Yeah,” I asked, “what do you think about that?”

“It’s stupid. What’s the point?” She fumbled in her purse and pulled out a crumpled, soft pack of cigarettes. “I know you hate it, but please, please can I?”

I sighed. I hated cigarette smoke. I hated that it lingered in the car afterward, soaked into the beige upholstery. I hated that it made me want to smoke even though I quit a year ago. But I couldn't say no to her, not right now. "Fine. But please blow it out the window."

"I will, I promise." Coral lit the cigarette before she rolled down her window, then inhaled deeply with her eyes closed. "Man, that's good," she said, eyes still closed. "All I need is a little vodka to go with it. Vodka and some painkillers." She opened her eyes in time to see my eyebrows raise, signifying my immediate disapproval. "Oh don't worry, I know the rules. No booze or pills in front of you, Miss Goody Two-Shoes. I wouldn't dare ask you to stop at a liquor store. Wait...you won't will you?"

"So, do you think you'll be able to talk to this new shrink? Maybe it will help."

"No way. What the hell will that do now? Nothing, that's what." She took a deep drag on her cigarette and blew a thick cloud toward the ceiling.

"Hey, come on. I said blow it *out* the window."

"You know, you were way more fun when you smoked." She punched me in the arm playfully. "What happened to that girl? The one who used to shotgun beers with me? The one who smoked cigs and didn't give a shit if her car smelled like it? Where's she at?" She laughed.

"That girl was a monster, remember? You're the one who said it earlier."

"Yeah, but you know I don't mean it." Coral had a way of worming her way back into my good graces. She thrust her pack of cigarettes toward me and said, "Come on, bring her back. Smoke one with me."

I hesitated. "Fine," I grumbled. I pulled a cigarette from the pack and lit it quickly and easily with a trained hand while the other steered us along the deserted road. God it

felt good as the smoke filled my lungs, roared through me and burned my throat. It had been several years since my last cigarette and I knew I shouldn't have said yes. Yet I hoped that, unlike Coral, I would not be victim to compulsions and wouldn't smoke another one if I told myself not to. "I'm seriously buzzed from this already. Man, why does it feel this good?" I blew smoke out the crack in my window. "I mean, really, why the hell does it feel good? It burns but I love it."

Coral laughed. "Come on, Iris. The pleasure of the pain. You know that." She leaned against the window and yawned. "How much longer?"

"About half an hour."

"Mind if I take a little snooze?"

"Nope, I'll wake you."

Later, I pulled in the parking lot and gently shook her shoulder. She looked at me groggily and wiped the saliva from her face. "Man, I was out cold."

"Yeah you were."

"I don't really sleep that great at night, ya know? Even though I'm on some new sleeping medication, I still can't sleep. For some reason I can't sleep at night, but I can sleep in cars. Something about the motion lulls me to sleep and I sleep just like a baby..." Coral continued to ramble on, a clear indication that her anti-anxiety medication was wearing off. She paused and pursed her lips. "Hey," she said, her eyes widening, "maybe I should hire somebody to drive me around all night."

"I bet Helen would pay for it." We climbed out of the car and slammed our doors loudly. I could taste the cigarette lingering on my tongue. We walked up to the small pavilion toward the path to the bridge—our favorite place.

I noticed Hank and his small Shih Tzu named Precious sitting in their usual spot. They were like gate keepers—you had to have a conversation with them before moving on toward the towpath trail. Unlike most people, Coral loved Hank and actually enjoyed talking to him. Hank’s skin was leathery, wrinkled and weathered by constant sun exposure and cigarette smoke. His hair was white as milk and he always wore a pastel-colored polo, which, I presume, he thought complemented his unnaturally tan skin tone. He sat with his legs tightly crossed and bounced his right foot. A cigarette was permanently in his hand and a full ashtray sat between him and Precious. His fuzzy white dog lapped water from her silver bowl as he scratched behind her ears with his free hand.

“Hey, Hank,” I said as we approach him. The sweet smell of bourbon invaded my nostrils.

“Well, hello girls,” he said in his gravelly, smokers’ voice. “How goes it, Coral? I haven’t seen you in years.”

“Just in town for a funeral.” Coral plunked down on the bench next to Hank. “How are you? How’s my girl Precious?”

“Same old, same old. Precious and I were just enjoying this weather. Although I wish it were a bit warmer so I could keep up my tan.” He touched his orange skin. “I’m starting to fade. Guess I better hit the tanning booth later today.”

I suppressed a laugh.

“You should come out and visit me in LA,” Coral said. “That’s where I’m living now. You could get an awesome tan there.”

“Oh no, I don’t think Precious would like the hot weather,” Hank said.

“Coral, I’m going to use the restroom before we head out. Need to come?”

“No, I’m good. I’ll hang with Hank.”

They chattered about tanning booths as I headed into the bathroom. When I pushed the door open to rejoin them, I saw Coral drinking from Hank's familiar silver flask. When she saw me, she thrust the flask onto Hank's lap and looked away. I was instantly jealous, a feeling I couldn't explain. I was also angry. Last time I visited the bridge, I ran into Hank, and just like now, he offered me his bourbon. When I told him that I didn't drink anymore, I'd also stressed that I was worried about Coral, that I thought she needed to sober up.

"Hey Hank, give me your flask," I said.

"Why?" He looked at me nervously.

"So I can pour some of your booze into Precious's dish. She wants some."

"No way! It's not good for her."

"Imagine that..." I shot him a glance. As soon as he realized my implication, his face reddened.

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," Coral said quietly.

"Don't be an idiot then." I immediately regretted it, and she turned away to look off into the woods. They smoked their cigarettes in silence, waiting for me to lecture them. Instead, I watched as little drops of drool fell from Precious's pink tongue onto the wooden bench. She looked up at me and it seemed as if the little dog was smiling.

Hank wheezed and then coughed; I felt his whole body seizing on the bench next to me. He spat black-colored phlegm toward the grass and Coral frowned and looked at her cigarette in disgust. She quickly stubbed it out in the overflowing ashtray.

"Ready?" I asked. She nodded and stood up.

We waved goodbye to Hank, who was still coughing, and I patted Precious on her small head. As soon as we were out of Hank's earshot, I whispered to Coral: "I wonder if Precious suffers from second hand smoke."

She laughed so hard that she had to stop to wipe the tears from her eyes, and I knew she had forgiven me.

We trudged down the Ohio Towpath Trail near the canal and veered off the path, disappearing into the woods. Nobody came to this part of the park and we knew this; in fact, that was the appeal of this place. We plodded through the heavy, thick, fragrant grass and swiped at the red-eyed bugs that wanted to suck our blood. The air was heavy with the smell of autumn leaves that were slowly dying, falling from the trees, plummeting to the ground. We didn't talk during this part of the trip and never did, never in all the times we'd come here together. There was something about the bridge's sudden, unexpected appearance that commanded utter silence, reverence. I walked slightly ahead of her, brushing the long weeds out of the way so she could follow behind me without any trouble. After several more steps, we both stopped when we saw it—the old abandoned bridge.

I'd come across this bridge while kayaking with a former boyfriend who was a nature buff. Although we weren't allowed to kayak the Cuyahoga River, we'd done so anyway. We paddled gently through the meandering water and saw the bridge when we navigated around a bend. It was covered in vines, moss, and flowers and I remember thinking it belonged in a Monet painting. I asked him if it would be possible to get to the bridge by foot and he'd said he thought so. He was right; I looked at maps of the park and

discovered that if I went off the towpath trail only about a half mile I could make it to the bridge on foot.

The first time I brought Coral to the bridge, she looked at me with wide, green eyes and said, “Is this where the rabbits are, George?” We’d seen a production of *Of Mice and Men* at the Cleveland Playhouse the week before and she had become fascinated, obsessed with George and Lennie. When the play ended, we walked out into the street and we promptly lit cigarettes. As we sipped vodka from my flask, she said it was obvious that she was Lennie and I was George. Stupidly, I said, “But Lennie dies.”

She shrugged and smiled, as if saying that was the point.

I thought of this as we plodded toward the bridge, as I heard Coral walking behind me, slowly, like a child I needed to protect. I knew what she meant about us being George and Lennie. I *knew* how George felt about Lennie, how he would have done anything to save him from himself. I also knew the resentment that George must have felt toward Lennie.

I told her to climb up first so I could catch her if she fell off. She used to be athletic and strong, but she’d gotten so skinny now that I knew I’d have no trouble hoisting her back up if she fell. She wobbled and struggled but eventually made it up. I hauled myself up easily with one muscled arm and swung my legs up and over.

We sat on the bridge adorned with vines, scarlet leaves and wildflowers and watched the water rush over the rocks. Coral claimed she liked to come here because it was peaceful, but I knew better; she came to watch the water moving fluidly, rapidly, uninterrupted. Coral stood up on the bridge and peered over the edge, an action that would have scared me years ago, but not now. I knew she’d never jump, not with me

here. Our mother once said that Coral was safest with me, that she would never hurt herself in my presence.

Coral sat back down and broke the quiet: “This one guy, Dave, who I met at that clinic Helen made me go to after I cut myself, was obsessed with the Discovery Channel. One of the nurses liked him so it was always blaring in the common room. I mean blaring, like really, ridiculously loud, Iris. Anyway, did you know that there are suicide pelicans that live in Costa Rica?”

“No. Wait...*suicide* pelicans?”

“Yeah, these pelicans, they crash into the rocks to kill themselves. Iris, they fucking dive bomb into rocks bigger than those,” she said, pointing at the large rocks in the river.

“On purpose?”

“Yeah, they think they do it on purpose. Because they go blind. Constant fishing, you know, diving into the water for fish, blinds them, and after their vision goes, they give up and don’t want to live. So they fly up real high and get going fast,” she said, flailing her thin arms in an attempt to imitate flying, “and they crash, head first, into the rocks.”

“And they showed this to you? *There?*”

“Well, not intentionally, but yeah, they left it on. Dave asked for them to put on the Discovery Channel and it just happened to be on that day.”

“They left it on?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She laughed. “Not everyone admitted there was...like me, but obviously we were all broken in some way, so naturally we were all riveted to the TV. One guy, Scott, said he was gonna get a pelican tattoo when he got out.”

“I can’t believe they left that on the TV. Did any of the nurses see? Or any of the doctors?”

“Oh yeah, they noticed. One of the nurses was completely fascinated by the show, too. What got me, personally, wasn’t that they voluntarily killed themselves. It was that people were trying to teach the birds not to do this. Researchers were actually studying these birds in the attempt to prevent their suicide, in the attempt to save them. That got to me. Why stop them from something that seems instinctive to them?”

I gave her a look.

“What? Iris, don’t look at me like that. You don’t know what it’s like. You’re...normal now. You cleaned up and look how great you’re doing.”

“I don’t feel great. I struggle every single day. You could do it, ya know. You could get cleaned up. You could move back here, move in with me, and I would help you.” As soon as I said it, I thought of Greg and what he would say. He’d probably dump me if Coral moved in with me.

“You know what this new guy said? This new shrink? He told us during a group session that we are normal, or at least have the potential to be normal, but that we are simply amplified. I think the fucker heard that in a movie, or something. I mean, come on buddy. *Amplified?*”

I didn’t say anything because I doubted she wanted to hear that for once I agreed.

We sat for another hour and listened to the rush of water on rock and sand. Coral and I watched a blue heron gracefully step through the water on lithe legs in search for fish. Every once in awhile, the female heron raised one leg silently, elegantly, as she

peered down at the water. The crickets and frogs sang a rough and disjointed symphony that was oddly soothing to my ears.

“The other night, when I actually slept, I dreamt about us,” Coral said. “We were toddlers on the beach, playing in the sand. As the waves roared closer and closer, we built up walls around us so no one could get in, not even the waves, so no one could hurt us. Like an idiot, I told my shrink about this dream. You should have heard what he said.”

“Oh boy...I can only image he went all Freud, psychoanalytic on you. Tell me,” I said, clapping my hands lightly. “I love this psycho-babble!”

“Of course.” She cleared her throat. “He said this means I’m longing for protection and that I see you as the only person who can be with me under this protection,” she said in a deep voice in the attempt to impersonate her male doctor. “He said that the walls symbolized my vagina and my virginity and that I was subconsciously trying to protect it and avoid penetration.”

“Holy shit! What did you say back?”

“Nothing. I was laughing so hard I couldn’t talk.”

As we laughed, the old bridge swayed a little beneath our weight. I touched the bridge, ran my hands along the soft, green moss.

“I want to get married on this bridge,” I told her. Immediately, she yanked my left hand off my lap to examine my fingers. Her hand was so cold that I flinched when she touched me.

“Holy hell! Your boy didn’t propose did he?” She searched my hand for a ring.

I laughed. “No, no, no. We’re nowhere even near that serious. I was just thinking as we were sitting here that I would love to get married here. I doubt Greg and I will even end up together. He’s what Mom would call ‘a stick in the mud’.”

“Yeah, but maybe that’s a good thing,” Coral said. “Maybe we need more of that in our lives.” She looked at me and squeezed my hand. I’d always been impressed by her uncanny ability to yo-yo from insanity back to sanity in mere seconds.

After another hour passed, I told her we better go.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Who knows where Artie is. He’s probably waiting in your lobby! Oops.”

I jumped off the bridge and landed on my feet. Coral made her way down the bridge awkwardly, clumsily, clinging to the rusting metal. I stood below and waited for her to fall. She didn’t.

The next morning, I woke Coral and Artie early so they wouldn’t miss the funeral. I made breakfast while they pulled on black clothes. I made pancakes since they were more comforting than eggs. While I cooked, Artie and Coral got high in the bathroom, or so I assumed.

“So who died?” I asked once they emerged. They were careful not to make eye contact with me.

“My buddy,” Artie said. “He had a meth problem. The poor guy was hospitalized a bunch of times. I guess this was bound to happen.”

“Well, I’m sorry. Funerals are always hard.”

Coral stood next to me in the kitchen and poked a pancake that was cooking in the skillet. I wrapped my arm around her and squeezed her bony shoulder.

After she ate a pile of pancakes, Coral turned to me. “Iris, why don’t you come with us? She could come, right Artie?”

“Sure. The more the merrier.” Somehow that little saying didn’t seem to apply to funerals, but I held my tongue.

“Really? You want me to, Coral?”

She nodded. After I washed my face and threw on a long black dress, we piled into Artie’s fully-loaded black Mercedes. He hit a few buttons on the radio and rap music filled the car, and I swore the leather seats were pulsing. Both he and Coral lit cigarettes and bobbed their heads to the beat. She leaned over her seat and offered me a cigarette. I shook my head, then closed my eyes and tried not to think about how good it would feel to smoke one.

The church was old and had an abandoned, eerie feel to it. I broke out in sweat even though the large room was frigid. We chose pews near the back and sat down; somehow I got stuck sitting between my sister and her bizarre boyfriend. Coral fidgeted with the rings on her hands and hummed to herself.

“How old was he?” I whispered to Artie.

“Twenty-three.”

Coral abruptly stopped twirling her oversized rings and looked at Artie. “Really, Artie? Same age as me,” she murmured.

“Yeah. Just a baby. Like you.” He reached across me to rub her arm. She pulled away and continued to spin the rings on her fingers.

“How did you know him?” I asked.

“Well, we used to do business together when I lived up here,” Artie said. “When I was in sales, that is.”

I knew what that meant, that they sold drugs together, and I wondered if he felt any remorse regarding the kid’s death. I looked around at the sparse group of congregants

and was surprised there weren't more people at the funeral. But then I remembered what my group said—that most addicts alienate themselves and destroy their relationships. The service started and we stood. I saw who I presumed to be the boy's mother standing in the first pew. She wept into crumpled tissue and, even from our seats in the back, I could see how she hunched her shoulders, as if pulling herself inward.

Throughout the service, Coral cried. Every time I looked over at her, her face was wet and red from crying. She wrapped her arms across her body and rocked back and forth, as if in an attempt to soothe herself. Artie, oblivious to Coral, stared straight ahead with cold, unblinking eyes.

I looked back and forth at them—Artie flipped through the prayer booklet while Coral wept into her hands—and I felt like an alien standing between them, completely removed from the situation. I felt nothing. Even when I looked up at the casket or the weeping mother, I felt nothing. What the hell was wrong with me? Was the reason I couldn't relate to Artie's denial or Coral's sadness because I had recovered from my addiction? If so, this realization did not comfort me. Coral continued to cry at my side, and I was jealous of her emotion. Was this what it had felt? I couldn't remember what it felt like when you realized how fucked up you were, how messed up life had become. And I wanted to remember—suddenly it seemed so important to remember. I wanted to feel what Coral was feeling because feeling something was better than feeling nothing.

When we got back into the car, they acted as if nothing had happened. Artie punched the radio until he found a hard rap song that throbbed and pounded in the small car. They lit cigarettes and moved to the beat. A slower blues song came on and Coral

began to sing along; I'd never noticed how beautiful her voice was—low and throaty. It occurred to me that I never really listened to her before. Never *really* listened.

The apartment seemed different when we got home. Of maybe it was us who had changed, but either way, something was different. I couldn't put my finger on it. After a moment, I realized that for the first time since their arrival, Coral and Artie weren't touching, weren't acting all lovey-dovey.

“Hey, can I nap in your room?” Coral asked.

“What, you don't want to snuggle with me?” Artie looked hurt. “You know I like touching your skin, baby.”

“I just want to be alone, that's all.”

“Sure, go ahead,” I followed her in and sat on the edge of the bed while she undressed and climbed under the covers. I saw that she was shaking. “Is something wrong?”

“I feel kinda sick. I just want to rest for awhile.”

“What the hell should I do with Artie?”

“I don't care.” She closed her eyes, and I assumed that was my cue to leave.

I walked back into the living room and saw Artie shoving his things into a blue plastic bag. “Listen, doll,” he said, “I'm going to go see some friends while she takes a nap. I'll be back later. Don't wait up.” He paused at the door and grinned, revealing his broken, decaying teeth that made me want to puke.

“Bye, Artie.” I closed the door and locked it.

I had never been to the bridge in winter, but I was curious to see what it looked like in the snow. I wanted to take a picture to send Coral. She was away again, off in

some new clinic that our mother had convinced her to attend. After a couple weeks, I finally told my mother that Coral was staying with me. Even though Coral seemed to be making progress, our mother had promptly arranged for her to go to a rehabilitation clinic—her fourth visit in three years.

Winter was Coral's least favorite season—she hated the cold more than she hated the dark—and if she were with me, she'd be complaining about it. I headed toward the pavilion and noticed that the place where Hank and Precious sat was vacant, as if they knew they don't need to be there because Coral was gone. At first, I couldn't understand why Coral loved to chat with Hank...he was an old chain-smoking drunk with a fuzzy white pet that looked more like rodent than a dog. Eventually, I realized that Coral was drawn to him because he was broken too. He would never judge her behavior like I had. Unconditional acceptance, that's what Hank and Precious provided, what Coral so desperately craved.

I slogged through the snow, toward the bridge, and thought of all the things I wanted to say to her, all the things that I had always felt but never had the courage to speak. There were times when I understood her, times when I understood the pleasure in the abandonment, the recklessness that accompanied the fall, the swing from normalcy to lunacy, the fine line between sanity and madness, the small crack that was stepped over in one footstep, crossed in a second, the line broken by a whisper. I knew what it felt like to surrender to drugs. But somehow I'd found a way not to.

As I plodded toward the bridge, my boots sunk down into the heavy snow, creating funny little holes that the falling snow would surely fill. There were no other tracks around me, not even animal tracks, and something about the solitude and the silence comforted me. I thought of all the things I couldn't tell her. I couldn't tell her that

she disgusted me. That when I saw her with Artie I was so repulsed by her that I wanted to smack her across the face to wake her up.

I couldn't tell her that I resented her for what she had done to my life, for how she had invaded and changed every aspect of my existence. The obligation of taking care of her trumped everything else in my life. I hadn't seen Greg in a month, which was my decision that was partially influenced by his skepticism and doubt in my sobriety. I also knew he'd never accept Coral, even if she did stop using. He would always see her as a destructive force in my life. And maybe she was, but I loved her. I knew that because now, when she was gone and I was alone in the snow with nothing but my racing thoughts, I realized loving her, taking care of her, was something I chose to do. I imposed this responsibility on myself, and when it was gone, when she was gone, I felt empty. Helping Coral helped define me – I was Iris, her savior with wings. It had become a normal part of my life, as natural as waking up in the morning. And like goddess Iris, I swooped down, scooped her up, and rescued her from herself.

Though the snow was peaceful and imposed a silence that was appealing to me, I missed the colors and the flowers. I missed the thick blanket of dandelions that swallowed the grass, and the sound of Coral's anxious, hyper, chattering presence. I vowed to take better care of her when she came home from the clinic. I'd help her build a healthy life; I'd prevent her from becoming like Artie's friend who died.

Standing by the silent white bridge, I thought of Coral, of the last time I saw her, when I drove her to the rehab clinic. Helen found a clinic that was out of state; she thought it would be better for Coral to be far away. Coral and I left early and the winter morning was bleak and cold. She looked out the window for the first hour and said the dark motion soothed her.

We didn't talk. We listened to the tires moving over the road, watched the winter sun climb higher in the sky as the hours passed. I let her smoke and she did often. Slowly, methodically, Coral removed her rings from her fingers, and placed them in my cup holder. I picked up her favorite one and slid it onto my finger, told her I would take care of it while she was gone. She nodded and turned back to the window.

Shortly before we reached the clinic, the sun had slipped lower, its oranges and reds fading slowly, blending together into pink and gold. I drove and she leaned her yellow head against the window. Something about the gentle, sloping curve of Coral's fragile neck reminded me of dandelions. I thought of when we were younger, when the neighborhood boys used to pluck dandelions from the grass, slide their grubby boy-hands up the slim stems and pop the heads off. As they beheaded the dandelions, they used to yell: "Mama had a baby and its head popped off!" It bothered me back then to see the flower broken, its head alone on the grass. All it took was one quick slide of the thumb and, *pop*, the glorious yellow-petaled head came off.

End