

Almost an Island

by

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THE CLOUDED EYES OF AN ALBACORE

The day the restaurant opens I'm in the kitchen early. The sea urchin ship alive, wrapped in newspaper, and packed in cardboard boxes. Using shears, I cut them open and spoon out eggs the color of ochre, and lay them on ice. I set aside the shells, like bird's nests, for plating.

In my picture in Dine&Wine, I look short, standing next to the entrance of Opu. Underneath the photo they printed, "Executive Chef Kenzo Amamoto." My arms look thin and my eyebrows fade into nothing. I cut the photo out before tacking the article to the kitchen wall.

The article quotes me, "You'll never appreciate a dish when your wife leaves you, or your boss fires you. No, you remember the food you eat on your honeymoon, or your birthday, when you're surrounded by people you care for. You remember food connected to people, or a conversation, or a feeling." I'm described by my "wild eyes" and "restless hands."

"Opu will only serve dinner, and dinner will only be served at seven."

It took months to build the menu, to train, to prepare. Tonight, the kitchen clatters, but no one speaks as we prep for the dinner service. I listen for the click of the gas, for the scrape of metal pans, for the cry of escaping steam. I check the cuts for consistency. Everything slows and sizzles.

At seven, the guests are seated. I look for Arisa. It's a small dining room. Just five, long tables in the clean, gray room. She's sitting in the center of the room at a table by herself. The design is modern and vaguely Japanese, with low wooden benches. The

centerpiece is a plastic cow, mid-step. His head is turned and his mouth opened. Guests chat in a rumbling murmur. After a quarter of an hour, it dies down. Tables grow quiet. Arisa looks to the kitchen window, and I wave. She smiles with her lips closed. Couples turn to look at other guests, or out the window, or at the cow. The chatter simmers. They run out of things to look at. Someone asks what is taking so long. Another says that *they* were on time. I wait. A man, sitting at the edge of the room with a large group, picks up the cow. He shakes it. I watch through the kitchen window. He shakes it harder, but nothing happens. He flips the cow over.

“MOO” springs from an in-belly speaker. Arisa laughs, and flips her cow over.

“MOO MOO” The room erupts in laughter, and in this moment the waiters deliver the first course: Wagyu beef with soy garlic. It’s on a bed of micro-greens, arranged to look like a plot of grass.

The reporter asked for dinner reservations for the opening night. The article he’d written was just a press-piece about the concept, but the next issue would publish the review. Dine&Wine had an exclusive for the first run of Opu’s dining experience. I considered test-trying the dinner, but I didn’t really have friends in New York, and I didn’t trust strangers to keep the surprise.

The reporter had emailed questions to me before he came, so I had time to think about how I would answer. When asked about my least favorite meal, I said, “beef-a-roni.”

The reporter laughed and asked me why. “I used to make it when I first came to New York, and couldn’t afford fresh food. It tastes like ketchup.”

If I was honest, the meal that sticks in my mind is salmon, Cajun-rubbed, and served over butter grits, with Arisa across the table, at the place she recommended. The napkins

were paper. The silverware was thin metal. I remember cutting into the soft belly of the salmon, and feeling the spice warm my mouth and flush my cheeks. I thought she might see the article. Maybe a friend would show it to her, or she'd be on the train and someone would be reading the magazine. Either way, I didn't want her to think that this was just about her.

I had met Arisa in Mizu, while I was still working in an open kitchen, and she, at dinner with friends, had seen me and sent over her number written on the linen napkin. At first, I was bothered by the ink stained linen, but I hadn't been on a date in a while. When you work every day, you don't meet many women. My life had wound into a tight circle. I walked the same streets, to the same job, and back again. The waiter pointed her out, and there she was, surrounded by a group of glittering women. She was laughing, but covering her mouth with her hand. She wore a shift dress in a black velvet, and I made two octopus dishes, instead of one, and burned the béchamel, and dropped a box of oranges before the night was over.

I called her after the service. It wasn't until I heard her voice, heavy with sleep, that I realized how late it was. I apologized, but she said she was happy I called. She said she saw me working and was taken with my intensity. Passionate, she said. I asked her if she enjoyed her meal, and she said it was the best meal she'd ever had. I offered to cook for her again, but she said she "knew a place."

Her hair, a triangle of curls, bloomed out and bounced when she ate. Arisa was a self-proclaimed foodie. Her nose was a button mushroom. At dinner, we discussed the proper method for butchering albacore, which she knew little about, and I was happy to explain. She nodded as I spoke, but her eyes drifted around the room. She sat straight up with her hands in her lap, like a picture of a girl. She worked in the Restoration Hardware in

the mall, and said she found my job glamorous. I asked her if she liked restoration.

“Have you been in a Restoration Hardware?”

I said I hadn't.

“You should come sometime. We have some nice knife sets.” She leaned forward on her elbows.

“I have knives.” She was wearing a sweater-set in a pumpkin orange. I wore a black button down, black pants, and my black work shoes. The shoes were grease-stained, the white soles had turned green from dirty kitchen floors. I had other shoes, but these ones made me an inch taller, and before our date I realized that I didn't know how tall she was, because I'd only seen her sitting down. I gauged her height when I picked her up, and I was fairly certain that we were practically the same height. I still felt glad that I wore the shoes, and believed my outfit to be slick, until I realized that I matched the waiters.

“I match the waiters.”

She laughed so hard that her eyes crinkled and her nose bunched up. I laughed too, it seeming like a joke between us. When the waiter came back, she asked to take a photo of us. I don't like being photographed, but I didn't want to ruin something, so I held the waiter's drink tray, while he sat in my chair across from Arisa, and she snapped the photo and smiled.

After the Wagyu beef is cleared, the waiters deliver letters, written by a team at Hallmark, complimenting each guest. Dear Mrs. So-and-so, how amazing you are. How lovely your taste! How shapely your features! What grace and poise and generosity you must bring to this world!

I wrote the letter for Arisa. I said she reminded me of home. I said that I wasn't

trying to win her back. I understood that she wasn't mine to win. I just wanted to know her. I wanted to understand what happened.

I watch the waiter with my letter walk past Arisa and deliver it to another woman. This woman, with a red beret, touches her chest and wells up. Arisa gets some other letter, saying who knows what. The second course is served: Opu Nopili, mushimono clam, sea bass, in ginger broth. The woman asks to keep the letter, but I tell the waiter to tell her no.

I wrap the Opu Nopili fish in tea leaves and cook in the stone oven. They're lucky fish, capable of climbing up waterfalls. They cling to the rocks to climb and swim upstream. In Hawaii, they're consumed ceremonially to encourage luck to cling.

My grandmother cooked them for me before I left the island. She cried and cooked and yelled at me.

“Why leave? I'll teach you to cook here.”

She pulled the tab off the can of spam, turned it upside down, and let it slide into the pan.

“You don't like my cooking?” With a wooden spatula she broke up the meat, and mixed it with the fish, and doused it in sugar and soy sauce. It smelled like oil and the ocean. Her kitchen was all orange: the cabinets, the porcelain knobs, the floral curtains. Her hair was tied up, and her face looked soft like dough.

I called every Sunday while I was in cooking school. Then, after I got my first job at Saints, I called once a month. She sends me postcards sometimes, as though she's on vacation. On them, she tells me what she is growing in her garden, and what she's watching

on tv. I bought some postcards, one of the Statue of Liberty, one of Times Square, but I never know what to say.

The summer we met, I packed a picnic for Arisa. We went to the park in Fort Green and sat on a bench and ate crab fried rice, with tobiko, and scallions. I learned that she liked plums, and biking, and these small brown birds whose name I don't remember anymore. She smiled at strangers and nodded to them like she knew them. I read an article about how to appear open, and so I was nodding when she spoke, and maintaining eye contact, angling my body towards her, and cataloguing what she ate, her reaction to what she ate, and what order she ate it in. She picked at the tobiko and separated the bubble-like eggs from the rice.

“You don't like them.” She followed my gaze to her plate.

“I'm just not a fan of caviar.”

“Well, it's not caviar.” Flecks of rice caught in the weave of her shirt. I reached over to pick them out, but she leaned back.

“What is it then?”

“The eggs of flying fish. Caviar is sturgeon. You know, I could show you what I mean. I go to a fish market every week, and I think you'd like it.”

“I don't like fish eggs.” She pulled at the grass.

“You won't come?”

“Is this a fancy thing?”

“It's a market for chef's only.”

“So, it's exclusive?” she asked.

I shrugged.

For the third course, a team of makeup artists and professional stylists file into Opu, each dressed in black turtlenecks and slicked back hair. They set up at each table and thicken brows, line lips, and wrap scarves around patrons. This takes longer than I expect. Some people seem offended by the plucking of stray hairs. A few people refuse the fake lashes. I watch from the kitchen door. I'm waiting for someone to say "God, you look beautiful." I want them to say, "I never could have imagined that you could look this good."

I watch Arisa wipe the red lipstick off onto her napkin. She adjusts the hat, and watches the room with a smile that I can't decipher. A wife laughs at her husband's quaffed hair. A daughter looks suddenly too mature, and the parents grow silent. A man, who had gone to the bathroom, walked past his girlfriend's table because he no longer recognized her. She, in a blonde wig and bright lipstick, had to stand and call his name, and wave her arms, for him to come back. He walked back to her, and hesitated before he sat down with his knees turning away.

The reporter, now wearing a bowler hat, writes something down. I tell the waiters to compliment them instead, and push them out the door.

"Beautiful."

"Quite lovely."

"Dashing." The waiters mumble the words while they serve the dish: Agemono squash blossoms served on a black sheet of slate, centered atop a bed of mung sprouts, with a light miso drizzle.

That summer, I met Arisa at Roy's Fish Market on a Sunday morning. The sun had yet to rise, but the sky was a brilliant white. I wore my thick-soled, rubber boots, and a green flannel.

“What, are we going fishing?” She asked nodding at my outfit.

“Did you want to go fishing?”

“No. No, I didn’t” She wore a cream turtleneck under a trench coat. She scrunched her face as we walked into the market. The building used to be South Central Train station. The bones of the station remain. The high-arched windows funnel the rising sun into the cavernous market. The single-paned glass is original. You can tell from the way the surface wavers. The glass is so old that sun has melted it over time. The ceiling stretches high above the vendor’s booths. The space is a maze of tables, and signs, and display cases. Gray sole, and whitebait, and butterfish nestled into beds of crushed ice. The packed, white ice shavings glitter around the smooth, scaled bodies. Clams yawn open. Lobsters drift through green-tinted glass.

She stopped in front of a stand of butchered octopus.

“Why did we have to get here so early?” she asked.

“All the good catches sell early.”

“You’re going to buy fish now?” The flanks of fresh tuna gleamed like polished marble.

“Do you not want me to?”

She rubbed her arms, and turned away from me.

“Can’t we just go to breakfast?”

“We can eat here. Have you ever had oysters for breakfast? Did you know New York used to be known for its oysters?” I led her over to a vender. The shells clattered together. I ordered us a couple Pacific oysters, some Kumamotos, Bluepoints, and Wellfleets. She rubbed her eyes, but smiled when I handed her a shell. We clinked them together like glasses, and I showed her how to pull the meat away from the base, and slurp

back the buttery brine of the oyster. I imagined us coming back to the market each week.

What makes people happy? Is it butter and salt? Is it wine and dim lighting? Do people enjoy food more when they laugh or cry? Does joy taste like salted ungai and chardonnay? Can you ruin it with too much salt? Is there a recipe for it? Or is it something that you can't reproduce?

In the dining room are two actors, who I hired to pretend to be diners. One turns to the other and begins to say lovely things about what they mean to them, and how they could not live without them. That actor kneels and cracks open a velvet box. Inside sits a single pearl ring. The woman pauses in shock and looks around the room as if seeking advice. Some people lean over to watch, and coo when he gets down on one knee. Arisa yawns and checks her phone. It makes me want to stop the whole thing. I want to tell her never mind. She laughs at something on her screen. The phone screen lights her face. She should leave. Forget it. Tears well in the actor's eyes, and the ring slides onto her finger. The people applaud. The waiters dish out sazae conch with a dashi foam.

After the trip to the market, I called her. She didn't answer, so I sent her a picture of my dinner: a bowl of fried rice with fried oysters. She didn't answer. I sent her an invite to a jazz concert. I bought stamps and sent her a postcard with flowers on it. I went to the market alone and waved at someone that I thought was her, but wasn't.

I showed up at the Restoration Hardware at the Harrison Shopping Center. I hadn't been to a mall in a long time. Not since I worked at Mizu, lunch and dinner. Every day I went to the market in the morning before work, and the bar down the street after work.

When I wore holes in a pair of shoes, I would order the same pair again. At some point, I ordered five of the same pair of black reebok.

The white tiles gleamed under the intense, artificial lights. Christmas music blared. I stood in the entrance of the Restoration Hardware. I had pictured it as a workshop, a builder's studio, or something. Instead, it looked like the living room of a mayor, or foreign diplomat. There was a series of different living room set-ups: one with blue velvet couches, another furnished with plush, white leather. Each had golden chandeliers the size of an industrial oven. I thumbed stonewashed Belgian duvet covers, while I scanned the room for her.

She was talking to a man, gesturing to a line of table lamps. She turned a lamp on and off. The man was gray-haired, and standing with his back to me. I walked up, and tapped her shoulder. I felt suddenly young.

"Arisa, can we talk?" Her face fell and she flicked the light. Then she smiled, and called the man "sir."

"Excuse me, sir" she said, and walked down the aisle of throw pillows. I followed after.

"You haven't answered my calls."

It sounded vulgar in the gleaming mall.

"I know and I'm sorry," She looked over my shoulder. "I just felt like we weren't working. Didn't you feel that?"

I tugged on a tassel, and the pillow tumbled into the aisle. She sighed, and picked it up, and stacked it back on the display.

"I'm opening a restaurant and I want you to come." At this point, I'd only told my grandmother about the restaurant. I mailed the news on a postcard of the city skyline at

sunset.

“Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I took her hand.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to talk to me anymore.” She pulled her hand away and adjusted a picture frame. The gold frame held a single cameo, the size of a nickel, surrounded by empty matte.

“Didn’t you get my messages?”

“I guess. I guess could come to this thing. You know, to support you,” she looked up at the white mall ceiling, “then we could talk about this.”

In the kitchen, separated from the guests by a paper divider, I prepare the fifth dish. The cod roe pickle while I whisk the sauce on low heat, careful not to break. I taste the roe and think there’s no way that Arisa won’t like it. The albacore bleed onto the cutting board with clouded eyes. I feel for the hard, scaly material that runs from the pectoral to the fin. I press forefinger to knife and cut off black tail. Knife slips under skin and runs up and along the flesh of his flank. To cut through the spine I hit my palm against the back of the knife to break through soft bone. I detach head from body and cut collars free. To preserve tender flesh, I wrap in sushi paper.

I wait for the burst of laughter, or the torrent of surprise, before cutting albacore belly in thin sheets and pin-wheeling the body around ginger slices. I serve the dish on ice sculpted to look like animal joints, and top with orange bubbles of roe. I dust the plate in Cajun spice.

I turn on the Vitamin D lights above the main dining room. A soft orange glow floods the room. It filters through the fake tree branches, casting webbed shadows across

the tables. The white table cloths adopt the color. Everyone looks sleepy and thoughtful as they take spoons to the last dish. From the window, I watch her scoop up the roe and dump it on the edge of her plate.

After the waiters clear the plates, the reviewer comes to the kitchen door and waves. I let him in and he looks around the kitchen like he's thinking of buying it. He shakes my hand. I ask him what he thought, and how it was, and was it okay. He looks at his watch, and tells me I'll have to wait for the issue to come out. He winks, and I feel tired.

Arisa stayed behind. I found her sitting at her table under the glow of the lights. I thanked her for coming.

"What are friends for," She said with a sad smile.

"What are friends for?" I traced a stain on the tablecloth.

"I was thinking I'd like to come again." She stood up and put her coat on.

"Okay," I looked up at her, "that would be okay."

"Could I bring someone?" She faced the door, like she was asking the room, instead of me.

"What?"

"It's just that it was boring, you know, without someone to talk to during dinner."

The string from the tablecloth hung loose, and I tugged on it, pulling the hem apart.

"So, could I bring someone?"

"Like a date?"

"Kenzo, please." She put her hand on her forehead like I exhausted her.

I think of our first date; I think of the way the fat bubbled white on the body of the fish. The grits were overcooked and over-salted. The wine was cheap. She had lipstick on her

teeth and asked whether I was an executive chef, or just a cook. I told her that I was a sous chef, and she asked if a “soup chef” made good money.

Arisa walks out, then turns to wave behind the glass door. I raise my hand and leave it up until she disappears around the corner. In the kitchen, the staff wipe stainless steel countertops and load the industrial washer. Someone mops. Someone rolls silverware. Someone scrapes uneaten food into black trash bags. I stay in the dining room, the sun lamps still casting down. My skin glows orange, and I will my body to soak it up. There is a smudge of makeup on the tablecloth, and a cow kicked under a table. My mouth feels dry and heavy and I don't understand the taste.

COFFEE WITH HENRY

Henry,

You said you like letters. You were standing in front of the mailboxes in our building, and you were holding this sunshine yellow envelope. You smiled at me when I came in the front door. I like letters, you said. You held up the envelope like it was proof. So, I've decided to write you letters. I know we don't know each other very well. I'll let some time to pass (one month) before I start sending them. By that time, I believe we'll have a friendship, maybe something else, and you'll be glad that I documented our beginning.

Here is what I know: you live in 6A and your name is Henry. You don't get many packages so I'm thinking you like to shop locally, or you don't like to waste cardboard boxes, or you're careful about how you spend your money, or you have a girlfriend and you send your boxes to her house. You seem to go to your apartment nearly every night, so I'm guessing that you don't have a girlfriend. Maybe you do, and I just miss you coming and going. It's not like I'm always in the lobby.

I live in 8H. I'm the one with the brown hair, who always wears high heels. You've never commented on my shoes, but I've seen you watch me walk. The first time we spoke I was wearing my pink suede shoes, white jeans, and a white turtleneck. My hair was pulled high. I had seen a picture of Angelina Jolie wearing this exact outfit. You knocked on my door.

I'd said hey, and tightened my ponytail. You'd asked if I owned the dog who barked all night. I said no, and opened my door like an invitation to check. You said thanks and left.

From the peppering of gray hairs I'd guess that you're not in your twenties like me. Maybe you're thirty, or thirty-five, but definitely not a day older. You have a couple of lines

around your eyes, which suggests that you smile often, but otherwise, your skin is smooth. There's a smattering of freckles across your nose, which makes you look young to me.

The next time I see you, I'm going to ask you out for coffee. Sometimes when you're leaving the apartment, you're carrying a thermos. I think you must drink coffee. We'll find out when I ask.

Wish me luck, Jordan

Henry,

I was heading out to work at Sister Scissors, the salon downtown. When you were coming in, and I held the door for you.

"Thank you," you said, and I said "Get coffee with me?" I looked towards the door when I said it because I wanted the light from the window to make my skin look clear and glowing. But you were rooting in your bag for your keys and asked "What?" without looking up. I turned away from the door.

"Coffee. Do you drink it?"

You smiled and your eyes moved past me, towards the green tile stairway. You said you'd love to, but you couldn't right now. You had your keys in-hand and you spun them on your middle finger.

I asked why and crossed my arms, leaning back with one heel forward to make my legs look longer.

You said that you just couldn't today, but it was nice of me to ask. I smiled, and walked up the stairs ahead of you, so that you'd watch me walk away. It wasn't until I got inside my apartment that I remembered that I was leaving for work. After I heard your door lock, I walked quietly back downstairs.

I don't believe that you were busy, and I don't think that you thought it was nice that I invited you to coffee. If you don't want to do something, just say that you can't. I don't understand why people lie like that.

I'm a little mad at you, but by the time you're reading this so much will have changed. I won't be mad at you anymore, but I think it's good that we're honest early on. I thought about tearing up the first letter, but I didn't, because I know this will be important to us later.

Best, Jordan

Henry,

It's a nice day. I'm sitting on the front steps, and I look great. I'm not waiting for you exactly, but the thought of possibly seeing you makes my chest feel knotted. People keep walking past. For a moment I think they are you. My blood runs in circles. And I hate them. I hate all of these people who could be you, but are not.

I don't know what it is about you. There's some difference. You have a grace that makes it seem as though you're trying to touch the world as lightly as possible. You seem like you're constantly waking from a dream with this happy, tired look on your face. And me? I'm clomping around and smashing everything underfoot. I'm altogether too awake. I want some of what you have. I want some of that sleepy-lightness.

Henry,

You just walked up the street. You're wearing a black t-shirt and a jean jacket, and you looked like a movie star. I looked at you over my sunglasses and said "You look like a movie star." I thought you'd say it back.

Instead, you asked what I was writing. I covered the page with my arm. I told you that I was writing a love letter. I saw a spark of jealousy in your eye. I nearly choked on my own happiness.

You called me old fashioned, and I told you I am a romantic. I asked you if you wanted to get coffee, or tea? Do you drink tea? You told me that you'd just had coffee, and smiled. I tried to gauge the yellowness of your teeth to figure out if you were lying to me again. Were you?

I held the door for you and followed you inside our building. I pretended to check my mailbox, and I asked you about your day. You said you went to work. You turned the silver key in your mailbox and a handful of envelopes fell out. I knelt on the ground to gather the mail, and noted that you have a subscription to a cooking magazine, many offers for credit cards, and a catalog from Sears. I asked where you worked. You said Bank of America, and I said, that's my favorite one. You smiled, took your mail from my hands. You started up the stairs and I walked with you. I asked if you liked your job. You said that people are the worst, and dug your keys from your bag. Surely not all people. I said, your girlfriend probably isn't the worst. Your keys were now in the door. I stepped closer to you. Your girlfriend is probably is really great. I kept talking. She works some great job, and has shiny hair, and does pilates or yoga. You opened the door a silver wide, squeezed through, and shut the door behind you.

I think you must be shy, because you didn't say much. But you seem like a good listener, and that's honestly what I'm looking for.

Yours, Jordan

Henry,

Yesterday, after work at the salon, I went to the bar in my blue satin heels. I ordered a Manhattan and pretended to watch the game on tv. I kept checking my watch to pretend I was waiting for someone. Sometimes when I do this, guys will come over and say things like, “Jeez, who would stand you up?” Then I get to act all sad and they get to feel like they’re saving me. I was waiting for something like this to happen. I saw a man I thought was you. He was leaning forward, talking to the bartender. For a moment, I kept looking straight ahead. I knew he probably wasn’t you, but I wanted to live in the possibility for a little longer. Then he shifted. I couldn’t help myself and turned to look.

He wasn’t you, but he did look a bit like you. You both have short, cropped dark hair, and faces made of tight angles. You have similar frames, but his shoulders seemed broader, and he seemed a little taller. His eyebrows are thicker, and his nose more rounded, but he has a similar poise. If I squint, he looks like you.

I yelled down to him that he looked like someone I know. He must not have known how to respond, because he pretended not to hear me. A girl sitting next to me gave me a look, so I walked down to where he was sitting and asked him what he was drinking.

He said it didn’t matter, which surprised me. But it seemed like something you might say, so I went with it. He doesn’t live in our building, but he does own a jean jacket. He works at the GNC in the mall, and likes mountain bike riding. He likes my shoes. He reads detective novels.

I asked him if he’d like to get coffee sometime. He shrugged, which I took as a yes. I figured this would be good practice for my first date with you. I could take him to a coffee shop and practice ordering and making conversation. Then I’d know what to adjust for our date (which I need to be perfect).

On the way home from the bar, I called my mom and told her I'd met someone new. She said okay. In the background, music played, and I asked her if she could go somewhere quieter. The sound shuffled, then a door clicked, and the beat of the music muffled. I asked her if she thought I came across too intense. She said my name like a warning.

I told her that I'd be bringing you home for Thanksgiving, and she let out a snort, which she claimed was a sneeze. I thought of her, loose-skinned and tired-looking pulling on a cigarette, alone. I told her I didn't even care what she thought, and hung up.

You don't have to meet my mom, Henry, at least not for a while. We can go to your parents' house for Thanksgiving? I imagine they live somewhere like Vermont or Massachusetts. Either way, I look forward to meeting them.

Yours, Jordan

Henry,

My mother never liked Halloween, so she didn't tell me about it. I understood that kids dressed up, so I would dress up. I'd put on cat ears, or butterfly wings, or wrap myself in aluminum foil, with my winter coat zipped up over top. We'd drive to my aunt Ellen's house. I'd eat butterscotch candies out of an orange, glass bowl. They'd cradle wine glasses. I'd play with the small dollhouse filled with felt mice, which she meant as a display, but it was okay if I played with, if I was very, very careful. To get to her front door you had to drive south of town, deep into a valley, then rise and weave through the Black Rothrock forest, so no trick-treater ever made the journey, other than me.

I imagine that you've always celebrated Halloween. Your mom probably made spiced apple cider, and sewed your costumes herself.

I still dress up for Halloween to make up for the lost years. When I was trying to come up with costume ideas this year, I heard you playing the “Imagine” album in your apartment.

This year, as Yoko Ono, I’m wearing thigh-high white boots, a white mini skirt, and a wide-brimmed straw hat, which I’ve spray painted white. I middle-part my hair and *voila*. I look fantastic.

I strut around my apartment, tidying up the living room, and scrubbing the kitchen. I tell myself that I’m cleaning so that when I open the door to give children candy, I won’t be embarrassed at the state of my home. However, I acknowledge, quickly and quietly, that tonight might be the night that you come over.

This is how I pictured it: Opening my door holding a crystal bowl of full-sized chocolate bars, the soft glow of candles in the background. Your gaze starting at the toe of my boot, and following the line of my leg up to that bare inch of skin between boot and skirt. Your shocked realization that I’m dressed as Yoko Ono. My shocked realization that you’re dressed as John Lennon. We laugh together. I invited you inside. I have cocktails prepared. I tell you that I’m really, very late to this huge party, where everyone is waiting for me. You beg me not to go. I put the candy bowl in front of my door with a sign that says “take as many as you want!” You blow out the candles. We kiss.

I’m waiting for this to happen. I’m sitting on my couch, picking at the loose fibers, and attempting to craft a playlist which is both scary, and romantic. The doorbell rings, but it’s only a kid, wearing a yellow shirt with red dots, and her mom. I kneel down and ask her what she’s dressed as. She screams “A pizza!”, plunges her hand into my jar of candy, and runs off with her pillowcase dragging on the floor. After her, I saw a Harry Potter, a

mermaid, and a zombie dog. Music, coming from an apartment over mine, beat loudly. Pacing in my entryway, I convinced myself to go to your door.

I turned the lights off in my apartment, went down two flights of stairs, and breathing deep breaths, arrived at your open door. I rang the doorbell, and leaned in to look at your clean, gray couch, the glass coffee table, the silver picture frames. I couldn't spot anything from the ikea catalog. From another room you yelled, "Come in." I stepped into your living room, and touched my straw hat. White paint rubbed off. I removed the hat, put it on the kitchen counter, and smoothed my hair down. There was an open bottle of wine on the counter. I poured myself a glass.

You walked into the room wearing a button-down and slacks. I said, Happy Halloween, and you asked me what I was doing. I said that I was trick-or-treating. I sat down on your couch, and asked you where you bought it. You said you didn't know, and asked me to leave. You said it in a polite way, like we'd known each other for a long time, and you were just having a hard day, and needed to be alone. I handed you the glass of wine. I saw my hat on the counter, and decided to leave it there so you would have to come and give it back to me. I said I would be in 8H if you need to talk. I touched your arm, and left.

Back in my apartment, I waited for you. My vinyl boots kept slipping down, and without my hat the costume seemed incomplete. The doorbell rang, but it was just a ninja turtle and his dad, who was wearing a t-shirt with the words: This is my costume.

Jordan

Henry,

I went out with not-you. We went to Bearclaw Coffee down the street. I pulled out his chair because I was being silly. He smiled and looked at me like he wasn't sure, so I

bought us both mochas with whipped cream. I thought we could have a nice back-and-forth, pointing out each other's whipped cream mustaches.

I talked and he nodded at me. I asked questions and he answered with shrugs or hand motions. I kept a notebook in my lap to keep track of what was working and what wasn't. He said he didn't like how crowded it was. I made a note to find a calmer coffee shop, or to come way earlier or way later and avoid the rush. He saw someone with macarons and asked what they were. I decided to buy a dozen macarons, one of each color, then excused myself to go to the bathroom. In the mirror, I saw dried whipped cream smeared above my lip. I rubbed it off hard with paper towels, and took some deep breaths. My face rubbed red. I went back to the table, and when not-you asked for a macaron, I said no.

Jordan

Henry,

I want you to know all of it. I want you to feel like you were there. Right now it's like I'm carrying our whole relationship myself. I'm not saying I'm tired of it, but I do feel the weight. I'm looking forward to when we'll share in this. We won't even have to move in together. We can just use both our apartments and pretend like the whole building is ours. Then if you need your space you can always go back to your place, or we can switch and you can spend the day watching movies in my bed. I can cook and play music in your apartment, and when you're ready to be social again we can eat dinner together.

It's just a thought. It doesn't have to go that way. Yours, Jordan

Henry,

I went out for drinks with not-you. He didn't say much and it wasn't a great date, but I wasn't finished testing things out. He called a Lyft after our date. I got in next to him. He asked what I was doing, and if I needed a ride home. I said no, and put my hand on his knee. He looked at my hand with concern, but when I kissed him, he kissed me back.

Walking up the stairs to his apartment, I asked if I could call him Henry. He said no. I told him it was just a nickname I liked, and he told me his name was something else.

I asked him I could call him "H," short for honey. He said whatever, and locked his front door behind us. A mud-caked bike took up most of the entry and I shuffled around it. He opened the kitchen window and rolled a cigarette. His apartment was small, with brown-painted cabinets, and an enamel kitchen table.

I sat across from him, and noticed that there was a black scuff on my shoes. The heels were cheap. I'd ordered them online at a discount, and in places the glue was coming loose. He smoked, scraped dirt from under his nail, and asked what I was looking for in a man.

I described you, and looked out the window so the wind would hit my face directly and I wouldn't have to smell the smoke. It didn't really work, and I tried not to cough as I talked. He stared hard at me and asked me how old I was. I told him I was twenty, and he asked me if I'd ever been with a man. He reached over and took the brown paper bag of macarons, and I nodded yes. He spilled the bag onto his newspaper-covered table. They looked bright as crayons.

He picked up a purple one and asked me if I knew the flavor. Suddenly, I wanted to go home. Lavender, I said. He smelled it, frowned, and handed it to me. He picked up a yellow one instead and popped it in his mouth. I watched him chew, and listened to

someone yelling in the apartment below. He ate another and asked me if I wanted him to be my Henry.

I looked at the macaron in my hand and said no. I looked at the front door, and he looked with me. He asked me if I wanted to leave. He reminded me that he hadn't asked me to come home with him.

I stood up, and touched the brown bag, but the cookies were broken and scattered and dirty-looking on his table. I stepped around the table and into his bedroom.

The room had a low ceiling and drew light from a small, square window. A comforter spilled off a mattress that lay flat on the floor. His bedsheets were either a burnt orange or a dull red. He came up behind me and put his face to my neck. I let out a long breath and imagined that your arms were around me. I turned to face him, but he was so clearly not you that I closed my eyes. He kissed me with small, dry lips. I laced my hands behind his neck. He pulled me closer and I pressed into him. We spent a few minutes kissing soft, quick kisses until he started laughing against my mouth and I pulled away.

He was shaking his head at me. "What?" I asked.

I looked down at myself, my silky cream dress, my heels on his stained carpet.

He looked into my face and barked a laugh. Then he couldn't stop. I pushed past him, back into the kitchen, and looked for my purse.

He asked me to come back, but I found my purse under the kitchen table, a shoe print stamped on the leather. I knocked the dust off and swung it onto my shoulder. He grabbed my arm and I jerked away, but didn't move to leave.

He looked down at the cookies on the table between us, selected a bright red macaroon. Smiling, he crunched it in his mouth. The soft cookie cracked and crumbled. Before I knew what was happening, I snatched the cookie from his mouth.

I dropped the crumbs on his floor, and stood there, my hand slick with spit.

With his eyebrows raised, he sat down. I took a step back and crumbs crunched under my shoe. He started rolling another cigarette. He licked the edge of the paper and said I was crazy. I felt for the wall behind me. He sat there, with the rolled paper between his fingers, and said that we could still hook up. I stepped around the bike, and unlocked the door. He laughed a shallow, mean laugh, as I closed the door behind me.

I breathed through my mouth and wiped my hands on my dress, leaving red wet flecks. I listened to my heels tapping down his staircase, and kept waiting to hear his door open. I almost wanted his door to open. I got to the bottom on the staircase and felt emptied out.

Outside, I realized that I didn't know where I was. I imagined him looking out his window at me, so I walked down the street and around the corner. Then, I called a lyft to take me home. - Jordan

Henry,

I said I'd wait a month to send these letters, and it's been a month. I've folded all the letters and put them in yellow envelopes with the date on the outside. I know we're not really friends. I'd hoped that I'd be handing you the letters, instead of stuffing them one-by-one into the metal slot of your mailbox. But this feels like the right time. Maybe this is how we're meant to fall in love.

NOT HERE BUT SOMEWHERE

Tom and his daughter, Rachel, live in a house with a flat roof, large paned-glass windows, and a black hole in the backyard. The hole is about the size of a kiddie pool, and a small, locked shed covers it. Tom keeps a measuring tape and clipboard to track its growth.

It grows slightly each year, and it's been there for as long as Rachel can remember. She's seventeen now, and she's past the phase where she believed the hole was magic. "It's a sinkhole, or something" she told her dad. "Stop being weird."

Tom would have moved if he hadn't designed the house with his wife. He works at an architecture firm, and they used to spend weekends together picking out tiles, talking paint colors, and arguing over the placement of staircases.

After a year at the house, his wife grew sick and the hole emerged. She'd been the first one to find it. Tom had come home to his daughter, who was four at the time, playing alone in the living room. He'd found his wife in bed and asked if she'd done anything, if she'd gotten out of bed at all. She said she had, that she'd watched the black hole in the backyard grow to the size of a coffee cup. He paused and patted the downy comforter, and asked her why she was doing this. She said she wasn't doing anything, that the hole was growing all on its own, and she was just looking at it, and she didn't let the baby near it, so what was the problem?

She threw off the comforter and stomped downstairs, which surprised him because she was rarely short with him, and almost never fast moving. He followed her out into the yard. She stood with her back to him. She was wearing his old college sweatshirt, and a pair of patterned shorts.

"Look."

He leaned down, and looked at the hole in the ground.

“Yep, that’s a hole.”

“It’s a black hole.” She started walking around the yard, looking down at the ground, picking up rocks.

“Honey, please. Look, it looks like a rabbit hole. Maybe a gopher.”

She threw in a rock, and it disappeared into the black.

“See.”

He glanced back at the house. “What am I supposed to be seeing?”

She dropped the rocks, and kneeled in the grass. “Come here and put your hand in it.”

He was wearing a suit: gray, with a nice cut. “I’m not going to do that.”

She shoved her hand into the dark. Her arm disappeared up to her shoulder, and her face pressed against the grass. “See.”

“Mary,” he crouched down next to her, “Take your hand out.” She glared up at him, but she pulled her arm out, and went back inside, and climbed into bed.

They didn’t talk about it, but Tom asked his mom to drop by once or twice a day, while he was at work. Mary mentioned her mother-in-law’s arrival and looked sharply at him. He said his mother just wanted to be a part of Rachel’s life, and maybe give Mary time to rest. She said she wasn’t tired, but she spent all day lying on the sofa, in front of the wall of glass windows that overlooked the backyard. Now it was dark, and the windows reflected the image of him standing behind her. Mary sometimes thought her husband had no inner life. He did the same things each day with a calculated rigidity. He spoke to their daughter as if

she were a colleague. She'd heard him negotiating breakfast with her. "Rachel, there's no way around it," he'd said with a spoonful of oatmeal. "Be reasonable."

He'd used the same tone with her when she suggested they build their house over a river, or in a tree. She'd wanted something like Philip Johnson's Glass House. She wanted the house to blend into the landscape, but they compromised on something with more privacy. The finished product looks more like Neutra's Reunion House, but with less clutter. Tom wanted it clean and modern. They picked a spot in Pennsylvania near the Allegheny State forest. They built it into the side of a hill so you can only see one story from the road, but two-stories of glass fill the back-wall. The windows look out onto the half-acre of mowed grass, beyond the yard the trees grow dense with pine, and maple, and scrub.

For years, the only things they talked about were the house and Rachel. When they moved in, they tried to still talk in the way that they had.

"You were right about the floors," he'd said.

"Yeah."

"They seem like they're holding up."

"I scratched it when I moved the couch."

"Oh. Well, the couch looks good there."

"Yeah."

The green velvet couch was their favorite purchase. They brought it in the early days of planning, and kept it in a storage unit under plastic. The first few weeks in the house neither of them sat on it. It seemed like something too precious, but then Rachel spilled a whole cup of grape juice on it, and Mary said they should have just kept their leather couch, and Tom cleaned the juice without looking at either of them.

Once, he'd been cooking lunch when he heard Rachel scream in the yard. He'd rushed out, and found her red-faced and crying.

"My glass. It ate my glass." She pointed to the hole. For her birthday, Rachel had received a wooden magnifying glass with rainbow streamers. She'd taken to searching for fairies and ghosts in the yard.

"Hey now." He tugged on her overalls. "I got it." Tom crouched over the hole, but couldn't see the streamers. He reached his hand lower and lower. He felt for the dirt sides of the hole, but there was nothing. His hand descended, until he was lying flat on the grass. Rachel sniffled at his side. He swept his hand back and forth. It felt warm, and a slight breeze brushed against his skin. His body relaxed, and he suddenly realized how cold he was, and he wanted to descend deeper into the warmth. His shoulder pressed hard against the ground, and he felt light-headed. "Daddy?" At this, he pulled his arm up with the magnifying glass in-hand. Rachel seemed surprised, but she grabbed it, and ran off. Tom watched her run, then he plunged his hand back in.

"Tom?" Mary stood in the open sliding door. "Everything alright?"

He stood up. "Can you finish lunch? I'll be in soon."

She didn't say anything, and turned back into the house. He looked at the hole for awhile, then went and got the shovel. They had a pile of mulch that he'd meant to use in the garden, but he started shovelling piles into the wheelbarrow. He still felt a warm pulse in his arm as he pierced the dirt. When it was full, he pushed the wheelbarrow to the hole. He didn't know what it was, but he didn't want it in his yard. He thought of Mary calling it a black hole. It's not like he'd seen a black hole before. No, it was a pocket of groundwater that had collapsed, or an animal hole, or the remnants of a well. He'd look it up later. There

had to be a geological reason. He shovelled mulch into the hole and watched it drop into the dark. The edge stretched wider, pulling in the surrounding grass, and inching towards Tom's feet. He shovelled faster, flinging the mulch into the ground. It crept farther. He lifted the wheelbarrow up and dumped the contents into the hole.

The opening yawned wider. Out of breath, Tom dropped the shovel, and leaned forward with his hands on his knees. It had grown to the size of a manhole cover. He turned the wheelbarrow upside down on top of it. He went back inside, and washed his hands in the sink.

Mary, in a pair of his tailored pants, chopped celery. "Did you fill it?" Rachel wiggled in her chair with a grape in each hand.

"No, if anything I think it's getting worse."

She nodded, but didn't look up at him. "I tried too."

Something about the hole embarrassed Tom, like lice or bed bugs. He felt like it said something about them, but he wasn't sure what. What kind of people were they? What had they done to spur it on?

After lunch Mary called Tom's mom and told her not to come over for dinner. She said the family was feeling under the weather, a cold, maybe. Tom called a concrete supplier and asked about the cost of a cement truck. He wrote down the numbers, and called his company.

They researched possible explanations for the hole, while Rachel napped. Mary leaned over the laptop with a flushed face. Mary had quit her job as a caterer to focus on the baby and the house. In her years away from work, she grew quieter, started wearing Tom's old clothing, and stopped calling people by their names, but she only talked to Tom, and Rachel, and Tom's mother, so no one really noticed. She spent big blocks of time painting

and repainting the rooms in the house. Before they moved, she wore long dresses, and went rock climbing with her friends, and taught cooking classes at the community center. She'd wanted to move from Richmond. She'd wanted to live in the woods with her family, and she thought she would find what she needed. Mary figured things would be different, but she thought they would at least be exciting.

“Maybe we should leave it alone,” she suggested.

“What?”

“I just don't know what the rush is.” She scratched at the stain on the kitchen counter.

“Aren't you worried that Rachel could get hurt?” He sat on the couch, with his back to her, slouching towards his laptop.

“So, we put a grate over it, or maybe plexiglass. Couldn't you figure something out?”

“Mary, be reasonable.”

Something about the hole interested Mary. It reminded her of the big coastal storms that swept through when she was a girl. People on TV would be standing on their rooftops surrounded by lakes that swallowed their houses whole. Or they'd be in boats, floating down highways past signs that pointed at nothing.

“The baby should be waking up soon. Can you watch her for awhile?” The house felt suddenly cluttered, and she wanted to go on a walk.

“I have to stop in the office to order the cement truck”

“Right.”

“I'll watch her tonight.”

“Maybe you could take her to the office. Would they mind?”

“Not today. I’m going to get the truck for noon tomorrow, does that sound okay?
You weren’t doing anything, right?”

“Right.”

Tom left, and Mary made a snack of juice and pretzels for Rachel, then buckled her into the car seat, and drove to the hardware store. They picked up carabiners, a pulley, and rope. Then they drove back to the house. Mary tried to get Rachel to watch a movie, but she cried and clung to her leg, so she took her outside and told her to look for fairies. Rachel raced around the yard with a bug net and her magnifying glass. Mary drilled three bolts into the deck, and made a cordelette anchor with nylon cord tied in a triple fisherman’s knot. Rachel yelled that she found one. Mary pulled her climbing gear from the garage. Rachel yelled that she found a real-life fairy and she better come look at it right now before it flew away. Mary found her sitting beneath the mountain laurel, with a pink and white blossom trapped beneath her net.

“See, mom.”

“What a beautiful fairy.” She looked at the grass stains on Rachel’s knees and felt tired.

“Can you help me find more?” Rachel held the magnifying glass in front of her face.

Mary pulled another blossom from the bush and held it out to her.

“Oh.” Rachel took it, and put it on the ground. “Thanks.”

She told Rachel to stay at the laurel bush, count ten fairies, then go into the house, and wait for dad. Mary went to the other side of the yard, put on her climbing harness, shoes, and helmet. She set up the lines, and attached them to the anchor on the back deck.

She hadn't climbed in years and the ropes felt good in her grip. She checked and double checked the knots. She took ten paces back, until she could feel the lip of the hole. Her feet gripped the edge.

"Mom?" Rachel dragged her net on the ground.

"Did you find all ten?" The soles of her feet warmed against the hole.

"Only one fairy today. Mom, what are you doing?"

"Only one fairy? Why don't you take your fairy inside?" Rachel looked at the blossom in her hand, but didn't move.

"What's in the hole, mom?"

Mary took a step towards her, pulling in some of the nylon ropes. She felt strange, standing in her gear in front of Rachel. Her daughter looked apprehensive in the way that she did when she saw adults in costumes, like the Easter bunny at the mall, or Santa.

"I don't know what's in there, but I'm going to look then come back, and I'll tell you all about it. How does that sound?"

"Can I come?"

"Not this time. Can you go inside and wait for me?" Rachel shook her head no. "Can you sit down on the deck?"

She sat down on the steps with her elbows on her knees. The sun started setting and the windows reflected golden light. The wind rushed down the hill and the leaves shook.

Mary stepped back, until she found the edge. She leaned back, checked her knots, threw the ends of the ropes in, and repelled into the hole.

Rachel, and her fairy, watched mom descend into the flat darkness of the pit. It seemed to stretch open as she lowered. For a moment she could only see the top of her head, and then nothing.

The rope pulled taut and quivered. After half an hour, Rachel got up, and stood by the black expanse. She decided it was about the size of her turtle-shaped sandbox.

“Mom?” The wind rustled the trees and orange and yellow leaves dropped to the ground, and disappeared into the black. She tugged on the rope.

“Mom?” The rope went slack.

“Rachel!” Tom yelled from the sliding doors and started running to her. “Get back!” She tripped backwards onto the grass. He reached for her and pulled her into his arms.

“Rachel,” he said her name into her hair. “My god, Rachel.” He pulled back and looked at her. “Where is your mom?”

The nylon ropes snaked limp yellow and green lines through the yard. The sun dipped behind the trees and turned the sky a flat blue.

Tom cancelled the concrete truck. He untied the ropes, but left the three anchor bolts in the deck. He waited outside every night for a few months, before building the shed to cover the gap in the ground. Rachel sat on the porch with him for the first few weeks, then she seemed to forget the reason for the vigil. She started asking where mom had gone, and when was she coming back, and could they go get mom because she knew how to make the pancakes she liked? He told her that mom left, and he didn’t know when they’d see her again. As she grew older, she imagined her mother living in a cabin in the desert, or in an apartment in France with white curtains with scalloped edges and small golden plates.

Tom kept designing houses. He built one after the other, quit his job, and started his own company. His designs turned stranger and less practical. The houses had resin staircases with little flowers trapped in the surface. Swimming pools modelled after elevation maps cut through the lawns and descend two, even three, stories deep.

He didn't care about the cleanliness of his own house anymore, and the clutter seemed to produce more clutter all on its own. He never felt particularly close to Rachel, and she grew up in the glass house, with the hole in the backyard, and forgot about the fairies and the magnifying glass and her mother.

At seventeen, she sold her laptop and bought a bus ticket to New York with the guy who was her boyfriend at the time. She left a typed note for Tom.

He came home and read the letter on the couch. He sat there until the sun dipped behind the trees and the shadows stretched over the yard like moving hands. The house smelled like mustard and wet wood. The green velvet couch that he picked out with Mary was now dotted with stains, and in places the velvet rubbed bald. He stood up, and pushed the couch, and it scratched the hardwood. He pulled it, and pulled it, and turned it on its side to get it through the sliding doors, and onto the deck, and into the yard.

He opened the shed door, and jammed the couch in, and shoved until it disappeared. The hole expanded and the shed tilted, then slowly sunk into the black. Tom grabbed a lawn chair and threw it in. He pushed the grill off the deck, and into the hole. He went back into the house and carried an armful of kitchen appliances to the yard. He started throwing everything in, and watching the gap in the ground grow and stretch. Soon it filled the backyard and the surrounding trees shuddered and cracked and tilted in. The trees folded into the ground like a closing pop-up book.

Tom stood in the house and watched the deck crumble apart. The windows cracked, then shards slipped into the black. The wooden floors moaned, and sighed as the ground underneath gave way. Tom climbed the stairs, walked out the front door, and left the door open.

ALMOST AN ISLAND

We moved into the lake house on Lake Erie's edge. I slept on the couch for the first few weeks, while dad finished insulating the second bedroom. It wasn't meant to be a year-round home, and June was cold and cloud-covered. The fog rolled off the lake each morning so dense that if I walked down the path, and stood on the beach, it was hard to see where the rocks stopped and the water started. I'd let the water lap against my pink water shoes, and imagined I could hear mermaids singing over the hush of the waves.

For a while, it was just us. Dad drove into town, through the morning fog, to install elevators. Buck and I would walk along the beach. I was working on my collection of blue and green sea glass. While I worked, Buck chased off seagulls, and bit at the waves. I talked to him sometimes, and pretended like he could talk back. "Look at this piece of sea glass, Buck!" I would say.

"Wow! Milly! That is just the best-looking piece of sea glass!" I would say in my low-toned Buck voice.

"Sounds like that dog has had too many to smoke," dad said when he heard us talking in the backyard one day.

I'd wade knee-deep in the lake to rinse the sand from the sea glass. If dad wasn't around, I wasn't allowed to let the water lap any higher than my kneecaps. He rarely made the trip down the dirt path to the shore, so the waves rarely hit my thighs. The water felt so crisp and cold that I could feel it in my chest. My water shoes squished between my toes, and I feared for the tadpoles and the minnows that lived in the shallows. I would step on

them, I was sure. I imagined my water shoes would suck them in, and they would squish between my toes.

I stood in the lake one warm afternoon, the sun shining on the water, when I saw a pair of neighborhood boys hitting the sand with rocks. They gathered the smooth beach rocks in their fists, and pelted them again and again into a spot on the sand. Their throwing seemed hurried. They laughed, breathless with the effort. When the boys left, pushing shoulders and smiling, I trudged up onto the rocks and found the spot. Under the gray and brown stones, the milky eye of a fish peered up, a yellow perch. Her brass-colored body bent at the spine and burst open. Her orange-hued fins were torn from her frame, and blood covered her body, nearly hiding her stripes. I was familiar with the fish my father caught, and skinned, and deboned, but I had never seen a body like this.

I couldn't look at it, but I sat with it for a while, unsure of what else to do. I didn't want to leave her alone. I shooed away the birds, but the sun began beating down on it too, and the smell of fish filled my stomach. When I could feel nothing but the warm salt smell wrapping around my body, I left.

Later, when the lake and sky reflected peach and orange, and the temperature began to drop, and the smell of charcoal drifted from the rental cabins, I went back to the yellow perch. Someone had covered her. A mound of sand encased her body, and someone had stuck a flat headstone into the ground. "FISH" was written on the headstone in chalk.

A girl, about my age, walked down the beach with a handful of dandelions. Her wet hair dripped onto her Little Mermaid T-shirt. She wasn't wearing water shoes, but clamored barefoot over the rocky beach. I waved. She shook the flowers.

She came closer, close enough that I could see her skinned knees and smatter of freckles. "I'm performing a funeral" she told me. "Want to help?"

I nodded, and she handed me two flowers. We knelt in front of the grave, with our knees on a beach towel and our elbows bumping.

“We gather here to say goodbye to Fish.” She put a dandelion on the mound of sand.

“Fish was a beautiful yellow perch.” I laid a flower next to hers. She smiled at me and I felt as if I’d done something right. We went back and forth saying things about Fish.

“She had a great sense of humor, and always made the other fish laugh.”

“She liked playing hide-and-seek in the seaweed.”

“Fish’s best friend was a Rainbow Trout who loved her very much.”

“Fish will be missed,” she said and dropped the last dandelion. We stood and I helped her shake the sand from the beach towel. The sun dunked into the lake like a cookie. The sky turned from peach to apricot to plum. She shook my hand, and told me her name was Kate.

“Kate,” I repeated. I knew other Kates at school, but suddenly the name sounded sharper, nearly iridescent, like the edge of an oyster shell.

I walked her back to her cabin, a red A-frame, down the block from my lake house. Most of the cabins in the neighborhood were rentals and summer homes. Only a few retirees and locals stayed through the winter. Kate, and her family, were on vacation from Columbus, Ohio. We said goodbye in the falling light. The pine trees’ shadows stretched on the pavement. I nearly reached out and hugged her. It seemed appropriate, somehow, after the funeral, but she was already walking backwards.

“I’ll see you around.”

I raised my hand lamely. At the house, my father warmed pre-made lasagna on the stovetop.

“Hey, Scout. What were you up to?”

Kate was still on my mind, but I wasn't ready to tell him about her. It felt like my pretending to hear mermaids: somehow personal, and maybe weird if I said it out loud. I would tell him about her soon. Maybe if I was with her, he'd let me swim in the lake without him there.

I knew that dad missed mom by the way he watched her favorite show. He'd sit, with a beer, and turn on the cooking competition show that he never used to watch with her. He'd yell at the contestants.

“There's no way that fucking soufflé will rise in five minutes.”

“Hurry up. Come on, come on!” He'd wave me over. I'd bring him another beer, and for myself, one of those glass coke bottles. He'd crack them both open with his keychain bottle opener, and he'd sit with a hand on my hair, just patting the top of my head, as if I were Buck. Sometimes he'd fall asleep like that, and the cooking show would shift into infomercials for Weight Watchers or Perfect Ab machines.

When he slept on the couch it reminded me of the mornings after he and mom would fight. He'd be on the sofa, with a decorative pillow under his head, and one of my fleece blankets. I'd eat cereal quietly in the chair next to him. After a few months, he had his own white pillow, and a summer quilt that he kept folded next to the fireplace.

In the morning, I took Buck on his walk. We circled past the A-frame three times. From the house I could hear a violin going up and down scales. I thought of seeing her, and felt a mix of hope and fear. That tight-string sound pulled on me, and I listened for a break in the music, before heading down to the dock. The salted air loosened a tightness in my

chest that I hadn't noticed. I took big gulps of it. Buck sniffed at the water's edge. It was still too cold for the tourists to flock to our rocky beach, but Alfred, the old man who claims to have driven the Oscar Meyer Weinermobile, and his wife, set up their beach chairs on the headland.

I waved to them, but I walked the other way, down to Fish's gravesite. At night, the tide had risen and engulfed it. It left a lump of sand, a half-dozen smooth stones, and the headstone knocked on its side. A part of the spine, picked of flesh, stuck out from the mound. I looked out to the waves.

"I blame you" I said to the tide, but it was already retreating.

I trudged back to the house, and found Kate sitting on my stoop. In the sun, her hair was the color of buttermilk. She wore an oversized, white t-shirt and a bleach-stained jean shorts. Kate squinted into the sun, her nose scrunched. Her hand cupped over her eyes, as though she was searching for boats. She smiled when she saw me. Beautiful, I thought, then dropped my smile so she wouldn't see the word behind my lips.

I sat next to her, and wiped my palms on my dirt-stained shorts.

"Would you want to go boating today?" She bumped her knee into mine.

"That could be fun, I guess." I shuffled my feet in the dirt. I looked up at the kitchen window. The light was out, which meant dad was at work.

We untied a canoe, the green one that dad and mom used to push into the lake on warm days. I held her hand to help her into the boat, before shoving the edge into the open lake. The air smelled like sunscreen and salt. I tied my hair up, and swished it back and forth, liking the feel on my back. She sat on the wooden bench in front of me, shirt already speckled with water. We dipped our paddles in and out of the water, our eyes on Presque Isle in the distance.

The sandy, arching peninsula juts out from Pennsylvania's coast. The rock was carried by the Wisconsin glacier, and was left behind when the glacier moved and melted.

"It barely holds together now," I tell her. "Each year they truck tons of sand to dump along the edges."

The boat cut through the water. Waves lapped against the bow. Kate looked over her shoulder and smiled at me in a way that made my chest feel heavy.

"How are you so smart?"

"My dad knows about this stuff. He knows all the names of the trees and rocks."

"Could you teach me? What about those trees on the shore?"

"Oh, those are black oak and sassafras." I couldn't quite tell. It could have been red oak and maple. From this distance, it could have been cherry or pine, but I didn't want to let her down. She nodded and studied them, as if memorizing their shape.

When we reached land, I leaped from the boat and pulled the canoe to dock so Kate wouldn't have to step into the algae green water. All the other beaches in Erie are rock, so the hard, brown sand of Presque Isle made it feel like we were arriving on a foreign shore.

We searched the beach for walking sticks. Kate held up pieces of wood, and I named them for her, whether I knew their names or not.

"White birch."

"Eastern balsam."

"Mountain ash." She handed this one to me, and kept the Eastern balsam for herself. They're both gray-barked and knobby. We stripped them of leaves and twigs, and pulled the bark in long strips until we were left with the soft, yellow wood underneath.

We followed the curve of the lake. The waves hushed as they hit the shore. The water shimmered as it rippled, forever reaching and slipping. She looked pretty. I told her so, without thinking.

“My mom says I have a square face.” I studied her. She had a broad jaw, pinked cheeks, and a slim nose.

“How can a face be square?”

She shrugged and didn’t say anything about my face. Instead, she leaned down and plucked a piece of sea glass from the sand. She held up the teal triangle of glass. A soft arch gave it the look of fin in water. She smiled, and squinted through it. The sun cast a blue triangle on her cheek. She took my hand, and pressed it into my palm. The weight of it sat heavy in my hand.

I always thought that I liked boys, but now something about the world seemed softer around the edges. I looked at the beach to see if anything else had shifted around me. I found the stretch of sand familiar. I recognized the driftwood bench, the lighthouse in the distance, the boats bobbing in the lake. Today, the water looked bluer, and the air had a crispness to it that I hadn’t noticed before.

“I like you,” I said. On the beach, a half-dozen people flew kites over the water.

“Why?” The wind whipped through a dragon-shaped kite, and it weaved under and over the other kites.

My first thought was that I liked the way her hair curled behind her ear, but I said, “you seem nice.”

“I don’t know why you think that, because I’m not.” She looked straight at me, and I couldn’t tell if she was joking.

“I’m going to fly a kite.” She turned and walked away, and I watched her go and tap on the shoulder of the woman flying the dragon kite, who handed over the spool of thread. The dragon, his mouth open, dipped for a moment before whipping up towards the clouds. He swerved around a multi-colored box kite. Kate tilted her body with the movement of the kite, swaying from side to side. Kate let the wind push the dragon further and further. He turned and twisted towards the clouds.

We ate hot dogs on the dock, while Kate told me about her school in Ohio. Her friends were Ade, Sasha, and Jenny, in that order. She packed her own lunches: peanut butter-captain crunch sandwiches. She played violin in the school orchestra, because her mom liked the idea of hearing violin in the house.

I hadn’t started school in Erie yet, so I didn’t have anything to report. Kate asked about my old school, and I said it was fine.

“It’s okay if you were unpopular” she said.

I tore pieces of bread from the hot dog bun and tossed them into the lake. Bubbles popped on the water, and a fish opened its mouth under the crumb.

“I have friends.”

“That’s not really the same thing as being popular, is it?” I wasn’t sure if she expected me to answer that. It didn’t really sound like a question.

“What? Are you popular?”

“I’m friends with Ade and Sasha.” She furrowed her brow and looked at me like she wasn’t sure what I didn’t understand.

Her freckles looked intentional. I leaned close to her face and tried to determine if they were drawn on.

She leaned back. "So, what's fun to do around here?"

"We could hike to the lighthouse, or go to the Raptor Center, or take out a pedal boat."

"Raptor Center?"

"Birds," I told her.

"Let's do that." She stood and tossed the end of her hotdog into the lake. The bread filled heavy with water and sunk slowly, but the hotdog bobbed on the surface.

I led the way through the trail that wound around the island. My shirt kept inching up to reveal a gap of skin above my shorts. I pulled it down, and tried to hold my arms to my sides to keep the shirt from slipping.

The Raptor Center consisted of a series of wire-mesh enclosures housing eagles, hawks, and a variety of owls. Most birds shared cages. The two eagles sat on the floor, and looked too big to be real birds. A clump of screech owls huddled at the top of their house. We had to lean in close and look up to see them on a high post. Kate passed the birds with a quick clip, but when she stopped in front of the American kestrel, he turned his blue head to her and screeched. He sat alone in his cage.

"He doesn't like you," I said.

"How can you tell it's a 'he'?" She squinted at the plaque in front of the enclosure.

"The males have blue wings, and the females are rust-colored."

"How do you know he doesn't like me?" She stepped closer to the cage and cooed at him. The kestrel hopped from one wooden post to another. Tucked into the edge of the woods, his cage was wire, framed with wood. He hopped and clung onto the wire wall with his talons.

"See, he likes me." She tapped on the enclosure and he jumped.

“Leave him alone.” I tugged on her sleeve.

“I’m not bothering him.” He screeched again, a high-wailing: *Klee! Klee!*

She gripped the wire with both hands and shook. The cage rattled and the kestrel opened his wings wide. I took her hand. Her palm was softer than I could have imagined.

She screamed. The kestrel had leaped onto her other hand and his talons sliced through the skin on her fingers. I let her hand go.

The cut was clean. Three gashes slashed across her left hand. She looked at me wide-eyed.

“I’m sorry.” I reached for her, but she pulled away.

“Why did you do that?”

“I was trying to get you to stop. You were making him mad.”

“You distracted me.”

“No, I was trying to pull you away. I was trying to help.” Kate wrapped her fingers in the edge of her shirt. The blood soaked through the white cotton. “Here, I’ll take you to the wildlife center. We can call your mom. We can get it cleaned up.”

“You were trying to hold my hand. That’s why this happened.” She started to cry. I put my hand on her shoulder.

“The center is right up the hill. It’ll be okay. Come on.”

She shook my hands off. “Can you stop hitting on me for one second?”

I stepped back. “I wasn’t.”

She wiped her face on the shoulder of her shirt. “I wouldn’t be losing my fingers right now if you weren’t so gay.” She gripped her hand and she walked away from me.

“I’m not.” The kestrel flapped its wings and hopped to a higher post.

She turned, a stretch of ferns between us. “Then why are you obsessed with me?” She didn’t wait for my response, but instead, turned toward the main trail.

The kestrel squawked. I yelled after her and his wings fluttered.

I made my way back to the shore, back to the green canoe. The water reflected heavy clouds. The sky bloomed gray and purple.

I pushed off from the dock and the boat wobbled beneath my feet. The water wavered and my eyes swam. Rowing stretched my shoulders, and made my chest feel like it might pop open.

Back on the rock beach, I took my water shoes off and clamored barefoot over the boulders. I thought about Kate, how someone must be wrapping her soft hand in gauze. I thought about the kestrel, and his *klee, klee* call.

I nearly stepped on a walleye, floundering on a flat rock. The waves had carried him up, and the tide retreated without him. His scales were olive and gold. His mouth gaped silently.

He flapped his tail against the drying rock. The tide pulled far from the rock’s edge, and I wondered how long he’d been laying there. His top fin fanned out like a crown. A blue film covered his eye. He threw his body hard against the rock, like he didn’t understand that he couldn’t swim through air.

I hit him. I hadn’t thought about it, I just found myself dropping the brown stone on his body. I threw another rock, this one gray and slim. His scales tore open. I watched the rocks hit the fish again and again. I heard myself choking on my own breath.

You could barely tell it had been a fish. Blood splattered my shorts. I walked home with heavy shoes. The A-frame glowed a warm orange, and I didn’t dare imagine her inside.

DAISY

My mom got the hamster to teach us about death. At the time, grandma was sick, and mom wanted to give us a soft start to the grieving. Someone at her work was getting rid of it because their family was moving, and they were clearing out what they didn't need, and they didn't realize it was pregnant, or maybe they did. Either way, we weren't expecting the hamster to give birth.

I was nine when we got Daisy. The twins were six. My father had been arrested the year before for talking to a young girl online. It was like the show *To Catch a Predator*, except no Chris Hanson, no tv crew, just a couple of police officers sitting in the living room when I got home from school. When he left, he ceased to exist for me. A year of my life felt much longer at that age. As time passed it felt as if I'd bleached the stain that was my father until he just remained a faint shadow upon an earlier version of my life. His sentence was ending in July, and my mother started cleaning the house like she does when company is coming. She told me to dust and vacuum the living room.

I asked if she was doing this for dad.

She'd stopped, crouched in front of the fridge with a wet rag, and said "He's coming home next week. Did you forget?"

In a way, I had. Whoever I'd thought my father was had shed his skin like the monsters in Scooby-doo, only instead of a regular guy underneath, he was another kind of creature. I hadn't imagined that my mother would allow whatever he was now to return.

"Do I look stupid?"

She asked if I really wanted her to answer that.

The next day she came home with the hamster, which I viewed as a bribe.

“Is this a bribe?” I asked.

She said that she supposed it was. The admission made Daisy somehow easier to accept. I yelled for the twins to come see.

That summer the twins and I were as close as we'd ever be. Mom had taken a part-time job on top of her other work, and had left me mostly in charge of managing Kelsey and Mona. We'd developed a routine. I woke them up by blasting Cartoon Network. We ate cereal when we had milk. I was in charge of smelling the carton. If it'd gone sour, I would smash the dry Captain Crunch into peanut butter sandwiches. We built towers in the couch cushions, put on my mother's dresses, and the floor was always lava. We lived a good life.

The morning after he returned, I found him sitting in the living room. A baseball game flickered on the tv. I picked up the remote and he asked me if I slept well. I turned on Cartoon Network. He opened his mouth, but said nothing. I turned the volume louder and louder, until the laughter of SpongeBob echoed through the house. He asked me what I was doing. I walked away with the remote in the pocket of my overalls.

My dad returned a passive person. He seemed forever in anticipation of being kicked, and in this state, I no longer feared him. If anything, I took pleasure in testing how far he would go to pretend not to see me or my actions.

That first week the twins and I decided that we wanted to share a room, so we tunneled a hole from my bedroom to theirs with a hammer. I did most of the swinging. It wasn't a large hole, just the size of a rolled-up sleeping bag. Dad had run at the sound of the first break. He'd been fired from his job, so he was always home. He stood there, framed in my door, and watched as I hit the wall again and again. My sisters screamed in delight on the other side. He didn't say anything, but later, while we were at swim practice, he'd come in

and cut the hole into the shape of a small arch and finished the edges, so it looked like a proper door instead of a yawning gash.

We wanted to keep the hamster in our conjoined rooms, but we didn't because of the smell. The cage stunk of wet cardboard and piss, and despite this, I loved her. She was white, with brown stripes, and black circles around her eyes, which made her look like a little raccoon. She was about the size of a meatloaf, and we named her Daisy.

She lived in the basement, which I'm sure she preferred because that summer was unbearably hot. One day, I went downstairs because I was sweating through my shirt. I fanned my face with an old newspaper, and sucked on a popsicle, and watched Daisy writhe. At first, I thought she had an itch. She twitched and convulsed in her bed of shredded paper. For a moment, I thought her organs fell out. It wasn't until I saw the squirming beans next to her that I understood. Daisy was giving birth.

I'd heard about the magic of childbirth, and this was something like magic. The hairless babies wriggled in a lump, while Daisy huffed next to them. Popsicle dripped onto my shoe. I set the newspaper down, and crouched so I was level with the cage. The babies were bright pink, hairless, and the size of my fingernail. They looked disgusting and I loved it. I counted out seven babies, while Daisy sniffed at their bodies. She nudged them with her nose, then picked one up between her pink paws. She held it like a sunflower seed. I leaned in, my nose grazing the wire cage. She popped the baby in her mouth.

I thought she would spit it out. I waited for her to spit the baby out into her hands. I tapped on the cage, but she only looked at me, sniffed, and walked back to the pups. She bit into the soft, pink back of a baby. I watched it struggle between her teeth, and she shoved it into her cheek. I'm not sure how long I sat there watching Daisy consume the litter. At some

point, I shook the cage, but that only seemed to aggravate her further. Like ticks, their bodies burst.

I hadn't noticed them come down the stairs. It wasn't until it was over that I heard Kelsey snuffle behind me. She cried quietly, while Mona held her hand with a dry, cold look on her face. When I stood, my legs felt numb.

"What now?" Mona asked.

I looked at the cage. A bloody Daisy scampered in circles. My face felt hot and my eyes welled up, and I reached for Mona.

Mona called us both babies, dropped Kelsey's hand, and picked up the cage. Daisy peered out, surrounded by the hollow bodies.

We walked up the stairs and into the bright heat of the house. We passed our father, who sat silently at the kitchen table, and his brow furrowed at the sight of the blood. I followed Mona outside. The orange plastic cage swung in her grip. We followed her down the street to the creek where the neighborhood boys fished. A small, wooden platform, made by someone's father out of scrap two-by-fours, bridged over the stream. Here, Mona stopped her march and held Daisy out to me.

"You're the big sister," she said.

I took the handle. An acrid smell, musky and burnt, grew in intensity under the sun. Daisy chewed noisily at the wire. I sat on the platform. The water beneath us gurgled over dark stones. It had rained the night before, so the water was deep and muddy. I lowered the cage as far as my arm could reach. Water tipped into the cage, picked up the brown, paper bedding, and pulled it into the current. I laid flat with the warm wood under my stomach

until the cage submerged deeper. Daisy let out a high squeal and clamoured up the cage until her small, soft body, was clawing and biting at the top where I held the handle. I dropped it.

Kelsey screamed and ran. Even underwater, even over Kelsey's cries, I could hear a sharp squeal. I didn't understand that I too was whimpering until Mona started yelling: Shut up! Shut up!

I heard her walk away, but I stayed laying under the hot sun, listening to the water rush under me.

When I got home, I went to my room and found that one of them had tacked a sheet over the arch between our rooms. I felt a wave of exhaustion, and slept until mom called for dinner. When I woke, I told myself it was a dream. It had all the makings of a dream, and I had convinced myself of this so thoroughly that when my mom asked where Daisy was, for a moment, I didn't know. Mona kicked my chair. I looked at Kelsey, who looked down at her lap. I could have told mom what happened: the birth, the killings. But the telling would have forced me to consider whether what we did, what I did, which felt so necessary in the moment, wasn't only the exact wrong thing, but that through this action my mother would see me peel back the mask of her daughter to reveal the evil girl that murdered her own pet. I'd heard stories of how Jimmy Valentino dissected his neighbor's cat and was sent away to some special camp for deranged youth. My head swam in a heated flush. For a moment I wondered if this was the sort of thing that they could send girls to prison for.

I looked at dad. He had seen us with the cage, but he didn't answer my mother. He just quietly slid chicken tenders onto my plate, and in that action my anger and fear worked itself into a ball, which I threw to my father.

"Dad killed Daisy," I said.

My dad, who was now scooping mashed potatoes, gave me a flat look.

Mom asked me what I said. Kelsey started humming, a habit she'd taken to when nervous.

“Dad killed Daisy.”

Dad started piling food onto his plate.

Mom looked at dad with a pale face, and she asked “Why he would do that?”

I said I didn't know why monsters do anything.

He dropped the serving spoon and it clattered on the tile. He picked it up and took it to the sink. I could see a flush rise from his shirt collar.

As he rinsed the spoon, dad said that Daisy was sick, that she was dying, that he'd helped her.

Mom, incredulous, asked if it was true. Mona kicked the bar under her chair in steady thumps. Kelsey's humming peeled out like a boiling kettle.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I killed the stupid hamster. Now, can we just get past this?”

YELP

We were celebrating. The waitress carried The Shark Bite out in a goblet filled to the brim with blue liquor, the rim dusted with salt. She lowered it in front of me and screamed "Everyone out of the water, there's been a shark sighting!" and poured grenadine into my drink. I, now a paralegal, had taken on the dignified glow of someone destined for success. I could practically feel the money nestling into my bare bank account. I'd gotten the offer this afternoon and immediately called my brother and then, there we were, overlooking the river, the sun bright as a lemon, ordering the most expensive drink on the menu, at my favorite restaurant: Joe's Crab Shack.

My older brother, Daniel, ordered a beer and it came in a regular pint glass without any special announcement, but we clinked our glasses together, and he said it was "divine." His hair is starting to grey, and the flecks add an authority that he'd tried to claim years before.

They unrolled the butcher block paper onto our table like we were royalty. Two waiters carried out the buckets, and threw a shower of seafood onto our table. Sweet snow crab, littleneck clams, cold water lobsters' tail, smoked sausage all cooked in a Belgian ale, piled on the table between us. Shells tumbled from the top and we caught them before they fell and rolled back to sea.

We ate with our hands. Old bay seasoning coated our fingers, and we wore bibs that said "What a Catch" and "Let's Get Crackin." I broke a lobster tail and submerged the meat in butter and feel richer than I'd ever been before.

Daniel found the sausage too cold, and the lobster too small. He ate only the crab, but signed heavily as he did. "Tasteless" he mourned. (I'll include a link to his review below)

Daniel, as many of you know, is an Elite Yelper, and he thought we would receive better service. At one point he stopped our waitress, Kaitlyn (who did a great job by the way! Thank you, Kaitlyn!) and he asked her if she truly didn't recognize him. Kaitlyn asked if he was a friend of her father's and Daniel tore his bib off and went to the bathroom.

When he came back he reminded me that he's a pillar of this community, and I agreed. He thinks I should review consistently, build up my following (I'd just written my first review before learning of the new job. Go to my profile if you want to read about the Taco cart on Franklin Street). Daniel makes friends through Yelp, gets free food at restaurants, and has conversations with wonderful people from all over the world! And he said, (he said this in a whisper, so I don't know if I can report this) that Elite Yelpers get invited to exclusive events where they have everything they can dream of. I asked Daniel what all of his dreams were and he told me to stop playing dumb because it wasn't a good look.

Then the music started. A country dance song played over the speakers, and the waiters and waitress all clapped to the beat until they were in a line between the dining room and the patio. Then they danced. Most of the dancing involved running between tables and getting children to come up and clap with them, but there was one guy who stepped forward and moved his body with such skill and such poise with the serene look of someone deeply in love with their own art. When it ended, I stood and applauded.

Hurry to the Joe's Crab Shack on the corner of Kingston and Rose, before this remarkable talent leaves for his inevitably bright future.

Jackie G.



Joe's Crab Shack

Around the corner from where I now work there's a dumpling place called Blossom Tree. The walls are painted plum, and black curtains cover the windows. It is dark, and because it is dark I can eat alone without observing myself as the sad, lump of a woman who no one must love, or even like enough to share a meal with. In Blossom Tree I'm only a shadowed shape in the cool, dim lighting.

I ordered five soup dumplings, five chicken and basil dumplings, and a scallion pancake. The dumplings stood in a line on a long stone tray. A woman, sitting in a shadow to my left said something about the smallness of me, and the largeness of the order. I asked her to join me and she did.

I'd had dumplings before. First, from the frozen section of the grocery store, and then on an exceptionally bad date. I'd met the woman on a dating site and she turned out taller and less kind than her photo suggested. The dumplings, however, became more flavorful, more delicate, as the certainty of our incompatibility settled in my stomach like a stone.

Here, the woman leaned forward and plucked a plump dumpling from the line and popped it in her mouth. Her hair, parted down the middle, shone purple in the dim lighting. She wore thin, silver eyeglasses, and a white button-up. "Ana," she said.

"Jackie." I held out my hand for a handshake and she looked at my hand with a smile, then shook it with an exaggerated formality.

She showed me how to bite into the side of the tender wrapper to let the soup pour into the spoon. Pork broth, bright with ginger, will burn your mouth if you're not careful, but let it cool and slurp back the soup, dumpling and all.

She spoke seldomly. We ate together in the quiet dark of Blossom Tree. I focused on the food (the best dumplings in town -- definitely check this place out), and avoided eye contact, convinced that my eyes would betray what that bubbled inside, where each breath filled my chest fuller and fuller, and the soft shell of my form threatened to tear and pour out.

She touched my hand. The scallion pancake had yet to arrive. (I'd later learn that she paid for my meal and left her number on a napkin printed with a small, red rose.) She thanked me, and left, and when she was gone, and I, left alone again in the black vinyl booth, wondered at the magic of a soup dumpling.

Jackie G.



Blossom Tree

Winning the lottery was the first of many signs. I don't gamble often, but Daniel had reviewed the egg, bacon, strawberry, goat cheese sandwich at a local gas station, and I'd stopped to try it one morning and bought some scratch offs, because why not. I sat in my car with the breakfast sandwich brown-bagged in the passenger seat, a quarter, and the tickets. I had three total. The first won five dollars. The second offered nothing, but on the third, the quarter uncovered a matching number, and in small print underneath: \$800. In a spinning daze I walked back into the gas station, where I handed the young cashier the tickets, (John R. was friendly, though he could have expressed his congratulations with more sincerity) he gave me five dollars and said that I'd have to mail the other ticket, because the store can't cash winnings that large. I bought another breakfast sandwich, this one with hot

sauce and sardines, and ate both in the car and they were as surprising and revolting as Daniel reported.

Jackie G.



Sunny's Fuel n' Fill

I'm not a brunch person. Spending my morning at Rosemary + Bird was not my idea, but I'd called the number on the square of paper, and Ana answered, "Hello Jackie," and I asked her how she knew it was me, and she said she had a reservation for brunch on Saturday, and would I join her? I said, yes. She said, eleven at such and such location. Then she hung up.

There we were, at a short, rough wood table, with fabric napkins with yellow birds stitched into their weave. "Quaint Artistry," Ana said, then made a note in a spiral-bound book. She reached Elite Yelper status three years ago. I ordered the Monte Cristo, with layered ham, turkey, and melted swiss, all battered and deep fried. Red currant jelly coated the bread, and a fried egg sat happily on top of it all. The sweetness of the jam cut through the heaviness of the sandwich, and the sharp cheese balanced the sweet.

Ana ordered the fresh ricotta topped with figs and honey. She ordered the fried oyster omelette, the steak and eggs, the Dutch style pancakes, an English muffin, and spaghetti. How can you write a good review without knowing the menu? She visits a restaurant three, four times before she reviews. She stood and took a photo of the spread in front of us. Take a bite, she said. I took a bite and she took another photo. Great, you look so great, she said. I blushed hot, and took a sip of a mimosa (too much orange juice, flat).

Ana also works as a paralegal. She works at Thompson and Sons, in the same neighborhood as the dumpling place where we first met. We complained about paperwork, about bosses, about people who used all the paper in the copy machine without refilling it. She smiled easily. She has a dog named Lemon, an herb garden, and when she took a bite of pancakes she closed her eyes, and I decided that I liked her.

After brunch, we stood on the sidewalk outside, and debated whether or not there was rosemary in the steak and eggs. She reached her hand out to shake my hand. I took her hand and held it, then kissed her once, quickly and softly. She tasted like garlic and butter. We said goodbye.

I was sitting in my car in the restaurant's parking lot when I got a call from Daniel.

“Shit, Jackie, I've been calling for hours. Where have you been?”

I told him I'd been on a date, all of the syrupy happiness still thick in my mouth. He told me I need to stop. I asked him what I needed to stop. “Yelping,” he said. “You have to stop reviewing.” Can you believe that? I told him that we could both review, that I wasn't taking his thing. In fact, we should get dinner together soon. Reviewing could be something that we could do together. Maybe we could even publish a joint review? We'd publish on his account, of course.

He said no. He said that I needed to listen to him, but I told him to call me back when he calmed down. Honestly, you would need to know Daniel to understand. He's all about the drama.

Jackie G.



Rosemary + Bird

White truffle shaved over the heart of an artichoke, trimmed into the shape of a rose, with petals of parmesan, warmed with a balsamic so sweet it might have been maple syrup, sat on a clean, white plate. I never thought I'd have a meal such as this.

The owner, Andrea Marino, had called me, and invited me to the opening of Arancia. My reviews were known, he said. This surprised me, but I was flattered, and did want to go to this new restaurant. I called Daniel. I'd called him several times in the last week, and again heard no response. I left a message on his machine asking him to join me for dinner. Later in the day, Ana texted "You going?" She, too, had gotten a call from the restaurant.

So, Ana joined me. To get to the restaurant we entered a building downtown, and rode an elevator paneled in smoky glass. The doors opened into a black hallway with a faint orange light at the end. We followed the hall, turned a corner, and the dining room opened in front of us. Windows lined the walls in a way that made the room seem as if it was pushed to the edge of a cliff, the sky seemingly both above and below the floor. She held my hand.

For the soft opening they offered a reduced menu. We ordered one of everything. Our waiter wore a white, asymmetrical dress, and managed to misunderstand every request. We asked for sparkling water. She brought flat. We ordered the appetizers to be staggered in intervals of five minutes. We even wrote out the dishes with the timing, clear as day. She avoided eye contact, and gave the table next ours the wine menu, even though we were seated sooner. It took twenty minutes for the first dish to arrive. Ana timed it. Honestly ridiculous, she said, and I had to agree.

The heat in the room rose. A plate of olives, simply drizzled with oil, sat between us in a shallow bowl.

“You know,” Ana said, piercing a green olive the size of a marble, “there was an island where nothing grew except for olive trees.” I bit into an olive that tasted like brine. I watched the way her mouth moved to separate the olive from the pit. “And the people that lived on the island ate nothing but olives for every meal. Until a ship came with sailors who brought beef and chicken. The people of the island learned to love the taste of meat, and when the sailors left they wanted more of it.”

Our waitress arrived with a detached smile. “Fazzoletti pecorino chicken confit summer truffle,” she said in one indecipherable sentence, and set the dish in front of us. Ana decided it was over salted and I agreed. She started again, “There weren’t any animals on the island. The people had never seen any, and they didn’t know where to find meat. It’s unclear who started it, or how it started, but they began to eat one another. They’d poach their neighbors in olive oil, roast them stuffed with olives, or slice and toss with small, red olives. They’d cook bodies whole and replace their eyes with green, pitted olives.” She held up two olives in front of her eyes, and for a moment, I felt them watch me.

She ate both, one after the other, with a wicked smile. I leaned across the table and kissed her, her lips slick. I asked her to join me in the bathroom. She nodded, stood, and I watched her walk. I decided to wait a couple of minutes to appear discreet. I ate the rest of the olives on the plate and felt like my skin was cooking, caramelizing. I followed her.

The women's bathroom at the Arancia is not to be missed. If the view from the restaurant left you speechless, make sure to stop in here. A glass wall glances over the city as you dip your hands in the floating concrete sink. Real, white towels wait folded next to a selection of soaps, lotions, and perfume. The tile is warm to the touch, and every detail is

accounted for. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the food. Although good, promising even, it's trying too hard, and the inexperience of the new chef shows.

Jackie G.



Arancia

I now receive flowers every day. Some of them come from appreciative restaurant owners, and others come from Yelpers. One card said: "Tried Yellowtail and Soy on your recommendation. Fantastic!" Another: "I've read all of your reviews! Hope you have a great meal today!" Then: "Thank you."

This last card I almost missed. It was tucked into a vase of sunflowers, and written on the back were the words: "Stop." It looked nearly like Daniel's handwriting. I studied it for a while. There was no company, no brand.

My favorite bouquet was a burst of peach blossoms in a copper pitcher arranged by Forever Flowers.

Jackie G.



Forever Flowers

My mother called and asked about Daniel. I told her I hadn't heard from him, and she asked if I'd seen his Yelp page. I opened my laptop while we chatted. I'd gotten a raise at work, they'd given me a plaque for the organizing system that I'd instituted, Yelp sent me a

promotional package filled with freebies, and I was approved for a new apartment! My mother said that she hadn't heard from Daniel in weeks and now this.

I made myself a sandwich. It was delightful.

Daniel G.



Home

My new mailman sorts the mail from most to least important, so all the flyers are neatly stacked on the bottom.

Daniel G.



John Pluck, Mailman

Purple like a plum, mixed with gray, inky clouds.

Daniel G.



Sunset

I went to his apartment. He opened the door wearing a gray button-up and slacks.

“Come in,” he said and walked into the kitchen. “Do you want tea?” He pulled two mugs from the cabinet before I could answer.

“Where have you been? Earl Grey is fine.” I sat at the counter. His kitchen was clean. A stack of color-coordinated cookbooks decorated the island. I had expected a mess of take-out-containers, a bathrobe, the dirt and disarray that accompanies a break in sanity.

“I’m know,” he said. “I’m sorry that I haven’t called you back. I needed time work through some things.” He set a kettle to boil.

“You can’t just disappear. People worry, people like mom.” I put my feet up on the rung of the stool. I hadn’t been to Daniel’s apartment since the Thanksgiving the year before. It felt odd to be in his house, to acknowledge that he was an adult with a life whose edges I couldn’t see.

“I called her,” he said. He took a breath, “I got fired, but I found a new job. I just didn’t want you to worry. I knew that if you freaked out, then I would too, and I just needed time to figure out what to do next.”

“You got fired?”

“See, I knew you’d freak out.”

“This isn’t about Yelp?” The water boiled into a wail. Daniel pulled it off the heat, poured a mug full, and handed it to me.

“No,” he said, “Why would it be about Yelp?” He held my eye contact.

“But, your reviews?” I wasn’t sure what I thought he’d say, but him there, with his tea, and his new job, seemed wholly alien.

He took a sip and looked at me with what I interpreted as a cautionary look. “I’m trying to focus on positivity and my own well-being. I’m only writing positive reviews, and I’m not dining out anymore.” He patted his stomach, which was flat. He told me about his

new job at some real estate company. We finished our tea, and when I took the last sip, he said “Okay. It was nice to see you,” and led me to the door.

I called Ana from the lobby, and we met for coffee nearby.

Wooden beams supported the high ceilings of the cafe. I ordered a black coffee and sat on a flowered couch. Ana sat down with a cappuccino, a bagel, a croissant, and a cookie the size of her head.

“Don’t you ever worry about your health?” I asked, and she looked at me with heat behind her eyes.

“Do you?” She smoothed her skirt.

“I read your last review.” I took a sip of my coffee, and eyed the pastries on her plate. “It was harsh, don’t you think?”

“Don’t you remember the food?” She pulled the croissant apart with her fingers, and made a note in her notebook. “This place is awful. Why did we come here?”

“In your review of Arancia you said you had a horrible night.”

“I did.” Then she picked up the cookie and bent it until it snapped. “The waitress was rude, and the food was like a girl trying to get noticed: sad. Let’s get out of here. I heard about a new Korean place around the corner.”

“I’m thinking about quitting Yelp.”

She looked at me, dusted the crumbs off her hands, and said, “Okay.”

“You’re not going to ask me why?” I put my hand on her knee.

“It doesn’t really matter, does it?” she moved her leg so that my hand fell onto the cushion, then she stood and picked up her plates. “Are you done with that?” I handed her my cup.

I picked at the fibers in the couch while I waited for her to return. I thought maybe she went to the bathroom, so I waited for a while before I got up and circled the store. She wasn't in the bathroom, or ordering at the counter, or in a booth with another woman. I saw the coffee cup, with a pulled apart croissant, and a broken cookie crumbing in a bin of dirty dishes. I called her, but she didn't answer. I googled "Korean places near me" but the closest restaurant was three miles east. I asked the boy working at the counter if he knew of a new place, but he hadn't. I asked him if he'd seen a woman who looked like her, but he hadn't.

I walked home and read her review of Kimchi Mama. I'll link the review below.

Jackie G.

Small Shoulders Cafe



THIRTEEN

For her seventh birthday, Olive received *The Secret Treehouse*, a series of brief, big-lettered books in which a thirteen-year-old girl, with no mother, happens upon a magic treehouse and travels through time and space. Having recently discovered the wonders of reading, Olive squirreled herself away inside the mind of the books. In one moment, she rode horseback, wrapped in an emerald green wool cloak, hoping that Sir Lancelot had survived the attack. Then the microwave would *ding*, and she would eat her oatmeal. It wasn't that Olive fully disliked the life that her and her parents had. It was just summer. Olive didn't have school to fill the days. She grew bored, and when she asked her mother what to do about it, her mother suggested chores.

With a lack of other things to do, Olive Naomi Walsh ran away from home. She packed what she imagined she would need: a flashlight, band aids, a book, and a foil packet of gummy bears. She walked slowly. Despite this, she came to the end of her driveway without anyone stopping her. She turned on Robin Road, then went left up the hill to Fairman's Farm. A truck rumbled past, but she saw no one else. She walked the dirt, tree-lined, farm service road. Sunlight dappled the earth like a lace tablecloth.

In running away, she walked nearly a mile of the service road. Green corn stalks swayed. A black animal darted across once, then twice. Olive froze. *A cat*, she thought, *be a cat*. But of course, it was a skunk, white-striped, ambling towards her. She hadn't seen a skunk before, but she could identify the smell that wafted into car windows. She thought this was the skunk's poison, and she didn't want to die. The fat lump of skunk scuttled closer and closer. In that moment, she remembered how, in *The Secret Treehouse* book three, Jane vanquished the forest monster. So, Olive stepped into the center of the path with her arm

out and her palm to the sky. She concentrated on the word *leave*, then pushed the thought towards the skunk.

The skunk stopped. Now only five feet away, it turned around, seemed to glance at her over its shoulder, then scurried off the dirt road and into the woods.

I'm magic, Olive thought. Then she sprinted the other way. Her boots, a size too big, slapped loudly against the dirt.

Sweating, with mud-caked boots, Olive arrived home. She stopped in the driveway. The house looked like a white shipping container. The aluminum siding reflected back the setting sun's glow. One of the few windows was obstructed by the garage, which her father had built too close to the house. The scrap wood he'd used had weathered poorly. The graying woodgrains had splintered like a bird's nest. The garage light hummed: a sign her father was at work.

In the kitchen, her mother microwaved hot dogs, and didn't ask Olive where she'd been.

Now, at twelve, Olive understands that she may be magical, but she's also a wimp, unlikely to experience a single adventure until she grows up. She reads every day and studies the habits of characters as instruction manuals on how to be like the remarkable, clever children in her stories. Books like *The Secret Treehouse* taught her that the forest holds secrets, that the fewer parents you have, the more adventures you went on, and that her thirteenth birthday would change everything.

Olive is an odd girl. She sews her own clothing from a box of her mother's fabric. She collects salt and pepper shakers. She tells people at school that at birth she was only the size of an olive. She packs a small mason jar of olives in her lunchbox each day, with squares

of swiss cheese, crackers, and an apple, because she believes this meal to be wildly Parisian. She sits with her friend, Kelly. They both read silently while they eat.

Olive's hair is brown and frizzy. She hasn't learned to control it, so she often wears a pink wig from last Halloween. She'll dye it when she's older, or perform a spell to make it pink forever. The hair brings out the color of her pimples, and the red of her always-skinned knees. She doesn't know these things yet, but she will.

You should know that Olive's mother loves her. Naomi does her best, but she has other things to worry about.

At twenty-seven, Naomi Minoru Nakamura married Charles Walsh. He'd repaired her car when it broke down on her way through Hanover, and when her car could leave, she didn't. They bought the white, ranch house with their own money and a large loan from the bank. Before this, Naomi had never lived in a real home with a real yard. She planted flowers. She hung Christmas lights. She bought pale green paint on sale, and painted every room. Her parents taught her that you should never pay someone to do what you can do for yourself. If something in the house broke, Naomi fixed it. From old sheets she sewed curtains, pillows, and a cat bed for Nancy, who would later disappear into the woods.

Naomi worked temp jobs until offered a position in hospital administration. She wouldn't say that the hospital filing system was her passion. She would say that job security, and a steady paycheck, are the signs of a good career. In that sense, she likes her job.

Now, at forty-one, Naomi works as the assistant to the Director of Patient Services, and dreams of being the Director of Patient Services. Her boss, Jerry Henkin, lives in a large colonial only a mile from the hospital. He spends money on dried cranberries,

monogrammed towels. He once bought cashmere scarves for her and the other two women in the department, for Christmas. Naomi hadn't realized that the scarf was any different from any other, until Carrie whispered over their desks that she'd seen these at the department store in the town over, and she'd been waiting for them to go on sale: this scarf, this knitted rectangle, cost nearly one hundred dollars.

"The gift is too much," Naomi told Jerry, standing in his office with the scarf re-wrapped in its box.

He kept typing as he spoke to her. "Naomi, you can take it back if it's not your taste. Maybe gloves instead? Okay, I've got to write this. Merry Christmas." He nodded to the door.

She took it to the store, but they wouldn't give her cash back, so she bought shoes for Olive, a coffee maker for Charles, and a twelve pack of white socks.

She had known that her daughter tried to run away, but she didn't want to encourage what she understood as a temper tantrum. She'd heard Olive come home sniffing. She'd pretended to be busy with dinner. That night, she scrubbed the mud off her daughter's boots.

Olive, at that age, didn't understand clean boots as an act of love. Even now, she worries that the presence of both parents will keep her from the world of magic that seems just outside her reach. She doesn't exactly wish her parents dead, but she believes that if her mother were gone, she would grow up faster. Her father, on the other hand, is rarely around. She feels like she could disappear into the woods for some time before he'd notice. Sure, she would feel a deep, unending sorrow, but that kind of pain would open her up to all that she

couldn't see. A veil would drop in her parents' absence, and that is when Olive's life would begin. She was sure.

Olive's thirteenth birthday, May 17th, is one week away. All the signs in her books suggest that her powers will be revealed to her on this day, or she'll be doomed to a boring life forevermore. Either:

- A. A letter will disclose her true identity
- B. An otherworldly messenger will appear to her
- C. A portal will open before her
- D. One day she'll live in her own house shaped like a white shipping container.

At dinner, she asks her parents to rent out the Community Room in the local firehouse so that she, like Julie Boucher, can have a party for her thirteenth birthday. Charles shrugs. Naomi says no.

"Do you know how much those things cost?" Naomi takes a scoop of peas and passes the bowl to Charles. He piles up all his food like a hill. The peas roll over chicken and stick to mashed potatoes. He hands the bowl back to Naomi.

"Kelly said it wasn't a big deal. She said we could hire her cousin to DJ for practically nothing because they're family." Olive carefully scoops four little peas from the bowl.

"Why don't you have a sleepover? We can rent a movie. Make cupcakes. You have to eat more than that."

"I hate peas."

"One more scoop. Why not have a party here?"

Olive looks around the room. Her dad had made the table from a wooden door. She could see through the hole where the knob used to be. The kitchen counter is the color of steamed spinach. The linoleum is peeling. Olive scoops out four more peas. She eats them one-by-one, letting the soft green ball break into a sickly mash under her teeth.

You see, there was a time, years ago, when Olive invited girls in her classes over for slumber parties. That was, until she went to the home of Kelly Myerson, a well-read, shy girl, who Olive knew from Library Club. The Myerson home was a three-story, five-bedroom house, with a heated pool, a gym, and a room furnished only with display cases of small, glass animals. Kelly's mother, a lawyer, cooked swordfish and couscous for dinner. Her father, an acclaimed surgeon, brought home buttery fruit tarts. That night, Kelly and Olive sat in the hot tub and looked up at stars, and talked about books they'd both read, and books they wanted to read. Olive told Kelly about her magic, how she was capable of mind control. Kelly said that she believed her, and for that reason, Olive didn't hate her. That night, Olive counted the Myerson's bathrooms in her mind to fall asleep. One, in the basement. Two, next to the kitchen. Three, by the living room. Four, Kelly's room. Five, her brother's room. Six, her parent's room. Seven...

Olive eats the last pea and says, "Never mind."

Charles understands what Olive wants. He'd like to fix up the house. He'd like to rent the firehouse for his daughter's party. He salts the chicken. He pours his beer into a plastic cup.

He's fixing up an old MG for a client now, but he won't get the next check until it's done. He has a few hundred, but he has to buy a new belt sander. He adds and subtracts while his family talks. He pours gravy over his food and thinks.

At ten, Charles Donovan Walsh, had taken the toaster apart then put it back together incorrectly. When his father attempted to make toast, in said toaster, and it started a small kitchen fire, which took a whole pitcher of lemonade to put out. Smoke stained the cabinets black. A new toaster was purchased. Charles' punishment was a full summer of work with his father's landscaping business.

This was how, in his tenth summer, Charles Walsh learned to love solitary, diligent work.

Now, at thirty-nine, he runs his own auto repair business from their garage. He likes to wake early when the sun cuts bright shapes onto the garage floor and catches dust mid-air. He turns on the radio: 94.7 FM Front Porch Bluegrass. His hands turn black from grease and he learns to associate that sharp smell with the slow turning of his own thoughts.

If you were to see Charles Walsh, you probably wouldn't wonder about his mind. He's a gruff man, with the deep tan of someone who labors in the sun. He has two pairs of work pants: heavy denim, smeared with paint and oil, with pockets large enough to hold an impact wrench on either side. You wouldn't guess, as no one had, that he was learning German from language tapes in his garage. His mother was German, a quiet, industrious woman who'd once told her son, no, she wouldn't miss him when she died, because after death came nothing. Two years ago, after her passing, he'd found a box of letters she wrote, and which were written to her, all in German. He'd taken to translating them. It wasn't that he was hiding this fact from his family. It was just that, of all the thoughts that drove and circled through his mind, the idea of sharing his inner workings never occurred to him.

That day at school, when Kelly Myerson asked Olive if she was invited to Olive's party, Olive informed her that she was becoming a witch on her thirteenth birthday, and the ritual was just, like, this whole thing, so her parents said she couldn't have a party, you know, for safety reasons.

Kelly asked if she could come to the ritual since she was, honestly, the only friend Olive had.

Olive said only people with magic in their blood could be there. Her parents, although super boring, had a mystical heritage that they didn't even know about. Also, she has lots of friends.

Kelly said she was probably just as magical as Olive. She was just younger, so her powers hadn't had time to mature yet.

Olive closed her locker and told her that there was no way that Kelly has magical abilities.

Then, Kelly Myerson conveniently remembered that her parents had offered to donate to the school library, so that Kelly wouldn't have to fundraise. She told Olive such.

Olive, in a sudden vision, saw herself alone in front of a grocery store asking strangers for money. This vision both confirmed that Olive could see the future, and revealed that Kelly wasn't a very good friend. Despite this, all Olive said was, "Whatever" and walked away.

This is how, after school, Olive and her mother drove on their own to the Bi-Lo Discount Supermarket. In her lap, Olive held the metal coffee can wrapped in construction paper with the words "Love Our Libraries!" She'd drawn multicolored books flying around the can. Charles had helped her cut a slot in the plastic lid. She'd already agreed on the outfit

with Kelly. She wore a white button-up, one of her father's ties, her black church pants, and a pair of fake glasses from the dollar store. So, this is what she looked like, standing alone in front of the grocery store's automatic doors. Her mom leaned on a pile of firewood, next to cardboard bins of pumpkins.

"Please don't make me do this," Olive said.

"This was your idea."

"Can't you help me? Stand here with me and ask people to donate." An older woman averted eye contact and held tightly to her purse as she walked past.

"Olive, this is your club. I'm right here. Just talk to someone and get it over with."

A man carrying a baby walked towards them.

"Excuse me, sir. Do you love libraries?" Olive said it all in one rush, holding the coffee can out in front of her.

"What are you supposed to be?" he asked.

"A librarian." She touched the tie, a red and green plaid, which her father only wore to church on Christmas.

"Right." He adjusted the baby, dug out a couple of quarters, and dropped them in the can. He walked on.

Naomi took her crossword from her purse. "How much do you have to raise?"

"Fifty dollars."

Naomi sighed.

An hour later Olive had only made \$7.43. After two hours, \$13.05.

"Mom, can I please just have \$36.95? It can be part of my birthday present." Olive repeated *36.95, 36.95, 36.95* in her head.

"No, Olive. What's a four-letter word for out of juice?"

“Dead?”

An older woman, wearing a long fleece jacket with embroidered flowers, walked past and stuffed a couple of folded bills in the can.

They waited another half hour, but it was late now, nearly ten, and traffic into the store slowed. The lights in the parking lot buzzed to life. The grocery had another entrance around the side of the building. Olive and her mother watched the last customers walk all the way around to avoid them.

Naomi folded the paper. “Let’s go home.”

Olive held the can against her chest and wished it was heavier.

That night she dreamt that all the loose change in town unstuck itself from couch cushions, emerged from storm drains, and rolled through the dark back roads of town until it reached her house. Dime, quarters, and pennies scaled the walls like spiders, slid through the gap in the window, and dropped into the coffee can.

Charles woke to a sound like rain on the tin roof.

In the morning, Olive poured the can onto the kitchen table and counted: Fifty dollars even. Naomi asked Charles if he had added to the can. He shook his head no, sipped his coffee, and examined a coin.

“It’s because I wished it so,” Olive told her parents.

Naomi rubbed her forehead, and sat at the table. “There was that one woman with the long coat. She must have donated what you needed.”

“But it’s exactly fifty dollars.”

“She must have heard you. You said how much you needed, remember?”

Olive didn't listen. When her mother went upstairs to change, she told her father about her dream.

Charles thought of the sound that woke him in the night, and told his daughter he believed her. Then he got up, and went to work. Olive listened to his music, muffled through the kitchen wall, and slid the coins off the table, back into the can.

On her thirteenth birthday, Olive Naomi Walsh woke with the idea that her heart had been replaced in the night. In its place, she felt as though a hot stone nestled between her ribs. She put a hand on her sternum, as if to hold it in place.

"Get up," her mother said, knocking on her door as she walked by.

Olive put on her best outfit: a black jean jacket, plaid pants, and her pink wig. It was Sunday, so no school. Her mother would go to work, and her father would spend another day in the garage. Olive went downstairs, and while her oatmeal spun in the microwave, she started a new book.

When her mother was gone Olive went upstairs and packed a bag. She started with a rolled fleece blanket, tied together with shoelaces, then a clean t-shirt, socks, and two pairs of underwear. She'd been saving granola bars from her school lunches, six in total, which went in the bag. Next, a water bottle, a utility knife taken from the garage, and a bit of rope. She hid the bag under her bed, took out her hiking boots, loosened the laces, and sat them at the ready.

Satisfied, she walked out and checked the mailbox. Inside were two discount flyers, five envelopes addressed to her parents, and one golden envelope addressed to Ms. Olive Naomi Walsh. Her too-warm heart thumped. *Tell me about my powers. Take me away from here.* She whispered her wish to the envelope.

She carefully peeled it open, and slid out the heavy, cream colored paper. *To a Special Granddaughter, On her Special Day.*

She sighed, and mentally crossed out a few narratives from her mind. Now, she would wait for sunset. To kill the day she went to the library. She reviewed her favorite stories. *The Time Before Now* suggested that she go to the forest and find an animal that would show her the way to the portal. *The Thing about Stardust* insisted that the entry to the sky would only open at sunset. *Boundless* said that to enter the magic kingdom of Lomore, she would need someone to hold open the gate.

“Happy birthday.” Kelly stood before her holding a fruit tart in a plastic container. “I thought you might be here.”

Olive thought *tell me you're sorry.*

“I’m sorry I didn’t help you with the fundraiser.”

Olive took the fruit tart. On top, amidst the blueberries and sliced strawberries, was a single Kalamata olive. “Do you know any birthday myths that could help me?”

“The mermaid one?”

“I already showered.”

“The portal?”

Olive held up *The Thing about Stardust*. Kelly smiled.

“But I don’t know where it is,” Olive said.

They weren’t sure what they were looking for, having never seen a portal, but they imagined that they would know it when they saw it. They walked around town, down to the stone drainage pipe by the Dairy Queen, over to the cliffside near the hospital, then back down to the valley where the white shipping container house looked grayer and older than

ever before. *Guten Morgen* played softly repeated in the garage. Green plants grew from the gutters.

It was six, only two hours left until sunset. Olive said, "This is it." The screen door creaked when opened and banged behind them.

In Olive's room, Kelly plopped on the bed. "I'm exhausted. Can I wash my face?"

Olive watched an ant climb over her shoe. "Sure."

The only clean washcloth was one from the dollar store, the kind that expanded when wet. This one was printed with Spiderman. To Kelly's credit she said, "Thanks," and went to the bathroom.

In the hallway, Olive listened to the water run, and tried to imagine what her life would look like if she didn't find a portal, if nothing happened at sunset, if she had to wake up the next day in the same bed, and be the same girl that she was today, forever. Her heart stone weighed heavier and burned hotter.

Charles stopped soldering. The German tape ended. He heard the voice of a girl saying, "Excuse me, sir." He did not recognize Kelly, not because he hadn't met her before, but because in the moments when he had, his mind had been elsewhere.

"Yes?"

"We need help finding a portal."

Olive had told Kelly not to bother, that her dad wouldn't know anything, so she was surprised when he came into the kitchen. He wiped the grease from his hands and said, "so I hear you need a portal."

This was how, on Olive's thirteenth birthday, they made their way down the driveway, onto Robin road, then left up the hill to Fairman's Farm. Olive brought her duffle

bag, and her father didn't ask what was inside. They walked a mile down the service road, past where Olive had encountered the skunk, and kept walking. The road curved around a hill, dotted with apple trees. Around that curve, Charles stepped off the path and through the trees.

The corn fields were gone and only grass remained. The flat land filled their whole line of vision; a soft green seemed to wrap around the edges of the earth. In the middle, a lake, the size of a baseball field, looked like a mirror reflecting the sky. The sun dipped low to the ground.

Charles took his shoes off and ran to the lake. The girls looked at each other, then followed. When they got to the edge, Charles had already rolled his work pants above his knees and waded in.

Olive stepped in. The water was like ice, and the rocks slick with algae beneath her toes. Kelly grimaced, but followed. Charles moved further and further in. His pant legs turned a deep blue. Olive followed. She took her wig off and threw it back to shore. Kelly stayed at ankle depth.

Charles stopped when the water hit Olive's shoulders. Around them, the water settled and rematerialized into the image of clouds. He looked up at the sky, then back to his daughter, and laughed. "What do you think?"

She thought about it. The wind picked up. The clouds moved fast overhead and all around. The light on her father's face was bright, then in shadow, then bright again. "It's not exactly what I meant." The sun was setting now, turning the water orange then pink.

He held his hand out to her. "I know."

"I wanted everything to be different." She took his hand.

"It can be." Pink turned to purple.

“I can’t stay here.”

“No,” he said, “You can’t stay here.”

So they left, shivering in their wet clothes. Charles carried his daughter’s duffle bag.

When they arrived back at the house, her mother was already sitting on the couch.

Her face fell when she saw them.

“Where have you been?”

“We had to make it to the portal,” Charles told her. Olive laughed.

“Go change.” Naomi walked into the entryway.

“Hug me first.” He dropped the bag and reached his arms out to her.

She stepped back. “No, you’re covered in mud.”

“Hug me!” He chased her into the kitchen. She laughed and hid behind a chair. He pretended he’d climb over the table, and she ran into the living room. Olive and Kelly laughed, and shrieked when he got close. He growled “hug me” at the girls; they ran to the stairs and watched as he caught Naomi, in his grease stained, lake-wet work clothes, and held her, and she let him hold her, and it wasn’t magic, but it was something.