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Carpenters: A Short Story Collection

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Carpenters

by

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Advanced Projects in Fiction

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Salt

She will float on her back until she cannot feel the skin around her fingers and toes. Then, she will let the salt eat away at her body. At first, it will soften her. It will turn the skin she's tried so hard to keep smooth and tight into wrinkly mush, withered and weathered and full of lines and cracks where more salt can get inside. Then, once the softening is done, she will start to break apart. Slowly, she will dissolve to pieces, until each particle of her former self is the size of the grains of salt that softened her. And then she will be part of the sea.

She will hear her children's shouts, at first. The two of them, standing on the shore where the white foam kisses their toes, will watch her. At first, they will be amazed. They will cry out with excitement. They have rarely seen her as anything other than their mother. She has made sure of that. And, now, she's not sure why.

Eventually, though, their cries will become pained and afraid. They will call for her, begging her to come back and feed them and wipe their bottoms and dry their tears. The little one will sit in a soiled diaper on the sand. Her soft pink skin, pale and new, will turn red and blistered in the sun. She will scream, loudly and desperately, too young to know how to hide her feelings, until her little throat grows raw and weak, and no more sound comes out.

For the older one, it will happen more slowly. Her panic will start sooner, but smaller, quieter, a deep tremor in her belly. At first, she will not cry; she will try to be brave for the baby. But her pain will be stronger, more acute; she knows what abandonment looks like. She will know that it is happening to her. Eventually, she will sink into the sand beside her sister, and she, too, will cry, but she will also curse her. She will use words she's never said out loud, but now feels entitled to, and she will hurl them out into the sea.

She will hear them, but their cries will be muffled by the tumbling of rocks and shells and sand and sea salt in the waves. Soon, she will be unable to differentiate their cries from those of the seagulls flying overhead. One day, they will give up, leave the beach, and never come back.

She needs them not to need her. She needs them to realize that she has no plans to swim back to shore, the sharp angle of her arm slicing confidently towards them through the blue-green water. Their mothers arm: skinny yet strong, freckled, gold bracelets jingling around the wrist; the arm that has cradled them since birth, held them to her breast, lifted them from falls, and rubbed their fevered backs. They have taken it from her, greedily, with sticky hands.

But, floating, the arm will be hers again. Then the salt will take it away and it will be nobody's. And then she will no longer need her eyes or her ears. She will communicate by the swell of the sea. She will drift out across the Atlantic, and the bits of her that aren't swallowed up by blue whales or giant squids will land upon faraway shores, carried there in the gentle, rocking arm of the waves. And she will wash up very, very far away from here.

She squints up into the bright New England sky. Her heart is still beating. Her skin is still whole. It is August. The year is 1979. There are no clouds. The sun shines down on her forgivingly. Apologetically.

She allows herself five more minutes. Count backwards from sixty, five times in a row. Then she'll go back to the shore where her daughters are waiting; the daughters she has grown in her own body, sharing her nutrients, her blood and her organs. Stretching and sagging and aching. She remembers pushing each of them out, vividly. The stretching and tearing. She winces. The thought of it makes her sore all over again. Though maybe the soreness is from the other thing.

Four more minutes. Then she will go back to the children and their father, who is asleep beneath the umbrella with the newspaper across his chest; their father who lets them sit alone by the shoreline because he trusts them, not because he is neglectful. Their father who loves them better

than she does; who plays their imaginary games, pretending, convincingly, to be a customer in a shell shop or a giant sea monster or the commander of their starship. Their father who hugs them against his side when they are upset with her, when she has scolded them, when she has spent all day with them and they are sick of her. He hugs them anyway. He kisses the tops of their sweaty heads. His love for them is simple and easy. Straightforward. She remembers thinking, when she watched him cut the umbilical cord that tethered her to her eldest daughter, that the mother should be the one to free herself.

Three more minutes. Her lungs are beginning to ache. She inhales deeply and stares up at the flat blue sky, fixating on a single wispy cloud, because otherwise, she will look towards the shore. And if she does that, she will seek out the face of her daughter who, awake with insomnia in the early hours of the morning, watched her come in through the sliding glass doors. At first, she hadn't noticed her sitting at the table with a bowl of cereal. She was too focused on the feeling of slipping through the door, sliding it shut as quietly as possible. On the sound of her breaths coming in and out in small gasps.

Then: her eleven-year-old daughter watching her through half-closed eyes, her brow furrowed in sleepy confusion. She was jolted back into reality; for a little while, out on the sand, despite the circumstances, she hadn't been a mother. She'd been a girl. She was ashamed of the kernel of relief this brought her.

She thought about coming up with some plausible explanation, but she couldn't manage it. They just stared at each other. She almost caved; she almost fell at the feet of her own child and told her everything. What would she have done? Stroked her own mother's hair? Dried her tears? Held her weeping head in her small, narrow lap?

Eventually, she just lowered her eyes and walked through the dark kitchen, smelling of smoke and salt. She felt sore and sick as she sank into bed beside her snoring husband. The cool

sheets felt too gentle, too forgiving, against her rough and sandy skin. She got up and showered, letting the hot water sting her in places she was afraid to touch with her own hands. Dirty water swirled around her feet.

Two minutes. She exhales completely and begins to let herself sink; she needs to fully submerged to think about the next part, because she knows that, if she's not, she will be physically unable to stop herself from turning her head and searching for him. And she knows that she will find him, sitting in the sun down the beach from her husband asleep beneath the umbrella and her daughters with their toes in the foam.

He will be there, in his red canvas chair, with his long tan legs dug into the sand and his baby girl bouncing on his knee and his wife nearby on the blanket pouring cups of pink lemonade; or, he will be standing before the barbeque on the deck of the big yellow house, shrouded in blue-gray smoke, gazing out at the horizon line, not at her. He will look right past her.

She remembers yesterday. She was alone for the first time all week, volunteering to walk the half mile down the beach to get everyone lunch so that she could hear herself think. And as she leaned against the splintering wood of the snack bar – her arms folded across her chest, a cigarette dangling between two fingers, her eyes watching the tall, golden-green beach grass sway in the breeze, savoring the meaningless, selfish thoughts that ran through her mind, and taking pleasure in the fact that they did not have to do with her children or her husband or what would be for dinner or whose turn it was for the trampoline – he brushed up against her.

It was late in the afternoon, and most of the families had finished their lunches and returned to the crowded beach; the area was quiet, aside from the fuzzy music coming from the radio and the rustling of the grass and sizzling of the hamburgers on the grill. She was so absorbed in her selfish thoughts that, at first, she was annoyed at the man who brushed up against her empty arm (empty because she was not yet holding the large bag of sandwiches and hot dogs and sodas and ice creams

that were still being prepared behind the counter, and all she carried on her was the change from a twenty, tucked into the back pocket of her denim shorts). But then he told her, in a quiet yet deep voice, that he thought she was beautiful and that he had been watching her on the beach all week and that he could not get her out of his mind; that he felt he would regret it forever if he never spoke to her, and he knew it sounded strange, after all that, but did her family want to come to their bonfire tonight so that he could get to know her? And then he let his eyes wander down her chest to the place where her arms folded across the sand-filled bikini top; the place filled with small wrinkles and lines and freckles from too much sun, the place that was once smooth skin leading to upright, round, milk-less breasts.

Thirty seconds left and she is running out of oxygen and she didn't even know she could hold her breath for this long, but she'd rather drown than bring her head above water now, because she's jumped ahead, and she's thinking about what happened later that night when, after everyone else had gone to bed, they were still alone by the dying fire, and she had told the girls she'd be right in, just one more minute, and she still isn't sure why she did it. Maybe she just wanted to see what would happen, to feel that heart-pounding, fingers trembling feeling that she hadn't felt in a long time. Just to tease it out for a moment. To try it on.

The kiss was enough. That was all she wanted out of it. Something simple, almost pure. A kiss didn't have to mean that much, she thought. A kiss wasn't an *affair*. It was good, and it served its purpose. She moved closer to him, and he held the back of her head, his fingers tangled in her hair. There were some quiet, soft sounds, tongues rubbing against teeth, the bite of a lower lip. That was it. That was all she wanted. She was done. She pulled away.

It's definitely been more than five minutes now, and her vision is getting blurry, and she wonders if she's drowning. Or maybe it's the salt taking her. Maybe she *will* actually dissolve to pieces, before she can remember the coarse sand against her stomach and breasts and the side of her

face, the crunch of it between her teeth; before she can remember him pressing her down, one hand still tied up in her hair, the other one forcing himself inside of her. How it turned so quickly in that. She didn't even make a sound of protest.

After, she stood and brushed the sand from her skin. She did not look at him. Instead, she walked to the edge of the sea where the waves were breaking, dark black dissolving into grey foam. And she thought about walking right in, but something kept her there, feet in the foam.

She stood for a long time, until she couldn't remember how much time had passed since she'd heard the distant sound of a screen door smacking shut. Until the glowing embers of the bonfire had gone black. Until she could hardly see at all.

She will float beneath the waves for a few more moments, until her lungs start to give out and she is unable to tell up from down, and she will do that thing people do when they're drowning, where they become very calm about it all. Surrendering, she will smile. It's easier this way. To not have to live with it. To float. Dissolve. Disperse.

However, of course, there are lifeguards. There are daughters watching from the shoreline.

Blush

My mother used to tell me to always wear pretty underwear, in case I got into a car accident. I could never really tell if she was joking or not, but, for some reason, I always took her seriously.

She would say it to me with a little side smirk whenever we were walking through the lingerie section of a department store, or when a news story came on about some tragedy, or when she was sorting through a pile of my clean laundry, and whenever she said it, it always put this image in my mind:

I'd picture myself lying there, on one of those cold, metal autopsy tables, under ugly white hospital lights, in nothing but a pair of silky, pale pink panties.

I never imagined myself as specifically dead or alive, or with any particularly gruesome wounds or bruises. I never imagined how I might have ended up there: pulled heroically from a fiery car wreck and rushed to the hospital in a wailing ambulance, or found dead and cold, wrapped in plastic, washed upon the pebbly shore of lake. Those details didn't seem to matter so much.

In my imagination, I was always very still and very pale, my slender body patiently waiting to be viewed and studied and prodded by some doctor or detective or mortician. *Thank God*, they'd say over my lifeless body, *at least her vagina is covered in a piece of lovely cloth. Thank God for that.*

She must have really drilled it into my head, because I often heard her words when I was getting dressed, or when I looked at myself half-naked in the mirror.

On the morning of the drive, I thought about it a lot.

I woke up earlier than I needed to, from a recurring dream I used to have about drowning. After catching my breath and wiping the sweat from my forehead, I realized there were only twenty minutes until my alarm was supposed to go off. I decided to stay awake.

I sat in the middle of my bed, blankets wrapped around my bare shoulders, and thought about the journey ahead. How I would keep myself entertained for fourteen hours. What music we would listen to. Where we would stop for food. If we'd share a motel room, or each get our own. If the boy really would be a good conversationalist, like his flyer had said.

I slumped back against the pillows and stared at the pile of clothes on the dresser, a pair of white underwear placed neatly on top. Even in the dark, they seemed to glow with clean whiteness. And I began thinking about all the possible scenarios in which they might be seen.

A car accident would be the most innocent, and it was definitely a reasonable possibility. Fourteen hours seemed like a long time, and I didn't drive on the highway very often, especially not the big six-lane interstate.

The other possibility, of course, was that this boy I'd never met, this boy who had posted a bright yellow flyer in the student center seeking a ride home to New York for winter break, would be a serial killer or a serial rapist or a serial something. That would be the much more dramatic, but much less likely possibility.

The final, and, in my pessimistic mind, least likely, possibility was that we would have sex in my car or a motel room or something like that.

I tried my best to keep my expectations reasonable.

With all this in mind, I got out of bed. I showered for a long time, letting steam fill up the whole bathroom, until the air was almost too thick to breathe. I needed the water hot enough to wash away the cold, slippery dampness of the drowning dream. I scrubbed until my skin was red.

Afterwards, in the foggy mirror, I studied my face: pale and dull, the skin under my eyes tinged with a tired shade of purple. I brushed the knots from my thick dark hair with a comb, before applying a complex series of serums and moisturizers. The small glass bottles and aluminum tubes lined up in the medicine cabinet made me feel calm. I liked their weight in my hands.

Back in my room, skin still wet and raw, I pulled the pair of silky white briefs up over my hips. The underwear was creamy soft, with a lettuce trim around the edges. Stretchy, so I could pull them up high, making my legs look longer, my waist smaller. I stared briefly at my pale legs, my too-bony hips, the dark purple bruise on my upper thigh that I didn't remember getting, my almost disappointing breasts.

I thought of the metal table, the fluorescent lights. My naked body, poked and prodded.

I shook my head at my own reflection. I wasn't being stupid. I had given my roommate his full name, told them the day we were supposed to arrive in New York, and I had talked to him on the phone and asked him plenty of the right questions. He was most likely harmless.

Half dressed, I sat back down on my unmade bed and stared out the window. I thought about how easy it would be to crawl back beneath the cool white duvet and just not go. Just stay here, in the safety of my room. Drive back tomorrow, alone. Winter break was five weeks long; one more day wouldn't make that much of a difference. I rested my chin in my hand. I considered it. I really did.

The sun had started to rise by the time I walked to my car. The cold bit my cheeks and woke me up a little more, though sleep still clung to the corners of my eyes.

The boy had said he lived close to me when we spoke on the phone. I had his address written on a scrap of notebook paper in my pocket, and I was rubbing it between my cold fingers as I walked.

But when I turned onto the street where I'd parked, he was there, leaning against the meter, reading a book, a duffle bag at his feet. I paused, not because I was confused or concerned, as I probably should have been, but because he was insanely good looking. He hadn't mentioned this on the phone.

At the sound of my footsteps, he looked up and smiled. “Louise?”

I nodded.

He grinned like we were old friends. “I thought that was you.”

I shifted the strap of my bag on my shoulder. “How did you know this was my car?”

“Well, you mentioned on the phone that you drove a white Volkswagen Golf, so... educated guess.”

“I did?”

He nodded and reached out for handshake. “I’m Will.”

I took his hand, which was surprisingly warm in the cold morning air. He was tall; I had to tilt my neck to see his face. Light brown freckles dotted his nose and cheeks. His eyes were a green like seawater. My hand felt strangely empty when he slipped his back into his pocket.

“Shall we?” he asked. I nodded numbly and unlocked the car so we could load our things into the trunk. When I tried to lift my own suitcase, he said, “No, no. Allow me.” I laughed, because I didn’t think people still said things like that. But he was serious.

He also offered to take the first driving shift. I shouldn’t have let him, but I was sleepy, and he was charming. I don’t know what came over me, but I slipped easily into the passenger seat of my own car, and I fell asleep so quickly that, when I woke up, I wondered if he had somehow drugged me. But no, we’d only shaken hands, and I’d only been asleep for twenty minutes or so.

I apologized and sat up straighter in my seat, running my fingers through my hair, smoothing it out on the side where I’d leaned against the seatbelt.

“Don’t apologize for sleeping,” he said. “It’s early.”

“I guess.”

There weren’t many other cars around; I felt small, speeding down the empty highway next to him. I had expected him to be more talkative, based on our first interaction and the claims he’d

made on his flyer – “Student Looking for a shared ride home to NY State (Westchester County)! Will pay for gas and snacks! Good Taste in Music! Great Conversationalist!” – but he had fallen into a quiet broodiness. He kept his eyes forward, his brows furrowed, hands placed carefully in the correct positions on the wheel. I figured I could blame this on it being early in the morning, and a Saturday morning at that; he seemed like the type to drink heavily, probably a member of some fraternity, an assumption I made based on the preppy blue crewneck sweater he wore beneath his bomber jacket and the monogrammed initials I’d noticed on his duffle bag, and last night had been the final round of parties before winter break. I’d been out late, too, and, now that I thought about it, my head did ache with a dull hangover. Still, his silence made me uncomfortable. A nervous lump formed at the base of my throat. I said the only thing I could think of: “So, what’s your major?”

He glanced at me like he had forgotten I was there. “Uh, political science. I want to run campaigns.”

“Ah.” I could have probed him about it more, but I was worried he’d turn out to be a Republican, and then I would have to rule out the possibility of sleeping with him.

“You?”

“English.”

“Ah. So you’re going to be very rich and successful, then.”

“How original.”

He laughed. “I’m just messing with you. So what year are you?”

“I’m a senior,” I said. “Class of ‘97.”

“Me too.” We looked at each other and smiled at this small, insignificant common ground.

“So, do you want to be a writer?” he asked.

“Ideally.”

He said, “I can see that for you.” Like he knew me.

“You can?” I felt suddenly self-conscious – not that I wasn’t already, I just became acutely aware of it, so that beads of sweat prickled the back of my neck.

“Yeah,” he said. “Something about you.”

For the first time since we started driving, he looked at me, really looked at me, and he smiled. Clean rows of white teeth. Seafoam green eyes. At first I felt a flattered flush in my cheeks, but then I began to worry that he had taken his eyes off the road for too long. That I had become a deadly distraction. I glanced out at the long, straight highway before us. No, we were still in the middle of the far left lane.

I exhaled, but kept looking out the window, so that he wouldn’t see the color rising in my face; I was cursed with an uncontrollable blushing problem, inherited my mother’s fair skin and propensity for red cheeks. There was nothing I could do to stop the blushing. All I could do was try to hide it. I pressed my cheek against the cool window.

I was blushing because I was sure that if Will saw me on campus, he would have overlooked me. It wasn’t that I didn’t think I was attractive. But I knew that my beauty was specific, and that boys like Will had a tendency not to notice it. There were plenty of more immediately beautiful girls. Green-and-blue-eyed, tall and tanned and soft around the edges. Girls who could make anyone, even me, pause for a moment, just to look, as they walked brightly across the green.

This isn’t to say I had a hard time attracting attention. I could, if I wanted to, get men to notice me. I had a way of luring them in that girls like me sometimes resort to, a way of making myself seem small and vulnerable and fragile. Certain men liked that.

I knew how to wear the right kind of clothes: shimmery low cut tops that refracted light and made my pale skin glow, accentuating my sharp collarbones and giving the shadowy illusion of breasts; or loose, soft things that hid my sharp, awkward angles and made me appear more feminine. The right kind of makeup could make my brown eyes look wide and warm like honey. Lips over-

lined just the right amount appeared softer. I dabbed perfume behind my ears and on my wrists. I applied the serums, I combed the knots from my hair, and I wore silky soft underwear, pulled up above the hips.

I'd had enough success – if you counted a handful of one-night-stands and an even smaller handful of flings that eventually fizzled out as success – to know that these things worked. But it was the fact that I had to *try* that bothered me; that I'd sometimes catch myself in the middle of a conversation with a boy sounding like someone I didn't know, my body and the way it leaned its sharp elbows on the table and twirled a strand of dark hair around its finger and puffed its lips into a soft pout suddenly seeming entirely alien.

I heard Will turn on the radio and start shuffling through the fuzzy stations. We were far away from the city now, somewhere in rural Illinois. The sky was a flat, whitish gray. Like it might snow. I pointed this out to Will, anxious again to fill the silence.

He leaned down a little to look up at the sky through the windshield. “Yeah, it might. How are you in the snow?”

I didn't understand his question at first. I thought of myself, literally, in snow. It suited me, actually. Snowflakes clung to my dark hair. My pale skin made sense in it. Then I realized what he meant. “Oh, I can drive alright in it. We can switch soon, if you want.”

So we did, at the next rest stop.

He bought us coffees and paid for the gas. I let him, without protest. When we walked into the rest stop, he placed his hand on my lower back as he guided me through the doors. It was just for a second. It could've been nothing

As I drove, our surroundings grew increasingly rural. Less warehouses and car dealerships and shopping malls, more wide, flat fields of corn and wheat and rye. The occasional silo and barn. A cluster of cows, at one point.

We played a game of I Spy that started as a joke, but grew somewhat competitive. The license plate game entertained us for some time, too. I spotted an Oregon, he spotted a New Mexico, we argued over which was more impressive.

The fear in my chest that I'd tried to dismiss early that morning was beginning to dissipate, though I knew it wouldn't fully go away until we parted for good. The little lump at the bottom of my throat and the slightly feverish feeling in my face would last until then.

I blamed my mother, because it was easy to blame her for things. And I blamed the dreams, because they made me act strange. I often awoke from them reminded of her, and spent the day in an anxious haze, as if the dream hadn't fully worn off. She told me a story once, of how she almost drowned in the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Cape Cod. She didn't give me too many details when she told me about it over breakfast in a calm voice. I was in high school, eating cereal before the bus, and she was smoking a cigarette over the sink. She told me I was just a kid when it happened, around two or three. My older sister had noticed, luckily, and called out to the lifeguard. Otherwise, she could have died.

She asked if I remembered that day. I said I didn't, but that I often dreamt of drowning. So maybe a part of me did.

She said to me, "I think we all remember more than we let on."

I heard Will sigh next to me. When I glanced over, he looked as if he'd just woken up. He smiled at me sleepily, and I felt my cheeks warm.

"Good morning," I said.

He laughed. "I fell asleep in the middle of reading. How long was I out?"

I shrugged. "Not long. You can read in a moving car?"

“It’s my useless hidden talent.” Will yawned, one of those big, long boy yawns, taking up too much space. Then he slumped back against his seat and said, “I’m exhausted.”

“Me too.”

“Late night?”

“Kind of.” I don’t know why I decided to bring it up, but I did. “I also have a recurring nightmare. About drowning. I had it last night.”

“Ah, a drowning dream,” he said. “I think that’s a pretty common one.”

I nodded. “Probably.”

“What do you think it means?”

“I think it means I’m scared of drowning.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I guess that’s pretty obvious.”

We sat quietly for a moment. I knew if he didn’t talk soon, I’d end up saying something embarrassing to fill the silence. I pressed my lips together.

Finally, he said, “I almost drowned as a kid. In a kiddie pool. One of those blow up things you fill with a hose.” He laughed.

I was growing annoyed at him. How quick he was to dismiss my fears and nightmares as common. Obvious. I sighed. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“You ever have anything like that happen?” he asked. “Could be the reason for it.”

I exhaled slowly. “My mother almost drowned once. When I was a kid. She almost died.”

I could feel him looking at me.

“Were you there?” he asked.

“Yes. But I don’t remember it.” My hands were growing slippery on the steering wheel.

“That must have been scary, almost losing her. Even if you don’t remember it,” he said. “I bet that’s where the dream comes from.”

“Oh, I did lose her,” I said. I briefly took my eyes off the road to look at him. “She’s dead.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize,” he said. “I’m so sorry, Louise.”

“It’s okay, really.” My cheeks were burning, and I wished I could press my face up against the cool glass of the window. “It’s been almost four years.”

“But, still.”

“It’s okay, Will. Really. The way she smoked, she had it coming.” I laughed, so he knew he was allowed to laugh, too. He did, awkwardly.

“Well. I’m sorry anyway. Can’t I be sorry anyway?”

I didn’t want to cry, so I refused to look at him. I just nodded and said, “Yes, you can be sorry. I’ll allow it.”

He was quiet, and a moment later, I felt his hand rest gently on my upper arm. One of those textbook sympathy touches. Completely devoid of sex. I lightly shook it off. The lump was back in my throat.

“Let’s talk about something else,” I said. “What are you reading?”

He seemed embarrassed when he held up the book. “*Zodiac*.”

I laughed, and the lump grew bigger. “Oh.”

“Yeah. I know,” he said. “I picked it up from one of those free book tables they have out in the library sometimes.”

“Are you interested in murder?”

He laughed. “Um.”

I cleared my throat. “I mean, as a *topic*. True crime.”

“Well, yeah. I am, actually. I don’t really tell people about it. It tends to get a certain reaction.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Kind of like the one you just had,” he said.

“No, I understand it, actually.” I looked over at him. He was fiddling with the worn out yellow cover.

“I think about that kind of thing a lot,” I said. “What it’d be like.”

“To murder someone?”

“No. To be murdered.”

“Right, right.”

I swallowed the lump. It was hard and sharp going down. I looked down at my knuckles on the wheel, and they were white. I had worked so hard to not be afraid. To quiet the nerves and the hot cheeks. And here he was, undoing it all with a worn out copy of *Zodiac*.

I chewed at the dry skin on my lip. A nervous habit my mother hated. The first snowflakes were beginning to fall. And then I was thinking about it again. The cold metal table, the bright lights, concerned faces hovering over my almost-naked body, wrinkled brows, surgical masks. Red and blue lights reflecting off of flat white snow. Frozen bare legs, all blue and purple and covered in ice.

I sucked in air through my lips. It was perfectly normal to be interested in true crime. There were movies, television shows, *Zodiac* was a national bestseller, even *I* had it on my bookshelf at home. Sometimes I’d force myself to read it, and other books like it, because I thought, maybe, if I understood it, if I could make sense of it, then I wouldn’t have to fear it anymore. So far, it hadn’t worked.

I looked over at Will. Long, thick eyelashes, a blonde curl falling over one eye. The sharpness of his jaw, which he clenched and unclenched as he read. I thought of the mace in my purse, and the white underwear pulled up high beneath my dark blue Levis.

I drove the rest of the way, too tense to pull off for a rest stop. The snow was falling heavily, but I didn't mind. It gave me a reason to focus, a distraction, a more present threat of danger to keep my brain occupied.

He stopped reading, eventually, and started up conversation again. It helped, when he talked; it reminded that he was just another college boy. That my brain was just doing that thing. Spiraling.

He had three sisters, he told me, after I told him that I had one. He said I was in the middle. I told him I didn't take him for a guy with lots of sisters, and he told me that two of them, the younger ones, had both been born with rare birth defects. What are the chances? "Yes," he said, "chance is a weird thing."

I softened to him then, as women tend to do when men reveal something vulnerable about themselves. I was not immune to this. And I was looking for reasons to soften. The fear, all twenty-one years of it, was getting too exhausting to bear.

We finally pulled off the interstate in a town called Dresden, somewhere between Cleveland and Pittsburg. As we drove in, we passed a tiny dive bar on the side of the highway. Will sighed and said, "Damn, I could use a drink."

And I didn't say anything, because even though I had softened, I was still gripping the wheel too-tightly and the lump was still in my chest.

After a minute, he turned to me and said he said, "Louise, do you want to get a drink with me?"

The way he said it made it sound like a date. The way he turned to look at me. I signaled to turn into the Motel 6 parking lot.

"Okay," I said.

"Really?"

"Yes," I said. "I could use a drink too." I meant that. My body ached from the drive.

“Great,” he said. Like we’d closed a deal. Then, “So what do we want to do about the rooms?”

I looked at him. He was still hot, even in this terrible lighting. I felt the lump rising in my throat. “I don’t know.”

He said, “I want you to decide.”

The sky had grown quickly dark, and everything outside was that December shade of blue. With the snow falling quickly past the window, even the motel parking lot looked kind of beautiful. His eyes were soft, and the green of them reminded me of summer. He looked right at me, waiting for an answer.

“Well,” I said. My heart beat heavily against my tight chest. My irrational fear fighting with my desire to fall asleep next to him under a scratchy blanket. “We could get separate rooms. But it’d be twice as expensive.”

“Yes, good point.”

“I’d like to save some money, you know, for Christmas presents and things.”

He smiled. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“So we’ll share one then?”

“We’ll share one.”

“A double, though.”

“Of course. Of course, a double.”

As it happened, there was only one room available, anyway. The large, cheerful woman behind the counter, which was decorated with a sad arrangement of red tinsel and rainbow string lights, gave me small, knowing look upon announcing this information, as if we were girlfriends scheming a set-up together. It made my stomach turn. As she led us through the snow to our room, she asked, “So where you two headed?”

Will answered, “New York.”

“Oh, how *exciting*,” she said, in that voice people do when they think all of New York State is Manhattan.

“Yeah, we’re heading home from school. It’s our winter break.”

“Oh, yeah, where’s school?”

“St. Louis. Washington University.”

“Wow, that’s quite a journey,” she said. “And still a ways left to go! You two better get some rest tonight.” She looked over her shoulder and smiled at me when she said this. Then she asked, “You two boyfriend and girlfriend?”

Will laughed. I sucked in the cold air.

“No, no. We actually just met today,” he explained.

The woman made a strange throat sound, almost a laugh. “Well, here’s your room. Enjoy your stay, kids. Merry Christmas.” She winked at us before she walked away. I had the urge to make fun of her, but I couldn’t think of anything to say. Will unlocked the room. There were two beds.

Now, we were sitting across from each other in a red vinyl booth in the small dive bar down the road. We walked there, stupidly, along the side of the two-lane highway – neither of us wanted to be the designated driver – trudging through the snow in single file on the narrow shoulder. The noise of the cars and the wind and the snow made it too loud to talk. I just watched the top of his head bobbing against the dark blue sky.

The bar was small, which made it feel more crowded than it really was; there couldn’t have been more than twenty people inside. The walls were all wood paneled, and they had those tacky stained-glass light fixtures hanging above the booths. It smelled like stale beer and cigarettes. Everyone looked how you would expect them to – flannels and worn out denim, large hair, white beards. We were the youngest people there by at least a decade and a half.

At the back, there was a microphone and a wooden stool, an acoustic guitar leaning against the wall. I pointed this out to Will when he returned to our booth with our drinks. The bar had a deal: three dollar PBR-can-and-vodkas.

“Oh, this should be good,” he said. “Which one of them do you think is performing?”

We scanned the crowd and made our guesses. I put my money on a rotund, white-bearded man in a red and green flannel, and he put his on a woman in a cowboy hat with grey-brown hair down to her hips.

“She’s giving me a Patti Smith vibe,” he said. “I bet she’s an undiscovered legend.”

I shook my head. “My guy has a Santa vibe. He’s definitely gonna do Christmas songs.”

We grinned at each other across the table. Then Will lifted up his shot glass and said, “A toast?”

I felt suddenly embarrassed. Something about this moment felt too intimate for this shitty Ohio bar. Though I was probably just blowing it out of proportion. I raised my glass to meet his anyway.

I said, “To the Zodiac Killer,” and then we drank. He laughed into his shot glass. The vodka burned going down, but it helped to momentarily wash away the lump.

Almost done with the first beer, I could feel the redness rising in my face – the blushing happened when I drank, too. To hide this, I sat with my elbows on the table and my chin in my hands, palms pressed up against the warm skin of my cheeks. My face was much closer to his than it had been this whole day.

In the reddish glow of the neon Budweiser sign above our heads, his eyes turned a golden kind of green. I thought of beach grass, when it’s hit by the light of the setting sun. Bending over gently, making that quiet rustling sound in the breeze. That kind of green. Summer in the middle of a snowstorm.

The fear wasn't gone. I wasn't sure it ever would be. But the more I drank, the quieter it got. And I wanted to silence it. I didn't want it to get in the way.

So I bought us a round of Tecate and tequilas. We smiled at each other with lime rinds for teeth. I was definitely drunk now; I'd given up trying to hide my red cheeks. I thought, maybe, he might find them beautiful.

And then I was doing it – slipping into the person I could force myself to become. But I didn't mind. I leaned further across the table. “You have pretty eyes, Will,” I said in the voice that was not my own. When the words came out, they surprised me.

“So do you, Louise.”

“That shot is getting to me,” I admitted.

He touched my cheek, and his hand felt like ice. “You okay?”

I nodded. I pressed my hand against his, keeping the coolness there. After a moment, he took his hand away and leaned back in the booth. He was smiling at me, still. “Tell me more about *you*, Louise.”

I took a big, long swallow of my beer, looking at him over the rim of my glass. Seafoam eyes, golden beach grass. Ocean sounds filled my ears. I said, “My mother.”

“Yeah?”

I was suddenly laughing. At first I did not realize the laughter was my own, and was confused as to how it was so loud, considering we were sitting far away from the very small crowd that was beginning to gather by the stool and the microphone. When I realized that the laughter came from me, I drank to quiet myself. Then I said, “You know what she used to tell me?”

“What's that?”

“Always wear underwear,” I said.

He laughed. “Yes, that's good advice.”

“*Pretty* underwear,” I clarified, when I could manage it.

“Pretty underwear?” he asked.

“Mhm.”

“Ah, I see. Always wear *pretty* underwear.”

I nodded. There was a warm feeling on my knee, and I realized that it was his hand.

“So does that mean?” he asked. And I realized what I had implied. But I had meant to imply that, hadn’t I? Wasn’t that the point? Why else would I have brought it up?

I forced myself to laugh, because I didn’t know what to say. I probably looked like an idiot, sitting there blushing and talking about panties in incomplete sentences.

Then I felt the warm feeling – his hand – moving further up my thigh. I looked at him across the table. His eyes reflecting the red Budweiser glow. His sharp jaw. I remembered, then, how little I knew him. I glanced out the window behind his head. Wide, snow-covered fields in the middle of nowhere. The side of the two-lane highway where they’d find me, bare legged, frozen and purple.

I swallowed. I could have let him move his hand even further up my thigh. I could have leaned even further across the table and kissed him right there in that rural Ohio bar, our knees bumping together, our mouths tasting of tequila and lime, the crowd of flannels looking on disapprovingly. I could have let myself have that, at least.

But instead I pulled away, standing up so abruptly that the table rocked and our beers fell over, smashing against the sticky wooden floor. The lump in my throat was suddenly back, and it had become so large that I thought I might to vomit right there in the middle of the bar. There was beer all over the crotch of my jeans.

Will stood and grabbed my arm to help me stay upright, but for some reason, I smacked it away. A few people turned to look, and I saw the bartender reaching for a mop.

I felt hot tears coming on. “Shit.”

“I’m sorry, Louise,” Will said. “I’m sorry.”

He sounded so sincere. For a moment, I thought about it: falling into his arms, pressing my sweaty face into the cool blue ocean of his crewneck sweater, and letting him to pick me up, take me anywhere. Let him have me any way he wanted. Let him leave me bare-legged and frozen in the snow. For a moment, I didn’t care at all what happened next.

What did happen next was this: I passed out, falling into his arms, with a few more bumps along the way – I woke up with a black eye from hitting my face against the edge of the table. Apparently I caused quite the scene, the townspeople wanting to call an ambulance, nervous faces hovering above mine, wrinkled brows, pursed lips.

I’m glad he didn’t let them help me. That would have made it all the more humiliating. Instead, he called a cab to take us the half mile back to the motel.

When I woke up, he was brushing his teeth in the bathroom. He had laid me down on top of the itchy floral comforter. With the little consciousness I had left, I began to peel off my wet, beer-soaked jeans, but I fell asleep again before I could finish the task.

So that’s how they were seen: the silky white underwear I’d carefully picked out the night before. Beer stained, off-white, smelling of yeast. Here I was: half-naked with a pair of wet jeans around my ankles, sleeping, my face pressed up against the rough pillows.

Pinch

In late August, they take the ferry to Martha's Vineyard to spend a long weekend with Alec's parents. Eleanor doesn't like going, a secret she hides from Alec diligently. It always makes her feel a little out of place, being around the large white mansions, the neatly trimmed hedges, the brunch restaurants and wine bars and lobster shacks where everyone seems to know each other and makes small talk about politics she doesn't agree with.

She didn't grow up with things like that. Sometimes her family took trips to Cape Cod or Lake George, usually staying with family friends who had their own houses. Though one summer, they rented their own little cottage all the way down by the lighthouse at the end of the Cape. That house was all wood, run-down and sagging, and there was only one bedroom, so she and her sister slept on the couch together for a whole month. But to them, it was worth it; it was a short walk down the splintery boardwalk to the beach, and they could watch the lighthouse glowing at night through the kitchen window. They were happy to sleep to the sound of crashing waves, instead of wailing sirens and subway rumbles. They didn't need the luxuries of a spacious, modern beach house, with its air conditioning and pools and Jacuzzi bathtubs. Not that Eleanor would ever need those things.

Alec's family's house is big and white, and it sits on a private beach. Only residents are allowed on the sand, and you must carry a little blue flag wherever you go, god forbid you're mistaken for a trespasser. Each time Eleanor visits, it becomes more difficult not to roll her eyes. But she knows this house will be theirs one day, and she is grateful for that. If they ever decided to sell it, they'd make a fortune. Though Alec probably never will; he has too many precious memories attached to it. And it is a beautiful house. It has six bedrooms, a master with a claw foot tub and a walk-in closet, private balconies, a wide open kitchen. A pool, giant and rectangular and dark blue, in

the middle of the spacious backyard. Eleanor fears the ocean, with its large and unpredictable waves. So the pool is a nice alternative. Maybe next summer they will teach the girls to swim in it.

This is the first time they've brought them to the house, so a big fuss is being made. Alec's parents have even invited Eleanor's sister to come help with the babies, so that Eleanor and Alec can have some alone time. Before Eleanor could question why the girls couldn't just spend time with their grandparents, Louise gladly agreed. She said she was sick of her four roommates, and that she wanted a real beach, something other than Rockaway. A beach you can roll out onto, instead of having to take the A train all the way to Queens.

So the five of them – Alec, Eleanor, Louise, and the babies – take the ferry together. They stand up at the front to watch the island grow closer and to feel the misty spray of saltwater on their cheeks. Louise points to the distant mass of land to their left and asks if it's the Cape.

"Yeah, I think so," Alec says. He raises a hand to block the sun from his eyes and squints towards the horizon.

"Remember that summer we went for a whole month?" Louise says.

Eleanor nods. "I'm surprised you remember that. You were so small."

"I remember. We slept on the couch." Louise is holding Claudia against her hip. She reaches her chubby brown fingers up towards Louise's face and smiles.

"Make sure she isn't getting too much sun," Eleanor says. "I don't want her to burn. Where's her hat?"

"She didn't like it," Louise says.

"Well, she's a baby, and she'll have to wear it. It doesn't matter if she doesn't like it."

Eleanor cringes at the sound of her own voice. Shrill and bossy, like their mother's used to be when she was angry.

Louise sighs. "Ruby isn't even wearing one. And she actually burns."

“Ruby will throw a fit and ruin everyone’s journey if I try to put it on her. Claudia is good, she’ll wear it. Besides, it’s harder to tell when she’s burning.”

Claudia watches them speak with wide brown eyes. She grins; she can tell they’re talking about her. Eventually, Louise gives in and places the floppy purple bucket hat on Claudia’s head. Claudia fusses with it for a moment, her small hands tugging awkwardly at the brim, but eventually she, too, gives in, and slouches against Louise’s chest.

The babies are sixteen and twelve months old. Ruby’s first birthday is on Sunday. Alec’s parents have hinted at some kind of party being thrown, and Eleanor hopes it isn’t some catered, over-the-top thing for a baby. She’s not sure if she’ll be able to keep a straight face.

Ruby is sleeping, her squishy pink cheek resting on Eleanor’s shoulder. She has spent the entire journey crying and fussing, as she often does, so her sleep comes as a great relief to everyone. Eleanor is particularly glad she’s stopped now, so she doesn’t attract annoyed attention from the other ferry riders. And, now that she is quiet, Eleanor can more easily appreciate her beauty. Her cheeks are large and flushed, and her long, honey-golden eyelashes cast a soft shadow onto the skin beneath her eyes. She gently strokes the soft blonde hair on Ruby’s head, hoping the touch doesn’t wake her. Eleanor can’t believe she made her – this baby. Her baby. She glances up at Alec and Louise, but both of them seem to be lost in their own thoughts, staring off at the horizon line where the rocky green bulge of the island is slowly coming into view.

It all started three years ago, with the series of failed fertility tests that sent Eleanor into a quiet, yet deep depression; she had always, more than anything, wanted to be a mother. But she prefers to skip over that part, to blot out all the days spent crying, sleeping until noon, hardly leaving the bed. The painful emptiness; it embarrasses her, now.

She prefers to start in April of the following year, when she and Alec were walking down Bowery, and he brought it up for the first time. She was wearing thick grey sweatpants and an oversized Irish fisherman's sweater, dressed far too warmly for the late spring day. The Callery pears were in full bloom, the sidewalks filled with their fat white blossoms and sweet smell. She wanted to get off of the wide, busy street and walk down one of the narrow, shady ones lined with old tenements, Elizabeth or Mulberry. She tugged on Alec's hand, and he let her, because she hadn't expressed a desire for anything in weeks.

The soft spring air was starting to feel good on Eleanor's skin; she could feel her insides beginning to shift. Like a swelling, an opening of space. Maybe Alec sensed this too, and figured now would be as good a time as any.

"Hey Ellie," he said.

She looked up at him. "Hm?"

He took her small, cold hand. "Can I ask you something?"

Eleanor nodded.

"Have you given any thought to adopting?" he asked.

Eleanor chewed on her lip, peeling off a small patch of dried skin. She touched the newly raw spot with her tongue. "Not really."

Alec was waiting for her to say more. His eyes were so wide and hopeful. Adopting. Of course she'd given it thought. It was the only way. But, to Eleanor, the decision to adopt signified a final acceptance. A complete surrender.

"I will though," she said. "Give it thought."

"Really? You will?"

"Yes, I really will. I want a baby. I still want a baby." As she said the words out loud, she realized they were still true. Maybe even truer than before.

Eleanor had one requirement. She wanted a newborn. Or as close to the newborn as they could get. The race, the gender, that all mattered much less to her. In fact, she didn't think those things should matter to anyone. She said she'd take any baby in the world, at this point.

The anticipation – the conversations about pastel paint swatches and cribs and strollers and nursery schools and the names they liked for boys and for girls – gave Eleanor hope. That opening, swelling sensation grew, and her breaths deepened. She was almost okay. And that made it easy to pretend. To hide that darkness that was still there, clinging to her lower belly. A dull, quiet ache, making her acutely aware of the hollow insides. Alec didn't need to know, and she hid it from him easily. It was so subtle, some days even Eleanor forgot it was there.

It only took a year. To Eleanor, it felt endless, but they were told that it was rare for a placement to happen so fast. That they should feel very lucky.

During that year, the opening, shifting feeling had continued, to the point where her ribcage and lungs felt almost whole again. But, at the same time, the darkness in her lower belly had also grown sharper, harder to ignore. Like a constant, aching period cramp. A quiet, ever-present nausea.

She figured this was why, when Alec picked up the phone one night before dinner and his face lit up with an expression that could only mean one thing, Eleanor immediately had to vomit. It happened so quickly, she couldn't even make it to the bathroom; she threw up right there in the kitchen, a step away from the stove. She thought the vomit signified a release of the darkness, a purging of that one last thing. She thought it meant that she was ready.

There was a woman in the Bronx who had chosen them. She was due soon, in about a month and a half. She didn't want to meet them; it would be a closed adoption. They learned very little about her, only that she was twenty-three and healthy, with no family history of illness, and that she was Mexican, and the father was white. That's all they got. Eleanor didn't mind the limited

information. In fact, she preferred it. The baby would be hers, and hers alone, from birth onward. As close as she could possibly get to birthing it herself.

Eleanor had never had a regular period. In high school and college, she'd been a cross country runner with a dangerously low BMI, and she rarely bled. Now, though she got her periods occasionally, her cycle remained abnormal. She had asked the doctor if this could have anything to do with her infertility. The long answer was a maybe, disguised in a list of other possible factors meant to make her feel less guilty; the short answer was a yes, it could have something to do with it.

So she did not have a period to lose. She missed the tell-tale sign.

The vomiting also didn't surprise her. She had a nervous stomach and a history of bulimia. She wasn't doing it on purpose anymore, but her body still seemed to believe that vomiting was a natural response to any overwhelming emotion. So, she didn't think much of that either.

Who knows when she would have found out, if she hadn't happened to vomit in the middle of the lobby of the maternity ward, the day her first daughter was born. It was a few weeks before the due date, so Eleanor was particularly nervous. But they had signed the paperwork. All that was left to do was wait. She'd be there any minute now. Alec was in the bathroom, and Eleanor was left pacing alone, when it happened. She was able to make it to a trash can this time.

"Oh god, I'm so sorry," she said to the nurse who was guiding her into a chair.

"Hey, that's okay," she said. "Are you feeling alright?"

Eleanor nodded. "I'm here to get my baby," she explained. She felt the need to justify the flatness of her stomach. "We're adopting her."

The nurse smiled. "How exciting. Congratulations."

Eleanor kept her eyes on the floor, linoleum squares of white, red, blue, and yellow, and tried to tune out the distant noise of mothers moaning, babies crying.

“Can I ask, are you feeling any other symptoms? Fever? Headache?”

Eleanor looked up at the nurse. She shook her head. “I just have a nervous stomach.”

“Have you been vomiting a lot recently?”

“I guess so. It’s been a stressful process.”

“What’s your name?” the nurse asked.

“Eleanor.”

“Eleanor, is there any chance you might be pregnant?”

One hour later, they were sitting in a hospital room of their own, with their jaws hanging open. Eleanor was five months pregnant. *Five.*

“Five,” Alec repeated slowly. “Are you sure?”

The doctor smiled. “Yes. Almost six, actually. She’s twenty-two weeks along.”

Eleanor couldn’t stop smiling. She pressed her hands against her still-flat stomach. The doctor noticed this and told her she’d probably start showing soon. With women as small as her, it could take some time for the body to make space.

Suddenly, the shifting – that opening, swelling feeling – made complete sense. Eleanor sank her head back against the pillows and cried and cried, and didn’t stop crying until they stopped in front of the NICU, where they saw their baby for the first time, through a glass window. Brand new and tiny. Shiny black hair and brown skin. Naked, aside from the impossibly small diaper wrapped around her waist. Wires and tubes tuck to her little chest.

Eleanor’s skin grew cold. She had forgotten. Briefly, during the five-almost-six-months talk, she had forgotten why they’d come to the hospital in the first place. Her shaky hand found Alec’s.

The NICU doctor explained that the baby would be okay, but she was very small. They just wanted to keep an eye on her for a few days, to make sure she was developing properly. They’d be able to hold her soon, the doctor promised.

“I’m sure this is a lot to take in right now,” she said. She gestured vaguely towards Eleanor. Someone must have informed her of the pregnancy.

“Yes,” Alec said. He half-sighed, half-laughed.

The doctor smiled. Understandingly. Pitifully. Somewhere in between. Somewhere that rubbed Eleanor wrong.

“We can manage it,” she said. She placed a hand on her stomach. It didn’t feel so flat anymore.

“I’m confident that you can,” the doctor said. “We’ll be in touch. And we’ll take good care of her. She’s strong. She’ll be home in no time.”

In the cab home, Eleanor was quiet. Alec could tell something was wrong, but he didn’t say anything, he just held her hand. He probably figured she was overwhelmed. Exhausted. She’d let him think that. In fact, she’d let herself think that. She’d refuse to acknowledge the rush of cold that had come over when she stood before the NICU window. The prickly goosebumps that sprouted from her skin. That quiet, imperceptibly small pinch in her gut. Regret. No, she would not acknowledge that. Not right now. Maybe not ever.

Alec’s parents are waiting at the dock when the ferry arrives, holding a paper sign that reads, “Happy Birthday, Ruby!”

“No sign for Claudia?” Louise whispers over her shoulder as they make their way down the steps.

“Just.” Eleanor bites her lip. “Just let them. It’s not worth it.”

There are hugs and kisses and squishes of fat baby cheeks between pointer finger and thumb. Coral pink lipstick smudges on the girls’ foreheads that Eleanor wipes away discretely with a napkin.

Back at the house, Alec's parents have prepared a breakfast spread of bagels and lox and cream cheese and capers. The kitchen is bright, and the back doors are left wide open to yard and pool, so the sunlight and the salty beach air can come inside, and so the old golden retriever can wander in and out.

"Okay, you didn't tell me the house was *this* insane," Louise whispers as they sit down to eat.

Eleanor smiles. "Didn't I?"

"It's borderline disgusting."

"Louise!" Eleanor elbows her sister in the side, but she is still smiling. She's glad to have her here. Usually, when they come visit, she feels as if she's floating in unfamiliar territory. She and Alec have been together for ten years, and she's never gotten used to it.

Louise being here, in this big house where she often feels quite alone, is helping Eleanor to feel grounded. This is unexpected. Usually, Eleanor is the grounding one; Louise can be unpredictable. She's not as good at holding her tongue and controlling her emotions. Eleanor is, always has been, very good at this. She hopes, as she spreads a little cream cheese into a scooped-out sesame seed bagel, that they can balance each other out this weekend, the way they sometimes do. The alternative – clashing – would be a disaster, especially here.

After breakfast, they put on swimsuits and sit by the pool. Louise jumps into the dark blue water quickly and noisily, making a big splash that excites the babies, who are waddling around in their matching bathing suits and fat swim diapers.

It might actually turn out to be a nice day. The sky is a clear blue. The babies are happily playing with Alec, and Ruby hasn't even cried since before the ferry. And, so far, Alec's parents have been okay. No comments, yet, about the tattoos on Louise's arms and legs or the tiny black string bikini she has chosen to wear, or about the brand of sunscreen Eleanor applies to the baby's faces, or about how dark Claudia has gotten in the summer sun.

Eleanor won't admit to herself that she has tried to prevent this, but she has. It's little things, like making sure she stays in the shade and wears the big floppy hat and lots of sunscreen, even though her warm brown skin is less vulnerable than her sister's. Of course, Eleanor makes sure Ruby doesn't burn, but she also carries her around in the sun more often and rarely covers her in the large hat.

They are small habits, things she's picked up without even realizing it. Wanting to balance the scales. To protect them, and herself, from questions, judgmental glances. The girls look similar enough to be twins, in terms of size, and, well, if Eleanor could just get their skin to even out a little more. They could look like real sisters.

Eleanor watches them play with Alec in the neatly trimmed grass. Ruby has just barely started walking, and she stumbles easily over her own feet. Claudia, who has been walking for two months now, though still with the slight wobble of a baby, mimics Ruby's trip and tumbles to the ground, laughing, her floppy hat falling to the side.

"The hat, Alec!" Eleanor calls across the lawn.

He nods and picks it up, waving it in the air so she knows that he's got it.

Pauline, Alec's mother, comes and sits in the chaise next to Eleanor's. She is holding a book and wearing large black sunglasses.

"Have you read this book, Eleanor?" she asks. She holds it up. *Beloved*.

"Yes," Eleanor says. "In college."

"Any good?"

Eleanor chews on the inside of her cheek. "Yes, it's very good. One of Toni Morrison's best."

"Time to see what all the fuss is about, then." Pauline smiles at Eleanor over the tops of her ridiculous sunglasses. Her blue eyes glint in the sun.

“Not quite a light beach read, is it?”

Eleanor hadn't noticed Louise, sitting on the steps in the shallow end of the pool, listening to their conversation.

“Oh, is it not?” Pauline says.

Louise throws her head back and laughs. Eleanor tries to make warning eye contact with her, but Louise is already talking. “I mean. Pauline! It's about slavery. And trauma. And a mother who kills her ...”

Louise has caught Eleanor glaring. “Well,” she says. “I won't spoil it for you.” She kicks off the side of the pool and swims away. Eleanor knows that she is laughing beneath the water.

For four months, Claudia was an only child. And she was, in every sense of the word, a perfect baby. She hardly cried, and when she did, it happened in short bursts, and was a soft, quiet thing, barely audible from the next room. She was easy to comfort. She smiled often, and laughed before Eleanor even thought it was possible for babies to laugh. She slept easily and let them bathe her and change her diaper without complaint. At night, Eleanor and Alec would lie her down between them on the bed and watch her sleep. The rise and fall of her bare chest, the size of Alec's entire palm. Her skinny legs sticking out of the preemie diaper. The flutter of her long black eyelashes. The soft baby sounds of dreaming.

Eleanor managed to convince herself that the coldness, the pinch of that thing she wouldn't name in her gut, had never happened. And Claudia was easy to love. She was like honey. And this made the small bad feeling go quiet, most of the time. Sometimes it resurfaced, like when Eleanor was changing her diaper, and saw her pale hands against Claudia's brown belly and thighs. It was only a pinch. So quiet, so tiny. But there.

Alec went back to work not too long after Claudia was born, and then it was just the two of them. Home alone all day, one baby outside her body and one in it. But Claudia made it manageable; it was like she knew what was going on. Like she understood. When Eleanor had to lie down because the aching in back prevented her from standing, Claudia didn't cry or whine. Instead, she would lie beside Eleanor making small sounds, entertaining herself with the discovery of her own feet and hands.

In those four months, Eleanor's body grew and stretched and swelled to a size she didn't think possible. She had always been skinny, made sure of it. And, despite the fact that she had always wanted to be a mother, she had somehow forgotten to consider the way it would make her body look: her face all puffy and round, her skin stretching and going purple with large dark stretch marks. Her belly grew so large, she could barely walk from the bed to the couch without having to stop and catch her breath. Her face broke out in acne, her legs in varicose veins, everything swollen. Alec insisted that she looked beautiful, said she was glowing, but she could hardly look at herself in the mirror.

She carried Ruby through the hottest months of summer, as if July in New York was not already bad enough. To be pregnant and waiting for a delayed F train at Herald Square on a crowded, humid platform with another baby strapped to her back, was a special kind of torture. To feel each individual bead of sweat crawl its way down her neck, inner thigh, lower back, between her breasts. People were quick to offer her their seats on the train; they moved far away from her sweating, aching, bulging body. Instead of smiling at her with excitement and admiration, she could tell the strangers pitied her. That, or they judged her, for the smallness of the baby she carried and the largeness of the one still inside. She could see the half-formed questions rising in the minds as they looked at her.

She was pregnant for a full term, plus a week. Eventually, they induced labor. When her water finally broke, she cried of relief. But the labor was even more painful than the pregnancy. They gave her the drugs, which she took gladly, the big needle in her back. Still, it lasted almost twelve hours. It was as if Ruby would rather stay inside the dark, wet comfort of Eleanor's womb than enter out into the complicated brightness of the world. It certainly seemed that way, when she finally did come out. Her cries were louder than Eleanor thought a newborn's could be. Even against her mother's bare, sweaty chest, Ruby continued to wail, her face all scrunched up and red. So Eleanor cried with her. Not the sweet, joyful tears of motherhood, but real tears. Sobs. She clutched Ruby, and they cried together.

Ruby stayed true to the way she entered into the world. She was picky, easily upset, sensitive. She had strong opinions – she hated stuffed animals and Eleanor's right breast and most pureed vegetables and rain and baths and water in general and bedtime and wearing shoes – that she made known, loudly. She had colic that refused to go away, no matter how much they burped her and massaged her belly. Finally, they just accepted that she was a fussy baby. They hoped she would grow out of it. That some of Claudia's sweetness would rub off. And, if there was one thing that didn't upset Ruby, it was Claudia. The babies loved each other.

One afternoon, about a week after Ruby was born, Alec went to get groceries, leaving Eleanor alone in the apartment for the first time since the birth. She had been waiting for a moment alone to do this. This was how she knew something about it was inherently wrong. But all she wanted to do was look. Quickly compare. Take stock of the similarities and differences one time, and then move on.

Telling herself she was just about to get them dressed, Eleanor laid the babies down side by side on the bed. She stripped them of their pajamas, but left the diapers on. Still so small and new, the babies had no choice but to lie there on their backs while she studied them. Claudia played with

her feet, pulling them up over her head and smiling. Ruby seemed less entertained. Her bored hazel eyes, still wet and red from her last cry, slowly scanned the room.

They could be twins, almost. At least in terms of size. Ruby was born at just under ten pounds, and Claudia, four months ago, at five and a half, so they were pretty much the same size now. Same amount of chubby fat around their little arms and thighs. The same length from head to toe, even. Eleanor considered finding a ruler to measure, but that would be too much. That would take it too far.

And then there was the problem of skin. No. Not the *problem*. Just the thing. The detail. It didn't bother Eleanor and Alec. It didn't *bother* anyone, besides maybe Alec's parents but even they were smart enough to keep their mouths shut, at least back then, when the girls were still tiny and new. But it was a thing. Something she'd thought about throughout the pregnancy. How they'd look beside each other.

Here, on the white comforter, it was the most obvious. Claudia was the color of caramel, a soft brown. Her hair was dark, almost black, already thick and shiny on her small head. Next to her, Ruby was almost as pale as the bedsheets. She had a wisp of light blonde hair. But that might darken with age. And she had Alec's hazel brown eyes, opposed to Eleanor's green. That was a similarity. Eleanor figured that, over time, she'd grow less pale. She was only a week old, yet to feel the sun directly on her fresh pink skin. They'd match up. As they grew together, they'd look more and more alike. Almost twins. Eleanor told them this. You are sisters, she told them.

Eleanor watched them lie there beside each other for a long time. She felt this strange thing; love, she guessed. But, if this was love, it was a special, torturous kind, a kind she'd never felt in her entire life. She had anticipated the love of motherhood, that one everyone talks about, the one that changes you. The purest form of unconditional love. But this wasn't that. This love was closer to something she could only recognize as anger, though it wasn't quite that either. It was like the

pinching, but stronger. A dark, throbbing pit in the middle of her womb, as if it wasn't fully empty yet. As if the darkness from before was still there, clinging to the uterine walls, refusing to shed itself with the afterbirth. This love made her fall to her knees and dig her fingernails into the soft skin of her own thighs, lest she let them dig in anywhere else.

* * * * *

As Eleanor undresses the girls for their bath, she inspects them for bug bites, burns, bruises, and ticks. She runs her fingers over their soft, peach fuzz skin, checking between their rolls of fat, behind their ears. As she goes, she hums and tickles their bellies and the bottoms of their feet.

This is her favorite time. These private moments she has with them in the half-darkness of the bedroom, just after leaving the dinner table with the welcome excuse of a bath, and just before bringing them into the harsh bright light of the bathroom, where there will be bubbles and plastic toys splashed and Ruby's inevitable tantrum. But before that, on the clean white bed, they lie beside each other, naked and squirming, speaking in quiet gibberish. Sometimes Claudia gets in a real word here and there. *Mama. Ruby.*

It is dusk; the sun has dipped behind the trees, but the sky is not yet fully dark, so no lights need be turned on. The room smells like clean linens and hot air. Eleanor can hear the distant sounds from the kitchen – the opening of a new bottle of wine, the scrape of forks against dessert plates – but no voices. Just the soft, comforting sounds of other people. In the half-light, Eleanor leans down to inspect her daughters.

“Let's see what trouble you've gotten into today,” Eleanor whispers. They grin up at her with gummy, half-filled smiles. No cuts, no bruises, no mosquito bites. For that they each get a kiss on the belly, which makes them laugh.

Then Eleanor inspects the skin.

Ruby has a slight tan-line from her bathing suit, new white lines along her shoulders and the top of her chest. Eleanor places her hand gently on the place where the skin goes from pale to slightly tan and feels the warmth it radiates. She thinks that, tomorrow, she will let them roam outside in just their diapers. It is a private pool after all. That should even things out a bit, if she makes sure to keep Claudia close by.

Claudia, they've learned this summer, tans very quickly, her skin growing shades darker in just a day. She looks beautiful. Eleanor admires her brownness. Really. But she fears it will get in the way. She wants them to be equals. To be free of conflict and competition. She feels that this is her responsibility.

The room darkens quickly, so Eleanor reluctantly moves them into the bath, where Ruby cries and kicks at the shallow water. Claudia watches on silently, her big brown eyes understanding. Patient, and not quite sad. She points a finger across the tub and solemnly says, "Ruby cry." Only "Ruby" sounds like "Wooby."

The next day, Saturday, Eleanor wakes up early. She wants to go for a swim in the pool before the day begins. She's not sure what compels her to do this, as she isn't typically one for early mornings, or swimming, but she wakes with a strong desire to be submerged beneath the cool, smooth, chlorinated water.

Maybe it's to mentally prepare for the day that lies ahead. A kind of meditation. She knows some people who think of swimming that way. Who say it keeps them sane, or something like that. So she slips quietly out of bed and into her bathing suit, which has been hanging off the rim of the bathtub and is not yet entirely dry. She puts it on anyway; its purpose is utilitarian at the moment. A minor, yet necessary step, taken in service of a larger mission.

She walks quietly down the stairs as to not wake the babies and her sister, though she expects Alec's parents to be awake. They're early risers, the way older people tend to be. They like to

read the newspaper front to back and drink black coffee on the porch. Eleanor is surprised, then, to find the downstairs empty.

She hurries through the watchful rooms and out into the backyard. The air is still cool, but damp, and the grass is wet with dew. She realizes, then, standing by the edge of the pool on the cold slabs of stone, that it must be even earlier than she thought. The sky is a pale blue, streaked with the pinkish remains of a sunset. She fights the urge to dip her toe into the water, because she knows that will cause her to change her mind, and she can't turn back now. She has put on the half-dried bathing suit and come all this way. The thought of going upstairs and peeling it off seems more unsettling than jumping in.

She walks around to the deep end, where the water is even darker, and where she knows she can dive without coming close to the bottom. She takes a deep breath of the salty air and closes her eyes. As she raises her hands above her head, her heart pounding against her chest, she hears a screen door slam shut somewhere.

She lowers her arms but keeps her eyes shut, hoping the sound came from next door.

“Eleanor?”

When she reluctantly opens her eyes, she sees Louise standing on the small balcony of her room. Her hair is messy, and she's wearing an oversized t-shirt and no pants. She has just rolled out of bed. “What are you doing?” she asks.

“What does it look like?” Though she's trying to play it off, Eleanor regrets this. She's shivering, and the water below her feet looks menacing and cold, no longer inviting and smooth. She takes a step away from the edge.

“You never swim,” Louise says.

“I know.” Eleanor stands still in the cold air, listening to the waves. She folds her arms across her chest.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Eleanor says.

“Good morning, Eleanor!” Pauline calls from the deck. She’s wrapped in a long white robe, the kind they have in fancy hotels. “Going for a swim?”

Eleanor smiles tightly. “I was, but I think it’s too cold.”

“Come in for a hot coffee! I’d like to discuss Ruby’s birthday.” She gestures for Eleanor to follow her, and then disappears into the large kitchen.

Eleanor sighs and looks back up to the balcony, hoping to share an eye roll, but Louise is gone.

That afternoon, after taking a nap with Alec while Louise watches the girls, Eleanor brings her towel and a book out into the yard. Louise is playing with them in the grass. The day is somehow more beautiful than the one before. Even bluer sky, even brighter sun.

Ruby is practicing her walking, stumbling through the grass like a drunk man. She loses her balance easily, when distracted by the seagulls overhead, and falls clumsily to the ground, cushioned by her fat diaper. Her cheeks are rosy pink.

“Have you been reapplying sunscreen?”

“Yes,” Louise sighs. “Jesus.”

“What?”

“You, with the sunscreen. The hat.” She stands and brushes the grass from her legs. “She’s gonna start noticing that stuff.”

Eleanor feels the cold come over her. The NICU goosebumps. She swallows. “What stuff?”

“You know. I know you don’t mean it that way, but.” Louise shrugs. She wrinkles up her nose, the skin peeling along the middle where it’s burned. “It could come across that way, to her. That you want her to be...I don’t know. White.” Louise winces.

“You’re wrong,” Eleanor says. “I don’t want that.”

“I’m just saying she might *think* that,” Louise says. Her face has gone red. “It’s not necessarily going to be easy for her. You have to just think about how it might sound.”

“She’s a baby, Louise.”

“Not forever. She’ll start to understand.” Louise looks at her feet. They can’t go back, now. To the time before this conversation. Ruby begins to cry in the grass. They look down at her, and she looks up at them.

“Mama,” she says between whimpers. She reaches her chubby fingers towards Eleanor.

“Hi, baby.” Eleanor squats down to the ground and lifts Ruby onto her lap. “You are getting so big.”

Claudia comes over and reaches her arms out, wanting to be included in the hug. Eleanor makes room. She can feel Louise watching, but she has decided to ignore her. She doesn’t know what else to do. Eventually she hears the soft flap of her sandals as she walks back inside. Eleanor sighs.

The girls are sticky with sweat, and they feel heavy and damp in her lap, but she lets them stay there. She kisses them both, but holds Ruby particularly close, thinking about how, a year ago today, she was so desperate for her to come into the world. How a year before that, she had no children at all. She had been losing hope.

The sun beats down, and Eleanor notices that the tops of Claudia’s shoulders are growing a reddish shade of brown. Worried, she lifts the girls off of her lap and scans the yard for sunscreen. She spots it, sitting on one of the steps of the deck. She squints through the kitchen windows, but

no one is inside. Alec is upstairs, still sleeping, and his parents are in town picking up wine and lobster rolls. Louise has stormed off. Only the golden retriever sits on the deck, his tail slapping steadily against the wood. Eleanor scans the yard for shade, but the sun is right above them, and there's nowhere else to go. She could take them inside, but it feels so nice to be out beneath the sun, getting a tan of her own. She half stands. The girls are playing happily in the grass beside her, squealing and speaking gibberish.

"I'm just going to grab the sunscreen," she tells them. They ignore her. "You'll stay right here."

She stands fully and checks the distance between the girls and the water. They'll be fine. The sunscreen is only at the other end. She'll watch them the whole time.

"I'll be right back," she tells them. Then she walks quickly down the edge of the pool, glancing over her shoulder every other second, it seems. With her head turned towards them, she stubs her toe against a sharp edge of a rock. At first it's numb, a moment of shock, and then the pain washes over. The nail has snapped in half, and bright blood is dripping across the stones. She curses to herself and crouches down. The toe is throbbing, and the sight of so much blood makes her woozy. She gasps, wanting to sit down and cry, but, she remembers her mission. She sees the sunscreen lying on the step. Wincing, she stands again and glances back over her shoulder.

And there is only one baby sitting in the grass. Eleanor scans the wide open lawn in a hopeful panic, but she already knows. She knows before she even sees it: the small ripples on the surface of the water. She knows, even as she dives into the pool and forces her eyes open against the burning chlorine, feeling through the slippery water for the soft baby skin. That it is her fault. Claudia, sitting in the grass, points solemnly towards the pool. "Ruby," she says. Only it sounds like "Wooby."

In the emergency room, Eleanor's toe is wrapped in thick bandages and gauze. Fractured. Black and blue. It continues to throb through the night. Her heartbeat, relentlessly pounding away against the broken, bleeding skin.

Coyoacán

In Mexico City, they take me to Coyoacán. They show me where Frida lived, in the blue house. Casa Azul. *Frida y Diego vivieron en esta casa. 1929-1954*. Her paintings hang on the walls. *Viva la vida, Coyoacán, 1954, México*, painting across the wedge of a bright red watermelon. A room of black and white photographs. *Frida mordiendo su collar, 1933*.

In her studio, a wheelchair is pulled up to the easel; paints, brushes, pastels, mortar and pestles, old books, medical posters. One reads: INTRA-UTERINE LIFE. A fetus grows from nothing, its head and neck contorted, chin bent to chest. The outdated drawings give it an alien face: wide head and pointed chin. I look away. When my sister died, she fell in headfirst.

The crowd moves slowly through Frida's rooms. We see her bed with the mirror hanging above it, so she could paint lying down. A pair of wooden crutches leans against the wall. A white pillow embroidered with colorful flowers and the word *Cariño*. I am surprised to feel myself beginning to cry.

Up ahead, there is a sudden commotion. The crowd stops its steady flow through the rooms. Someone moans. I crane my neck, but I cannot see above the heads. We are almost in the bedroom. The noise comes from in there.

It's woman's voice. She moans again, louder this time, almost a yell. Like she is in pain, but not afraid. Some gasps ripple through the crowd. A museum employee squeezes by. The woman's cries grow louder. There are shouts in Spanish. I turn to my mother for reassurance, but her eyes are wide and confused, too.

Following an unexpected rush of determination, I begin to shove ahead. I hear my mother shout my name in a tone more embarrassed than angry. I don't know what drives me to keep pushing forward. Maybe it's those babies with the contorted heads bent forward. The Intra-Uterine Life. My sister fell in headfirst. In Frida's bedroom, the woman sits on the floor with her legs spread

out wide, her head thrown back, red and sweaty. The museum employee is on the phone, half-crouched beside her but it appears it is too late. The baby's coming out. Headfirst, the way it's supposed to.