THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

The Graduate School

College of Liberal Arts

Why We Don't Talk

A Collection of Short Stories

A Thesis in English

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Of Master of Arts

May 2019

I certify that the material contained in my final project for the BA/MA program in English with a concentration in Creative Writing is my own original work.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the wonderful B.A./M.A. students who read through these drafts at the beginning stages and for their guidance in giving these stories life.

I would like to thank all my dedicated instructors, especially Charlotte Holmes, Bill Cobb, and Elizabeth Kadetsky, who read countless drafts of these stories in workshops and conferences over the last two years. I appreciate every comment and moment that you spent in helping me to develop my craft.

I would like to thank my parents, who encouraged me to take chances, honor commitments, spread kindness, and pursue a life worth living.

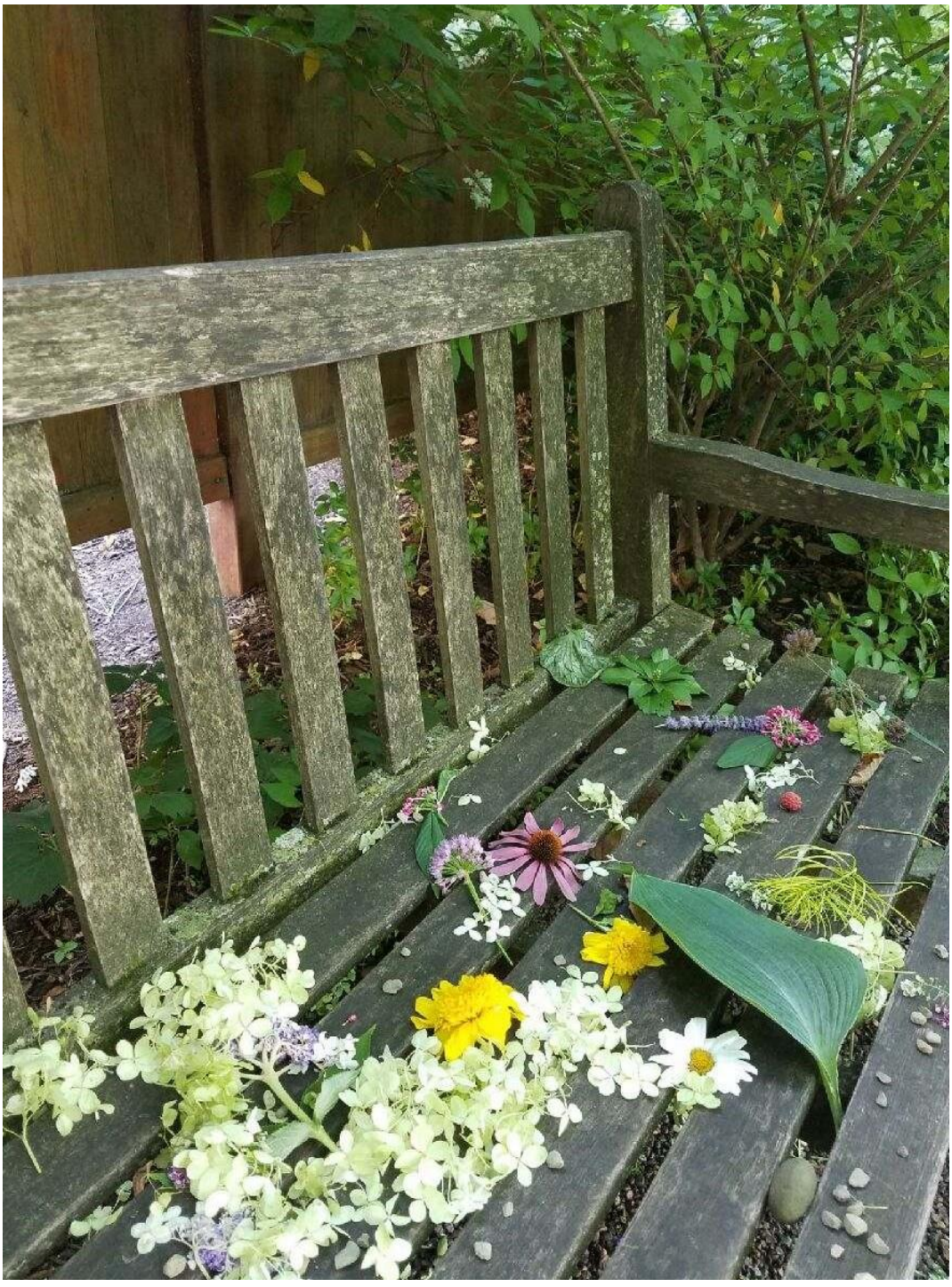
I would like to thank Daniel Guarracino, for the use of his handwriting in the story "Depth over Distance" and for teaching me to appreciate the small wonders of being present.

"The Nobody of the Planet" was chosen as the Grand Prize winner of the Center for American Literary Studies *Wanted* Writing Contest in 2017. It was also published in *Kalliope* and *Klio.*

Some of the photographs included in this collection were previously published in the 2016 edition of *Kalliope*.

For my grandmother, whose strength is a constant inspiration

“Perhaps there’s another, much larger story behind the printed one, a story that changes just as our own world does. And the letters on the page tell us only as much as we’d see peering through a keyhole. Perhaps the story in the book is just a pan: it always stays the same, but underneath there’s a whole world that goes on-- developing and changing like our own world.” ~Cornelia Funke, *Inkheart*



The Nobody of the Planet

Priyanka Lakshmi had the shortened hourglass figure of a woman whose time was running out. The moon stretched its reach into her room and illuminated her bottle of Kingfisher from the inside out with its milky whispers. The label had started to unfurl its upper left edge folded over from sitting next to the candles that she blew out once the moonlight entered her room. Priyanka had grown used to sitting in as little light as possible. The darkness was obscuring of both identity and past. These two entities had become intertwined, crossing over and over one another like the henna lotus flowers that her mother had once painted on her arms and legs.

These days, she was covered by either anything or anyone. Men's kisses were curled tongues around the backs of her knees and inner elbows. She never let them kiss her anywhere else. To kiss was to feel, and to feel was to know why the girl who lived on Brindavan Street never turned away a man whose touch might bring her freedom. In some ways, she was similar to the girls who spent nights on high heeled shoes down by the fish market. They were desperately fishing like the men who spent their days on their own high stilts staring at the water. All hoped for something to pass by so that they might catch it. These women and men spent their nights fishing together, hook and bait, and left when the sun arose.

Priyanka was not one of these women. But, she was slight of hand in the width of her palms, and in her means of trying to gain freedom. And so, she posed as a woman of the night by way of a sign on her door advertising sex in order to draw the men her way. The villagers left her alone, and Priyanka vowed not to harm those who brought her food. She was honest with the men who came to her bed, except for the image of what she truly looked like and what she really was. *"I am the universe,"* she'd say, and they'd follow

her story past the stars and into the milky white galaxies of her Kingfisher bottles. It was only when the men burst into flames that they realized the truth of her fate.

"Pyaar sari dunia ki raaz dikhaega. *Love will reveal the secrets of the universe*," Priyanka whispered to the flickering light of the candle. The force of her quiet breath caused the flame to lean back against the wick, then correct to its upright dance upon the closing of her lips. Fire, or Jmvi as her mother called it, was the most forgiving of all the earth's elemental lovers. It was also the most dangerous.

When her apartment building was devoured by flames, she too was ravished by the burning light. It flickered across her skin along the lines of her henna. The flame meandered slowly along each petal of the lotus flower until her skin became all at once a glowing golden lotus. Only the skin marked by henna on her arms and legs was given this treatment of the burning lotus. Her face was not spared from the marring effects of an accidental fire caused by Timir Tarak's neglectful discarding of his cigar onto the dry mulch of the flowerbed beneath her first-floor window. The only places left untouched were the insides of her elbows and backs of her knees because of how she had held herself tightly like a scared child as she waited for a death that never came. Gone was the only picture of her father before he left for a war there was never any hope of winning. Gone was the antique sitar whose melody lulled her to sleep night after night. Gone was her mother. Gone was Priyanka Lakshmi's beauty.

And so, she lived in the near darkness, hidden away by Timir's guilt in the attic of his home. Even he had never seen her in complete light since the fire. But he brought her

food each morning by way of leaving it outside of her door. And every night he collected the wooden plate with only the exchange of “sadaa sukhi raho.” And every night she replied “jeete raho” in rhythm with the gentle clicking of the grandfather clock across the hall. Despite the accommodations of a prisoner, she was free to leave anytime she wished. She was bound only by her circumstances of disfigurement and the burden she now carried.

Sixty moons had passed since the making of Priyanka’s fate. Timir had died of tongue cancer caused by years of smoking cigars. He left the deed to his house to the sole survivor of the apartment fire. And while she was not thrown out on the streets, she began to starve slowly and deliberately with no one to bring her food and no chance of understanding from the village people. The hourglass figure of her youth remained intact, but began to grow smaller and smaller, as though the fire was still burning away at her body, as if she were a candle. There came a time when she openly welcomed the embrace of a dark and solitary death.

“Hello? Is anyone there? I saw your advertisement on the sign outside,” the man said while sliding off his shoes by the door as he entered Priyanka’s dimly lit house. The gesture was automatic for him, like buckling a seatbelt upon sitting down in a car. He was broad of figure, but narrow of mind. Priyanka could tell by the way he groped around in the dark without taking the time to let his eyes adjust. In her eyes, he was a hasty man

with little patience for contemplation of the best way to navigate the unknown. She had seen his type before. But, he was the only visitor in over a month and she was growing desperate.

"I am here. Please, follow me upstairs to my room and I will give you what you came for," she spoke quietly from the opposite side of the room.

The moon's light coming through the windows began to grow brighter as if she had summoned it with the sound of her voice. And so, she blew out the room's sole candle in the same breath as her request of the stranger. She was not ready to be revealed.

The man groped his way up the staircase in the same way he had entered her home. The heavy sound of his footsteps against the painted wooden floors indicated that Priyanka had been wrong in her initial assessment of his figure. He was not only broad, but immensely large. She only hoped that he would not crush her increasingly diminishing figure beneath his own if he accidentally stumbled in the dark.

"What is your name?" he asked. This seemed as much in interest of sparking conversation as in wanting to use the sound of her voice as a way to orient himself in the darkness.

"I am nobody. I am the universe."

And with that, she removed her clothes. As he kissed the insides of her elbows and the backs of her knees, she began to tell him her story. She was unlike any prostitute he'd ever known. But he was not a man seeking company as a means of control. He was a quiet fisherman just looking for some comfort. And so, he let her whisper her story as they drank Timir's last bottles of Kingfisher.

"When the fire burned the lotus flowers upon my skin, it also burned a hole inside me. The hole was dark and expansive and so I began to fill it with the stars and planets of my own imagination. Comets became my thoughts, and the moon became my soul. I am the universe, and the universe is me. I am trapped here alone inside of my own self, and I exist alone on a planet I have created. I am physically here on earth, but I have been trapped traveling amongst the stars for decades. The passing of time has not aged my physical self, but I am like a large blue star, and I have burned hotly from the inside out for too long. There isn't much time left. I need you to free me."

The fisherman stumbled backwards upon his heels. He was simple, and none of this made any sense. But, his simplicity had made him kind, and so he asked:

"How can I help?"

"I need you to love me. Not in the way that storybooks depict romance, but I need you to understand me in the light, and accept me as beautiful. However, I must warn you that you are not the first man to try. If you find you cannot accept me as I am, then you will burn until you are as empty and as dark as this room."

"And if I should accept you? What will happen to me?"

"I'm not sure. No one has ever been successful."

The fisherman did not hesitate. She knew from his first steps into her home that he was not a man of hesitation. They never were. And they had all died in flames.

"Please light the candles. Let me learn of you," he gently urged.

One by one Priyanka lit the candles that were placed around the small bedroom's four walls. With each successive lighting, the milky white light of the moon's reach was replaced by the orange glow of the shortened candles. Her arms were the first to be

revealed. They were covered in old and intricate burns. Next her face was revealed. It was so badly marred that it was a wonder she could see at all. On the last candle, she hesitated. She was sure that after this, with her body fully in view, he would cry out in horror and burn like all the others. Priyanka lit the last candle, and then closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable. But, he made no sound. Confused, she turned around to where he stood. His eyes were the same color as the swirling stars that she had created in her universe. The fisherman was blind.

"Well, what do you think of me?"

"I understand you."

And with that, she opened her mouth and revealed the entire universe before swallowing him whole. Priyanka Lakshmi was finally free, and as the last wax of the room's candles dripped down onto the wooden floors, she left her physical body behind forever.

"Pyaar sari dunia ki raaz dikhaega."

Love will reveal the secrets of the Universe.

Tally 8,032

Delilah's eyes reflected the color of her clothes so wholeheartedly that no one could quite agree what color they actually were. The nurse at the hospital had written "blue" on the birth certificate, but most days her eyes faded and brightened between shades of green. Delilah knew exactly how many people had claimed to know her eye color. Blue, 14; Green, 63; Hazel, 2. Each time it came up in conversation at late night sleepovers, second dates, and driver's license renewals, she would write down the responses in one of her monogrammed leather notebooks. She kept notebook with her at all times, switching it between purses and pockets as needed. When one notebook was full, she replaced it with another. Over the course of the latest notebook's thirty-day life, it had seen pens of all types. Sparkle gel, 5; Black ink, 107; Blue ink, 84. This was the first of her lists scrawled into the narrow upper left corner of the first page in sparkly yellow ink. Delilah kept track of everything-- including how many door knobs she touched, the number of people she walked by on her way from 30th Street Station to her job as a receptionist at a law office, and the number of cardinals at the park across the street from her house. She counted so often, her eyes constantly scanning her surroundings, that she had little time for anything besides work and occasional social engagements. More often than not when friends called, she marked a tally next to their name before making excuses. In the last thirty days, she had made exactly four excuses.

She hated this obsession, a life driven by numbers that amounted to nothing. Her right index finger and thumb felt empty and oddly spacious without a pen pressed between them, an extra finger. Every time she thought this she had to make another tally.

When Sam called, the first mark next to his name in the latest notebook, she felt her shame growing, heat radiating up the insides of her arms to her finger tips. She had seen exactly zero friends this month.

Delilah agreed to meet Sam at his house for dinner and board games. While getting into her car, she made a more notes. Cars, 10; Joggers, 3; Houses with porch lights on, 5. She climbed into her Mazda, closed the door and tried to will herself to stop counting. She marked this down too. The night was dark and only about half of the street lights on Dekalb Pike were lit. Delilah counted the mile markers on the road, tapping the steering wheel each time she reached ten to help her better remember it for later. In front of her, about twenty feet ahead, a shadow passed over one of the lines on the road. Thinking it might be a large animal, she braked suddenly at 45 m.p.h. Directly in front of her car, a woman stood blinking, her body clothed in all black. Their eyes met briefly, the woman's vacant. She turned and continued walking back across the highway and made it to the other side before the next car drove by. Delilah pulled out her notebook and began a new list.

"There's no way it happened like that," Sam said.

"I'm telling you, she walked right in front of the car without warning. I almost hit her. I could have *killed* her if I wasn't paying attention."

"Well I guess it's good that you're so obsessive," he gestured to the list she was currently making: Number of times Sam had said "no way" since she arrived at his house; 3.

"You would said that wouldn't you?" Delilah snorted.

"Look, I'm sorry. I wasn't there. It could have happened like that."

"It did. Why won't you believe me?" she asked.

Sam gave her three reasons to go:

1. He interrupted her "hello" with "it's about time"
2. He glanced away while her voice cracked
3. He started clearing the dishes while her fork was still twirling the pasta around its prongs

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Delilah documented the night, her pen soaking in the resistance of her reality. She stared at the word "tally" repeated page after page. On the shelves of her office, she stored all of these journals dating back to the early 1990s. Leather, 42; Plastic, 12; Paper, 174. What did all of this life amount to?

She pulled the closest journal off of the shelf, chose not to open it, and dropped it into the trash.

Why We Don’t Talk

That winter, there had been some discussion of divorce. Sheila's belly, that she refused to call her uterus, betrayed itself by looking three months larger than it was supposed to. We lived in a small town and had to travel to Philadelphia for the appointment. The baby doctor, appropriately, had a rounded baby face free of wrinkles. How old must he have been? Twenty-five? No, that seems too young. But he was young. He smiled at us when we walked in to his white and beige office and told us to call him "Johnny." Clearly this was a man who did not know the tortures of a pregnant wife.

In my memory, Sheila was kind to the doctor. She took his hand and kissed it before placing it over our growing child. Smiling at each other, they looked the perfect family. I twisted my watch around my wrist with an anxious wish to return to my home office where I could continue not writing my novel. My first book had been a New York Times bestseller and had earned us enough money to both stay home for the next year. Sheila quit her job as a travel agent specializing in trips to the African continent as soon as she found out.

"Eight weeks, perfectly healthy."

On the drive home, Sheila insisted we listen to Brahms' *Lullaby* on repeat. I hinted that the sound would make me fall asleep at the wheel on the turnpike. She hinted that I should stop being so selfish by crossing her arms over our blueberry sized baby that looked more the size of a coconut. The baby doctor mentioned that she should "play classical music to stimulate the baby's intellectual development" by placing headphones over her stomach. She was the last of her friends to get pregnant. She had a twenty- eight-item list of dumb-looking things she saw other mothers do.

Number fourteen: Alice placed headphones over her stomach like she didn't realize that her protruding torso was not actually a second head.

According to Sheila, she was smarter than Alice. So, the entire car had to listen.

"Who knows, maybe this will stimulate your own intellectual development. Heaven knows that'd help us all," Sheila grumbled.

We returned before too much of the day had passed to the one- bedroom house that our real estate agent had labeled "quaint." For no good reason, I told Sheila that the stretch marks on her hips really turned me off. It was okay to say this because they weren't because of our coconut baby. Sheila had been fat since our first date. She said that she didn't care what I thought and that she'd try turning on the television instead.

I made myself comfortable by placing the soles of my feet against the wall in my office. Once, Sheila and I had worked on converting this walk-in closet into a usable work space. When half of the shelves made their new home in our backyard shed, Shelia began the next project of starting a family. She began this endeavor by decorating my office with pictures of cartoon elephants. Why were nurseries always decorated with elephants? During those months, we argued on this point constantly. The distraction kept me from writing and gave me a tangible excuse to pass on to my editor. I argued in favor of cows. A baby should grow up looking at pictures of familiar animals. Elephants are too exotic. Sheila said they reminded her of her own childhood.

"That's exactly why we should go with cows," I said loudly enough for her to hear as she closed the door behind her.

If you spend too much time thinking of elephants, then you start wishing you were somewhere else.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote that no art should be created in less than nine months since this was the exact amount of time needed to create human life. My literary agent did not know much about Hemingway, never having read any of his works. But he had been an English major at Juniata College, class of 1974, and had graduated without reading anything other than novels by Charles Dickens. So, he was an expert in pretending to know things that he didn't.

"And that's why I need at least nine months to write this book."

"I've never read any of his dribble. However, I consider myself to be very open-minded. I'd like two hundred pages of your story on my desk in seven months."

"But Max-"

When Sheila and I sat down to dinner, we acted out our favorite play. I called it "Shifting Blame." We always began with the uncomfortable shifting of weight. Pressure moving from the left to right foot. Not anxiously, but rather as a way to prepare for the weighing of options that would occur when the play commenced. The baby doctor told Sheila that the baby was now the size of a cantaloupe. This cantaloupe made it more difficult for her to act in the play. She could not easily shift from one foot to the other in the rhythm with which we had grown accustomed. And so, she said, "I want a divorce." She held her stomach and stood up from the table.

My literary agent had given me seven months to write my second novel. I dedicated the novel to Sheila and wrote the first line.

Fine, go fuck the doctor.

Sheila and her scratchy leg hair decided to give our marriage one more chance. Perhaps she was afraid of being a single mother. She complained of being cold and suggested that I buy her a space heater. Until then, she promised that she would keep this extra furry layer over her entire body.

The second time she complained of the cold was in a doctor's office. Unlike the baby doctor, this doctor displayed his qualifications on the wall behind his couch and did not ask us to call him by his first name.

Temple University- Master of Science in Psychology.

Temple was a mediocre university, even back then, but we had already driven in to the city and had paid him for the hour.

"When I look at my husband, I feel cold and empty. He's never given me anything besides this child. This has been a huge weight on our marriage."

"Phil, earlier you mentioned your wife's 'weight problem.' Is this what you were referring to?"

"No, I was talking about the fact that she weighs 207 pounds and is only five and a half feet tall."

At this, the psychologist changed the subject.

"How long have you been trying to conceive?"

"Too long, we waited too long," Sheila whispered from behind the hands covering her face.

Sheila found my one-line novel written in her honor. The day before I had reinstalled the shelves in my office. She had been able to get in to the closet, but the baby and her already large shoulders prevented her from being able to move herself back out again. When I found her, she was sobbing like a pathetic animal. She was crouched in the back corner holding her legs. They were spread, supporting her heavy stomach. She rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. Her blonde hair was matted across her face, held there by the salty tears she had already cried. She wore one of my old t-shirts from an AC/DC concert that we had snuck out to go see in high school.

"For the love of your damned God, stop sobbing. You're getting your snot all over my t-shirt." I closed the door.

My literary agent called during a snowstorm.

"Hey, I need you to send me what you have so far. The draft's due in one month. The file you sent was only one- line long. Where's the plot?"

Once again, Sheila had ruined the private sanctuary of my office. Once she removed my desk from the room, and into the shed, she was able to move in and out without getting stuck again.

Instead of elephants, she framed inspirational quotes and hung them on the wall. She had learned how to print using silk screens in a class at the YMCA. The quotes made the room look smaller, as if it was closing in on itself. I thought I might die in there

surrounded by thoughts of "Cupcakes are muffins that believed in miracles" and "Behind every great man is a woman."

Another day I came home and saw that she had painted the closet walls yellow. The baby doctor knew the gender of the baby, but Sheila asked him not to tell us. If it was a girl, she said she wouldn't push when the time came. I told her she damn well better push either way. Sheila was too old to pretend that she didn't know how the world worked. When a baby decides it's coming into the world, there's nothing a mother can do to stop the inevitable. Perhaps that's what scared her. Once the baby left her body, it would be the one calling the shots. As way of explanation, Sheila said "a girl shouldn't grow up thinking she's in charge. Every mother has to tell her daughter that eventually. I don't want to have to be the one to break the news. Boys are easier than girls. The bell always tolls in line with their demands."

I spent the afternoons working on my novel. It was now two lines long.

Fine, go fuck the doctor. He can have the baby.

Ernest Hemingway said that art would take at least nine months. At that point, we were married seven years. I was still waiting for our marriage to turn into something to appreciate.

Hemingway's editor, Max Perkins, probably never told him to add plot. He didn't let other people push him around. Perhaps that's why he married four times. In 1959, he was invited to an exhibition in New York City. The Metropolitan Museum of Art displayed Joan Miro's "The Farm." The painting was on loan from Hemingway's house

in Cuba. While there his wife, Mary, said that she would never give up the painting and intended to keep it forever. Hemingway told the MOMA director he was interested in selling and not to listen to a damned thing his wife said.

Sheila went into labor in the baby doctor's office. He tried to carry her across the street when the contractions were only twenty minutes apart. By the time they finally made it past the speeding cars, the doctor had given up and shouted for a wheelchair. Sheila gave birth at Mercy Hospital while she gripped the doctor's hand with uncommon strength. The baby was still the size of a cantaloupe. Sheila cried, the baby did not. The doctor looked at us and spoke of "unimaginable tragedy." Two days later she returned from the hospital with the photos that the nurse had taken.

"She had your nose."

When the baby didn't cry, I ran from the room. The hallway reminded me of the first time we visited the baby doctor. I couldn't see past the sterility of the walls. A new mother and her husband walked by me. They carried their red- faced newborn.

"Congratulations. Don't worry, the shock of being a dad wears off after the first few days. This little guy is our second."

Another doctor was in the room when I returned. The baby doctor had apparently left to have dinner with his wife. Sheila looked as if she couldn't decide whether she wanted to cry or open her mouth to yell.

"I was going to be a stay-at-home mother. Who am I if not a mother?" The new doctor and nurse nodded their heads when she shouted this at them. They had heard this

before. Loss makes people profound. It's as if they're trying to make up for the part of themselves that's no longer there.

I wonder when your child stops being yours. The baby in the photograph was blue, but had closed eyes, a nose, a tuft of blonde hair, and a mouth with two tiny pursed lips. Sheila instinctively cradled her, the baby that she would only have for three hours before two men from the morgue came to take her away.

Once the hours passed, the baby disappeared under a cloth. In her place came paperwork. I did not leave again.

I sat holding Sheila's hand and thought of the prominent vein on our daughter's forehead. We did not speak. We had nothing to say before this, and we had nothing now. This was our last chance, the connecting thread of a life between us. An accident only in timing.

My literary agent called to tell me they would extend the deadline given the circumstances. He had only one request.

"Write about your daughter."

In high school, Sheila and I were in the same English class for all four years. She read my first short story and declared it "obtuse." I was staring at her long blonde hair resting on top of my desk when I first heard the name Ernest Hemingway. Our teacher held the chalk as if it were a pencil and it screeched when she wrote on the board.

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

The urban legend claims that Hemingway wrote these words as part of a bet with other writers. At the time, I didn't understand how six words could constitute an entire story. I could see no characters, no plot, and no deeper meaning. I didn't yet know what he said about art taking nine months. Maybe that's why there was no sense behind these words. The doctor had spoken of "unimaginable tragedy."

"Sheila, I'm sorry."

Our neighbors must've been busy because they never called in half-hearted attempts to lessen our grief. Sheila's friends all had happy, healthy toddlers that could be seen waddling around the park with Spiderman t-shirts and Disney princess backpacks. We had the yellow closet and two boxes of diapers that we had bought prematurely. The two of us existed as best we could. We had only each other. And so, we were lonely.

"Do you want to watch the news?"

Grief doesn't disappear, not really. I grieved for the child I never wanted and Sheila grieved for the old stability of our marriage. Sheila mourned gracefully. When she cried, her skin began to glow. There was no evidence of the Sheila that I had found sobbing uncontrollably in the closet. Sheila made lasagna for the neighbors as if they were the ones grieving. Within three weeks she began wearing heels and expensive dresses. When asked how she was feeling by family members, she replied "I'm good, how are your kids?" She did not fall apart into tears when we found ourselves alone.

In the spring she saw me writing a story about our daughter.

"That's not how it happened."

When I showed her the first draft of the novel, she crossed out almost every single line in red pen. She kept only one paragraph.

Sheila's love for our baby was captivating; it was as if the baby was not just her world, as people tend to say, but rather her entire universe. One autumn night, I found her sitting alone with her knees curled under a wool blanket next to a faintly lit table lamp. She stared out the window and ran her fingers across her stomach. She said "I am counting the stars, and the planets, and there are many. But, there's just one of you. And I love you more than I can fathom."

Under it, on the same page, she wrote: *This is the story. You loved me once. We went on midnight walks in Fisher Park and stole ice cream cones from Sadie's on Sunday afternoons when Alfred left to take his bathroom breaks. You kissed me for the first time under the apple tree in your front yard. Afterwards, you picked an apple from the tree and held it up over your left eye. You told me that I was "the apple of your eye." I thought you were the cleverest boy I knew. And I wasn't surprised when you wrote your first novel as a satirical recounting of the early years of our marriage. Everyone thought that it was fictional and they loved it. That's the thing about fiction. You can say whatever you want and it doesn't matter because most people can't tell which details are true and which are not. In the first novel, you stretched the truth. But in this one, you wrote a memoir and cast me as the incompetent fool. I am not the reason she died. At some point, you must have known this. When you saw me sitting on the chair, you thought of me as a woman that could be loved. But in this story, you made yourself the victim to hide the truth. We are both the victims. The cruelest thing you ever did was pretend not to love me in order to sell more books. None of this happened the way you describe it. You didn't hold my hand through the birth and cut the umbilical cord. I never cried in your arms and told you that it was all my fault. You wrote that I went into labor when I moved*

your desk outside to the shed. You called this a "double injustice." I don't understand. To the world, you will be remembered as a writer. And a good one at that. But to me, I will think of you as the boy who picked me an apple and made me smile. You are the man that I spent seven years holding every night. I will not miss your company-- you were unkind towards me when I needed you the most. But your breathing still reminds me that we once had a life together between us. I want you to know that I forgive you.

The closet is now just that. Shelves have been returned to their proper places once again and my clothes take up both sides. I asked to keep the house in the divorce. Sheila agreed. Even now, she'll call me on the telephone to see if I still live in the one- bedroom house on 231 Lexington Dr. When she calls, we don't speak. In her breath I hear my own. I take these phone calls in the living room because it's the brightest room in the house. On fall days, I sit at the window and watch the trees shrug off their changing leaves. We stay on the phone for hours, listening to the other breathe. Usually there are other sounds in the background. A washing machine churning at the end of its cycle. The ringing of a bell on a child's tricycle. Creaking floorboards from our shifting weight. Sometimes I press the phone against my heart. I don't know if she can hear it beating. The sound of our breaths reminds me that we are both still alive. The telephone cord is our only connection.

Rumination

Anya spends most of her first job with her fingers clutching the hem of her skirt, pulling downward in an attempt to maintain her modesty. In clothes too short for her height, she spends hours typing to make only enough money to eat and take the train to type again the next day. With her elbows almost perpetually extended, she's often praised by her mother for having excellent posture. When sitting, she has less need to constantly adjust, and can spare one free hand for the typing of memos. In the hours spent sitting at her narrow desk, she finds comfort in the slow clicking of keys and a small wall which partially obscures her legs from view. Anya's self-diagnosed nervousness is most clearly evidenced in the journey from her desk to the women's bathroom. Over the course of the five minute and thirty-two second walk, she has to pass at least fifteen other desks, not all of which belong to women.

Anya has had her legs crossed for almost one quarter of her eight-hour shift. The tapping of her foot has gradually increased with each paragraph she composes and now outpaces the striking of her keyboard. Unfurling one leg, and then the other, she rises. Her right hand is centered on the upper lip of her chair, while her left stretches the fabric of her new yellow cotton dress. She stumbles out awkwardly, one hand still following her body as she pulls and presses the dress to her skin. Upon making it to the bathroom door, she glances back across the rows of cubicles without seeing a single hunched body turned in her direction. In fact, she realizes, the murmur of thirty typing hands did not cease at all.

Audelia

A story by Laura Nejako

Audelia

This short story is an examination of the fragmentation of perception. Each of the vignettes is meant to be interchangeable. When arranged in new orders, the progression of the story changes. In other words, your first impression of someone is the one most likely to stick.

My grandmother Audelia is like the scarves she wears around her waist as belts. Fragile, but made stronger when given an extra tug in the right direction. The scarves are her diary, gifts from friends and family. One is black with sequins, coiled onto itself with discs of netting jutting out. A remnant from the 1980s, it only appears after a third glass of wine and smells of Fragonard Etoile perfume mixed with moth balls. Another is purple and green silk condensing into triangular meeting points. Even when laid flat on her dresser the night before she needs it, the scarf seems to propel forward in perpetual motion. Another scarf is covered in pink hydrangeas; the outstretched petals so large that as children, my cousins and I would place the scarf over our faces and pretend to be talking flowers. She calls one scarf "afternoon tea in Paris," but only weaves the thin yellow fabric with orange daisies through the belt loops of her jeans when she slips on running sneakers. A shimmering purple satin number complements her hazel eyes and only appears at art show openings and weddings. Of all of her scarves, she says her favorite is one covered with Mickey Mouse faces. Mickey moves from oval mouthed surprise to squinted eyed laughter to scrunched asymmetrical frown. Every two inches the facial expressions repeat themselves, one distinct face bordering the next.

Once, while hanging dry cleaned dress shirts up in her closet, I ran my fingers through the Mickey scarf's fabric, thinking it would never end. I continued this way until it slipped through my fingers and the scarf fell to the floor, sprawled over itself. Knowing the scarf was a gift from my late grandfather, I picked it up off the floor and placed it gently around the neck of the hanger.

"I just don't understand why people go on this show," she says, emphasizing each word with a flick of her half- filled glass of merlot. I reach over and grab the glass stem before steadying it on the coaster next to her La-Z-Boy. My grandmother and I are living together while I am in school studying Anthropology since her house is only two miles and a bus ride away from Bryn Mawr's campus. Every weekday is the same. She wakes at 5:30am to feed the dog. I leave at 7:00am for class. She leaves at 8:30am to work as director at the local art gallery. At 4:00pm we watch *Judge Judy* together with her bichon frise Alfie who sleeps curled up inside a knit blanket on the couch. The second episode of the hour blares with the usual introduction.

The people are real. The cases are real. The rulings are final.

"Oh, this one's about a dog," she says, hands clasped, glancing sideways as if in cahoots with herself. "Judge Judy always sides with the owner of the dog," she says quickly.

This statement rolls into the next. As she tells me of Judge Judy's two dogs, twelve grandchildren, and trademark lace collar, I pull at the corner of the knit blanket. Alfie perches inside it, as if it were a nest. I wonder if dogs have enough of a facial range to be described as looking perturbed. My grandmother seems to notice my slight shift in attention, and angling her body towards Alfie, she says "I know you made that blanket, but it really is his favorite. Here, let me get you another one." She accidentally presses the recliner's down button before laughing and pressing the remote again to go up. After shuffling down the hallway, she pulls a light beige blanket from the closet where she

keeps her scarves and dress shirts. Thin black strings from her black disc scarf cover its fabric.

Last month, when I was knitting another blanket, this time for my uncle, she told me that the sound of the knitting needles calmed her. We sat like that every night for weeks after I finished my schoolwork. The winter brought more snow than usual to Pennsylvania. With the ground obscured by a leaf and snow mixture, we sat together in the living room. Recliner and couch. As her pen marked off answers in the New York *Times* crossword puzzle, my knitting needles answered in response. The nights were otherwise quiet. The sounds of our pastimes were quiet, but consistent. My grandmother reached for my hand and smiled before saying that we must look like two old birds.

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Audelia, my grandmother, organizes her social responsibilities by the small cursive markings on her calendar. If something is not marked down, she maintains that it will not happen. Messages like *Cathy's 60th birthday* and *Go to Wegmans- need more blueberries* provide the structure for both of our lives. On Tuesday, she forgets to go to her cycling class but remembers to go to work. We update the calendar for next week so it does not happen again. We keep the calendar next to the phone so that we do not let go of flittering memories of conversation when walking between rooms to write events down.

"All of my friends call," she says when I try to teach her how to text. "Who knows how many days they have left. A letter could take up to a week to send and they don't have time to learn about text emails." At seventy-nine years of age, she claims to feel forty. Work at the art gallery from 9:00 a.m.-2:00p.m. every weekday. Three walks a day with her dog, Alfie. Cycling class twice a week. Balancing class on Thursday. She only writes things down in her calendar because there is so much to remember.

Today, a Saturday, she is wearing her shimmering purple scarf and tells me she will be home late tonight after the Recycled art show opening downtown. When she closes the wooden door my grandfather carved for her, the wedding photo on the shared wall shakes. The white dress tapered and billowed like an inverted teacup; she is forever nineteen and smiling. My grandfather holds her arm delicately, hand relaxed, as if he were only checking to make sure that she was real. One year later she would have her first son followed by two more and a daughter, my mother. In the photo, she is two years younger than I am now. We share the same arched eyebrows, gently sloping nose,

lopsided mouth, and round but thin face. I wonder if our resemblance will continue through the years.

Afternoon tea in Paris is hard to come by in Pennsylvania, so we settle for the local campus café, Le Jour, with a picture of the Eiffel Tower adjoining the front door. Cursive lettering loops across the blackboard over the barista's head. My grandmother, used to looking down to avoid tripping, is forced to look up. In an attempt to be more inclusive of diversity, the college has added tea blends made from internationally sourced fruit. She tries out the word açai, and after being thrown by the cédille accent, she pronounces it "ah-sigh." The barista, not looking up from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, flips the page and says "it's pronounced *ah-sigh-e*. It's a berry sustainably harvested from the Amazon rainforest."

"Well then, I'll take a glass of your best *ah-sigh* mix," she says, moving her scarf belt to the left side of her jeans so that the yellow fabric is not caught in the zipper when she goes to open her brown leather purse.

After one year of studying at Marymount University, she dropped out to marry my grandfather, a recent graduate of DeSales. She had seen his photograph in a magazine and asked a mutual friend to introduce them. In the photo once accompanied by an article on powerlifting, my grandfather faces away from the camera, showing off by flexing to the side. When she tells the story, the details are never elaborated. Who was the friend and how did he know both of them? Which magazine was it published in and why did she throw away the article? Why did she have to leave college to marry at nineteen? When I ask her these questions, she drops the answers like sugar in her açai tea, stirring so that they dissolve. To a family member, there is something unfair about memories that only

belong to one person. Memories feel like inheritance. When they are hoarded, there is the sense that part of you is slipping away with no concrete explanation. There is no way to tell if she does this on purpose. Smiling at me from across the table, her purse hanging on the back of the chair, she seems an unlikely miser.

After months of living together, we often run out of conversation topics. When this happens she turns to family history. I know only the briefest of details: her mother, my great-grandmother, was raised on a farm by Mennonites after her mother, my great-great grandmother, died in childbirth; my grandmother had a twin sister who died when they were two years old and her father died in a French hospital during WWII.

Glancing around the café, she tells me of afternoon tea with her mother at the Hotel Tremont. She describes a history beyond a series of family obituaries. The dining room of the Hotel Tremont centers around a large mural of dancers from the 1890s. Women wearing long black gloves extend outstretched legs mid-gesture. She gifts me these images. Yet, she thinks of narration like spices in a dish and moves back to the facts listed on the Historical Society's website. The building was demolished in 2003 and a Rite Aid stands there now. Turning to the barista, she says, "You know, this *ah-sigh-e* is actually pretty good."

Six o' clock brings the beating flicker of the exterior light and my grandmother's quiet shuffle. Some mornings she forgets the keys, the doggie bag, her jacket. But always, she forgets her phone. I rush to turn out the light only just turned on. If she knows that we wake at the same time, then she will no longer have these solitary morning walks.

Early in the morning, I hear the heavy light switch as it is flipped up. Across the street, other house lights turn on as if all of Sycamore Drive blinks awake at the same time. The street lights no longer work, so we make our own beacon home, pulling energy from the earth. When I drive home at night the opposite occurs, the houses' lighted windows blinking closed. The morning is hopeful, biding time until the sun rises. The sidewalk is uneven, slabs of concrete overlapping like a young child's teeth before braces. My grandmother chooses this time to walk when the winter air likes to steal her breath before she goes back inside.

From my window, I see her leave, her small frame hunched over to grab her purple mittens that have fallen in the dark. Her dog, Alfie, trots ahead with seemingly deliberate footfalls. As they pass out of the purview of the porch light, I lower the parted blinds in my room and walk to the kitchen to begin making our morning coffee. Folgers does not come with a spoon and the screech of the opening silverware drawer sounds simultaneously with the canary call of the dining room's bird clock. 6:15 a.m. Since the coffee is cheap, I manage to convince myself that it is okay to make three cups instead of two. The water begins to heat as the coffeemaker gurgles, and I go outside to retrieve the

newspaper. Once again, the carrier has forgotten the plastic sleeve and I dig to find the loose pages in the indentation in the snow. My mother's voice sounds on the answering machine as I walk back inside. She explains that she is only calling so early because she knew we would be awake.

From the kitchen, I hear the wooden door softly shut and the sound of my grandmother unclicking Alfie's leash. Alfie races towards me, his bichon blitz, and I give him a small treat from the jar on the counter. The canary sounds again. 6:30 a.m. My grandmother hesitates in the doorway of the dining room and I see her two rooms over from the kitchen. She unties the Mickey Mouse scarf from her belt loops and holds it to her face.

"Are you going to wear that today?" I ask, still straining to see her in the partial darkness.

"I think I need to go to the hospital," she says.

I turn on the light and think of the joke my friends and I would tell as children about something being black and white and red all over. Adults always said we would understand things when we were older. Is this what they meant?

In her long black leggings and blue fleece, it is hard to tell where she stops and the pain begins. Eyes dark and skin sallow, she moves the scarf back up to her face and presses it against her cheek. It is hard to tell who is more scared, so we hold each other and walk out to the Toyota Camry. NPR blares from the radio at high volume as the engine coughs awake and we let it play, deafeningly, on the drive to the emergency room.

When we come to a stop at the hospital entrance, she tells me to turn left where the sign says to turn right. I listen to her and find myself relieved that someone is telling

me what to do. We pull in front of an unmarked building and I let her try the door with no success because I want her to be correct. A man in scrubs comes out and points us to the entrance up the hill to the right.

"Thank you," she says kindly. "I haven't been here since my husband died."

I park haphazardly at the emergency room doors and hold her shoulders as she shuffles in to speak to the receptionist.

"I am injured," she states as if waiting for the woman in scrubs behind the desk to confirm that she is allowed to be there.

Two nurses direct us to a small waiting room to ask a series of questions about her accident. She describes the moment she tripped in precise detail.

"There was a raised sidewalk edge uneven with gravel from construction that someone never finished. I think I fell on my left knee and side of my face. My glasses must have flown off somewhere because I couldn't find them in the snow, but my little dog stayed by my side the entire time."

But when asked exactly where the fall occurred, she becomes silent and holds her right thumb with her left hand so tightly that it is almost as if she is grasping at the memory itself.

"I don't remember" she says as one of the nurses leaves to order a head CT. "Why am I on trial?"

She glances up at me, once more pressing the scarf against her cheek while the second nurse leaves to grab an ice pack. My grandmother looks worried, her brow still furrowed and skin pale. In my psychology class last year, we read an article on techniques used to calm down those involved in traumatic events. One way is to get them

talking. There is not much to note in the sterile waiting room that would distract her, so I focus on the scarf.

"Why did Grandpa always call you Minnie Mouse?"

"Oh, that's a great story." She twists her wedding ring as if turning a dial to bring back the past. "When I first started running marathons, there weren't any athletic running pants for women. I had to wear dancing tights with the small footholds at the bottom. I was so skinny in my black tights, and my feet were so big that your grandfather started calling me Minnie Mouse. And I started calling him Mickey."

She talks like this for almost an hour, recounting all of her fondest memories. The family history that had always seemed so inaccessible pours out of her as if saying the words out loud will help her to heal.

The X-Ray and CT scan reveal she has a broken kneecap and a small brain bleed. The doctors call an ambulance to take her to a trauma center in the middle of the city. My grandmother reassures me that she'll be fine and that I should go to my classes for the day. I promise to call her later. As they wheel her out in a tall stretcher, I overhear her tell one of the nurses that it looks like a chariot. Waving with a flick of her wrist at the nurses' station and the other patients in the emergency room, she looks like a queen in a hospital gown greeting her subjects. I grab the scarf off of the floor and place it in a hospital issued plastic bag labeled *Patient Belongings* to take home.

Five weeks after the accident, my grandmother begins to complain of the unstylish exterior of her leg brace. Today, we are planning our first trip since her return home from the hospital.

"I'm out of wine," she says. "We need to go to the liquor store."

Since it is only a short distance outside of the neighborhood, she is convinced she will run into one of her friends and insists on dressing up. She pulls the scarf covered in large pink hydrangeas from the closet and says that the colors will complement her black leggings. These leggings are the only non-negotiable part of her outfit because it is the only type of fabric thin and stretchy enough to fit over her leg brace.

Her physical therapist requires her to walk with a cane at all times, but she is embarrassed to be seen with it in public. I go in first to the liquor store to grab a cart to bring back to the car. I hold the cart still while she hesitantly grabs the handlebar and tries out her new stability.

Once inside of the store we discover that the cart is about one inch too wide for the aisles. She pushes forward around the perimeter to the clearance section. Now confident in her balance, she grabs four bottles of merlot, one after another, and places them into the cart. On our way to the register, she accidentally knocks over a cardboard display advertising Barefoot Moscato. I rush to pick up the sign while she continues to cruise down the aisle with her cart. Noting my embarrassment, she says, "Well, they can't blame me for that. I'm *practically disabled* after all."

At the mention of the word “disabled,” the normally apathetic cashier springs into action and shouts “I’ll take you over here at the third register.” My grandmother turns to me, and a smile larger than the pink hydrangeas spreads across her face.

“See, my dear, we’re moving up in the world.”

I have stopped asking for her recollections of memory. Now I write down my recollections of her.

On a trip to St. Michael's island, my grandmother makes only one demand.

"I'd like to sit by the water and eat Maryland crab," she says.

Late in the afternoon, we search for restaurants on Main Street. We pass bright yellow ice cream shops and the house where Frederick Douglass once lived. There is a small plaque on the exterior of the house describing his persistence in teaching himself how to read and write. Instead of reading the plaque, my grandmother walks over to a small bench next to the house. She looks up, chin tilted towards the budding pink flowers on the tree above her head. We sit together on the bench each taking up the same amount of space and each looking at the same thing.

"Crepe Myrtle," she says, "this is the farthest north they're able to grow." She tugs at her purple and green triangular scarf and ties it around a slightly broken branch of the tree. "They're fragile, but determined to keep going," she closes her eyes before standing up and walking back towards the house.

When the evening starts to doze off, I find my grandmother on a swing outside of the bed and breakfast, staring at the water. One foot firmly pushes off the ground and the other catches the breeze. She swings forward as if to reach the last of the daylight. Her back is to me and I cannot see her face. I imagine it must match mine, smiling at her freedom.

The Prediction

The summer was heavy like eyelids after a long day at work. My brother James waded through the humid air until the doctors diagnosed him and placed him in a room with a view of City Hall and the Benjamin Franklin statue. The view was for the conscious, this July belonging to my parents, and my brother existed at the center and I on the periphery of trauma. His eyes closed, and mine filled with trips to the zoo, the art museum, and anyplace my grandparents dreamed up while I stayed at their house. At four years old, my younger brother became a prisoner of his epilepsy. At six, his medication stopped working and he moved into the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and stayed there while his brain healed from misfired connections.

Years later, when I heard my mother and father yelling across our pink Formica kitchen table, I thought that seizures must occur like that. Voices competing to be heard, firing outward, bouncing back against walls. Either nothing was being heard or there was a choice not to listen. Lying in a hospital gown that was paisley patterned and thin, James looked as if he might sink into the bed, as if pulling the scratchy green blanket up beyond his waist would make him disappear. White netting spread around him, separate from the dividing curtain. This netting was like a box, placed there to prevent visitors from touching him. James was trapped, still as if paralyzed, drool escaping from his mouth while his brain remained stabilized, the coma induced to keep his body from fighting itself.

When James opened his eyes that October, the doctors praised themselves for keeping him alive. My mother, pale from spending most of the summer indoors, did not

cry. Instead, she shut her eyes, squeezing them closed so hard that her chin jutted out and my father walked over and placed his hands on her shoulders. Although awake, James was still trapped within the netted box. My mother reached out for him, hand flush against the netting and he looked at her, blinking slowly as one would look at an animal, curious but not understanding. The doctors, all three of them, spent another week running diagnostic tests before concluding that the induced coma had brought on a form of reversible amnesia. Reversible in my brother's case simply meant that his six-year-old brain had plenty of time to relearn all of the things he had forgotten.

My mother, one day while scrubbing the bathroom floor, turned to me and said, "Who's the idiot who thinks memory is like a sponge?"

"I don't know, Ma. No one ever really says that as if they're serious. It's just one of those off-handed comments."

She stood, navy blue sweatshirt dangling off her thin frame and white socks wet against the scrubbed tiles. She walked out into the hallway and stood over my body that was lying on the carpet, knees bent and iPod resting on my stomach. I thought she might continue asking questions about memory, my brother now two weeks out of the hospital, but instead she sat down next to me. I placed my head in her lap. As she ran her fingers through my hair, she struggled against knots and pulled slightly against the resistance. When all of the knots were smoothed out, she replaced her leg with her hand under my head and slowly stood up. Walking down the hallway, wooden floorboards under her feet, she glanced back at me over her shoulder and smiled so slightly that it didn't quite reach her eyes.

That November, instead of starting first grade, James repeated kindergarten. Despite the loss being labeled as temporary, we had no distinguishable timeline to reference. James retrieved memories in pieces. On day two of recovery, he remembered our parents. On day seventeen, he asked for his friend Alex to visit. It was as if he were standing in a large room of objects placed in locked boxes with no way for him to retrieve these objects unless the boxes unlocked themselves. Despite this, both my mother and father kept looking for the key in medical journals and doctors' offices.

At the hospital, we received a pamphlet that claimed *epilepsy is fatal because it is often misdiagnosed*. My mother threw it in the trash.

In the mornings, I'd often find her sitting on our back sunporch looking out at the yard. Two fences from the houses behind us intersected: one metal and one wood. Before the diagnosis, my mother had planned to hide the mismatched fences behind tall Thuja Green Giant trees, even going so far as to place an order at Lowe's.

"You know, I don't mind the fences anymore. We have nothing to hide," she said.

"That makes it sound like we're the subject of some crime novel," I laughed.

She let the silence fill the room. Almost whispering, she said, "I'm sorry."

"For what, Ma?"

"You're only twelve. This is too much."

I left her there, staring out at the fence that we could no longer afford to cover. We couldn't cover anything.

The new epilepsy medication, the only thing keeping my brother alive, cost $1,800 a month with insurance. This alone comprised two thirds of my father's monthly salary as a teacher. To pay for the extra expense, both of my parents began working longer hours in various jobs while I babysat James.

"Now remember," my mother said, "if his eyes start to close and his face goes blank, you have to wake him up right away. It's not like in the movies. His body won't seize. It will just shut down. If that happens, do you know what to do?"

"Place him on his side so he doesn't choke on anything and call 911."

"And call me too!"

"Okay, bye Ma," I said closing the door behind her. Through the glass I could still see her standing on the porch, the metal buckle of her trench coat hitting the railing in the wind. She sorted through her purse and after pulling out her phone, she let go of the breath that she had been holding back. The cold air made her breath look like smoke lingering after a cigarette.

I turned to James, and found his eyes expectant behind his oversized orange glasses.

"So what do you want to do today? Look through photos again?"

"No, those are just of old James. Can we go to the park?" he asked.

The park was three streets over from our house, newly built on what had once been an open field, bordered by a small stream that was home to frogs and toads of various shapes and sizes. When the landowner sold the plot to the township, they moved

and sloped the land so that it drained into the stream, swelling so large during the spring months that the children could wade in it. Without a playset in the park, the chipped blue bridge over the stream left over from years ago offered an alternative. In the winter, the stream dried up and neighborhood kids sometimes hid under the bridge and grabbed the feet of unsuspecting adults as they walked by.

Although it was Sunday, the February wind had emptied the park. James reached out for me, and I held on to his orange- mitten- covered hand so he wouldn't slip on any of the hidden ice patches. The path wound through the trees, finding space between the manmade hills. We walked on until our feet grew so cold that we sat on a bench and wiggled our toes.

"I wish it would snow," James said, glancing up at the gray sky.

"Why's that?"

"Because then we could spend all day playing in it."

Other than me, James had no one else to play with. When he had to repeat kindergarten, all of his friends stopped coming by the house after a few weeks. He stood almost two inches taller than his new classmates. Some of the mothers in the neighborhood told my parents that they were afraid he'd have another seizure and that's why their kids couldn't invite him to their house.

"Do you think I'll ever get my memory back? Mom and Dad talk about old me like another kid. But new me likes video games and stuff like that. Did old me like them too?"

To James, it was as if he was two people: the before and after.

"Old you liked video games too, especially Harvest Moon because it had cows and lots of horses and you always got to meet new people in town."

He nodded. I looked at my hands—dry from being exposed to the cold winter air. I hadn't remembered to bring gloves. James shifted around on the bench in his bright coordinated snow gear and rambled about a new game he overheard one of his classmates talking about at school. I thought of my mother and father and the shadows they carried in their faces, growing more defined with time. James wasn't the one who changed. We grieved not at having lost something, but rather at the thought that we could at any moment.

"Do you think I can reboot and find my memories that way?" he asked.

"I don't know."

James nodded and squeezed his eyes shut.

"What are you doing?" I asked remembering what my mother had said before she left the house.

"I'm searching for them."

In that moment, I understood him perfectly. I closed my eyes. The two of us sat on the bench in the middle of the park, eyes closed, until the first cold raindrops hit our faces and we laughed. We ran back to our house, no longer wishing for the snow that was predicted.

A Flush of Shame

Krista gracefully entered the restroom of Zeppelin restaurant before running into the first stall. She was tall and lean in a way that made finding clothes easy, and also gave her a distinct advantage when trying to get anywhere quickly. She was passing through North Carolina on her way to Georgia to visit her friend Julia. As a general rule, she tried to avoid public restrooms because she wondered how many people touched each of these surfaces before they were cleaned who knows how long later. Even the toilet seats, likely cleaned on a daily basis, were exposed to the most intimate extremities of strangers taking part in a necessity that no one liked to discuss. Physical needs, in all interpretations of the phrase, were considered taboo dinner conversation in polite society.

Why then, Krista thought, ruin a perfectly nice dinner by running to the restroom? Her date for that evening, Brett from Tinder, was surely counting down the seconds of her absence. With no one to talk to, he had probably shifted his attention to his phone. She had three minutes at best before her absence became impolite and potentially embarrassing.

With one hand holding up the ends of her intentionally frayed hem, Krista used the other to unravel a long piece of toilet paper. A sign on the back of the stall read:

"How to Use the Toilet"

1. Please do not stand on the toilet
2. Please place all hygiene products in the proper receptacles
3. Please do not pour tea leaves down the drain
4. Please do not flush the toilet with your foot—you may fall in!
5. Please do not graffiti the stalls with your phone number—you may end up with a "crappy" date

6. Please leave the toilet paper firmly attached to the holder
7. The sinks are for washing your hands ONLY—please bathe your baby elsewhere
8. This bathroom is for everyone

There was another woman in the restroom, one with hairy feet casually clad in Birkenstocks, and Krista didn't want this woman to imagine that she'd be doing the unthinkable in a public restroom. Pulling on the toilet paper roll would definitely signal this loudly and clearly with each distinctive tug, and Krista was wearing bold pink heels. Even if they didn't run into each other at the sinks, this woman might notice her shoes while walking by in the restaurant and would know what she may or may not have done. Was there a rule somewhere along the lines of *what happens in the bathroom stays in the bathroom*? And if so, could she count on this stranger to keep her secret?

Krista glanced again at her watch and noticed the time, five minutes past the hour. What time had she entered the restroom? She was in such a rush that she had forgotten to check. The toilet in the neighboring stall flushed. This woman had entered after her and was now leaving before. Though she had also finished, she didn't want to have to make eye contact with a stranger she had just sat half naked next to only thirty seconds before. What was it about a five-foot metal door that gave people the illusion of privacy? Sound and smell were not private, so why was the absence of sight supposed to provide comfort? Upon hearing the door softly shut, Krista rushed to the sink and quickly, but thoroughly, tried to rinse her hands in the sink with the lavender soap. Hearing the door creak open, Krista glanced up and made eye contact with Brett's casual

smirk. Krista backed away, not taking the time to dry her hands, and rushed out of the restroom. What had she done that made him think she wanted such an overtly sexual advance? She vowed to never see him again. Presumptuous men never made good companions.

702 N Entregris Street

Nick noticed that the man didn't look up from his reading when he entered the house on Entregris Street, after knocking. A glass of water perched on the man's knee. Through the water glass, Nick saw a coffee table balanced by three short wooden legs and a brick. Nick closed the door gently at first, then harder after realizing the lock had not caught.

"Oh, don't worry about it. We usually leave the door unlocked anyway," the man said while moving the water and book to the coffee table. Standing up, he reached his hand out as if to say hello but quickly pulled it away. "I'm Greg. We don't lock it because there's always so many people coming and going and it'd just be a pain."

"Hi, I'm Nick. Nice to meet you."

"Yeah, I know. I recognize you from your Facebook profile picture from when you replied to the housing post," Greg said, shifting.

"And you said a lot of people come and go? How many people live in the house? The post didn't say," Nick asked.

"Um, there's seven of us, including you if you choose to stay. There's two bedrooms in the basement, two on this floor, and three upstairs. You'd be in the room upstairs next to mine. We'd- oh and Kat- would all share a bathroom," Greg said.

As Greg spoke, Nick glanced around the house and noted that the place did not have the indescribable smell of most group houses-- body odor, rotten produce, and weed. This house smelled faintly of women's perfume, stale air, and laundry detergent. Nick only had a week to find a place before he began his new job as a Mechanical Engineer in Manassas.

"You said your budget is $1,000 a month, right?" Greg asked. While Nick sized up the house, he felt Greg's eyes on his back. Wearing his usual plaid flannel shirt, even in the summer, and off-brand boots, Nick stood at only five-foot-three. His gawky beard currently grew in the no man's land between scruff and full-grown. Greg, in contrast was one inch taller, appeared to be two months further along in growing his beard, and revealed he was about ten years older. The visit was preliminary and served as an informal interview. Greg spoke for the house and presumably all of the other roommates. He was not the landlord, but Miles, the house's owner, also owned three other properties in Arlington and the oldest tenant took charge in each of them.

The tour started in a living room, inexplicably sparse with furniture. To the right of the front doors sat a large L shaped couch. Its gray upholstery was only just dark enough to hide years of stains and general wear, all of the mismatched throw pillows had been taken and used as a sort of back support. Greg's indentation was still visible even minutes after he stood up to almost shake Nick's hand. Nick wondered how many years it took of living in the same house before one started to become part of its very fabric.

Across from the couch stood a large television, about eighty inches in diagonal, set atop a second coffee table with distinct wooden connectors that reminded him of the IKEA furniture in his parents' house. The television leaned against the wall next to the staircase.

"The keyboard, the Christmas tree, and the sled are Ben's," Greg said about the dining room as a way of explanation for all of the misplaced junk. "He just moved into Zach's old room three weeks ago."

A large painted black wooden table sat in the center of the room, buried under half-filled bottles of booze and mail with postmarks that Nick noticed were years old. One chair lived tucked underneath the table as if to signal the solitary lives of those in the house. According to Greg, there were two rooms behind the galley kitchen, but they were well-hidden. In contrast, the focal point of the kitchen was a large window that mirrored a window of the same size on the neighbors' house. With only ten feet between the exterior walls of the houses, he could easily mistake the neighbor cooking grilled cheese and her family to be the other five roommates. The kitchen was otherwise unremarkable in appearance, and only distinct in the then pervading smell of burnt toast, making the whole house feel simultaneously lived in and abandoned.

The basement was dark, the light seemingly broken, and the gray carpet that dominated much of the first floor continued down the steps to the rooms below. Like most older homes, the basement was cloaked in a musty dampness suffused with a medley of several different laundry detergents. Nick had viewed other houses with basement rooms for rent and almost immediately ruled them out because of the smell alone. "These are Aaron's and Sarafina's rooms," Matt said.

On the basement level, there was a finicky second refrigerator that Greg said was only used for cheap extra beer that no one cared enough about to keep in the mini-fridges in their rooms. He opened the door so Nick could see that the basement refrigerator contained a total of three Coors light bottles, one stray Activia yogurt, and an ice pack.

Greg decided to show the second floor last, the only one Nick really cared to see, like a comedian saving their best joke. The gray carpet continued up the steps, its flaws more visible in the light from the large windows that ran parallel all the way up the

staircase. The carpet abruptly ended at the second floor. The landlord likely installed the carpet to protect the original floorboards from any damage, so the lack of it gave the impression that those sleeping on the second floor were more trustworthy.

At the top of the stairs stood Greg's door, painted white to match the rest of the woodwork. To the left was Kat's room, the door slightly ajar with ABBA's "Dancing Queen" coming from inside. The bathroom next to her room was entirely painted white. It was difficult to tell where the wall ended and the tile floor began. Its two large windows again mirrored the neighbors' house. In the matching windows, the neighbors had placed an opaque, foil-like barrier which may have had something to do with the shower bordering windows that came down to waist-level.

At the end of the hallway, the last room to be seen, was the room for rent. The door caught on the frame and required Greg to push his shoulder forcefully against it. The room was unfurnished, but large, with a sloped-ceiling walk-in closet. On the far wall, three small windows looked out past the front porch onto the street below. The house was only a ten-minute walk from the nearest metro stop, and Nick felt inclined to overlook its gray carpeted character. By far, it was the nicest house that he had found within budget.

"I'll take it," he said.

Outside of Nick's window, the leaves blew, a harbinger of a short summer storm. Since it was Thursday, he moved all of his belongings into the room himself while everyone else was at work. Parking on the street outside of the house was only permitted from 5p.m.-8a.m. The driveway ran between two houses, but extended almost all the way into the backyard. Five reasonably sized cars could fit behind one another with their

bumpers almost touching. Since this meant that they would be parking one another in most of the time, Greg said to leave all keys on the small, craftsman- style shelf next to the staircase.

Greg, who worked as a freelance contractor, moved his construction truck (the length of two reasonably- sized cars) out of the driveway at Nick's request. Instead of pulling back in behind Nick's U-Haul, he drove off without any indication as to where he might be going. Unable to lift the heavier furniture items such as his bed frame, desk, and bureau, he moved in backwards by carrying all of the smaller items up first. Nick climbed and descended the stairs over and over. He learned that the fourth step creaked if he did not step directly in the middle. While ascending with a particularly heavy, but not cumbersome, stereo system, he tripped slightly on the intersection between the final carpeted stair and the wooden floorboard.

Taking this as a sign that he needed to stop and rest, he walked down to the kitchen for a glass of water. Through the kitchen window, he saw a tall and stiff- limbed stranger ride up to the driveway on a Bird scooter. Nick waved and the stranger waved back before carelessly leaving the scooter in the driveway without flicking down the kickstand. It fell to the ground as he opened the side door and entered the house.

"Hey man, I'm Ben. Are you the new guy?"

"Yeah, I'm Nick. Nice to meet you."

For a few minutes, they exchanged general pleasantries. Ben was originally from New Jersey, but had just graduated from George Mason and started a job in IT at the Capitol building.

"I'd tell you more about my job, but then I'd have to kill you," Ben joked with enough distance in his laugh that Nick could tell he had told this joke several times before. Up close, Ben's hair looked about one inch too long as if he did not care enough to get it cut on a regular basis. Nick assumed that Ben must have just come from work, but his Nirvana t-shirt and cargo shorts made this seem unlikely.

"I left work," Ben confirmed, "and walked outside and saw someone had left their Bird with the app still running. I guess they didn't know how to turn it off. The metro gets kind of crowded on the weekdays, so I just took it." Ben's eyes lit up at the thrill of not getting caught.

"Wait, but isn't it still charging that other person?" Nick asked, trying not to judge Ben too quickly.

"Yeah, I think it's like $0.15 per minute or something like that. But I've only had it for twenty minutes and I'll return it in the next few days."

Nick quickly did the math in his head. At $0.15 per minute, with it currently being 4:15p.m., and assuming that Ben returned the scooter to a station by 8:00a.m. the next morning, that person would be charged a total of $141.75. When Nick pointed this out, Ben shrugged his shoulders, the oversized shirt sleeves bunching up, and said, "They should learn how to use the app. Then they can turn it off remotely." Ben looked at Nick and his eyes narrowed and mouth turned aside. Nick returned the glance, indicating that neither knew what to make of the other.

"Want to see some of my other stuff?" Ben asked.

Ben had at least one stolen item in every room of the house. On the front porch, a beach chair from a resort in Florida. In the kitchen, a set of china plates. In the living

room, Brooks Ghost running sneakers tucked under the coffee table. In the dining room, a clearance sale Christmas tree still in the box. Nick did not want to insult Ben, so he settled on the now neutral usage of the word “cool.”

“And all of these are things I’ve claimed just since I moved into the house.”

“So,” Nick started in an effort to change the subject, “have you gotten to know many of the other roommates?”

“I hang out with Sarafina a lot and there’s Greg, but he’s kind of an asshole. He showed me the house, but we haven’t really talked much since then. Sarafina’s cool though. We’re going out tonight if you want to come,” Ben said, reaching into the fridge for a beer.

“Sure, I don’t really know anyone yet. What’s the best bar in town?” Nick asked politely.

“Probably Whitlow’s. That’s where we went when I was at Mason. But we call it ‘Shitlow’s’ because we go there to get shit-faced. It’s a good place to pick up girls.”

“I’m tired, but I’ll go,” Nick said.

“I’m going to tell Sarafina to get ready. It literally takes her three hours.” He walked down the basement stairs. Nick moved the last of the smaller items into his room. He locked his door and walked back downstairs to wait.

In the time that it took Sarafina to get ready, Ben helped Nick move the furniture and told him everything that he knew about her. The first, that she was a real-estate agent who spent all of her money on Pinterest crafts and boxed wine. The second that she

taught nightly Zumba classes during the week to supplement her income because she had only ever sold one house. The third, that the one house she sold belonged to her very wealthy parents that she was currently estranged from. Ben did not know why. The fourth, that she was an old high school girlfriend of Greg's. The fifth, that she had driven Greg home from a date ten years ago and had spun out on an icy patch of road. They hit a tree. Sarafina walked away with only a broken arm. Greg spent a month in a coma. They broke up. The sixth, that Greg had invited Sarafina to live in the group house after her parents threw her out.

"What? That sounds crazy. Why would he reach out to her after so many years if he blamed her for the crash?" Nick asked.

"I don't know man. Maybe he realized that was a dumb reason to be mad at someone. Or, they broke up for some other reason? I only know what Sarafina told me- oh hey, Sarafina," Ben said, only just noticing the woman walking through the dining room.

"Hey boys. Are you Nick?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Well, welcome to the lovely residence at 702. Here we have seven bedrooms, three bathrooms, and a whole lot of shitty drama." As she spoke, she waved her left hand around in almost careless exaggeration, while her right hand held a glass of red wine steady.

"You know, I've heard her make that joke at least three times since I moved in and it's never been funny," Ben whispered to Nick.

Sarafina was dressed in red-heeled stilettos, black leather pants, and a black v-neck tank that almost reached her belly button and held itself together by a series of crisscrossed straps across the front. Her blonde hair was stick-straight and only just brushed the tops of her shoulders. It smelled of product and something slightly burnt. Nick thought she was pretty but noticed that her face seemed jaded, her skin dull and her cheeks too big in comparison to her mouth. Nick was not sure that she had been joking earlier. Sarafina took out her phone and dangled her legs over the end of the couch.

"Sarafina, are you ready to go?" Ben asked.

"Isn't Kat coming too?" she asked.

"Oh shit, I forgot to invite Kat. Is she home?"

"KAT COME GET DRUNK WITH US YOU WHORE," Sarafina yelled in the direction of the steps, not bothering to move. Upstairs a door creaked open and tentative footsteps descended the stairs. A small head poked around the wall.

"Why, hello friends. Did you call for me?" Kat asked.

The first thing Nick noticed was her pink curly bob. It drew attention to her pixie-like features.

"When are you leaving?" Kat asked, her voice soft and relaxed.

"As soon as possible. We don't want to sit around all night waiting for you," Sarafina said. Nick and Ben exchanged a glance and tried not to laugh.

"Oh, then count me out. I have to take care of Bartholomew," Kat said, already starting back up the stairs.

"Who the fuck is Bartholomew?" Sarafina asked while taking another sip of wine.

"My betta fish. He killed his brother, Reginald. Did you know you're not supposed to have more than one in the same tank? Anyway, I think he feels really guilty about it because he spends all day swimming around really slowly in circles. I even changed the lightbulb in my room to a green one to match his little scales but no luck. I have this suspicion that he's really into alternative folk music. I'm gonna go play him 'home' by Edward Sharpe to remind him that he's home here and I won't send him to fish jail for murder," Kat said, with urgency.

"Kat, have you been smoking today?" Sarafina asked, her eyebrows raised.

"Only the new stuff that I'm growing in my closet. Oh flop-er-socks, don't tell anyone about that," Kat said to Ben and Nick. "Oh hi, are you the new guy? Nack? Pleased to make your acquaintance, dear sir," Kat said, curtseying.

"Actually, it's Nick. But, nice to meet you."

"Nack is not even a real name," said Sarafina.

"It could be his last name. Nick Nack. Like a knick-knack?" Kat laughed.

"So, are you coming with us?" Ben asked, checking his cellphone.

"Yeah, give me two minutes to get ready. *When we go hoooome home home. Home is whenever I'm with you*," Kat sang as she walked back upstairs.

"Those aren't even the right words!" Sasha shouted after her.

As if they had switched places, Greg appeared at the top of the stairs and walked down, then through the living and dining rooms without speaking to anyone.

"Hey man, we're going out to Whitlow's. Do you want to join us? Kat's coming too. That way you don't have to stay in the house while everyone else is out having fun," Ben said when Greg walked by again.

"No, thanks. I have better things to do like clean the toothpaste glob out of the sink that Nick left this morning," Greg said.

When they heard the door close upstairs, Sarafina turned to Nick, "Don't worry about him. He's like that sometimes."

"That's what I told him too," Ben said, "like the other day he messaged our GroupMe and said that Aaron needed to vacuum the entire house because he left some crumbs on the coffee table."

"It's so dumb. Look at this place. Everyone leaves crumbs everywhere. Just ignore Greg," Sarafina said. "He's only nice to Kat because he thinks she's deranged and not worth bothering, plus I think she's his dealer."

Nick was surprised that the walk to Whitlow's took ten minutes. Entregris Street ran through a quiet neighborhood of more expensive looking homes. Three houses down, they passed a home for sale with a tower covered in small, circular windows. Nick thought about one day having enough money to buy it and turn it into a home library or a children's room.

On the walk, he saw a group of people grilling hotdogs and hamburgers in front of the Methodist church. Ben described how the neighborhood centered around two parks where children left their toys in large bins overnight. A few lots down from 702, a house displayed a large floor-to-ceiling window (and no blinds) on its front exterior. Inside, a toilet and shower were clearly visible. The house's only redeemable quality was that it kept 702 N Entregris Street from being the worst house in the neighborhood.

On the way to Whitlow's, they turned left towards Clarendon Drive and walked out of the residential area, past the car dealership that advertised in both Spanish and English, towards downtown.

Ben described how Clarendon presented itself as a mix somewhere between a small college town and a wealthy city. Most of its residents were young professionals out living on their own funds for the first time. The main strip of the downtown area reflected this with restaurants serving food of all imaginable varieties, and three rooftop bars. Emanating out from the main strip were family-friendly stores and restaurants such as Kinder Haus Toys, the Cheesecake Factory, and Barnes and Noble.

While unremarkable from the outside, inside Whitlow's was an incongruous mix of a 1950s style diner and a tiki bar. Along the far wall, a large sign with red lettering labeled the bar by its full name-- *Whitlow's on Wilson*. Chrome and black plastic chairs centered around tables with napkin dispensers and ketchup bottles. The bar itself sat under a grass fringed roof supported by bamboo columns. A sign listing drinks and specials illuminated by neon blue light took up most of the back wall. The main room contained a DJ, a dance floor, and about two hundred people pressed tightly together. On either side of the main room were smaller spaces filled with pool tables, foosball, air hockey, and arcade basketball. Nick guessed these were breathing rooms for when the rest of the bar became too claustrophobic.

Sarafina walked into Whitlow's first, and after the bartenders checked her ID, she moved into the crowd and disappeared. Once Nick made it through he turned to the others, "Hey, should we go find Sarafina?"

"She does this. She grew up in this area so she knows a lot of people here. She's probably just looking for someone to, you know-" said Ben while making an obscene gesture with his hands.

"Gotcha," Nick said

"Let me buy us some drinks," Ben shouted, already moving towards the tiki bar.

"What a showoff. Am I right?" Kat said. Nick noticed how the low lighting offset by single bulbs hanging down from the ceiling subdued the harsh pink color of her hair and made her nose ring glint.

"Listen Nack, I don't know you super well, but I need to ask you a very important question. Can I use your soap? I ran out yesterday and I'll be too drunk to go to the store tonight. Normally, I'd just use it without asking like I do with Greg's shampoo, but I feel like you're really perceptive and would notice."

"Sure Kat, go ahead," Nick replied.

"Thanks, dude. Greg hides his soap in his room because it's really expensive and he's afraid Ben will take it."

"Did you say my name?" Ben asked returning from the bar with a pitcher of Blue Moon and three glasses.

"Wait, Greg told you all this?" Nick asked Kat. They were standing close and practically shouting into ear others' ears over the noise.

"No, Alyse tells me this stuff when she stays over," she said.

"I didn't realize Greg had a girlfriend," Nick said.

"She's not his girlfriend," Ben said, pouring each of them a beer. "She just stays over most nights. His room is right above mine and--"

"Alyse is our eighth roommate. She and I dated for like two weeks but it didn't work out so I introduced them," Kat said flatly.

"Doesn't it bother you that she's still hanging around the house so much?" Nick asked, confusion evident in his voice.

"No, Alyse is a beautiful flower and she can share her petals with whomever she wants. Oh wait, that sounded more sexual than I meant it to. I was trying to take her hooking up with Greg and make it into a metaphor. That was a metaphor, right?"

Nick and Ben shrugged.

"Um Kat, what the hell are you talking about?" Ben asked.

"Who knows. Let's drink this beer and then sleuth around the dance floor," Kat said.

"Can't we just dance?" Nick asked.

"Yes, that too."

While they were dancing, Nick glanced over to the 50s-style diner side of the bar and saw Sarafina and Greg sitting together at one of the tables. The tables all around them were empty. Everyone else crowded together on the dance floor. Sarafina leaned back against her chair with her stiletto-clad feet lifted up on another one of the chairs. As if to counteract her posture, Greg leaned forward with his hands resting folded on top of the table.

"Hey guys, when did Greg get here?" Nick asked.

"He walked right by us when we stopped on the corner of Wilson and Clarendon Boulevard so that Kat could spin around in circles with that stranger's dog," Ben said.

"I miss that little doggo already," Kat said.

"I totally missed that," Nick said, "what do you think they're talking about?"

"Maybe reminiscing about the accident?" Ben said, more malice than humor in his voice.

Sarafina suddenly stood up, took a moment to regain her balance, and walked toward them. Despite having been absorbed in what looked like a heated conversation, she had not lost sight of the rest of the group. "Are you ready to go?" Sarafina asked tersely.

"But we just got here-" Ben started.

Kat instinctively embraced her, holding onto her from behind. She was too small to reach her shoulders, so her arms wrapped around Sarafina's waist. From the front, Nick thought Sarafina seemed to have an extra set of arms.

"What were you guys talking about over there?" Kat asked gently. Before answering, Sarafina braced her body in the way one does when they are either trying to be strong or know that they are about to be hit by something.

"Greg is kicking me out of the house. He says I have three days to move all of my 'shit' out," Sarafina said, staring blankly at the floor.

On his first Sunday morning in the house, Nick woke up at seven, as usual, and made an omelet with cheese, green peppers, and cilantro.

The Air and Space Museum opened at 10 a.m. and Nick had been waiting around the house to see if anyone else might want to go with him. Greg still had not added him to the house GroupMe, and he did want to wake anyone up. At 9:52 a.m., Nick left the quiet

house and walked towards the metro stop. On the way, he passed a French café, Le Pain, and saw a row of outdoor tables made of wood and iron under the shade of large oak trees. Across the street, townhomes with brightly colored doors in shades of yellow, blue, and red hid behind trees. A small sign by the café entrance read *Bienvenue* and below, *Please seat yourself*. Nick chose the only unoccupied outdoor table.

From this vantage, he saw a King Charles Spaniel sit down in the middle of the sidewalk and refuse to budge, already panting from the heat. Nick was about to ask the woman sitting behind him if he could borrow her water glass to rehydrate the dog, when the dog's owner scooped it up and continued walking. Nick glanced back over at the woman and noticed she was typing fervently on her laptop. She looked as if she did not want to be disturbed. At the table in front of him, a couple sat drinking coffee from large cups without handles. They both looked around the street and then talked quietly with their foreheads almost touching.

After finishing his breakfast, Nick walked back to the house to see if anyone else had woken up yet. He opened the door and found Sarafina lying across the couch while Greg stood on the middle of the staircase.

"Alyse is moving in tomorrow, so you need to get your shit out today!" Greg yelled, his gray hair visible in the light from the incoming window.

"Why doesn't your fucking girlfriend stay in your room?" she countered.

"Because someone needs to start paying rent for that room because God knows you haven't been!"

"Okay, well I talked to Miles, our actual landlord, and he said he'd take care of it," Sarafina said.

"You told him you couldn't pay the last two month's rent two days ago and his way of 'taking care of it' was to ask me to find someone new," Greg said, gripping the stair handrail so tightly that his veins were visible.

Sarafina threw the knit blanket off of her legs and revealed tie-dye colored leggings covered in peace signs. She grabbed her phone from the coffee table and stomped down to the basement.

On the couch, Nick had the perfect spot to watch all of the events of the house unfold. Tom walked by on his way out the door, introduced himself, and left. Steven wandered into the kitchen from his room, grabbed an apple, and sat down next to Nick without saying anything.

Greg had been right on that first day. This house had a revolving cast of roommates. Getting to know anyone too well was unnecessary because they might not stay. The leases were month to month. With this neighborhood and price, Greg could easily find someone to take Sarafina's place within a couple of hours. Tom and Steven would have known this. They might even have forgotten Nick's name as soon as they walked out of the room.

If Nick took all of the people who had ever lived here, he thought he could probably fill up the entire dance floor at Whitlow's. It was the housing version of sitting down at a French café and watching people walk by, the dog only memorable because it acted unexpectedly. Tom and Steven seemed to live in the house to serve as a reference point for normalcy. Even further on the periphery were the significant others and friends.

Thousands of people might have wandered through this door in the thirty years the house had been for rent. How many of them stopped to ask why there was no carpeting upstairs? How many grabbed cheap leftover beers from the basement fridge while they were sleeping over? How many made the ten-minute walk to the metro day after day? Nick sat on the couch, watching the house move past him, and knew that he would soon leave this place.

The house collected people and stories without asking. Ben stole things he thought no one would miss. Kat misunderstood the inclinations of her betta fish. Sarafina moved into the house hoping to be forgiven for an accident that happened ten years ago. Greg oversaw and facilitated this collection of stories, and perhaps some part of him resented remembering all of them. The scenes and the drama of the house indefinitely replayed in a loop of walking up and down the stairs.

From the bathroom, Greg shouted “Who moved the trash can?”

“Why,” Sarafina said from the porch, “so you can throw somebody else out?”

Despite her complaints, Sarafina packed all of her things into three purple suitcases, loaded these into her car, and mumbled something about the movers coming for the rest of the stuff later that night. Kat came downstairs and hugged Sarafina from behind with her arms wrapped around her waist. Ben stayed in his room.

Sarafina took one last look around the gray living room, said her goodbyes, and left. On her way out, the lock caught and Nick went to close it.

Leaving Space for Grief

Nora stared at the man sitting with his back flush against the bus seat and his knees spread as if to defend himself. This posture wide-set, but not aggressive, seemed like an accidental claiming of space. Nora sat directly across from this stranger and tried to compensate for his widened stance by making herself as small as possible. She picked up the black and white umbrella resting carelessly between her feet and Velcroed it closed. Though still wet from the rain and fog of the early morning, she placed its winged folds into the left pocket of her backpack opposite her water bottle. Although she thought the wet umbrella might soak her books, she was more concerned with getting all of her things placed out of the way. She took the flared edges of her red wool coat and placed them under herself before stopping to wonder if the straps of her backpack, now placed on her lap, stuck out too much into the empty seat next to her.

Nora counted the stops on the route. One next to the car dealership. Another by the burned-down bowling alley. A third by a monochromatic apartment building. The ride from her house on the outskirts of Philadelphia to the center of the city took approximately forty-five minutes on the SEPTA bus. With each successive stop, the man's stance grew wider, his toes turning outward, until the space between his legs looked like a diamond being pressed together with unnecessary force. This pressure built first in his legs moving upward through his straightened torso, clenched hands, and closed eyes. With his left eye closed more than the right, the pressure met in the center of his forehead, skin bunched, and felt unevenly dispersed. He was not frightening, but pained. On his ears he wore headphones and Nora wondered if this was the source of his tension. If so, why did he not take these off? Why choose not to silence the source of such extreme discomfort?

At the fifth stop, bordering the railway, he started to mumble to himself. The unconscious urge to release something, even sound, seemed to Nora to be as natural as releasing a long-held breath. With this release, his eyes still closed, the woman two seats to his right glanced out of the corners of her eyes and reflexively gripped her small dark leather purse more firmly. When the man began to open and close his fists, she shifted one foot behind the other, like Nora, making herself smaller. The woman folded her hands to match, red nail polish starkly brilliant in the bus's gray light. After a few moments, she took her trembling hands and shoved them under her purse as if she did not want anyone else to see.

Across from Nora, the man rose, holding onto the handrails above him. Hands still opening and closing in unseen frustration, and eyes closed, there was no way for him to anticipate when the movement of the bus would change, accelerating, stopping to avoid a pedestrian, turning a corner. Alone, he played a game, muttering to no one. One woman uncomfortable, the other frightened. Nora did not want to be like this other woman, afraid because she did not understand, so she uncrossed her legs, folded her coat back out from under her, and placed the wet umbrella back on the floor between her feet. At the fourteenth stop, she rose, politely said "have a good day" to both the man and the bus driver. Standing in the rain, the umbrella resting on her right shoulder, she looked at the man, still standing, unchanged. When the bus drove on to the next stop, rolling cautiously through the potholes, she was unsure why she had been nervous. Life seemed intangible beyond her grip on the umbrella collecting rain and bowing to the wind.

The next morning, Nora stood at the bus stop across from her neighbor's fenced yard. Originally, there had been twenty houses here, spread out through forested lots. Nora's mother had grown up in this neighborhood, living in the same house, before her death in a car accident two years before. As a child, Nora often pictured both parents dying this way on windy roads veiled by rainy mist. She did not imagine the specifics of how the steering wheel of the old Cadillac would fail to deploy the airbag before crushing her mother's chest. These thoughts borne from loneliness appeared only on late nights. When the police called to say her mother had died while merging onto the Schuylkill expressway around 8 a.m. on her way to work, they did not know that the disbelief heard in her voice was not about her mother being dead but rather how she had died. Alone and during the morning. The timing wrong.

Nora's father still lived in the house with her. Every morning, she made their coffee, half a pot with three cups, one for each of them and another that they never finished. After two years of taking the bus, she knew exactly how much time to spend on each moving part of the morning routine. If she woke up at 6 a.m., she had five minutes to wash her face and brush her teeth, ten to eat a breakfast of coconut yogurt and granola, fifteen to prepare a lunch of dates with quinoa and chicken, twenty to watch the morning news while the coffee brewed, and ten to assemble an acceptable hodgepodge of business wear for her job as a copyeditor at a pharmaceutical firm. When timed precisely, she had enough time to make the 7:06 a.m. bus which stopped one block away.

On the day she saw the enigmatic man, she almost missed the bus entirely. Nora's father, an unemployed heating and air duct installer suffering from a back injury, decided to decorate their home for Christmas three months early before most neighbors even put

up their Halloween decorations. A wreath hung over the door by a large hook that reached over the back. This made the door difficult to close, often taking several tries, occasionally more, to force the door into the lock. The unexpected rainy morning drove her back inside after one successful closing of the door to retrieve her black and white umbrella. The second closing took five attempts followed by the rush of cold water soaking through suede boots as she sprinted down the street. Most runners do not use umbrellas in the rain, knowing the rain will blow in and render it useless. Examining her saturated boots, Nora now knew the same, and placed the umbrella on the floor between her feet.

When the bus came the next morning, the air crisply clear and the neighbor's fence where it had always been, she boarded and sat in her usual spot, the puddle her umbrella had made the day before now gone. The seat across from her now empty.

For the next two weeks, Nora's schedule remained unchanged. Traveling to the city on the 7:06 a.m. bus and home on the 5:35 p.m. bus. The man who had taken up so much space seemed to have vanished. She thought of his hands opening and closing, the image so vivid in her memory. Besides the ends of his fingertips, raw where the skin had been nervously picked away, she could not remember any details of his appearance. His erratic behavior had been so consuming, so all-encompassing, that the memory of him was like an idea not fully-formed. Having only seen him once, out-of-breath and tired after running to the bus stop in the rain, she imagined she was filling in details. Like

looking at a photograph of herself as a child and remembering a story told by someone else as if it were her own.

When he reappeared two weeks later, on a fog-drenched Tuesday, she did not recognize the brown eyed man before he sat in the seat next to her. Twisting his body forward, hunched as if to hide, he was only distinguishable by his fingertips. He began to mumble to himself.

Nora looked up from her hands and saw that he was now seated upright. Talking seemed to quite literally open him up, his legs spreading back to the diamond shape of their initial encounter. His hands circled in the air as he spoke incoherently with increasing volume as if the words were all around him and he was throwing them in his mouth, processing, and uttering them as intangible thoughts newly formed.

Nora shifted her body as a means of both standing and readjustment. She thought this stranger, still opening and closing his hands, might be one of those fanatics who rides public transportation and shouts that everyone is condemned unless they accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. All of the other seats on the bus were taken, and the time was only 7:31 a.m. with twenty minutes to go before her stop.

The bus stopped and a woman sitting three rows back stood up and exited. Nora eyed the seat, turning her entire body towards it, pointing her toes in the direction she wanted to go. She gathered her things and gripped the plastic blue seat covers for support as she moved to a vacated spot next to a teenager playing solitaire on his phone. At 7:51 a.m., she pulled the cord for her stop. When she walked by the man, she noticed he was wearing his headphones. He had once again retreated into himself. Nora politely told the bus driver to have a nice day before stepping off onto the sidewalk.

Nora woke up the next morning at 6:00 a.m. and followed the usual routine. In the middle of brewing coffee, the machine broke after sputtering out its last rhythmic and insistent grinding of life. When she took it outside to the recycling bin, she felt the cool autumn air shift. She knew the old sailor's trick that this meant she had twenty minutes until the storm began. Unsurprisingly, this math was inexact and the first raindrop fell at 7:02 a.m. after she left the house. While standing at the stop, staring at the neighbor's fence, she decided she would not sit in her regular seat in case the man was on the bus again. The bus maneuvered around the pile of leaves carefully gathered on the street for collection, and met her where she stood.

Nora moved to sit in the last row of seats. Leaving the umbrella on the floor, and drying her hands by rubbing them on the tops of her jeans, she paused to look out of the window before starting to read where she had left off in her book.

Nora finished reading and at 7:10 a.m., pulled the cord for the next stop. Taking only her backpack, she left the umbrella behind and walked into the rain. The downpour took only a minute to fully soak through her red coat and boots and as the raindrops rolled down her arms, she whispered "Mom, please help me understand."

Depth over Distance

The forest is an intricate architecture of memory. Starting with the ground that we tread on this morning, boots that fell softly and created hollows in the mud and dirt. Prints dramatized by the motion of feet landing, stumbling, leaving. Tonight, as it rains, I reflect on mud not re-flattened, but obscured. The two of us are making a mark on the forest, however impermanent, and it makes its mark on us.

Before dusk, almost too late, we gathered sticks for the fire, starting with twigs picked in earnest. I scanned the ground in search and wandered past the creek edge, away from the trail. It wasn't until I felt the first flirtation of rain soft on my cheek that I remembered to look up. In the distance, I heard Anwar's voice calling out. Knowing there wouldn't be a fire, I dropped the sticks and listened again for his call. "Marella!" I walked high, avoiding ridged rocks and hiding snakes, until I found our camp. Each campsite is different, and the evenness, or unevenness, determines the orientation of the gear. This is our first night here at the site we quickly dub "mosquito river." The tent pitches forward like a middle-aged man with a beer gut. It's not ideal, but the entire campsite slopes towards the river's edge; it's the flattest part not riddled with immovable rocks and tree stumps.

The fire pit is charred by previous backpackers. From the smell of burnt wood, I assume some must have just left this morning before we arrived in the afternoon. On the trail, it's hard to know if you'll see anyone else. Sometimes we go days only looking at each other's matted hair and re-worn clothes. Day one on the Appalachian Trail. Nineteen more to go.

Anwar shifts inside the tent, and I watch his shadow stumble as he changes into the shorts and t-shirt he'll wear to bed. I sit in the rain, waiting for him to finish because

the tent is too small to fit us both unless we're lying down. I only have three pairs of shirt and short combos. Tomorrow, I'll hang the soaked cotton clothes off my backpack's hooked rings while we hike to the next campsite. There's something beautiful about knowing that you've already accepted your choice. The rain falls. I sit. Anwar changes. In this part of the forest, we are alone. I close my eyes and breathe in the smell of the damp earth, opening around us into puddles.

The morning after the rainstorm brings the feeling of soft, gentle, unexpected music. Instead of counting notes, I count raindrops on the tent's outer tarp. They remain perfectly formed as if preserved just for this moment. Inside the tent, Anwar reaches for my hand without opening his eyes. When he finds it, he begins to stroke my fingers from knuckle to fingertip. He does this in no particular order, moving from thumb to index to pinkie to ring. When my wedding band stops him he pauses, twists the ring, and begins to sing "maybe I'm amazed at the way you love me all the time, maybe I'm afraid of the way I love you, maybe I'm amazed at the way you pulled me out of time." When I laugh, he begins to sing louder, but not better, and he moves my arms as if in a lying down dance. The movement shakes the tent and I watch as the raindrops run down the plastic.

"Today we're hiking the ridgeline. Do you think you can do fifteen miles? I don't want us to get stuck up there in case another storm rolls in," Anwar says while sitting up. He opens the tent and reaches for his shoes. I do the same. We stay seated in the tent while we lace up our boots and make sure not to track any of it inside. Unlike Anwar, I check my boots for spiders. The sunlight shifts and catches the squinting of his eyes. His

pose is relaxed, arms resting on the surface of his legs. He swings his arms forward and stands.

"Still got it, eh?" he says with pride lilting his voice.

I use my arms to push off of the ground and feel the fatigue of carrying forty pounds during yesterday's hike. My Osprey pack rests against the tree next to Anwar's. Our packs are the same model in the men and women's styles. On the top of his, there's a scratch that doesn't puncture from a trip that he took with a girlfriend years before we met. I imagine how he must have felt when he first noticed it there. Knowing Anwar, he would have felt the fabric between his fingers, judged its elasticity and strength and decided it could take on more pressure. Anwar was this way with everything he owned, from socks to food. He wasted nothing. Perhaps it was because of his love of the outdoors. Out here in the woods, it was easy to see how plastic and waste sit on the earth. "Leave No Trace," the backpacker's motto--Anwar took this outside of this tree-lined sanctuary and into our shared home.

When we first moved in together, before we were married, I'd buy food in bulk. Costco taught me that there could be an apocalypse at any moment and that I might as well buy a twelve pack of muffins. I fed our fridge until it overflowed. At first, still in the bliss of our first months in the tiny apartment in Arlington, Anwar said nothing of the excess food and ate it all before it spoiled. The muffins became muffin tops. None of the food ever spoiled because Anwar sometimes mixed disparate ingredients in odd combinations. Mashed potatoes and yogurt. Spinach and hummus. Pizza and sardines. Then, the butter incident. The sticks tumbled out of the fridge, pushed by the carrots, and

landed on the ridge of his foot. “Enough!” he shouted. We carried more food in our packs than we currently had in the fridge. He said nothing else.

I think of that word “enough” and turn it over in my mouth, careful not to say it out loud. As a teenager, I only used it sparingly to ask over and over, usually while putting on makeup or after sex “am I good enough?” In later years, it became monetary. This salary, this week, “will this be enough?” In the woods, the word is tied to resources. “Do we have enough to survive?”

We’re still on the ridge from yesterday, cowered under our sleeping mats that double as lightning deterrents. Exposed, stuck like animals without sensory advantages, we wait as the rain pounds against the mats. My unscuffed hiking boots were advertised as “water-proof.” The salesman at the hiking store assured me they would last through mud and extreme conditions. I hadn’t considered that the wilderness is not just the ground. Sometimes, the extreme conditions come from the sky. This was our second backpacking trip, the first being only for the weekend. Like moving in together, time made all the difference. My feet squished against the inside fabric, and I could feel every toe pruning. Anwar peeked out from beneath his mat. “Let’s keep going,” he said.

We crouched low to the ground, mats still held over our heads and bodies like shells.

“We need to make it off of the ridge,” Anwar gestured to the sky.

"How much further do we have until then?" I asked. The sky was still dark though my digital watch read 2:00 p.m.

"Here, pull the map out of my brain," he said.

"Your what?"

"The top of my pack where the toothpaste and compass are," he exhaled and continued, "I'll move so that our mats meet and nothing gets too wet. This is our only map and we need it to get out of here. At the end of the ridgeline, the trail splits, one takes us another thirty miles towards the southern edge of the state and the other takes us off the trail and into West Virginia."

"Do you wanna hear a joke about hiking?" I asked, taking the segue that I made appear.

"Marella, we're getting soaked. Can it wait?"

"It's really quick, I promise."

"Okay, fine," he agreed.

I told him the joke.

"You didn't make that up. Milton Berle said that."

"I never said that I made it up. Turn around so I can grab the map," I said.

I unzippered the top of Anwar's pack and reached inside. The toothpaste was open and the inner lining of the brain was wet to the touch. His backpack was wearing thin like his patience. In his desire to keep everything until it fell apart, he hadn't checked to make sure that it still did what it was supposed to do. The ink on the map ran purple, the trails absorbed into the markings on the woods. I knew his temper.

"How much further do we have? We just passed the abandoned medical cabin."

I placed the map back into his pack.

"Only a few more miles. Let's keep going," I said.

I thought of the soaked purple trees. I thought of Anwar's condescending tone when he found out I'd be breaking in new boots on our first trip. Through the rain, I saw the painted markings of the trees moving us forward. *We'll be fine,* I thought. We just have to be careful not to lose our way.

We continue. The rain ceases, begins again. Anwar hums. I think of tea, warmth, and a fire. The trail is an indistinguishable mess of rocks, sticks, and leaves. Our direction is determined by where we're least likely to lose our shoes in the mud. When we pass trees with markers, I reach out and touch the bark. I'm telling the universe I've noticed it.

"Hey Anwar, you know the poem 'The Road Not Taken'?"

"What about it?" he asks.

"Okay, so you know the part where the speaker has to choose between two paths? Most people think it's a choice between being unique or being like everyone else. But it's not. There's a part in the poem, I think it's in the second stanza, where he says that previous travelers had 'worn them really about the same.' So when he makes his decision, and chooses the famous road 'less traveled by,' it's meant to be read ironically. Both paths are exactly the same. It doesn't matter which way you go."

"Except it does," he said, missing the point, "if you go in the wrong direction then you're lost. Literature tries to make everything sound fancier than it actually is. That's why I hated English class. You either choose the right path or you don't. Speaking of which, are we almost at the end of the trail?"

In the woods, there are seven unofficial rules for going to the bathroom called the "Seven D's of Dumping": Desire, Destination, Device, Dig, Dump, Disguise, Disinfect. In other words, pooping in the woods is a lot like going through a breakup. What starts as desire ends in trying to rid yourself of all evidence that something has happened-- that something changed when you went off on your own.

Marriage is a long hike without a map.

"We've passed about five trail markers. Usually, they're spaced apart by about five minutes of walking time. So, once we hit six that should be a mile," Anwar states. "Should we double check it on the map?"

"No, I trust you."

Five weeks ago, his married ex-girlfriend, Erica, messaged me online. She asked to meet for coffee in the middle of the day. She said she had something important she wanted to tell me about Anwar. At work, I pretended to be sick and left the office to walk to the café down the street. Through the window, I saw a young woman sitting alone. There were only two other tables. Both empty. She wore a pale blue scarf wrapped

around her neck and atop her slight shoulders. She was bent over herself, like a cornered animal. When she looked up and saw me standing there, her eyes grew wide and she gripped her elbows as if to keep from falling apart. In a language we both understood, she confirmed what I already knew. I moved past the window and kept walking.

There are many dangers to being lost. For one, the trees all look alike. On sunnier days, light filters through branches reaching outward and casts the same shadows.

In the newspaper, I read an article about plant emotion. It detailed a study where experimenters put two sets of houseplants in the same conditions. To one group, they yelled at the plants and told them all sorts of terrible things. To the other, they spoke lovingly. After a few months, the first group had withered and died.

Looking up, I see the branches stretch so far that the trees in the forest make one continuous canopy of green leaves flickering in the light. The leaves move back and forth as if in conversation. Or rather, like lovers caught between a fight and a dance.

Under my feet, the ground shifts as my boots displace the mud. Deep underneath the ground, the roots live like inverted trees. The relationship between a tree and its roots is like any. They give and take without ever fully seeing the other. Without knowing for whom the other is reaching.

Anwar walks ahead of me with his arms swinging in calculated motion.

"If you move your arms like this, it will help your body to gain more momentum. You'll be able to move faster," he says. He waits for me to try it.

"This is making me more tired," I say.

"You're just doing it wrong. Forget it. You always give up too soon."

Was this when he'd break the news? That he was the one giving up on me?

By now, we've passed fifteen trail markers. I look at my watch. 5:06 p.m. We should've passed the next marker by this point. Anwar, the great hiker and former Eagle Scout, hasn't noticed. He didn't bring a watch. For all of his precision, he said that he'll mark the hours through the movement of the sun. In the overcast haze, he's left in the dark.

He begins to hum again, and in his confident gait he swings his arms too enthusiastically and knocks his sunglasses off the hook of his pack. Almost instantly, he spots where they've landed. He bends down to pick them up and the forty-pound pack pushes him further into the mud where he loses his balance and slips down the steep incline. I reach out my hand, he catches it, but I'm not able to hold on to him.

I watch as he falls too quickly to remove his pack. He gains momentum as he tumbles down, hitting rocks as he goes. Instead of calling out, he is completely silent. If I closed my eyes, it would be as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. But I don't close my eyes. I watch as my husband of two years falls down the side of the mountain, and all I can think is that I've never seen him so quietly out of control. "Anwar!" I yell, but my voice can't stop what has happened. "Anwar! Anwar! Anwar!" after some time has passed, my voice becomes too hoarse to counteract his silence.

I don't know how long it takes for him to reach the ground. At this height, I can't see him. I'm at a loss. I could try to find my way back to the trail we lost miles ago in the hopes that I'll eventually reach the trail station. There, in southern Virginia, would be food, other people, and a phone. Another option would be to find a way down the mountain in the direction of Anwar. He may be dead. Is it better to take the trail for who knows how much longer to call the police? Is Anwar bleeding out at the bottom of the mountain and needs immediate medical attention? Despite everything, I decide to look for him, to bandage him up, to save him.

I take off my pack and search through the various compartments. I remember putting the first aid kit in this morning. It's not in easy reach; I didn't think we'd need it. Thinking of Anwar, I turn the pack upside down and dump all of its contents. On the ground, my extra clothes, sleeping bag, food, tent, and tarp lie scattered. The first aid kit is tucked inside of the sleeping bag. I open the plastic hinge and find two Band-Aids and a roll of gauze. I think of the silent fall and the rocks pointed in wait. This will have to be enough.

Anwar and I lost the trail before he fell. The first option isn't really an option at all unless I want to wander around by myself hoping that I just happen to go the right way. With the other option, I at least know that I have to go down the mountain. I doubt

that he would be able to just get up and walk away, so there's only a small target of ground where he could have landed.

When things like this happen in movies, the protagonist always says to themselves *hmm, I'll need to find my way back so I should probably drop pieces of food on the ground to mark my path*. But what happens when you're not going the right way to begin with? If I find my way back to this point after locating Anwar, then we'll still be lost. What if he's trying to find his way back to me? He didn't even know we were lost when he fell. Did I keep this from him because he kept a secret from me? Does this make us even? If we're the same, then who of us is the tree and who is the roots?

As it begins to rain again, I wish for Anwar to call out in pain. I don't want him to be hurt, but then at least I'd know he was alive and I'd have a direction to follow.

Being alone in the woods is not lonely. If anything, it creates the feeling of being watched. Paranoia grows in the unknown. In moments of serenity, people call this "oneness" with the earth. In crisis, it's the fear of both real horrors (bears, injury, survival) and imagined (ghosts, rustling leaves, whispering trees).

The overcast sky darkens and I realize that I'll have to make camp for the night. I haven't prayed in years since I don't believe in God. But Anwar does so I pick a single star and ask it for guidance. Anwar tried to do this earlier when he said he'd use the sun to tell time. Humans following the stars, how cliché, I think. When people are lost and alone they'll look to anything just so they don't have to face the fact that everything is outside of their control. Anwar is the one who knows how to survive out here, not me. I don't even know how to hang the bear bag up onto the tree. All I know is that it has to be at least one hundred feet from the campsite. Using my headlamp to see, I wander through

the trees for about ten minutes and then leave the bag leaning up against a distinctive tree with a wide trunk and bark that twists itself upward.

Years ago there was a horror movie about teenagers wandering through the woods at night to find their missing friends. Instead, they found the exact image of themselves standing in the dark staring back at them. The surreal moment was terrifying because the only thing worse than being alone is feeling that you're without your own body. If you see your body outside of yourself, your first thought will be that you do not have it, and maybe you never did because you're not supposed to know what you look like to others outside of mirror and photograph recreations. I walk back to the campsite and scan the single beam of light between the trees, looking for myself.

I start to make a fire using matches tucked inside a small plastic bag. There's no pit in the ground this time because this isn't an official campsite. This is probably illegal, I think, but there's no chance that a wildfire would catch with the ground so saturated. I pile rocks together in a small pile and place the tinder on top. In my brain, there is still some dryer lint tucked into a second small bag. I stuff it between twigs to help the fire catch. After a half hour of prodding and careful watch, the fire maintains itself with minimal assistance. It's the first time I've made a fire without Anwar showing me what to do.

The aboriginal peoples of Australia have a tradition where everyone sits in a circle around a fire. When they look at who's seated directly across from them, they ask themselves what qualities they like and dislike about that person. Then, they take this

observation and turn it inward. In other words, the qualities that you project onto others are really just indicative of how you feel about yourself. I make a mental list of Anwar's qualities: kind, intelligent, charitable, gregarious, secretive.

When I close my eyes, I see Erica sitting in that café. She must have known who I was but she decided not to run after me. Why? Did she feel guilty for what had happened? Her original message had no apology-- *Let's meet. Coffee at noon? I have to tell you about Anwar and me*. Women are a lot like trees. They're indescribably observant and perceptive of those just like them. Physically, Erica and I share very few traits. She is tall and slight where I am small and curvy. On that day, her blue eyes met my hazel ones. Yet, we both loved the same man. This man who was now at the bottom on the mountain, probably injured or dead. The flames of the fire crackled and released small pockets of fire up into the night. I followed the flames with my eyes as they flickered towards the stars before disappearing.

Halfway through the next day's search, I realized that I had left the bear bag with all of the food in it leaning against the curved tree. Without trail markers, it's difficult to gauge distance, but I had been hiking for at least an hour. Anwar still had some food in his pack. If miraculously uninjured, would he know not to move from that spot? Carrying thirty-five pounds of gear (now lighter because of the missing food) and hiking for the majority of the day meant that I only had a few more hours to find him before I was too weak to go any further without eating. The journey down the mountain was easier in terms of physical exertion, but harder because of the pressure on the body. I loosened my

straps when going down the steeper section so that my weight would be shifted back. That way I'd fall backwards and not forwards if I lost my balance. *If I lost my balance,* I thought, *where the hell is Anwar*?

I began to lose hope around 3:00 p.m. when I heard the distinct sound of something walking nearby. The sound was coming from below me and I followed the voices of what sounded like two men in conversation. Part of me thought that one might be Anwar and I began to run towards the sound, convinced that this was all finally over and that he was okay. Someone must have found him and was leading him back up the mountain to find me.

Minutes later, I found the owners of the voices. Two men, both in plaid casual shirts, stood on the edge of what appeared to be a trail. With them was a small dog with a smushed bulldog face and hound ears. It was sniffing the ground with unnecessary fervor. The men each carried a small daypack on their backs.

I shouted at the men, worried that they might not hear me if I spoke at a normal volume. Seeing other people after days in the woods with only Anwar and then a night by myself was overwhelming and I collapsed onto the ground in front of the men.

"Hey ma'am, it's okay. We're right by the road. We'll take you to the hospital and call the police. It's going to be fine. We'll find your husband, don't worry," the taller of the two men said, concern furrowing his brow. He turned to the other. "Take Reggie to the car. I'll help this lady back."

"We can't leave!" I shouted "My husband is here somewhere! He's missing. I'm not leaving him." How could these men be so dense?

"Ma'am your clothes are soaked and you asked for our help. I'm trying to help you. Please come with us. We need to get somewhere where there's better reception so that we can call the police and send out a search party."

"Okay," I agreed, after feeling the fatigue creep into my legs. I was still on the ground making lines in the mud as my body shook in relief. The taller man reached out his hand and I took it.

Time spent in the shade of the wooded trees exists outside of the rest of life. Reentry is difficult, jarring, and currently sounds like radio static. In the police station, I stare at the fluorescent lights. One flickers off and on. Minutes later, the flickering stops and waiting resumes. On the ridgeline, the trees were covered in lichen-- a sure sign that the air was clear and uncorrupted. The police station smells like stale feet and cigarette smoke. I check my watch again.

The two hikers waited with me for the first hour but left to join the search party for Anwar. I'm not sure what makes people so kind to strangers. A few years ago there was a podcast about altruism that aired on NPR. It mentioned MRIs that had been taken of both psychopaths and those who donated kidneys to strangers. In the scans, they were able to measure that altruism stems from having an advanced hippocampus. Psychopaths have underdeveloped brains. In some cases, researchers couldn't even locate the hippocampus.

If I stare too long at the fluorescent lights, my vision sharpens into black pinpoints and everything closes in on itself into these dots that are contradictorily both clear and fuzzy. What if they don't find Anwar?

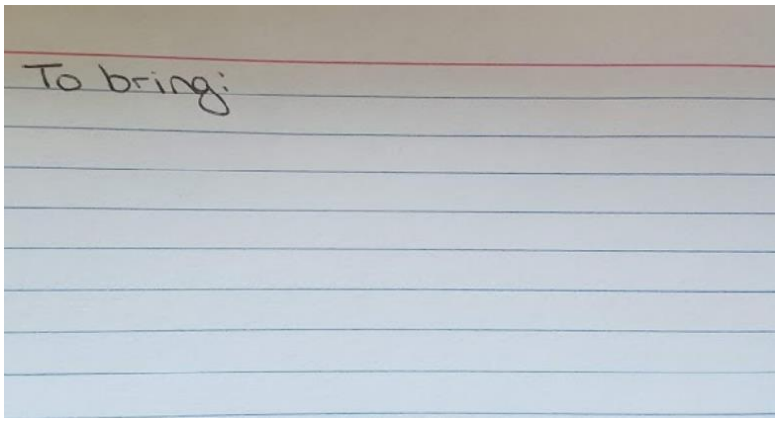
From: Erica
To: Marella
Subject: Missing

I was watching TV with my husband and saw on the news that a man matching Anwar's description went missing while backpacking. I'm worried sick. Please message me back as soon as possible. What happened?

They found his pack open with half- eaten food scattered around it at the bottom of the mountain next to his body. When I asked to look at the pack, the police officer looked down at me spread across the waiting bench,

"We need to keep it for evidence. I'm sorry ma'am. We'll need you to identify the body."

How do you grieve for someone when you already know "what happened," but not what happens next?



Anwar is the one who usually makes the lists. I'm not sure how to prepare for this. Erica emails again, then begins to call. She could go to the police, claim I was the last person to see him and should be investigated. She could ruin my life. She already has. Does she feel guilty?

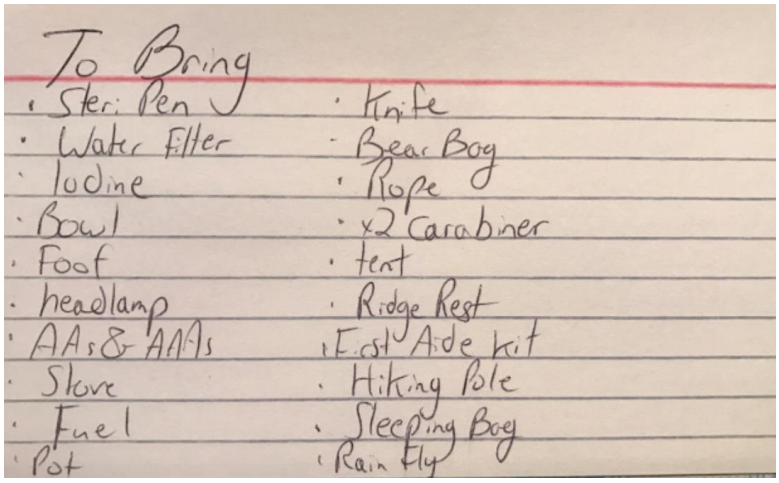
I let the receiver pick up so she can hear Anwar's voice on the recorded message: I'm sorry; we're not available at the moment. Please try again later.

Part of me hopes that she'll never stop calling. Her persistence is a reminder that Anwar was not the same man I married. If I can convince myself that I really lost him long ago, then maybe I'll stop reaching for him in the middle of the night.

Aloneness fits me like my backpack. I only used to wear it when I was with Anwar, but now I take it everywhere. I can sort through it when needed, looking for a buried memory or a funny story to tell his mother when I go to visit. Often, I put things away in it after figuring out which compartment it fits best in. Erica's calls fit in the pockets intended for hiking poles-- which are useless unless going downhill.

Some things, like the sound of Anwar's voice on our last morning, are moved to the very bottom. I place other memories on top just so I can see how much pressure it takes before everything below it is crushed. When the pack is closed, no one can tell what's inside. If they want to know, they'd have to take everything out and lay it on the ground. Leaving the backpack hollow.

On some days, the weight is too much and I put it down. Always, I pick it up again. This pack, these memories, hold everything I need to survive-- everything I need to find my way out of this forest.



Reflective Essay

Why We Don't Talk is a collection examining the unspoken conflict that occurs in human interaction. This silence is often subtle, and dramatic in being unannounced-- a mediation on never truly being able to understand another person.

I began this mediation while riding the CATA bus to and from my internship at the Hemingway Letters Project during the summer of 2018. At the midpoint of the bus, there are three single seats that rest one behind the other. I call these the "solitary seats," the place I would sit when I wanted to observe rather than converse. After the first few weeks, I noticed that the same people would take the "A line" from Park Forest to campus. They would board at the same time, differing by only a few minutes each day, and sit in the same seats. Like students entering a classroom, everyone acted as if they knew where to go and what role to play.

Characters emerged from these interactions through overheard conversations. Since I sat in the middle, I could only hear and not see those seated behind me. Afraid of gawking at those in the front, I often carried a book and listened to the sounds of the bus moving beneath me and the music emanating from the headphones of someone sitting in the back. Most days, the bus was quiet in the morning hum of just waking up. Other days, polite conversation would break the silence with "the weather today is beautiful," or "how's your daughter?" In the afternoons, I often overheard phone calls made or continued on the bus, as if the speaker was absorbed in the phone and wouldn't come back to the space until hanging up.

From all of this, I observed how an awareness of others, or lack thereof, manifests itself in an enclosed bus where you can choose to get off at any time, but not necessarily

in the right place. This conflict literally comes into being in the story “Leaving Space for Grief,” but I attempted to recreate this in the more intimate setting of relationships in my other stories.

In the fall following that summer, my grandmother, whom I lived with during the creation of this collection, fell while out walking one morning. Eventually, my thesis moved from a reflection on the lives of strangers, to a meditation on never fully knowing those with whom we feel the closest. In old photographs, my grandmother shares my downturned mouth and sad, but expressive, eyes. In her image, I see my mother and myself. Living with her complicates this simplicity of connection, but we wake at the same time and fold the dinner napkins in the same way and do so many other things alike, and I couldn’t shake knowing that we are similar enough to be reflections of the same person at different stages in their life.

Of course, we are dissimilar in many other ways as well. But there’s a need, outside of my own, to identify with family and to say “this person is like me” because it gives a sense of connection. When my grandmother had her accident, I realized how physically fragile the strongest woman in my life actually was. In the months following, while she healed, I observed her quiet resilience, waking each morning to complete physical therapy exercises. And I asked myself why I felt the need to hold on to her story as if it were my own. This question led me through the writing of this collection, most directly in the story “Audelia” as I examined the connection of communication and relationship ties.

These stories are fictionalized attempts to answer this question of truth and preconceived notions of ownership. I dedicated this collection to my grandmother for her strength and guidance during this process of self-reflection.

The third major element of my brainstorming process stemmed from a photograph of my grandparents on their wedding day. In the photo, they are posed in front of an altar that has since disappeared in the family church that will soon close its doors. Taken before the birth of any children, before grandchildren, before their lives really began, they are captured in this moment. Currently, the photograph is displayed in the dining room of my grandmother's house, watching the present moment sixty years since it was taken.

Photographs are often referred to in clichéd phrases of "being worth a thousand words." I don't believe this to be true. They're facsimiles of moments gone and conversations past. In this way, they're secretive and unknowable. In my attempt to explore and write about never fully knowing others, I tried to breathe life into photographs by writing stories inspired by images I had taken over the past five years. At the beginning of the collection, I reference a quote from the book *Inkheart* by Cornelia Funke which reads "Perhaps there's another, much larger story behind the printed one, a story that changes just as our own world does. And the letters on the page tell us only as much as we'd see peering through a keyhole. Perhaps the story in the book is just a pan: it always stays the same, but underneath there's a whole world that goes on-- developing and changing like our own world." To me, photographs abide by similar restrictions. And yet, I find myself taking photographs almost constantly as a device of memory. As if I don't trust myself to remember moments and interactions on my own. This tool of the camera is freeing in its ability to recreate, but limiting in its continuation of the myth that

we have captured something or someone as they actually exist. It's a perpetuation of the false belief of knowing and pulling understanding from fragments.

The photographs in this collection are meant to enhance the understanding of the stories themselves. For instance, how does the meaning of the descending staircase of a lighthouse change when in the context of a story about a failing relationship? Or, how does a cairn used as a trail marker enhance a story about a couple lost both literally and figuratively?

I consulted numerous short stories, novels, essays, letters, and poems before and during the creation of these narratives. Some of these influences appear directly, such as Hemingway's letters inspiring the title story of the collection from his quote that art takes nine months to develop-- the same amount of time needed to create human life. Other influences, such as Edward P. Jones's *Lost in the City*, László Krasznahorkai's *The World Goes On*, Mary Robison's *Why did I ever*, and Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*, taught me how to intentionally experiment with structure as an answer to my question.

The poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye and Rita Dove taught me how to savor language and to feel its presence rolling across the page. To me, poetry is movement and sound and magnification. It pushes the limits of observation by intimately writing of life's various elements. In the story, "Depth over Distance," I tried to mimic this effect through the use of shortened syntax and honed diction.

Graphic novels proved to be an unexpected, but informative, source for examining the relationship between image and text. In some cases, such as Kristen Radtke's *Imagine Wanting Only This*, I saw how image can dictate tone before a single word is read. Since image can easily overpower text, or vice-versa, the trick is to

establish the relationship early on and to keep it consistent. I did not want my photographs to be more powerful storytelling tools than the narratives. However, I did want to use image to enhance narrative elements.

Of all of the sources I consulted in my research, I fell most in love with *The Collected Stories* of Lydia Davis for its haunting ability to closely examine human relationships through the absence of unnecessary language. She had answered a question of her own, and I used her prose as an inspiration for the shorter stories in my collection. By leaving so much unspoken, she propelled the reader into self-reflection. This was the final missing piece of my research. Apart from the desire to understand my own observations and reality, I then proceeded to ask myself how understanding the preservation of identity through secrecy and withholding is meant to influence readers. My hope for this collection is that it works like the pan that Cornelia Funke describes, and that it's an opening to an increased understanding and respect for others.

After graduation, I plan to continue working on these stories as I move into the professional world and experience new aspects of life. I'm not sure that my writing of these stories answered the question that served as a catalyst. As I reflect, I still find myself curious about the best ways to tell these stories and which ones I want to tell next. Over the course of the past two years, my writing has dramatically matured through the careful study of craft. This study has been difficult, at times overwhelming, but has resulted in one of my most admirable pursuits. If curiosity is a cold, then I have the flu. These stories undertake the daunting task of answering the core question of human interaction and understanding, and I realize that more time is needed, or at least desired, to fully explore this subject.

As mentioned before, this collection brought up questions of family history and the permanence of memory. I recently began a correspondence project with my grandmother and great aunt. In a series of letters to one another that will be collected over the next five years, each sister will depict details of shared memories and personal experience. At the end of the process, I will compile all of the letters into a printed book to be shared with the family. Instead of relying on our own recollections, we will have accounts of the lives of these two incredible women in their own words.

The most rewarding part of this process was in letting go of what I thought I should be writing. Originally, I place emphasis on making my stories as “literary” as possible. In that goal, characterization and humanness was lost. Since this directly thwarted the research of my question, my stories benefited most by the decision to step back and let my stories breathe on their own. Elizabeth Gilbert, in a TED talk titled “Your elusive creative genius,” details a conversation with the poet Ruth Stone where she revealed that “she would be out working in the fields, and she said she would feel and hear a poem coming at her from over the landscape. And she said it was like a thunderous train of air. And it would come barreling down at her over the landscape. And she felt it coming, because it would shake the earth under her feet. She knew that she had only one thing to do at that point, and that was to, in her words, "run like hell." And she would run like hell to the house and she would be getting chased by this poem, and the whole deal was that she had to get to a piece of paper and a pencil fast enough so that when it thundered through her, she could collect it and grab it on the page.” This is the closest description that I’ve ever heard to the sensation of being a writer.

When I wrote “The Nobody of the Planet,” I closed my eyes and when I opened them, thinking it only seconds later, the entire story was on the page before me. In answering the question of the ownership of stories, I began to examine the ownership of ideas and where they really come from. This is another question that I never fully answered. But in the process, I experienced the wonder of feeling like words have magically appeared, like they’re captured on the page, but not owned. And I find this shared collection of thoughts to be beautiful and inspiring. Once I let my observations take full charge of the narratives, my writing improved. I ask my readers to do the same—open your eyes and observe, then close them and reflect. You never know what ideas, what connections, might appear.

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