The Struggle for Identity:
How Female Writers Find Their Voice

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to examine the value and purpose of the female voice in literature. In the first part of this project, my artist's statement clarifies my intent as a writer and an academic. This statement describes certain specific works that have influenced my writing style and content, and my literary aspirations. The second part of the project is the critical paper, which analyzes the importance of the feminine voice and identity in literature throughout different time periods and through different lenses. Within this paper, I examine how male writers have dominated the writing world and explore the social, moral, and emotional restraints that have prevented women from gaining literary equality with men. The third and final portion of the project is the creative manuscript. This manuscript includes five short stories that I have mostly composed during my time in Liberty University's MFA program.

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Artist Statement

Throughout my 29 years of life, I have had many experiences that disallowed me to speak my mind. Many of my formative years in childhood took place in a religious cult that saw women as powerless, shapeless objects both in the material and spiritual sense. Later on, I faced situations at college and in the workplace that sought to dim my creative voice and convinced me to follow a more "practical" career path. I became silent and unhappy, so I began to write again.

This collection of short fiction is built on a foundation of strength and driven by my own fervent desire to move, share, and empower the female voice through writing. I write stories about women, identity, and moral conflict. I write about how women navigate a chaotic world, how women and men negotiate power, and how women struggle to find their own identity. I am a firm believer that the female writer should be bombastic, raw, and vauntingly honest. As I have personally had my own voice quieted and my dreams shelved by many far wiser, I feel purposed in this project to create a work that reflects my struggles, victories, and failures in finding my own voice and identity in the world.

First and foremost, this collection of short stories is driven by my own voice and personal experiences—my trials, my failures, my successes, my desires, my hopes, and my fears. I feel a strong connection to stories about women who have overcome being silenced. All of the main characters in this collection of fiction are women who are, in some way, powerless and voiceless and struggle to overcome difficult, and sometimes supernatural, circumstances.

Secondly, these stories are driven by the voice of others, the collective feminine voice that challenges, questions, and provokes. I like to ask the hard questions, to take unspoken things and speak about them. I enjoy taking the struggles women face and putting them on paper for my characters to solve. The collective feminine voice seeks not always to solve these problems, but

to explore them, dissect them, and express them in news ways. I want others to read these stories and see bits and pieces of themselves in these characters, just as I have seen bits of myself in them as I have carefully crafted them.

Lastly, these stories are driven by the desire to create true identity. Many of the stories I have written in this collection follow women who do not know who they are. They are lost and confused. Sometimes, they are lost because someone has led them into confusion or doubt. These women have been convinced they are powerless, fragile creature and must not attain an identity but share an identity with someone else—a father, a sister, a husband, a friend, a lover. One of the primary driving forces behind this collection is to explore women who seek to break past boundaries and find their true selves.

I never intended to write short fiction. It was novels I loved—novels I intended to write. Quite recently, I read voraciously through a large spread of Raymond Carver's short works—"So Much Water So Close to Home," "Cathedral," "The Father," and others. Specifically, Carver's powerful and volatile "Cathedral" moved me, upset me, and challenged me. Of course, at one time I was the green English major in undergrad fawning over Sylvia Plath and Margaret Atwood, dreaming of writing the next great American novel as almost every young, fiery freshman does. While I still have several longform ideas mulling around in my head, over the years I've taken to short fiction more as it has allowed me to express myself with explosive brevity. I would say this collection is a ripple of that detonation, an essence of the great American short story in the 21st century.

The work in this collection is in the form of fiction. Fiction is my forte. I have always been a born storyteller. The joy of writing, in my opinion, lies in the opportunity to write about

anyone and everything. Fiction is the author's own, independent truth about how they see the world.

I have tried my hand at poetry, but poetry, in my opinion is much too brief. It doesn't allow for the right kind of flow and expansion that I like to use. The essay is a medium that doesn't quite fit my speed either. For me, fiction allows for the best, truest kind of expression. I am reminded Edgar Allen Poe's criticism of the novel, the poem, and the essay in *Twice Told Tales.* Poe said of short fiction, "It (the short story) has particular advantages which the novel does not admit. It is, of course, a far finer field than the essay. It has even points of superiority over the poem" (568). I fully agree with Poe's point of view, but it's not just the short story. It's fiction in general that is superior to all other mediums of creative writing.

My Vision

My vision for this collection is to inspire both women and men to see the female voice as an equal and as a unique power. The female voice has been isolated in many ways. It is crucial that other modes and mediums of literature allow for the feminine voice both presently and historically to come to the surface and breathe.

My goal for this project is to closely examine women's voices and their development, both in various literary works throughout history and within the context of my own short fiction. I envision that this collection will tie together through a common thread of strength through identity, as each story describes women who are seeking to find themselves and discover who they are in their own lives. Most of my stories have their own individual visions, but all of them share the same ideals in terms of identity and power.

While crafting "The Circus," I thought more about the female voice within the family unit more than within society and culture. I thought about sibling dynamics, how the past influences the present, and about themes of change and forgiveness. The purpose of the story is not exactly to move or to change, but simply to show emotional growth between two sisters.

Conversely, my short story "The House Lenormand" presents themes of confusion and fear that showcase the female voice like a fly caught in a spider's web. The intention behind this story seeks to demonstrate feminine power through a woman's ability to find truth in deception. This story resonates with works like Marghanita Laski's "The Tower." In many ways, I think of myself to be more a psychologist and a philosopher rather than an author. As a fiction writer, one of my main objectives is to discover in what capacity my interest in understanding people and their motives attributes to my fiction writing. I love exploring emotional and psychological landscapes and creating plot that reflects inner conflict, making the inner and the outer one body. "The House Lenormand" does just that as the main character, Annie, realizes the man she's married might not be who she thought he was.

My own creative fiction has been inspired by both creative and journalistic writers. The utility of Joan Didion's prose draws from both journalistic succinctness and from an artistic pool, marrying aesthetic beauty with cultural and political knowledge. The feminine power in her writing influenced me to write both realistically and honestly, paying no mind to what a biased world thought women might do and writing only what women do.

Margaret Atwood is one of my biggest literary influences whose style I emulate more than any other author. Atwood's writing technique is concise, laconic, and establishes a personal connection with the reader. I incorporate this kind of personability in my own writing, mirroring the intimacy Atwood executes in novels like *The Handmaid's Tale*. *The Handmaid's Tale*

inspired me to explore themes of feminism, power, and identity in my own works. I am fascinated by Atwood's examination these themes through often unsettling situations that provoke and dismantle the reader. When working on my own creative fiction, I am always seeking to reproduce the same kind of emotion that Atwood so remarkably perfects.

Toni Morrison is not just a writer to me. She is an artist, a creator, and a life speaker. Anton Chekhov's "show me, don't tell me" concept feels much like it was written with Toni Morrison in mind. Morrison's writing inspired me to consider my words, not simply the plot and the characters, and she taught me to pay special attention to diction and elocution in my writing. Morrison's unique style encouraged me to write with personal conviction, and to write in order to make something beautiful—not simply to entertain.

I describe my own writing style as vivid, conversational, and laconic. I like to keep a steady balance between plainsong and Baroque style in my writing, employing both colloquial style like Hemingway uses and more ornate diction like that of Angela Carter's writing. I believe this collection of short stories showcase my range but also my niches in style and methodology, and demonstrate a uniqueness in tone and theme.

The significance of the topic I have chosen for this collection of short fiction is monumental, and that is the issue of the power of the female voice. Women have been misrepresented culturally, socially, and religiously for thousands of years. I spent a great deal of my life growing up in the southern part of the United States. After living in Washington D.C. in my early twenties and later moving back to the South, I saw how differently women are seen in society even between the northern and southern regions of my own country today. I, myself, have faced discrimination for my gender and I have witnessed many women in my life face equal or worse instances of discrimination. Equality for women is something I am very passionate

about, not simply for political reasons, although I do see it as important for women to be in positions of political power.

I am primarily passionate about this issue because I believe it to be a fundamental part of my own faith and ethics. I am a highly driven individual. I care a lot about injustice and inequality. I believe everyone deserves love and the opportunity to have a good and fulfilling life. I have not had the same things available to me that men do because I am a woman. I have been excluded and judged in certain ways simply because of my gender.

For example, while working as a political journalist in Washington D.C., the sportswriter at the news outlet I worked for announced to the whole office one afternoon that he believed women were simply a distraction and did not belong in the workplace. One female reporter ended up in the bathroom crying over the remarks. He was not reprimanded for those comments because the editor-in-chief was also a man who clearly shared the same view.

Based on these and many other life experiences, I plan to dedicate my life to writing about injustices and inequalities such as these in hopes of empowering the female voice and providing women with a safe place to understand they are not alone. Therefore, the significance for the topic I have chosen for my thesis project, although a work of fiction, is paralleled to my own personal life, and creates an array stories about women who have faced similar struggles and issues that I myself have faced.

The relevance of literature to me as a spiritual scholar is the ability to use stories to share messages that impact people's lives in a real and authentic way. I don't believe that stories need to be positive in order to be considered "Christian." Biblical text is rife with stories that are highly graphic and often don't contain very moralistic endings. Biblical text is a showcase of humans who have problems and make mistakes, often times leading them into complicated

situations or to troubling ends. The relevance of this fact in my writing is monumental as it guides me toward analyzing human thought and behavior on a similar level.

I refer to myself as a "spiritual scholar" more than a "Christian scholar." This is due to the fact that I believe my stories contain themes and messages that can influence people of all walks of faith. It is my primary goal as a spiritual scholar and a trained writer to discuss universal themes on a creative level, demonstrating the commonality between various demographics.

At the core, I believe all people are the same. I believe we all want to give and receive love on some level. Humanity as a whole, regardless of their faith, is unified by many of their life experiences. Both the religious and the non-religious experience joy, pain, trauma, fear, success, and failure. I believe it is my job a spiritual scholar to create stories that people can understand and relate to, not simply happy stories with happy endings.

Critical Paper

There are few words as potent to the contemporary, female writer as "identity." Identity can define and it can separate. The desire for distinction lives deep within the human condition, and it is this desire that drives the pursuit for individual identity. "The search for identity" is as commonplace a theme in literature as the conflict of good versus evil. It pervades many corners of literature, showing up in classic works like Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist.*

The empowerment of the female voice is necessary in the crafting of the female identity. If a person cannot speak, they cannot tell you who they are or they are not. If voice is denied, identity is denied as well. The relevance of the female voice has long been questioned by male writers and has faced discrimination and exclusion. Female writers have struggled to gain a foothold on the rung in the ladder of recognition, preventing them from expressing their own ideas and perspectives without restriction. The canon of classic literature has remained primarily male-dominant and, as a result, the female perspective has often been silenced or ignored. Although, presently, women writers have made great strides in equalizing themselves among their male counterparts, the fight for the right to be heard is still ongoing.

The intent of this thesis is to explore how, in lieu of restriction and stereotype, female writers approach the search for identity apart from male influence. This thesis contains three primary points of exploration and reflection: (1) the methods of silencing female writers; (2) an analysis of creative fiction written by women that portrays women breaking their silence finding their voice out of oppressive circumstances; and (3) a reflection of the creative fiction in my manuscript, how I am influenced by these themes, and how I hope to influence them.

Silencing Women's Voices

Identity can be defined as the qualities that make up a person or group. Identity can be based on the group collective, as emphasized in sociological study, or it can be based on an individual. Elements such as the physical, cultural, psychological, and political, all take part in forming an individual's identity. One of the primary methods for expressing identity in literature is through "voice." Voice is the opinion or attitude expressed in a piece of writing that forms a strong connection between reader and story.

Identity and voice are closely linked, if not inseparable, concepts in the female consciousness. Voice provides comprehension of the human identity and is, essentially, the heart of the freedom of artistic expression. In Matthew Longo and Patrick Haggard's article, "What Is It Like to Have a Body," Longo and Haggard explain that the body is "the most familiar object people encounter" (140), and that a women's identity is "closely connected to her body." Since our voice is uniquely our own, when it is taken, silenced, or ignored, our identity, our unique "self," cannot be clearly expressed or represented. Helen Cixous furthers this idea. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous says, "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (880). Cixous, and many other feminist writers, believe that a woman's ability to express herself verbally is crucial to the retainment of her identity. If a woman does not speak she will never know herself, and if she does not know herself she will have nothing to say.

Voice is deeply connected not only to what we verbalize, but also to the written word. In the realm of literature, female authors have the responsibility and opportunity to share their voice and experiences with the world and represent a larger voice. When female writers tell stories, they relate experiences of fictional characters that contain remnants of their own identities. Storytelling is ingrained in the human experience, allowing people to form a unique sense of

where they come from, what they think, and who they are. Many writers view their work as an extension of themselves, and, therefore, because women's literature has often been excluded from the mainstream, their experiences have been unable to be shared and their identities are unable to be known. Nineteenth-century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft addressed the exclusion of women in writing, including the exclusion from education, in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft writes, "Women have seldom sufficient employment to silence their feelings" (153). Identity, Wollstonecraft writes, means having the ability to freely express any thoughts, opinions, and ideas on any topic or issue without consequence.

When women's voices are ignored, they are denied the opportunity for plain expression or proper representation of their own experiences. Often, the male experience has been deemed more relevant than the female experience, resulting in a denial of women's experiences and, therefore, their identities. In 1977, American writer and feminist Audre Lorde addressed the Modern Language Association with her landmark talk and essay, "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action." In the essay, Lorde names some of the destructive forms of silencing women experience: "namelessness, denial, secrets taboo subjects, erasure, false-naming, non-naming, encoding, omission, veiling, fragmentation and lying." Lorde further states that in order to overcome these judgments and reclaim the "language that has been made to work against us," women must find their strength and creative power through unification, not division:

> My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength (42).

Patriarchal restrictions often deny women the ability to speak about the female self and the female experience in a manner that distinguishes her from the man's self and the man's experience. Rather, it is expected that women writers should use patriarchal systems as a ruler against which to measure their own language and ideas. Women are often expected to tell their stories in an environment wherein their words muffle and drown. In a language made by men for men, it has been a struggle for women to step outside of the system and say what they truly want in their own way.

Loss of Power and "Otherness"

The universal understanding of the female condition is that because women are not physically capable of doing what men can do, they do not deserve the same power or privileges. Femininity has been supposed by scholars to be divine punishment for Eve's sin in the garden—the "weaker sex" being weak due to moral error. Women cannot be trusted because, as John Milton says in *Paradise Lost*, "left to herself, if evil thence ensue, She first his weak indulgence will accuse" (IX, 1182–1186). The idea forms that women are inherently immoral and have corrupted men, and it is, therefore, man's responsibility and burden to protect women from themselves by denying women power and autonomy and, therefore, an individual identity.

Identity encapsulates distinction just as much as it does sameness, and the ability individualize, to separate oneself from the group, is a defining factor in identity. Men, however, have often tried to prevent women from separating themselves. According to Adam Jarowski in *The Power of Silence,* "Silence is oppressive when it is characteristic of a dominated group, and when the group is not allowed to break its silence by its own choice or by any means of any media controlled by the power group" (118). The expectation then arises that women's identity

should be derived from a man's identity, and that, apart from men, women cannot create their own selfhood. Simone De Beauvoir states in her book *The Second Sex,* "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not herself but as relative to him" (3). She further claims that man is the subject; he is "the absolute," and women are thereby presented as the "other sex," dismantling the female identity and reconstructing it by men to serve their own interests. This concept leads women to believe that they have no self-worth without men. Women cannot have their own ideas, fears, revelations, or revolutions. Men must think of it first and then give women permission to speak about it.

When women lose their autonomy, they lose their sense of self—their identity. In Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler's book, "Woman's Embodied Self," Johnston-Robledo and Christler describe the body being a necessary part of what makes up the female identity. "Without a body, there is no self. In the most basic sense, a living body provides a home for the self, and the brain creates the mind, which produces the sense of self" (4). When a woman is silenced physically, she is silenced emotionally. It is this lack of autonomy that has forced female writers to often write about women only in certain contexts that are approved by men. Louisa May Alcott's publishers only permitted to publish *Little Women* on the condition that the main character Jo March was married by the end of the novel. Alcott intended for Jo to remain unmarried, a "literary spinster" just like Alcott, but her publishers felt no one would read a story about a single woman.

Pseudonyms

A search consisting of "classic American novels" on Google results in a list made up of primarily male authors. Sure, female authors are included in the list; Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* make the roll, but they are never considered first, never most, and they, most certainly, are never considered best. To find that specific list where women are considered first, most, or best, the phrase must include "classic American novels *women.*" Female writers are in a separate category, not simply because they once retreated to the safety of their own canon, but because there was no other place for them among male writers. Female-penned literary texts have for centuries been marginalized and cast aside, their content deemed "too controversial" or "unimportant," resulting in a literary realm dominated by the male voice.

In the 17th century, women were expected to be subservient and docile. Women's choices were limited within the bounds of marriage and childrearing. However, the portrayal of female characters on the theatrical stage was far from real life. Famous playwrights at the time like Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare created feisty and powerful female characters that defied social norms. In Shakespeare's The *Merchant of Venice*, the character Portia dresses as a man and assumes the role of a lawyer's apprentice in order to save the life of her lover's friend. However, women were not even permitted to act, leaving male actors to dress as women on the stage.

Even after women were allowed to actively participate in the arts, the level of scrutiny often forced women to write under male pseudonyms. Nineteenth-century English novelists Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë first published their works under the male pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. In Carol Ohmann's article, "Emily Brontë in the Hands of Male

Critics," Ohmann reveals Charlotte Brontë's reasons for her and her sisters taking on male pen names were due to worry over being judged for writing about unladylike topics: "We did not like to declare ourselves women, because – without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine' – we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice" (906). The sisters would later use their real names for publishing, but the fear was valid as all three sisters often received heavy criticism for the controversial content of their stories.

In 1847, ten years before Charlotte Brontë would publish her defining novel *Jane Eyre,* she sent several of her poems to the poet laureate Robert Southey for critique. Southey's response to Charlotte was far from encouraging. Southey rejected the idea of women pursuing a career in literature, stating, "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it even as an accomplishment and a recreation" (The Brontës: A Life in Letters, 46-48). Today, the Brontë sisters are considered some of the most powerful and prolific novelists in literary history.

American novelist Louisa May Alcott also used a male pseudonym early in her literary career. Although Alcott's best-known book, *Little Women*, was published under her own name, Alcott commonly employed the pseudonym A.M. Barnard as many of her gothic thrillers contained topics that were deemed to unladylike for a 19th century female writer.

The concept of the male pseudonym would appeal to many female writers throughout the 19th and 20th century, including the likes of Mary Ann Evans, better known as George Eliot. This trend even spilled into the late 20th and early 21st century with the author of the famous Harry Potter book series, J.K. Rowling. Rowling was encouraged by her publishers to assume the gender-ambiguous initials "J.K." rather than use her first name, Joanne, as publishers believed

male children wouldn't want to read a book with a male protagonist if it was written by a woman.

Stereotyping

The stereotyping of women in literature has long been a problem for women writers. I once had a professor in a survey of American literature course joke that every novel written before 1960 ended with a woman dead, pregnant, or both. Unfortunately, she wasn't far from the truth. Until second-wave feminism took off in the 60s and 70s, a great deal of fiction written by men often portrayed female characters who experienced terrible tragedies, ending up dead, destitute, committed to insane asylums, or simply just married for the sake of being married. Even works written by women often portrayed women in the same light. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* for example concludes with the emotionally troubled Esther Greenwood being committed to a psychiatric facility and undergoing electroshock therapy. Women's identities, therefore, have been reinvented and misinterpreted by male writers, resulting in female stereotypes like the virgin, the mother, and the whore.

Male-dominated literature has consistently taken to the habit of stereotyping and objectifying women in order to disempower the female voice. In Charles de Gaulle's *The Edge of the Sword*, he explains that silence is the "ultimate weapon," and that "nothing enhances authority better than silence" (28). It is that authority that have set in place patriarchal restrictions, creating expectations for female writers to only portray women in ways that men wanted to see them.

In Joseph Agbasiere *Portraits of Women*, Agbasiere explains that literary texts written by men often stereotypically depict female characters as too weak to overcome their hardships.

Agbasiere continues to say, “This presents stereotypical literary texts where female characters do not play any positive roles, but are only able to perpetuate negative images and not explore all aspects of female experiences” (82). Once women were given the right to write, they were limited by men to only write about themselves in a negative way. If women portrayed themselves positively, they might push the concept that women were inherently as good as men, or even better than men, which was a dangerous ideology at the time. Early works written by women often showcased female characters who were mentally and emotionally inept and who viewed themselves in a very negative manner. Because, after all, women are too weak to be happy.

That’s not to say men didn’t write about women. Much of both American and English literature is rife with female characters of all sorts. The problem is simply that in many literary texts written by men, female characters are portrayed as marginal beings or as commodities to help the male protagonist reach a goal or fulfil a desire. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s book *The Man-Made World: Our Androcentric Culture* touches on the limitations on female writers, saying, “The dominant male, holding his women as property, and fiercely jealous of them, considering them always as his, not belonging to themselves, their children, or the world; has hedged them in with restrictions of a thousand sorts” (17). This biased perception of female characters has produced difficulty, treated as “objects,” and, therefore, “problematic objects” needing to be fixed or removed.

Religious Influence

There are many signposts that point us toward the underlying causes of the suppression of the female voice. It has been previously discussed how women are silenced for sociological and artistic purposes, but religious influences have also played a huge part in silencing women's voices in literature and distorting the female identity.

Feminism has long thought to be antagonistic to traditional religious groups including the Roman Catholic Church, Jewish Orthodox, Latter Day Saints, and the Protestant Church. Feministic ideologies often challenge religious doctrines, like the widely-accepted idea that God created man to be superior to women. Even God's identity is inherently masculine. English translations of the Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek texts mostly use male pronouns to refer to "Yahweh" or "Elohim," even though most Old Testament mentions of God use plural pronouns like "they." Jesus Christ's reference to God as "Father," or "Abba" in the original Hebrew, have reinforced this concept that God is male and, therefore, men are superior.

Beliefs like this have limited women's role in within, and outside of, the Church, and led many to many arguments against women rights—voting, owning property, having a job, etc. According to historian Sally McMillen, "interpretation of biblical scripture was used by ministers to adhere to clearly defined social roles during the early colonial years until the women's suffrage movement in the early 1900s" (112). Even today, Western Christian traditions place heavy emphasis on stereotypes that women are expected to embrace.

One of the more central ideas in traditional Western Christianity is the idea of a woman's total and perfect purity. Purity is the ultimate spiritual destination for all women, and women can achieve this purity only by assuming the stereotypical role of the wife and mother. It's an

ideology that teaches women to find their value only through what they can produce for men rather than what they can create for themselves and their own belief system.

This idea of ultimate purity has also led to restrictions on women's knowledge. Religious groups often look down on women who discuss things like alcohol, sex, murder, or other "controversial" topics. Women are to be pure, virginal vessels, and writing about such things would surely taint their purity. If women lose their purity, they are categorized as "whore" and their identities are forever lost to time. According to Carol Meyers examination *Women in Scripture,* religious scholars have claimed for nearly two millennia that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute ever since Pope Gregory I first pronounced her a "sinful woman" in the year 591 CE. Though there is no canonical evidence or other historical evidence to prove this theory, Mary Magdalene's contributions to the ministry of Jesus Christ have been downplayed due to these unfounded claims. Her voice was, subsequently, silenced, her reputation tarnished, before her true identity was ever fully investigated or understood.

Women's Responses Over Time

In her book *Reinventing Womanhood*, feminist writer Carolyn Heilbrun discusses issues of identity for twentieth-century women, stating that "society assumes the male view to be all encompassing" (88). Furthermore, Heilbrun suggests new ways on how to construct new female role models through the reinvention of womanhood. Heilbrun believes women should define themselves in a descriptive manner rather than a prescriptive one, allowing them to be seen as autonomous and limitless. According to Heilbrun, the act of a woman perceiving herself through "description" leaves room for anyone to take part in describing her rather the use of

"prescription" allows a woman to directly define herself with boundaries impenetrable by outsiders.

Throughout history, many female writers were able to execute this idea by defining themselves in a direct and active way. The result led to a myriad of narratives based on women rising from the patriarchal ashes, of finding their voice in male-dominated world. Female writers rose from the restrictive ashes by creating narratives about strong women who are lost and have to find ways to identify themselves through difficult circumstances. These narratives take an introspective look at the development of the female consciousness from repressed to free.

Women were pioneers of selected genres and literary movements. For example, Mary Shelley is regarded as the world's first science fiction writer after the publication of her novel *Frankenstein* in 1818. Other innovative writers like Jane Austen explored women's place and status in society in works like *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen daringly wrote about women who wanted to marry for love rather than status, which pushed the boundaries on social expectations. Marrying for love rather than wealth gave women the power, identifying women as honorable rather than materialistic. Although forced to write in the confines of social hierarchy, Austen uses this to her advantage by creating characters that push boundaries on female stereotypes.

Edith Wharton follows suit in *The Age of Innocence*, writing Countess Ellen Olenska as the free, known woman—uninhibited by social constructs—versus May Welland as the silenced woman—a male-manufactured product of the world with no sense of self. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* breaks through these stereotypes as well, portraying an honest and intelligent heroine who is neither "the seductress" nor "the angel of the house." Brontë explores identity in the novel as Jane struggles to find her autonomy and identity apart from men. Many of the men she encounters throughout the novel threaten to steal her freedom rather than ensure it, including St.

John Rivers and Rochester. Jane's integrity is a key factor to her identity, and she quickly realizes that following her passions would strip her of her integrity and enslave her, not free her.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Height* contains instances of negative symbolism and contentious themes that proved too controversial for its time. Although the novel later gained its rightful place in the canon of English classics, it was still blacklisted for quite some time, much like Kate Chopin's groundbreaking novel *The Awakening.* Chopin' Edna Pontellier embarks on a journey to self-identification and awareness that shocked readers at the turn of the twentieth century. Edna first seeks herself through career by becoming an artist. Madame Reis comments on Edna's interest in art saying, "The artist must possess the courageous soul. The soul that dares and defies" (48). Edna both dares and defies when she, dissatisfied with her role as a mother and wife, breaks ties with her family, stating, "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn't give myself" (72). After her affair with Alcée leaves her unsatisfied, Edna realizes she need not derive her identity from other people and that she is in control of her own voice and her own freedom.

Today, Chopin's novel wouldn't barely scratch the surface of what modern society deems as "taboo," but in 1899, themes of "sexual freedom" and the "female search for identity" proved too controversial in the cultural climate and essentially ended Chopin's career.

The twentieth century saw a rise in publication of lost or ignored works. Julie Dobrow's biography *After Emily* explains how Emily Dickinson's collection of nearly 1800 poems were originally published by family friend Mabel Loomis Todd but after egregious changes were made to Dickinson's work (13). The first publication of Dickinson's work included the alteration of words, the removal of capitalizations, the inclusion of poem titles, the removal of Dickinson's famous dashes, and others.

Thomas H. Johnson released a complete volume of Dickinson's work in 1955, but even then the poems still bore a great deal of editorial changes. It was not until R.W. Franklin's version of Dickinson's poems was published in 1998 that her original work was entirely restored. Mabel questioned many of co-editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson's decisions, including his choice to create titles for the poems. For example, Higginson wished to title one poem, "A World Well Lost," that began with the line, "I lost a world the other day, / Has anybody found?" Mabel believed titles such as this one misrepresented the poems' meanings and misinterpreted Dickinson's voice.

In addition to the discussion about lost or ignored works, new works were published that talked about the relationship between race, gender, religion, and class, bringing a sense of unity to the female voice on many levels. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* considers how the white presence in society imposes difficulty for the African-American woman to form an identity. Meanwhile, Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* discussed these issues within a dystopian setting, exploring discrimination and the destruction of individuality from the perspective of protagonist Offred, renamed "of Fred" after her handler, Commander Waterford.

Despite a world of labels and dehumanization, Atwood manages to retain small pieces of Offred's identity is several ways. The first way is by not deifying Offred's character. Since the story is told from Offred's point of view, it would have been very easy for Atwood to write Offred as the pious virgin archetype, making her a lamb among wolves. Instead, Atwood writes a flawed character, one with mistakes and regrets. Offred often recounts her life before Gilead in flashbacks, revealing that she had an affair with a married man and, later in the novel, has another affair with the Commander's driver. This character choice provided authenticity to Offred's character, which eluded male-imposed stereotypes.

Another way Offred's identity is retained is through her refusal to conform—internally, at least. Externally, Offred is forced to be subservient in a hostile and sexist cultural climate that has reduced to inhuman vessels if they are fertile, caretakers if they are not, or disposable harlots if they break Gilead law. However, despite powerful, sometimes life-threatening influence, Offred's beliefs never conform to Gilead's ideologies. Offred continued to hold to the belief that women were equal to men noting that, "Perspective is necessary, otherwise there are only two dimensions" (78).

Personal Influence

My own creative fiction has been influenced by the theme of the "search for identity." As a woman, I have certainly faced gender discrimination in various places and forms throughout my life, and it is that truth that shapes the theme and tone of my own artistic expression. Through my own personal experiences, I seek to create works of fiction that describe woman's journey to finding true herself. I often attempt to shape my characters around the pursuit and retainment of identity and voice, leading to sometimes complex and unlikeable characters.

The Circus

"The Circus" deals with themes of family and conformity, discussing issues of sibling jealousy and the pressure of women to conform to societal norms such as marriage, buying a home, and having a stable career.

"The Circus" was one of the first short stories I ever wrote, which I started at the age of 22 when I was just a sophomore in college. I wrote the story for a writing competition at my

university and took third place for it, but I wasn't satisfied at all with it regardless of placing in the contest.

So, I shelved the story for six years where it sat and sat until I decided to apply for my MFA last fall. It was then that I took "The Circus" down off the shelf, dusted it off a bit, and decided to mold it into a final draft. And I did. I edited it thoroughly, rounded out the characters, reworked the plot, and changed the ending to create a sense of completion and unity.

This piece was influenced by works like Amy Bloom's "Silver Water," which explores the bond between sisters and the effect imbalance in mental stability can have in familial relationships. The story is told from older sister Rose's perspective about her younger sister's mental illness and, later, suicide.

My piece follows the same kind of pattern. Although told from a third-person point of view, younger sister Jenny's life is told from older sister Anne's perspective. In both my story and Bloom's, the identity of the younger, more unstable sister is represented biasedly by the older sister who harbors feelings of resentment and jealously. Anne does not have her own identity, and, therefore, frequently attempts to persuade Jenny lose her own identity by marrying a man she does not love and staying in a career she hates. Anne's revelation at the end of the story begins her journey to finding herself when she realizes she has conformed to those around her and has encouraged her sister to do the same.

Water Voices

"Water Voices" embraces symbols to reveal important information about the protagonist's identity. The story focuses on themes of control and freedom as the protagonist Trinity fights for her own independence from male control. The voices coming from various

bodies of water represent the imposing male voice constantly observing and monitoring women, mirroring the suffocation Trinity feels from boyfriend Gabriel. The ghostly cloud in Trinity's eye is symbolic of Trinity's blindness to her true self. Even after the cloud finally transfers from her eyes to Gabriel's eyes, the question remains of whether or not Trinity truly found herself as she attempts to drown an identity-shifting entity in the ocean who takes on Trinity's physical form.

"Water Voices" was influenced greatly by Kristen Roupenian's "Cat Person," a narrative on the perils of dating a manipulative man named Robert who objectifies women. Throughout the story, protagonist Margot is referred to as "concession-stand girl" by Robert, defining her by her job and subsequently denying her an identity. Roupenian also addresses the issue of power when Robert openly insults Margot. "Glad to see you dressed up for me," he remarks on her casual outfit. Instead of deflecting the insult, Margot is convinced that Robert is the victim and that she has offended him by "not seeming to take the date seriously enough." Margot doesn't reclaim her power until the very end of the piece when she breaks things off with Robert. Robert tries desperately to reclaim his power by sending Margot a slew of obsessive text messages. His final message, and the last word of the story, is shockingly and powerfully, "Whore."

The Taste of Lemons

My most recent piece, "The Taste of Lemons," explores themes of fear, emotional trauma, and sexual assault. This single-location narrative addresses certain problems with the theme of identity, primarily the issue of reclaiming power after experiencing trauma. When protagonist Jenny fails to name her rapist in court, speculation is drawn onto the definition of power and autonomy.

There are many works that have influenced my creative fiction. The Taste of Lemons was influenced largely by works like Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted,* an autobiographical look at women's mental health and the relationship between sexism and psychiatry. Kaysen explores the separation of woman from herself through mental illness, and how women's identities are lost when they are deemed insane. This idea greatly encouraged me to explore women's psychological development as much as their emotional and personal development. I incorporate a psychological exploration into Jenny's past and her perspective as she slowly begins to remember her trauma through only the smell of lemons. Mentally, Jenny has attempted over time to block the memory out. This narrative opens with Jenny finally awakening to her trauma, but still deciding by the end to not fully accept it.

The House Lenormand

"The House Lenormand" differs greatly from other pieces. In this haunted house narrative, protagonist Annie attempts to find her identity through husband Tim, leading to increased paranormal activity. Tim slowly strips Annie of her power—making her move to the country, paint the walls a color she hates, etc.—driving her into physical and emotional solitude. However, supernatural occurrences empower Annie to reclaim her voice and regain her own identity.

Works like Shirley Jackson's "The Haunting of Hill House" were big influences on this piece. Brian Boylan's article, "'I Am Home': The Feminist Implications of Identity Loss in Haunted House Narratives," discusses the idea of an individual morphing their identity with part of a house. Boylan explains that the haunted house is an especially appropriate metaphor for the subjection of women: "They (women) are reduced to guardian spirits of the home, with no

agency, no personality, and practically no body of their own. The idea of a woman merging into the house is merely an extension of this mindset, the concept made literal-and if the house is haunted, the grim irony of the situation only increases." This concept is reflected in "The House Lenormand" as there is a strong a connection between Annie's identity and the events that take place in the new house. As paranormal occurrences increase, Annie's perception of herself and her place in the world changes and she starts to form a stronger sense of self.

This same kind of connection is formed in another influential piece, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." In the story, there is a strong, thematic connection between the female protagonist and the woman behind the wallpaper. Again, house and woman form a bond, becoming inseparable and nearly dependent on one another for the formation of identity. This idea helped to shape my own work, leading to my creating a connection between Annie and the manuscript.

Flask

"Flask" follows the story of Stana who is dealing with the death of her brother. Her family is indifferent to his death as he was a failure in his life and career. The short story explores themes of loss, family, and rebellion, analyzing family dynamics from a closer angle.

This piece was influenced by works Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted.* Novels like the ones mentioned follow a more slow and lethargic kind of plotline, brimming on being more boring than upbeat and interesting. However, the interest in this story is found in the emotional framework of the characters and the tension between certain people. I enjoy exploring this idea of that familial tension just waiting to be broken. I like

creating situations where I can break that tension, and this story completely encapsulates that concept.

Conclusion

While female writers have long struggled to maintain who they are, many women have broken down walls, moved past barriers, and shattered the glass ceiling on male-dominant restrictions. Female writers have battled social taboos, religious law, political stumbling blocks, and many other obstacles to earn their rightful place beside, and often ahead of, male writers. Various women painstakingly molded their identity despite judgment and discrimination, which resulted in some of the greatest voices in literary history.

This paper has discussed the relationship between voice and identity and the importance of women having the right to express their feelings, thoughts, and opinions. In addition, women's autonomy was also discussed. I examined the importance of women having their own identity separate from men in order to forge a female person not dependent on any other image except their own self.

My project explored certain issues and literary works that demonstrated how men often refused women their own place in the literary world. For example, I looked at the use of male pseudonyms and the problem of female stereotyping, issues that made it difficult for women to opening express their own voice. Religious influence was also discussed, demonstrating how religion was used to exert male dominance from a moral standpoint.

Later in my critical paper, I looked at how women rose from the ashes, from hiding in the shadows with pseudonyms to reaching the ranks of equality beside male writers. I investigated

the boundaries women crossed and the struggles their encountered in order to break past certain social and cultural barriers. Lastly, I looked at how certain literary works and ideas have influenced my own fiction writing and how I hope to one day return the favor by making my own kind of unique impact in literature.

As I continue in my own personal and professional journey as a writer, I hope to retain my own power, strength, and voice as I create artistic pieces that reflect the truth about women. I hope to remember the voices that came before me and my own voice that I am shaping now. I aim to create works of literature that follow in the footsteps of the women that came before me, works that reflect the struggles we have faced in the past and the struggles we are still facing today.

My Creative Manuscript:

A Collection of Five Short Stories

"The Circus"

Anne was sitting on the couch with her husband Simon watching SportsCenter when she heard a determined, angry knock at the front door.

"Here we go again," Simon rolled his eyes.

"Stop it," Anne said, getting up and rounding the couch.

When Anne opened the front door, there stood Jenny soaked through from the rain. Jenny didn't even hello, just walked past her sister Anne and marched into the kitchen.

"Hi to you too," Simon patronized.

Jenny ignored him.

Anne found Jenny in the kitchen slumped in her usual spot on the floor in front of the refrigerator.

"What's wrong this time?" Anne asked, standing there.

Jenny removed a pack of Newport menthols from the pocket of her coat and lit a cigarette. "I hate Sam," Jenny said, her mouth a cloud of smoke.

"I know," Anne said.

Anne knew it was going to be a long night. She grabbed the glass ashtray off the window sill and laid on the floor beside Jenny. Then she retrieved a bottle of Chateau Ste. Michelle and a grass-green porcelain mug and sat down at the table. As soon as Anne had finished filling her mug, the old, beige telephone on the table by the back door to the mudroom began to ring.

"Tell him to stop calling," Jenny ordered.

"You tell him," Anne ignored.

"I'm not going to answer it. And your phone doesn't need to be ringing all night. You have work tomorrow."

"So do you," Anne hummed into her mug.

The phone continued to ring.

"Babe? Can you get that?" Simon called from the living room.

"No!" Jenny and Anne both yelled.

Jenny paused and looked at Anne for a moment. "I hate Sam," she said again.

"I know," Anne watched Jenny.

"I don't really hate him," Jenny relented.

"I know."

"We're just so regular. It kills me. Everything we do is regular. You know we ate at Giovanni's three times in two weeks?"

"I hate Giovanni's." In unison again.

"It's my fault, though." Jenny's voice was muted. "I knew he was regular when I met him—"

"You date regular, you get regular."

"—not that I'm unregular, but I think I'm more unique."

"You are."

"Am I?" she looked toward Anne.

Jenny wanted Anne to tell her she was special with a little something more than verbal confirmation. A picture, or an action, or a sign, or anything at all would have been nice, but Anne could only provide a nod that barely cracked the wall between them.

Anne wished she could have given a token of evidence, something concrete that made Jenny remember she was special and not crazy. Not a whore or flighty, which Jenny often

pretended to be but never fully embraced. Because no one can fake it for that long. So Jenny took Anne's nod and stored it away, aching for something stronger she feared would never come.

Even a picture would have been nice.

"I just feel everything is routine," Jenny said. "I just feel so powerless lately. Like everything is so planned and we just repeat, repeat, repeat. Like I'm in a termite circus."

"A what?" Anne chuckled.

"A termite circus," Jenny screwed the butt of the cigarette into a glass ashtray on the floor beside her. "You know those cartoons where the termites are in a box and there's a tiny circus inside and the termites are in there performing but you just can't see them? And they're doing the same tricks over and over again, but no one can see them, and they don't know what they're doing it for--they're just doing it."

"So, you feel like a termite?"

"I don't know. I just don't think I can feel that thing you're supposed to feel, Anne. You know that thing you're supposed to feel with someone? I just can't feel it. I've never felt it. I definitely can't feel anything with Sam. I always thought I would by now but nothing's changed. I just feel so stupid."

"You're not stupid. Humans do what they do."

"How did you know with Simon?"

Anne started to reply, but the phone rang again, and both she and Jenny forgot everything else and looked toward it like it was an unwanted visitor. To Jenny, the rhythmic trills seemed to grow more and more daunting the longer it rang. It was a rotary phone that had belonged to their mother Claire in the 1980s that Jenny, while visiting from college in New York and still emotionally malleable, had discovered buried under a collection of Leslie Gore records in the

attic of the old Boca Raton house. Jenny had memorized every word of "It's My Party," and whenever she noticed, really noticed, Anne's phone, the song would wind around in her head on a little mental ribbon.

Anne and her husband Simon bought their brownstone, "old brownie" Jenny dubbed it, in 2010 after Anne had finished grad school at Syracuse. Jenny had given the phone to Anne as a housewarming gift. "For safekeeping until I get my life together," was the promise. Jenny was never one for getting anything together.

She was the failed dream that every woman fears of becoming. The kind of woman that sits on a scratchy stoop wearing an Hermès leather blazer, smoking a pack of Newport menthols she promised she wouldn't buy because she's quit four times already and can barely afford the light bill—let alone a leather Hermès blazer. Jenny's failure stemmed from wanting to be one thing but instead becoming something practical. She loved to paint and spent a great deal of her childhood holed up in her bedroom pasting colorful portraits on cheap, department store canvases. Jenny ended up studying business in college instead of art like she wanted. That was because, as she always put it, "my good for nothing goy of a father wouldn't pay for anything else."

Art, according to Pat Walsh: "A degree in finger painting."

Jenny and Anne's father Pat had won the Boca Raton house in the divorce settlement and Jenny had smuggled the rotary phone out before it was junked with the rest of their mother's things. Jenny had taken the phone back to her studio apartment in Queens and had kept it all these years, probably for functionality or nostalgia, but also for solidarity between women of a certain caliber, women who had been wronged by men, women like her mother Claire.

Claire Penzik was from Clifton, New Jersey. Her family was more Jewish than they were Jerseyan. She met Pat in ‘82 while he was doing construction work for the synagogue her family attended. Claire had told Pat they couldn’t sleep together unless they married. So, they married and moved to Boca Raton soon after. In ’93, Pat flew to Texas to see about a contract job with an old friend of his. He never came back. Anne was ten. Jenny was eight.

Anne pretended she forgave him. She also pretended it was Jenny’s fault. Jenny believed it was Jenny’s fault. Anne retaliated by treating Jenny like a stranger for most of their life, barely calling, barely sharing, barely being a sister to her.

When Jenny was 14, she developed an obsession with becoming as frum—pious—as possible, to which both her mother and sister strongly objected. Even her paintings morphed into depictions of Jewish rabbis with their arms wrapped in tefillin and the backs of women walking down dusty streets in their tichels. The fixation lasted only until college when Jenny realized her father Pat didn’t actually love her and that, if her father didn’t love her, then Yahweh probably didn’t either. Then, according to Anne, Jenny lost her light and became a nafka.

A whore.

Anne rose up irritated and answered the phone. She spoke low. Jenny listened intently from her place on the floor, but the parade of rainfall outside muffled Anne’s voice. “…well, I can’t make her,” Jenny thought she heard Anne say. “…to her yourself. Yes, I do know…yeah, Sam, I get what you’re trying to say but…Sam, I have to go…”

Jenny stopped trying to listen just as Anne hung up the receiver and brought the phone back into the kitchen with her.

“Why is he calling the house phone instead of your cell?” asked Anne.

“I turned it off,” expelling smoke from her nostrils.

"Well, turn it back on."

"No. He'll call me."

Anne sighed, removed the cord from the phone's back, and set it on the stove. It clanged finale-like.

"I can't believe you kept that old thing," Jenny mused, eyes glued above.

"You told me to save it, remember?" A reminder. She sat down again at the table. "Besides, I like not knowing who's calling sometimes."

"Yeah, like Sam."

On cue, Anne's cellphone rang. Anne picked up her phone and held it out to Jenny.

"Please, talk to him."

"I don't want to," Jenny hissed, biting the filter of a new cigarette and searching for her lighter and discovering it peeking out from under the fridge.

"Jenny," Anne begged.

"*No*," she snapped, offering Anne a throat-slitting gesture.

Anne conceded. She denied the call, turned off the phone, and sat it on the stove with the rotary. Then she sat back down at the glass table and watched her little sister light her third cigarette of the night.

A snap. A flame. A breath. Relief for Jenny. Anne longed for such relief.

"Simon?" Anne called.

There was no answer.

"Simon!"

"What?" Simon responded.

"Turn your phone off."

"Why?"

"Because."

"I'm using it."

"Just do it."

A beeping noise.

"Sam's calling me. Why is Sam calling me?" came Simon.

Jenny scoffed and laughed along with Anne. "Tried to warn you," her hands cupped.

"Just ignore it then turn it off," Anne instructed.

"Fine. It's off."

Anne and Jenny shared a smile, but it quickly faded. Jenny's eyes turned downcast and she crossed her arms defensively. Anne sat in the quiet for a moment, waiting for some kind of explanation this time, which Jenny never gave when she came over in the middle of the night. It was usually Fridays so they could stay up late and talk about things like their childhood and Sam. She would have liked to have been angry at Jenny's wildness, but she, for one, liked the company and, for two, liked her sister's youthful indecisiveness that Anne herself had never much experienced. It was an excuse for Anne to try and get to know Jenny like she'd always loathed doing when they were younger. It was also an excuse for Anne to smoke inside and to not watch Sportscenter with Simon.

"So, you going to tell me?" Anne could barely say it. She knew Jenny didn't like talking on emotion, or talking of emotion, especially emotions that were her own. She figured she'd taught Jenny to be that way and it was her job now to unteach her.

"Tell you what?" Jenny avoided.

"Come on, Jen. You can't keep doing this, coming over here all the time and expecting me not to ask questions."

Jenny's eyes trailed around the open window above the sink, watching segments of damp wind bring alive the blue lace curtain. The rhythmic patter of rain against the glass seemed to sync up with the curtain's movement, the way an ocean wave syncs with the inglorious sound of it swelling and breaking on sand. The wall by the window was brick. Just that one wall. There was no more brick anywhere else in the house. It was Jenny's favorite of all the walls she had ever seen, not because it was brick but because it was adjacent to the open, white-trimmed window over the sink and Jenny liked the contrast. She also liked it because it made her think of her old studio in Queens that she was forced to sublet before she and Sam moved in together, and because it made her think of the wilted geraniums in the black, muddy flowerbox outside, and because the window was her sister Anne's and she liked Anne very much.

"I'm so done with all of this," Jenny muttered.

"He's not hitting you, is he? I'll kill him. I swear."

"I'm just done."

"Is he hitting you?"

"No. I wish he was."

"If it's really that bad you can always stay here for good," said Anne, cradling her chin in her hand. "Simon won't mind."

Simon would mind. Simon was a lawyer. Simon liked his space. Simon didn't really like Jenny.

Jenny looked toward the phone again. Her mind careened unsteadily to a memory of her father calling from a payphone in Dallas when she was eleven. He rarely called, but the few

times he did he never wanted to talk to Jenny or Anne despite their mother's begging. That time he'd asked first to talk to Anne, who understood that he'd been severed from them and that the call was only a fleeting anomaly that would eventually become a tangible reminder for why Anne disliked him. Then he'd asked to speak to Jenny, who wasn't, at the time, old enough to predict emotional outcomes the way Anne or Claire could. Jenny could only remember the phone call itself, nothing of what was said between the two of them. It was the last time she'd hear from Pat Walsh.

"You remember my poli sci professor?" Jenny started. "The one that tried to sleep with me but I wouldn't let him?" Jenny started. "Dr. Singer. He told me to call him Anthony, but I never did? Anyway. He always said--what was it used to say? Faces are—no, that's not it. Oh, yeah, I remember. *Words are the masks we wear so we don't have to speak*. I hated him, really hated him, but he did always make me think about the things I didn't want to think about."

"I remember him," Anne said.

"At least he made me feel something."

"That was the wrong kind of thing, Jen. Sam loves you."

After their father stopped calling, Jenny's faith in people was whittled away by men. She convinced herself at around twenty that if her father couldn't love her then she would exclusively love people who couldn't love her back. Like Sam. She'd met Sam while studying abroad in Valencia and casual sex had turned into casual love. He came back to New York with her in the summer of '07, and since then they'd both cozened that it was logic and not sex that had led them to this point.

"How are termites like people?" Jenny asked, snuffing her cigarette on the bottom of her sneaker.

"It's too cold. I'm going to close it," Anne said, beginning to get up to shut the window.

Jenny told her to leave it, so Anne reclined again and pretended that she wasn't cold for Jenny's sake. Anne was heroic because everything she did for Jenny was done in the name of listening like one's supposed to and not just because one wants to close a window.

"How are termites like people, Anne?"

"I don't know," Anne moaned, her fingers twisting the leaves of the plant on the kitchen table. She tore one leaf in half to the stem and tried tying a knot with the two halves, but it only wilted them.

"They both make holes, lots of holes, and they can both be in a circus," Jenny shook her head perceptively. She lit a fourth cigarette. "Maybe I should join the circus. Quit my awful corporate job."

"You need to stop smoking."

"You're one to talk," Jenny giggled into her shirt sleeve and tossed the pack to Anne who barely caught them because she was laughing too.

Anne lit a cigarette and hissed the smoke in loudly, clenching the filter between her fingers tightly. "I thought you liked your job."

"I tolerate it."

"Okay, then quit. Find something else."

"Smoking or my job?"

"Both," Anne was still picking at the potted plant.

Jenny shook her head. "That thing's going to die if you keep doing that."

"It's going to die anyway. It told me this morning at breakfast."

"While you were drinking your disgusting protein shake, it told you that? Did it also tell you about termites? I think you're a termite to that plant."

"Then what does that make you, Jenny?" Anne looked at her. Really looked at her.

"I'm the ringmaster, of course," she grinned. "I make the little termites dance and swing on those bar-things—what are they called—trapezes," she spread her arms. A score of ash scattered.

"Ole!" Anna followed suit.

"That's for bullfighting," Jenny laughed, paused and thought about something she shouldn't have, and then laughed again, this time with an added essence of feigning. "I just hate feeling this powerless."

"I know."

"I blame Dad." Jenny only hated her father because Anne didn't anymore.

"You can't blame Dad for everything."

"Of course, I can. You blamed me for everything, didn't you?" Jenny stared.

"What's this really about, Jen? It's too late for wine and cigarettes time." It really was too late. The night was creeping away. Jenny had work in the morning. So did Anne.

"We never have wine and cigarette time anymore," Jenny said, remorsefully. "It used to be our thing."

"Yeah. It took booze and cancer sticks to get us to have an adult conversation."

"At least we're having one. I just—I can't."

"Can't what?" Anne asked.

"Can't with Sam."

"Why not?"

"Because."

"Because Sam loves you?" A little exasperated.

"Sam loves everything."

"If you expect too much, you won't get anything."

"You sound like Dr. Singer."

"Smart guy."

"He wants to get married, Anne," Jenny released.

"What?"

"He asked me to marry him last night at Giovanni's."

"At Giovanni's?" Anne sneered.

"Yeah. Our favorite place." That was sarcasm.

"What did you say?"

"I couldn't say no."

"You could've said no."

"No, I couldn't."

"I thought you were the ringmaster?"

"Stop. This is serious. And now there's that dinner next week at his family's summer house and he wants to tell them all there. Make this big announcement. You're still coming, right?"

"Of course, I'm coming. But, Jen, maybe this is a good thing. You love him, don't you?"

"My name is going to be Jennifer Green. Jennifer *Green*. Like grass."

"Better than Penzik."

After their parents' divorce, their mother Claire had legally changed hers and the girls' names back to her maiden name. Claire hated Pat more than Jenny or Anne put together. Anne always thought that was why Jenny went frum in high school, clinging to their mother's faith as a way to keep her own.

"You don't like our name?" Jenny questioned.

"Not really. It's not mine anymore."

"It'll always be yours. I like Penzik. It suits me."

"Good for you."

"Maybe if you traveled to the homeland you would like it," Jenny feigned a Hebrew accent.

"Well, L'chaim," Anne announced, raising her wine glass in celebratory fashion.

Anne thought about what it would be like to raise a real glass at a real wedding for Jenny. The thought made her skin crawl. The idea of Jenny doing anything big and serious like getting married seemed so archaic. So counterfeit.

"I just feel like I'm settling," Jenny muttered to the floor.

"Jenny," Anne scolded.

"What?"

"Settle already. You're 29. It's time to grow up."

"I can't," Jenny shook her head furiously.

"You can."

"You don't understand. I can't marry him. I've done something. Something really, really terrible."

"What did you do?" Anne set her lipstick-stained wine glass on the table and leaned forward in her chair.

"I wish I was more responsible like you," Jenny wiped her nose. She'd started to cry and hadn't realized it until saline started running down her upper lip.

"Jenny, what did you do?"

Jenny gazed at Anne. Her eyes were watery and fearful. She clenched her bony fingers together in preparation. Anne didn't know what Jenny meant when she said she'd done something terrible. Terrible was relative in Jenny World. It could mean anything from sleeping with her boss to forgetting to fill her car with gas. Jenny was so unpredictably polar that Anne had a hard time keeping up. But this kind of terrible sounded worse than usual and made Anne think that it really was something heinous and not particularly modest.

"Elohim ya'azor li," Jenny prayed, to no one in particular.

God help me.

Anne didn't know if Jenny still believed in God the way she believed in her vices. It seemed like Jenny relied on the prayers and rituals out of habit more than conviction. Anne figured religion was Jenny's security blanket, which was fine with Anne so long as Jenny kept it to herself.

"God's busy. Talk to me," Anne ordered.

In the middle of that, there was a knock at Anne's front door. Jenny and Anne exchanged sideways glances. Jenny's eyes told Anne not to answer the door, but Anne's eyes told Jenny she had to. So, Anne did, and, of course, it was Sam standing there in old sweats and boat shoes and an indigo windbreaker, looking desperate and angry. His blond hair was soaked, and his sweats were dotted with raindrops.

"Where is she?" he demanded, knowing good and well where she was: the kitchen floor in front of the refrigerator where she always was. It was where Sam usually found Jenny whenever he came barging in looking for her in the middle of night. Either there or in the mudroom with Anne.

"She needs space," Jenny heard Anne say, but Sam broke past her and stormed into the kitchen.

Jenny noticed the note in his hand before she noticed the way he was dressed.

"What is this?"

"A note."

"I know it's a note. Three years together and this is how you end things?"

Jenny tried to pay attention to the sound of Sam's voice because she knew what he was saying was important, but all she could hear was the loud dripping of rainwater splatting onto the kitchen floor in between the silence.

"Sam—"

"Is there someone else?"

"No."

"Then what?"

Anne was still out of sight, probably next to Simon on the couch explaining things to him and wondering why Jenny hadn't mentioned that she'd left Sam a note ending their relationship.

Anne heard Jenny quieting Sam and then the backdoor slam shut. She peeked in the kitchen and saw their two silhouettes dancing around the mudroom. Anne wished they had actually been dancing. They weren't. They were screaming. Jenny kept trying to place a hand on Sam's arm, but he kept pulling away.

Anne felt Simon come up behind her. “They’re really going at it,” he chuckled.

“Yeah,” Anne replied.

“What’s new,” he pecked her on the cheek and started over toward the stairs. “I’ve got to get up early.”

“Simon?” Anne grabbed him with her voice.

He paused at the base of the stairs, one hand on the railing, the other scrolling through his phone. “What, babe?” he asked, mindlessly, without looking at her.

“Did we settle?”

“Settle what?” his eyes still on his phone.

“Nothing. Never mind,” Anne released.

Because Simon hadn’t recognized the question’s earnestness the first time without provocation, Anne didn’t care to provoke him a second time. With that, she told Simon she’d be up soon and he left.

An hour later, Anne had retreated to the sofa, covered herself up with a Sherpa throw blanket, and was falling asleep to Friends reruns. The mudroom door opened and Sam came through the living room with Jenny at his heels. Anne sat upright when she heard Sam’s boat shoes thud across the hardwood. Sam gave Anne a remorseful grin when he noticed her there in the dark of the room, then he headed out the front door without a word.

Jenny came to Anne and hugged her from behind the sofa’s back. “Sorry,” she whispered, rocking Anne gently back and forth. “We’re good now.”

“You sure? What about the thing?”

“The thing?”

"The thing you were going to tell me. The terrible thing."

"Oh. It's nothing. We're good. Trust me," and Jenny let go and went to the front door.

Anne followed, the blanket wrapped around her, and stood in the doorway like she often did to make sure Jenny got in the cab alright. Only seconds went by before she stopped Jenny again. "Are you sure it was nothing?"

Jenny turned back on the stoop and smiled. "Sure. Don't worry about it."

Two days went by and Anne assumed Jenny had worked through whatever qualms she'd wrestled with in the kitchen that night. The second night, Anne awoke with a jolt. Palming the back of her neck, she wiped away a layer of icy sweat then swung her legs over the side of the bed.

Simon didn't stir. He was a heavy sleeper, but Anne looked over her shoulder at him anyway hoping he might have heard her and sprung up in a panic to console her and tell her she was safe from the nightmare she'd been having. Instead, he remained motionless under the mustard-colored floral comforter.

Of course, she didn't remember having any kind of nightmare, only vague flashes of her and Jenny as teenagers washing their parents' old Buick LaSabre in the driveway. It was one of the only good memories Anne had of the two of them. Jenny had thrown a soapy rag at Anne's back, and, for once, it had amused Anne instead of angered her. Anne got angry at Jenny a lot. That day she didn't.

They'd turned on the car radio and danced barefoot on the hot, washed concrete to "Genie in a Bottle," to the lemon-chemical soap smell, and the setting Florida sun that always reminded Jenny of oranges. They'd laughed and forgotten the barriers between them because that

afternoon in the driveway had felt like a world all their own, a world of laughing and summertime and 2001 and Christina Aguilera. Anne believed for an hour or two that she and Jenny were finally sisters instead of strangers, but after Jenny had showered and put on her new Bon Jovi t-shirt their mother had bought her at the Grand Plaza Mall the day before, their special world was washed away with the spray of the showerhead, just like the hose water had dispersed the dirt and dead ladybugs off the LaSabre.

Anne didn't know why the memory had frightened her, why it had been so nightmarish. She imagined it was because it was so rare. She kept it tucked away in the back of her mind and only brought it out when she felt especially distant from Jenny. Anne wondered whether her and Simon's move to Queens was a secret attempt to be closer to her little sister, to somehow repair the damage Anne had caused.

An even greater fear struck her then. A regret. She saw the importance of Jenny and the meaninglessness of Simon. Anne tried to shake the thought, but it was too powerful. The silence and the darkness of the early, pre-sun morning told her the truth. She came to the understanding that most truths are, universally, realized somewhere between a sunset and sunrise. Anne's truth was that she had settled. Not simply for Simon but for most things, and she had urged Jenny to do the same.

She suddenly felt much more like one of Jenny's termites than a human, a creature that had bored holes all throughout Jenny, and that they were both part of a grand circus performance neither one could escape. Anne wasn't ever outwardly cruel to Jenny. She never called her names or hit her or fought with her. She simply acted as though Jenny was never really there and that everything Jenny loved, Anne hated. Everything Jenny was amused by wasn't funny at all to Anne. Everything Jenny was passionate about was a silly pursuit to Anne.

Like art was to Pat Walsh.

It was now, in the darkness of that Friday morning, the day before Sabbath, that Anne wished for the first time in her life that Jenny was there in her Bon Jovi t-shirt and smoking a third cigarette by the refrigerator. Or even a fourth. She wished she believed in Jenny's God the way Jenny had at 15. She wished she hadn't implied in front of all their friends at a high school basketball game that Jenny was a nafka whore and had slept with most of the boys on the team. It wasn't a lie. She had slept with most of the boys on the team. But not because she was a whore.

Because she was lonely.

Anne grabbed her phone off the nightstand and turned it on. While she was waiting for it to start up, she heard a faint, high-pitched sound coming from downstairs. She got up and opened the bedroom door to listen. Halfway down the stairs, she realized it was the rotary phone by the mudroom ringing.

"Hello? Jenny?" she answered.

"Anne?"

"Oh. Sam. What's up?"

"Where is she?"

"Who—Jenny?"

"Who else? I've been calling all night."

"What's going on?"

"She's gone. I woke up and all her stuff's gone and—she's just gone. Can I just—can you just put her on the phone?"

"She's not here."

"Come on."

"I promise you, she's not here. I would tell you if she was."

Jenny had left and hadn't come to see Anne. She had just left without a word to Sam or to Anne or anyone. Anne began to cry because she realized what that meant. It meant that Jenny was done trying to earn Anne's approval and Anne couldn't bear the thought of not having Jenny there trying to make Anne love her.

"Well, then, where is she?"

"I don't know, Sam. If I hear from her—"

"You'll call me?"

"Yes. I'll call you," she promised, then hung up the phone.

That was a lie. She wouldn't call him for any reason. Especially any reason relating to Jenny. She rested her hand for a moment on the receiver before yanking out the cord and throwing the phone across the kitchen. She hoped it would break. It didn't.

She stood still and stared at the floor in front of the fridge. Jenny's spot. It was Jenny's desire to be like Anne that had kept Anne together all these years. Without Jenny, Anne's reasons for loving Simon and living in New York faded. Maybe she'd run away too. Back to Florida to live with her mother, or a detour to Texas to rekindle a relationship with Pat. Maybe she'd run into Jenny in a café somewhere out West and they'd become sisters again instead of strangers. Anne knew, however, those were just unlikely fantasies and that she was totally resigned to the life she'd chosen. She suddenly saw that the hate she'd had for Jenny was actually hatred for herself.

She walked back toward the stairs to go back to bed and lie beside Simon and forget about her sister for good. Halfway up, she stopped and decided to go smoke instead. She never smoked without Jenny so it was strange that she wanted to now. But the urge was so

overpowering that she thought for a second or two that she might actually start up regularly instead of just socially.

She grabbed the pack of Newport menthols off the glass table and opened the front door. There, to her amazement, was Jenny, curled up on the stoop flanked by a sea of boxes, a blue suitcase and matching overnight bag, and a crate full of blank canvases that had been stuffed in the back of her and Sam's closet since she'd moved in. Sam had put them there.

Anne began to cry again, partly because Jenny was there and partly because she was asleep and, from where Anne was standing, looked very much like their mother. She sat beside Jenny and gently shook her awake.

Jenny smiled then yawned and stretched her arms. "Surprise," she eyed her blue suitcase.

Anne inspected the canvases. "I'm happy you're here, Jen. I'm really happy."

"I won't stay long."

"Yes, you will," Anne demanded. Her mind drifted back to the other night. "What was that thing—that terrible thing you mentioned? What was it?"

Jenny finally looked at Anne. A guilty sort of glaze in her eye. "It doesn't matter now."

"I want to know."

Jenny sat silently for a moment then resolved to tell Anne. "I did something with Sam's dad."

"You slept with him?" Anne understood.

Jenny looked at Anne, nodded.

Something came over Anne and she began laughing uncontrollably. Jenny watched her in shock. Anne usually responded to news like this with anger. A laugh, Jenny never expected.

"What's wrong with you?"

“Nothing,” Anne tried to calm herself. “I need to tell you something too.”

Anne lit a cigarette, passed it to Jenny, then lit one for herself.

“Alright,” Jenny said.

“I hate Simon.”

“I know.”

"Water Voices"

The first time Trinity heard the voices, she was mid-shampoo in her cramped shower in her flat in Echo Park and she had just gotten some Paul Mitchell gentle wash in her eyes. She splashed fountains of water from the showerhead into a held-open eye. One and then the other.

Eyes red, attention drawn on the burning sensation. A small collection of deep whispers peeked in from somewhere. She stood still and listened. A statue, naked in the noisy steam. It was a male voice. Sounded like more than one. Chorus-like, all murmuring and hummed. The words were ungraspable, though.

She was finished anyway so she turned the shower knob to the far left to let the stream dry up, slid the curtain back, and stuck one leg out. A cackling laugh emerged from the other side of the wall. A sigh of relief. She recognized the voice. It was Noah. Her neighbor Eva's boyfriend.

Noah's laugh echoed again and Trinity banged her fist against the tile wall. A "please shut up" kind of thud.

"Alright!" Noah called.

Satisfied, Trinity picked up the lavender towel she'd laid out for herself and draped it around her shoulders, squinching her toes into the white bathmat. A few passes to dry her back, then a bend and a dry scrub of the hair.

She'd recently cut her hair shorter than she ever had before—just an inch above the shoulders—in an effort to kill all the dead ends and replenish the roots. The decision had left her feeling unrecognizable to herself, the blunt cut making her appear childlike. It exposed her shoulders, which Trinity believed were too broad and boxy. She also thought the color had changed too, the once vibrant black sheen seeming to have faded into a flat, unpolished sort of

brown. Leaning into the mirror and clearing a lone blackhead, she examined herself, twisting the ends of her hair with her fingers and smoothing from her side part down to the tips. She shook it all back out of place in frustration and rolled the towel around her chest.

Just as she'd looked away, the foggy glass seemed to growl at her. A demonic, echoed sort of peal. She looked back to the mirror. She wiped the glass to clear the vapor then stared at her image in the wiped spot. A space in the clouds. There was nothing there. There was no one there.

For a second, and only a second, she spied a fogginess in her left eye. A ghost circling the green of her iris. She shook out of it when she realized it was probably just the steam moving across.

Her shower almost made her late for work. She breezed in and passed an apologetic glance to the manager, Reese. He didn't say anything, just told her to restock the plain bagels in the glass display.

Trinity hadn't planned on being a barista for very long when she moved to LA two years earlier. She came to LA to act. She spent the first seven months crashing at her boyfriend Gabriel's shared apartment and going on what seemed like endless numbers of auditions that led only to dead ends. At the end of month seven, Gabriel's roommates became annoyed at her freeride. Now, she had a small studio in Echo Park she couldn't afford. The money was tight. Trinity was on edge.

Trinity's shift ended at six. She was crossing the street to where her car was parked when her phone started ringing. She dug around in her bag for a moment then finally located it buzzing relentlessly somewhere near the bottom.

It was Gabriel. Her boyfriend. She felt a tightening in her chest when she saw his name on the caller ID, but she answered the call anyway.

"Hey," she said. "Just got off. I'm on my way."

Trinity was halfway across the street when she saw him. A man in a red baseball cap was standing in the middle of the road staring at her. Motionless. Just standing and staring. *What a creep,* she thought. He didn't look like a typical downtown wino. He was well-dressed except for the baseball cap. As she crossed the road, his eyes followed her. From one side of the street to the other. Trinity felt threatened so she got in her car as quickly and locked the doors. When she looked back at the road, the man was gone. She breathed a sigh of relief and located her concealer from her satchel.

She cocked the rearview at herself and there was the fog in her left eye again. The one she'd seen in the bathroom mirror the night before. She looked away but only for a second. When she looked back at the mirror, the fog was completely gone.

She figured it was just a trick of the light or something like it, and by the time she was pulling her car into the parking lot at the base of Burbank Peak Trail, she was already starting to put the whole thing out of her mind.

Trinity met Gabriel at the trailhead, the same place they usually met. It was sunnier than usual. Hotter, too. The desert landscape felt heavy to Trinity, suffocating.

They headed off and Trinity struggled to keep up. Gabriel was more fit than Trinity. He worked out daily, drank kale protein shakes. Trinity worked out when she could in between shifts and auditions.

On the right side of the trail sat the San Fernando Valley and on the right side the view stretched into downtown LA. Trinity always thought the city looked very much like a dream from the peak's ridge, and often she pretended it was.

Sometime into the run, Gabriel noticed Trinity had been unusually quiet, so he slowed the pace and said, "You good?"

"Bad day," Trinity said in between breaths.

"Again?" he laughed.

"I saw someone."

"Who?"

"A man."

"He hit on you?"

"Stared at me," she said.

"He stared at you?"

"Yeah. It was weird."

"Why?"

"You don't think that's weird, staring at someone?"

"Guys stare," he shrugged. "They stare at me."

"Not like this. This was different."

Gabriel turned around and started running backward so he could look at Trinity. "Have you thought any more about Portland?"

Trinity stopped running. Gabriel did too after. He kept walking backwards though, matching her pace. She couldn't run while thinking about bad things like Portland. Gabriel had a job offer there. A good one. He wanted Trinity to come with him, get away from the hectic LA

lifestyle they'd both been immersed in the past several years. Trinity wasn't ready to let go of acting yet, and that bothered Gabriel. He wanted to slow down. To settle. He wanted Trinity to settle with him. Trinity wanted to remain uprooted. Commitment to her was scarier than failure. Commitment to Gabriel was the scariest kind of commitment.

She didn't want to tell him she didn't want to go. So, she said, "I've been thinking about it," even though she hadn't.

"Portland will be good for us, I think," he said. "Don't you think so? I think so. It'll be a new start away from the city. I think we need that. Don't you think we need that?"

Trinity didn't hear him. All she heard were the voices. They had started only moments before and were now so distracting she couldn't concentrate on what Gabriel was saying.

"Do you hear that?" she asks.

"Hear what?"

"That," she pointed at the air. At nothing. She jogged around the curve in the desert trail, trying to find out where the voices were coming from. There were whispers here and there, seemingly coming from every direction.

He caught up with her. "I'm trying to talk to you about Portland."

"Gabriel, I told you a million times," she said, the whispers sickening her. "I'm not ready to leave LA."

"You hate LA."

"I love LA. I hate people *in* LA. There's a difference," she stopped and put a hand on Gabriel's chest. "Can you just listen for minute, please?"

He pushed her hand away. "Stop messing around, Trin. This job is a once-in-a-lifetime thing for me. I need this."

"Just listen, Gabe."

The voices penetrated her again. She turned from the mountain side of the trail and peered out over the side that inclined down. She watched the horizon as if the source might sail in from the very edge.

"If you're trying to push me away, it's working," he spat, sternly.

The voices rose. Deeper, louder. She looked over and just off the trail stood the figure of the man in the red cap she'd seen in the roadway outside the café earlier. "Hey!" she called and gave chase.

Gabriel followed her, calling after her but she ignored him and followed the rocky trail upward and around a short bend.

The voices were real. She was sure of that. She wasn't imagining them. She also knew the man was real too and it was possible he had something to do with the voices. Maybe one of the voices was his.

A peak came into view, one with a bench overlooking the whole of the city. The man was standing at the very edge of the overlook watching her. Not out of breath like she was. Like he'd just appeared there out of nothingness.

She stood for a moment and listened. Really listened.

The crude whispers spoke words for once. They took alliterative shape. "I am empty," they said. "I am empty. I am empty. I am empty. I am empty."

She couldn't take it anymore. Trinity ran toward him. The closer she got to the overlook, the louder the voices became. She closed in and was about to grab the man, but someone grabbed her instead. Gabriel had caught her just before she leapt off the edge of the overlook and down into the ravine below. An arm around her waist, they both fell to the ground.

When she looked up, she realized the man wasn't there anymore. Gabriel was giving her an earful. "Are you crazy?" he said. "Trying to kill yourself?"

Even though the voices had subsided, she didn't hear anything Gabriel said. To Gabriel's objections, she stood up and neared the edge carefully. The voices were clearly coming from somewhere beneath. She glanced over. Down below was a small body of water. Just a small pool collected in the lush rockface.

The water. The voices were coming from the water.

Trinity was in the holding room for two hours before it was finally her turn to go. The audition was for a TV series titled, "The House Lenormand." It was some kind of thriller about a haunted house. A petite woman in a hijab escorted Trinity into the audition room that was lit with harsh fluorescents.

Three very bored looking individuals sitting at a long white, plastic table greeted her unenthusiastically. Trinity joked about the long wait. No one laughed. A man with a beard and a nose ring prompted her to start with a lackluster "go ahead" and a staccato-ed hand wave.

She was about to start the monologue. In fact, she did start. One line in, "You don't believe in ghosts the way I do, Tim," and then she stopped. She stopped because the voices started. Those shy little whispers seemed to bubble up out of nowhere. She noticed the casting director was drinking out of a water bottle. The whispers heightened in register and level. She tried to concentrate, keep going. She stumbled over the lines. The men at the table watched. They looked bored. Disgusted.

The man at the far-left end of the table suddenly became familiar to Trinity. He looked just like the man who had been following her. He hadn't looked like that before. She was sure of

it. It was as if he had been transformed somewhere between the present and when she had first entered the audition. He was wearing a red baseball cap now. He hadn't been wearing it before. She was almost positive. But he was now.

It wasn't him. It couldn't have been him. But it was him and it wasn't him and it was no one all at the same time.

"It's you," she said to the man.

They all exchanged confused glances.

"Why are you doing this to me?" she was screaming now. She threw her script to the floor, approached the man at the table.

The assistant who'd led her in appeared beside Trinity, trying to get her to leave. Trinity pulled away, leaned across the table. Right in the man with the red baseball cap's face.

"You know where I work, where I live, where I go jogging with my boyfriend—it's enough. Leave me alone!"

A larger security guard entered from somewhere and did what the assistant was unable to door. He dragged Trinity out of the room, but she fought him. She fought him all the way out, screaming and pleading to the man in the red baseball cap to tell her why he was following her. Right before she was taken out of the room, the man seemed to change right before her eyes. He looked the way he used to when she entered. A balding, skinny guy. Looked nothing like the man in the red baseball cap.

She realized her error then. In the holding room, she begged the security guard to let her go back in and retry the audition again. He ignored her pleas and dragged her out of the building.

Trinity didn't want to go with Gabriel to Pacific Park. She didn't want to do anything with him anymore really, but Gabriel's little cousin Rachel was visiting and Gabriel had promised his aunt and uncle that he'd take her to ride the Sea Dragon and get her as much cotton candy as she wanted. So, despite Trinity's reservations, she went with Gabriel and watched him and Rachel ride the rides while she stood by and watched. Gabriel tried to convince her to at least try the Ferris wheel, but she refused. She didn't like heights. She didn't like carnivals. She was still reeling from the memory of her audition, her mind going round and round like the tilt-a-whirl thinking of all the horrible feelings that came of the encounter.

Trinity had said she wasn't hungry but Gabriel had taken her to the cotton candy counter and bought her a pink one anyway. And so she stood there in the crowded carnival in the late California dusk eating the unwanted treat and listening to Gabriel and Rachel's mindless, childish giggles. Some inside joke about a cartoon they'd watched together that morning at her parents' hotel room.

Rachel let on that she needed to use the bathroom, so Gabriel led her and Trinity to the restrooms over by Inkie's Scrambler and Scoops Ice Cream and Treats. While waiting for Rachel outside, Gabriel grabbed Trinity's hand and said, "I was going to wait to tell you, but I have a surprise."

Trinity looked toward him. She wasn't excited. Gabriel didn't really excite her anymore. But she played along anyway because she had nothing better to do. "What's the surprise."

"I bought a place," he grinned, waiting for Trinity to smile too. "Well, a house, I mean. In Portland." He waited again for a smile, but there was nothing. She just stared. "For us."

"For us?"

Trinity understood that Gabriel expected her to be happy about the decision, a decision he'd made without her, a decision he'd made against her desires. Trinity should have been angry, she knew she should have been, but she felt more as though she had been released from some kind of lavish prison, one where Gabriel and men like him could see true things with visible evidence and choose not to believe them. That prison was a fast, confusing place where a "no" meant to proceed and a "yes" and led to no provisions. She was glad to be released from that prison though. It meant she could speak again, perhaps get a word in over his voice or the ones in her head. It meant she could breathe her own breath again.

So, Trinity breathed, the wind above her stale and rushing. Then, she turned to face him. Pink, dissolving beams cast him in shadow.

"Gabriel, has anyone ever made you do anything you don't want to do?" she said.

"What?" he stared.

"Has anyone ever made you do anything you don't want to do?"

"No," he scoffed. "I do what I want, I go where I want, and I want to go to Portland. With you."

Trinity's eyes glazed with a certain clarity and she looked at Gabriel with a newfound kind of release. "Go then." Walked past him.

He called to Trinity as she walked away from him. He couldn't leave Rachel who hadn't come out of the restroom, so he was quickly gone from Trinity after moments of wandering. As she maneuvered through the dense crowd, Trinity felt a release. An unburdening. More alive now in the conviviality of park-goers and the artificial scrapes and dings of rides and games than she'd ever been in the safety of Gabriel.

Suddenly, there was a little space in the crowd, and through the little space Trinity eyed a large tent with colorful steps leading inside, and atop the tent door read the words “Funhouse.” A new attraction, she assumed. The perfect place to hide from Gabriel. She hurried through the little space of people and up the rainbow steps inside the tent.

Immediately, Trinity was met with an array of mirrors all around her. She saw her reflection, her whole body from a distance, and she was surprised. More surprised than she was when Gabriel expected her to be surprised earlier. She looked different, she thought. Not because one mirror thinned her and another made her three times her normal size, but because there was one mirror that was almost true to life, and in it she saw herself from the outside for the first time in what felt like months. She was aware of herself. Fully aware. She saw what others see, what a customer at the coffee shop might see, and she liked it. She liked herself, her bony, pale legs, her dark, frizzy hair, her thin lips. She saw and she admired. For the first time.

A mirror to the left changed then. A figure appeared in it that wasn’t hers. It was the man with the red baseball cap. Trinity screamed. She thought about leaving the funhouse. The door was right behind her. But she wanted it to stop. She had to make it stop.

Trinity gave chase toward the man down an opening. She grew close to him and reached out, but her palms hit only the flat surface of a mirror. The man’s reflection shifted then and appeared at the end of another long passage. She ran at him again, being more careful of illusions. But yet again, once she reached him, there was only a mirror and no man.

The reflection shifted again, this time to the mirror right beside the other one. She looked behind her. She looked all around her, but she couldn’t tell where the man in the red baseball cap was standing and how he was casting his reflection onto the mirror. She looked back at his face, stroked the glass with her fingertips to be sure it wasn’t real. As her fingers crossed over, the

image suddenly altered like the turning of a TV channel. There, in the mirror, was not the man's reflection, but Trinity's own. She gazed at herself curiously, wondering why she had not seen her own reflection there before. She looked at her eyes. They were different. Fogged. Both eyes had the fog in them now. She clawed at her face, rubbed her eyes several times, but the fog remained.

"Stop it!" Trinity screamed. "Leave me alone!"

In fear, Trinity charged the mirror running face-first into it and shattering the glass. She felt the wound on her chin and wiped the blood onto her jeans. Trinity quickly found another passage and moments later exited the funhouse.

Gabriel was standing there with Rachel waiting for Trinity when she stumbled out. He saw the blood dripping down her chin and neck and ran to her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, frantically.

Trinity didn't answer. She saw Rachel standing off in the distance behind him. She looked scared, confused. *I am scary and confusing,* Trinity thought.

"What happened to you?" Gabriel said.

No answer.

"What happened to your face?"

No answer. She remembered the fog, felt at her eyes.

"My eyes," she said, her voice trembling. "There's something in them."

Gabriel examined her carefully. "I don't see anything," he said.

"You have to believe me," she begged. "Look!"

"There's nothing there," he argued, angrily.

"You have to get it out," she said, tears running down her cheeks.

Gabriel grabbed both her arms tightly, shook her. "Enough!" he screamed.

She stopped.

“You are empty,” she thought she heard him say.

“What?” she asked, calmly.

“I said, there’s nothing there,” he said.

“No, you said something else.”

Suddenly, the fog lifted from her eyes and she saw the fog move into his. His appearance became ghostlike to Trinity. He was an apparition floating there lifelessly. She backed away in fear and ran toward the beach. Gabriel followed, calling after her, calling out her name.

Trinity. Trinity. Trinity.

When she reached the shore, she stopped. Inches before the water. The voices were loud. So loud. She covered her ears. It didn’t make a difference. She screamed wretchedly. Animalistically. Her knees hit the sand.

The voices: “I am empty. I am empty. You are empty. We are empty.”

Trinity: “Stop! Please, stop it!”

The voices rose and rose and rose until Trinity thought her eardrums might burst or that she might lose consciousness. Still, they rose, rose, rose. She wallowed on the sand, begging for relief. Then, when the blackness plagued Trinity’s eyes and she felt herself slipping all the way away, the voices crescendoed into a resounding silence. She laid there immobile, listening to the spectral ringing that hung cold in the aftermath.

Her strength returned and she stood up. The ringing subsided and all that was left was the sloshing of waves and the echo of festivities from the carnival meters behind. Trinity stood and basked in the silence that she’d never before known to appreciate but that she now knew was as sacred as a holy instrument.

She looked to her right and there he was. The man in the red baseball cap again standing so close to Trinity that she knew she could catch him now if she tried. She waited to see what he would do. He stood still like she was standing still.

"What do you want?" she asked.

He said nothing.

"What do you want from me?"

Still nothing.

She waited a little more and then, when the timing was right, when she was ready, really ready to get him, she ran at him. He didn't move at all. Just stood statue-like until Trinity had her hands on him and was dragging him into the sea. He didn't fight her. He didn't pull away. He was like a doll. He moved when she moved. And when Trinity held his head under water and brought him back up and asked him 'what do you want from me' and he said nothing, she submerged him again and repeated the process until the man's mouth opened. She pulled him up again but he didn't speak. His mouth was open wide and he stared, but he didn't speak at all.

As she watched him, waiting for something from him, she knew he would never tell her. She would forever be trapped in his land and stay dumb and curious until her life was over. So, she shoved him back under the shallow water and held him there. Foam drifted across his image and he transformed before her into something else.

His face became Gabriel's face. She was horrified. Wanted to let go but couldn't. Wanted to stop but refused. Another wave rushed over the face in the depths and Gabriel's image became her own. A morphed version of Trinity sifted just beneath the surface of the saltwater.

She wanted to bring her up.

She wanted to stop.

She was drowning the man, the evil man. Then she was drowning Gabriel. Then she understood she was drowning herself.

"The Taste of Lemons"

I enter the courtroom earnestly with a strange, acidic taste in my mouth that I don't like but that reminds me of something important. People turn and stare. They know who I am. What I'm about to do.

My mother is sitting on the left side in the front row. Pro-defendant. The defendant is my father. She's staring at me too, gives me this delicate, paper grin as I pass her. She is childlike. Whenever I see my mother, I picture her drying her veiny hands on a dishtowel saying things like, "Eat something, Jennifer."

I see him at the defense table reclined a little in his chair. Mr. Reinhart, his lawyer, is leaned over toward him saying something. My father nods several times. They're talking about me probably. Our deal.

I go up to the witness stand, sit down. The wooden chair creaks in the dim quiet. The jury analyzes me, skimming for the slightest gesture or look that will give me away. I'm a circus attraction, a bearded lady or horned man. They're waiting to hear what I have to say.

I look over at my father again. He's looking at me too. That pesky acidic taste returns, leaking into the crevices under my tongue and spreading around my teeth. I lick my lips but look away from him when I do it.

I haven't seen him since Christmas in Baltimore. The last time was at a Christmas party at my Aunt Naomi's house in Lochearn. He had just come back from the grocery store, been gone two long hours. Log truck overturned on 95, he'd said. Held everyone up, he'd said. I remember he took off his jacket and Oriole's cap, hung them on the coat rack by the front door, then looked me straightly in the eye as he passed as if to say, "You're old news, honey."

I left after that.

Looking at him now in the crowded, thick courtroom, he looks so much older. His tanned skin is leathery. A used saddle. He's wearing a blue suit and his blond hair is slicked back greaser-like, smooth-talking-car-salesman-like. He always hated the idea of aging. Bought a BMW convertible for his 40th birthday just to prove he was still young. Then, he got older.

He palms a little wave at me. "Hi, Jenny Wenny," I can hear him say in his voice. His specific voice. I give him a little nod back. The jury notices.

He swallows and I watch him swallow. His tie bobs under his Adam's apple when he does it. I am uncomfortable. My throat tightens. I swallow too, trying to get rid of that awful taste in my mouth.

Then, I see her. She's straight across from me, hands buried in her lap. Her black hair is curled into tight, little ringlets and her white blouse looks freshly ironed. White. Prosecutor's choice, probably. Accents her innocence. The well of the court is a dense chasm between us. A valley of the shadow neither of us can cross. She not looking at me, and I'm glad.

Mr. Reinhart stands. His loafers clunk on the hardwood as he moves toward me. Clip. Clop. Clip. Clip. I think of horses. Hands in his pockets, chin cocked upwards smugly. Like he's waiting for an uppercut. Or a bridle.

He thanks me for taking time out of my day to be there.

"No problem," I say.

Mr. Reinhart is blocking part of my view so I can only see half of her now. Half an eye gaping. Half an arched brow. Half a wilted mouth. Half a white blouse.

He asks me about my father, Ezra Lennon. Asks about his character. What kind of father he was. Is. I say he was a good one. *Is* a good one. A good father. I say he worked a lot as an investment banker but still made time for me and my mother. I say he had a boat we used to go

fishing on in the summertime at Fell's Point. He named it *The Anne* after my mother. Anne Penzik Lennon. I say he's Catholic and my mother is Jewish, but my mother let him raise us Catholic. I say he loves The Beatles and used to joke with people about his last name. Lennon. "I'm related to John, actually," he'd say. "He's my second cousin."

"That's a good one," says Mr. Reinhart.

Mr. Reinhart is trying to paint my father as a family man, and I'm helping him do it. I have to. They kept their end of the deal so now I have to keep mine.

After all, it's what a good daughter does.

That horrible, acidic taste in my mouth resurfaces. Lemons, I realize. The taste is of lemons. I hate lemons. I hate the taste, the smell, the color. I ordered hot tea at a café downtown last Friday and the waitress mistakenly brought it to me with a slice of lemon in it. I snapped at her, sent it back. I felt bad afterwards, but not that bad.

When Mr. Reinhart is done, he sits down and smirks at my father. The prosecutor stands and comes over to me casually, like she just wants to chat.

"Ms. Penzik," she starts, "from what you told the defense you seem to have a good relationship with your father."

"Yes. I do."

"When's the last time you saw him?"

"A Christmas party at my aunt's house in Baltimore last year. I work a lot so I only come home around the holidays."

To the jury: "Let the record show the witness is referring to the night of December 24th, the date Lindsey Ramos says she was raped by the defendant."

I look at Lindsey again. I can see her fully now. She's finally looking at me. I don't like that she's looking at me.

To Jenny: "How often do you see your father?"

"Just once or twice a year around the holidays."

The prosecutor comes closer, folds her hands. "What do you remember about that night?"

"I remember that it was cold, snowing," I say, adjusting myself in the chair. "My Aunt Naomi made latkes and beef brisket like usual. I remember that."

"Do you remember seeing Ms. Ramos there?" the prosecutor asks.

"Yes."

"How do you know Ms. Ramos?"

"She's a family friend. She's dating my cousin Andrew."

"Now, you met Ms. Ramos before the night of December 24th, correct?" she asks.

"Yes."

"When?"

"I think the first time was at Andrew's piano recital at their school."

"You talked to her?"

"Yes."

"You liked talking with her?"

"She's a lot younger than me so—"

"She's 13."

She's 13.

"Yes," I say.

"But you like talking to her, despite the age gap?"

"Yes."

"Do you like her?"

"What?"

"Do you like Ms. Ramos?" she repeats.

I look at Lindsey. "She's nice. Funny."

Lindsey's eyes burn into me. Two dark little coals, hot to the touch.

"Funny? How's that?" the prosecutor asks.

"She just told this joke when we were opening presents. It was funny."

"What was the joke?"

Mr. Reinhart objects to the question.

"It speaks to Ms. Ramos' character, Your Honor," the prosecutor argues.

The judge allows the question.

"What was the joke?" the prosecutor repeats.

"We were all talking about why we have a Christmas tree if we're Jewish and Lindsey said, what do you call a Christmas tree that knows karate?"

When I don't say anything else, the prosecutor says, "I don't know, what?"

"Spruce Lee."

Quiet laughter slowly erupts throughout the room. Even among the jury. Even the prosecutor smiles at the punch line. It settles before the judge gets involved.

"That's a good one," the prosecutor says.

I say nothing.

"Did you talk to your father that night?" she asks.

"Not really."

"You see your own father once a year and you didn't talk to him?"

"We said *hello* and *goodbye*. That's usual for us."

The prosecutor goes to the plaintiff's table and picks up a stack of papers. She scans the top page.

"According to your cousin Andrew Warner's testimony, you and the defendant were arguing in the backyard at around ten p.m. Does *that* sound accurate?"

I swallow. There's the taste again. "We were just talking," I say.

Yes, we were arguing.

"About what?"

"I don't remember."

I do remember.

"You remembered Ms. Ramos' joke word-for-word, but you can't remember a conversation with your own father—who you only see once or twice a year?" she says. She sounds sardonic now.

I say nothing.

"Several members of your family testified that you stormed out of the house in anger. Do you remember *that*?"

"I left, but I wasn't angry."

"What did your father do that made you so angry that night?"

"Nothing."

"He must have done something."

"I don't remember."

"Well, what do you remember, Ms. Penzik? Because we'd all like to know."

I remember only one thing: lemons. The memory spills through easily, unwantedly. I hate lemons. I hate the smell, the taste, the color, the texture. I hate them because my father loved them. He loved them in iced tea. He's southern. From Charleston, originally. Everybody drinks iced tea down there, he used to say. My mother had to learn how to make it right for him. Sugar goes in before the ice otherwise it doesn't mix well.

It goes in this order: tea, sugar, ice, then lemon. No deviation.

End of every meal, after he finished his tea, he'd take one last, big swallow then let out a boisterous, contented sigh. An I'm-full sigh. A clear-my-plate-Mary sigh. Then he'd shove his thick fingers to the bottom of the tall glass and retrieve the two or three soaked lemons. One at a time, he'd suck on them until he drained the meat of the leftover lemon juice and tea that the slice had sponged up while it was in the glass. He'd toss the dried remains on his plate, and when he was finished, he'd often suggest taking me for a drive in his BMW with the top down, which I loved because it meant getting my own kind of freedom.

And as we would drive down 95 with the top down and "Here Comes the Sun" by The Beatles blaring on the radio and the warm, Atlantic wind whipping through my tangled, twelve-year-old hair, I would become free. So very free. As free as any child could be.

But then the freedom left because Dad took an exit off the highway and drove us to Garden Hill Park and parked the car by a grove of trees and turned the radio down low and he took off both our seatbelts and made me kiss him on the cheek, and the next thing I knew I had no freedom because he took it from me in a way no child's freedom should ever be taken. And as he took my freedom, I could smell the leftover lemon on his breath. Over and over, I smelled the lemons and I hated them after that. I hated them even more the next time it happened, and the next, and the next. Most times, I stared at the Orioles cap on his dashboard

wondering if I'd ever get to see them play, or get to do anything again, without thinking about my father and lemons and how much I hated them.

Both.

I never told my mother about the lemons. She never asked. Assumed the best, just like she was assuming now. Dad told me I couldn't her or anyone. Ever.

It's not what a good daughter does, he said.

The prosecutor looks at me, says, "Mr. Warner stated that during the argument with the defendant, he overheard you say," looks at the page, "he stated that you said, '*I saw you, Dad. I saw you.'* Did you say those words to the defendant that night?"

"I don't know. I don't remember."

I do remember.

"Ms. Penzik, you said saw something. What did you see?"

I didn't see anything. Nothing at all. All I saw was my father, the good father that he was—is—realize that we were running low on sodas and offer to go to the grocery store. All I saw was my father convince Lindsey's parents to let Lindsey come and bundle up so they could drive there with the top down in his old BMW listening to Beatles songs that he never got tired of and promise that Lindsey would be perfectly safe and back within twenty minutes. All I saw was my father come back with Lindsey two hours later and explain it was because a log truck had overturned on the highway and they couldn't get past it. All I saw was Lindsey wearing the same face I wore when I discovered my revulsion for lemons.

She at 13 and I at 12.

I agreed to lie for my father if my father did something for me. He had to sit in front of me in Mr. Reinhart's office while Mr. Reinhart went out for a long smoke break. He had to look

me in the eye without hubris or pride or even the smallest hint of indifference. He had to have remorse in his eyes, his voice, his hands—his whole body had to be sorry. He had to say it to me. He had to say that at the end of every meal, he'd shove his thick, contemptable fingers to the bottom of his tea glass and thieve two, maybe three, ruined lemons, and that, one by one, he'd suck them dry vampire-like until the meat was only filmy slivers that he would discard on his plate. He had to say that after dinner he would convince me go for a drive with the promise of rock n' roll and maybe some mint chocolate chip ice cream on the way home. And then after luring me to the soundtrack of "Hey Jude" and convertibles and freedom, he would take an exit off the highway and drive me to Garden Hill Park and park the car by a grove of trees and turn the radio down low and take off both our seatbelts and force me to kiss him on the cheek, and then he would steal my freedom with the smell of lemons on his breath.

Over and over and over and over and over and over.

And he did say it to me right there in Mr. Reinhart's office. He told me what he had done to me. And I knew he wasn't sorry. I knew he had taken Lindsey Ramos' freedom too. I knew it that night when he passed me like I was old news and went into the kitchen with the new packs of soda and was greeted by my mother and Aunt Naomi and Lindsey's parents and everyone else like he hadn't just done what he'd did. I knew it when he left Lindsey standing by the stairs in her ice pink puffer jacket and duck boots and she looked at me like I had something she wanted but that she knew I could never give. I knew because her eyes were my eyes. They were the same. We were the same. Mutuals.

He tried to make us less but indirectly made us equal.

"Ms. Penzik," the prosecutor says when I don't answer.

"Sorry," I say.

She watches me for a moment, then says, “Do you think your father raped Lindsey Ramos?”

I think about the lemons. They weigh heavy on my mind. I should tell someone about them someday. Now would be a good time.

I look at my knuckles and not at anyone in particular. “I can’t say whether he did, or he didn’t. I haven’t seen him since Christmas in Baltimore.”

"The House Lenormand"

"You love it, don't you?" Tim asked Annie. "We love it," he said to the realtor.

Annie went over to the fireplace.

"Was there a fire?" Annie asked, stroking her index finger along the underside of the cherry mantle picking up a thick layer of black dust.

"I don't believe so," the realtor said. "The previous owners were careless. Let things fall apart. A little love and attention is all this place needs."

"A little?" Annie said under her breath.

The realtor didn't hear. Tim did.

"So much fire, so close to home," Tim smiled at Annie from across the room, shoved his hands in his pockets.

The fireplace was symbolic of the rest of the house. Old, large, and out-of-date. It sat at the center of the first floor, the rest of the rooms circling around it. Its crumbling red brick and mahogany mantel made Annie feel even less certain about the place.

Annie crouched in front of the brick hearth and slid open the mesh screen. She reached a cold hand inside the fireplace, felt around for a moment, then located the damper release and pulled hard. A loud scratching noise, metal on metal, sounded, but the release didn't budge.

"Oh," the realtor realized, "I believe the damper's broken on that."

The realtor led them into the kitchen and connected dining room. The two rooms were in the back of the house and overlooked a small sunroom with a door leading to the back garden.

The house was a Colonial. White. Two massive acres. Massive anyway to someone like Annie. "Known for their geometry," the realtor told them, giddy. "It's your typical four-over-four style except for the sunroom addition there," she pointed.

"What's that—four-over-four?" Tim asked, closing a pantry door.

"Four rooms down, four up."

Annie looked at Tim. "Four?" she mouthed.

Annie wandered over to the bay windows that looked out over the front of the property. Tim's silver Audi was parked in the muddy drive. She knew he would complain about the splatters later.

Annie wasn't sure if she loved the house the way Tim did. It was upstate. Away from people. She liked people and she wasn't sure if I wanted to live so far away from them. Tim had been insistent about seeing the place. He wanted a change from the city. Someplace quiet where he could finish his novel. What the novel was about, Annie couldn't say. He never let her read his writing.

"You're a private artist," she'd always say.

Annie wasn't herself, and she hadn't been herself for quite time. When Annie first met Tim at the law library on campus three years ago, she was most certainly herself. She was in her third year of law school working on a research paper for a torts class. Tim was on a computer near her and couldn't log in, so he asked to borrow her student password. He smiled when he asked, and his smile was warm and pearly. She felt something surge through her, something new and prickly, which she surmised to be physical attraction.

They went on their first date the next night. Some pizza at a local joint downtown and a late-night walk around campus. He wore a striped scarf and an overcoat. November in the Northeast. He looked sophisticated, Annie thought. He laughed at all her jokes. Loudly. Threw his head back and everything. She liked that.

They had gone to a poetry café called Primitive Prose because Tim thought it was eclectic and unique and Annie figured he was trying to impress her with his literary suave. Annie hated poetry but she lied and said, "I like it alright." At a table by a window in the back, Annie had talked about the pressure from her dad to work at his firm after she finished law school. Her dad was partner at Mancini and Fischer—he was the *Fischer* part. They handled mostly DUIs and fraud cases, but she was more interested in environmental law. She told Tim how, as a child, she planted lilies with her mother in the little garden at their rowhouse in Brooklyn. "It was my only source of life at the time," Annie told Tim, remembering things like the way the dirt smelled and her mother's laugh. "That's when I knew I cared more about plants than people."

Tim had talked about his rural life on a farm upstate. Instead of lilies, his family raised chickens. His parents died in a car accident when he was fifteen, he explained, and he'd gone to live with his uncle in the city after. His uncle was reclusive. A writer. Stern, but kind. He sent Tim to a fancy private school, got him into a good college. His uncle wanted Tim to be a writer too, payment for taking in his orphaned nephew, Tim always supposed.

"I'm just playing along," Tim had said. "I'm not very good at it. I do like Raymond Carver a lot. Have you ever read anything by him?"

"No," Annie had said, wishing that she had read something by him.

During one of the poetry readings, Tim had leaned in and palmed Annie's necklace. It was silver with a padlock charm hung on it. She wore it always. She felt a little intruded upon when he touched it.

"This special or something?" he asked.

She took it out of his hand carefully, thumbing the surface. "Yes," she said. "My mom and I had matching ones."

"Wait, wait," he held up his hands. "Let me guess," he paused. For effect, Annie supposed. "Lock and key? You're the lock, she's the key?"

Annie nodded, taking in every inch of Tim's perceived sincerity.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She looked at him. "For what?"

"For talking about your mother. She's dead, isn't she?"

Annie's mother had died in a house fire almost a year ago to the day. Someone had stabbed Elizabeth Fisher seventeen times before setting the place on fire. Whoever had killed Annie's mother had taken the key necklace too as a trophy, a sick reminder of the tragedy Annie had experienced. The story made national headlines. "The Fisher girl," the media called Annie. Annie's dad had a solid alibi, out drinking with a colleague.

So, police had started looking at Annie for it. Annie had had some issues with drugs when she was in high school. Did a stint in rehab at 18. Those were things she kept to herself, but they were also things that the police had found out about. They thought Annie had maybe had mental breakdown. Maybe it was an accident. Annie denied it and her name was later cleared, but the damage had been done. The label stuck no matter how hard she tried to shake it.

Since then, Annie had developed a strange feeling that had left her in a state of not feeling like herself, of seeming like a stranger in her own body and spirit. Disassociation, some call it. Annie felt disconnected from her emotions, thoughts, and her surroundings. The feeling had faded over time and, for a while, she had convinced herself that the feeling wasn't there at all. But it was there, lurking and teeming just under the surface.

During the next few days, Tim was aloof, rarely calling or texting. Annie thought he was done with her. Then suddenly, one night while she was at her dorm studying, he called. She was

sitting on her bed when he called. He told Annie, “I think I could love a woman like you.” Annie was surprised at the comment, thought he might have been pressing his luck. She told him she couldn’t love anyone who didn’t let her grow lilies in the garden in whatever house they lived in so she could think of her mother when she saw them. “I’ll get you lilies,” he had said.

A year after Annie graduated from law school, she married Tim at St. Luke’s in the city. Tim went there sometimes with his Uncle Parker growing up, the uncle that had raised him. His uncle showed up but was standoffish most of the time, and he left early before Annie had a chance to really speak to him.

Annie’s father wasn’t happy she was marrying Tim. Whenever Annie would ask why he didn’t like Tim, he would just respond, “I don’t know. There’s just something about him.” Despite everything, Annie’s father still walked her down the aisle and danced the father-daughter dance with her at the reception. They danced to James Taylor’s “How Sweet It Is.” They had danced and danced and Annie had thought that, for the first time in a long time, she was finally herself and would stay herself for good.

The feeling subsided for a long while, but had since returned. It began creeping in when Tim first suggested leaving New York. Annie tried to brush it off, pretend it wasn’t there. On the drive down to see the old, white colonial that Tim had seen in the paper and had fallen madly in love with, the feeling only grew. Standing in the house now, though, the house Tim said reminded him of his own dead parents, Annie couldn’t deny that the feeling had fully reemerged.

The house, it seemed, magnified the feeling in Annie, making her feel even further from herself than ever before. It was a trap set for her, waiting for her to come in and remind her of things she never wanted to be reminded of.

As the showing continued, the realtor led Annie and Tim through the kitchen to the small glassed-in sunroom in the back.

"This room has great potential," the realtor said.

Annie looked around. She could see into the kitchen and dining room through the large panes of glass that encased the entire addition.

"This could be my writing studio, babe!" he said.

Tim was elated. Clearly. Annie tried to be. Couldn't. She wasn't herself still.

"Oh, you're a writer?" the realtor pretended to care. She was about to make a sale anyway.

"Trying to be," Tim said. "Fame doesn't happen in a fortnight."

Annie watched Tim speak, thumbing her lock necklace.

Against Annie's better judgment, they signed the papers for the old colonial the very day.

After they bought new furniture for the living room and bedroom, Annie still wasn't herself. Even after she'd spent weeks unpacking every last box and finding the right cabinet for the pots and pans. Even after they'd cooked the best pot roast Annie had ever eaten and had electric sex in the writing studio and on the dining room table and left the dishes until the following evening.

Even then, Annie wasn't herself.

Annie couldn't quite pinpoint why she felt so distant from her former self. She wondered if working for her father had been the trigger. She'd gone to work for his firm right after graduation two years earlier. That's about when it started. Maybe a little before. Or maybe it was more recent than that. Moving out of the city she'd always known. The change of scenery. From tall buildings to tall Maples. From a city of thousands to just the two of them on a two-acre plot.

She was already starting to miss the routine, the paperwork, the courtroom, seeing her dad every day and occasionally trying to match suits. He texted her all the time, called on the weekends, but it wasn't enough for Annie.

She threw herself in the remodeling of the house. They repainted the kitchen a canary yellow, one of Annie's stipulations, redid the tile in the kitchen, and refinishing the wood floors throughout.

One afternoon, Tim came in the kitchen while Annie was painting. She was on the next-to-top rung of the stepladder rolling yellow paint onto the wall above the writing studio.

"You're going to kill yourself," he said.

"At least I can rest easy knowing the kitchen's painted," Annie joked. She glanced at Tim and noticed his hands covered in some kind of black dust. "What's that?"

"What?"

Pointed with the roller. "On your hands."

"Oh. Soot," he realized, wiping his hands on his jeans. "Leslie was right. That damper's messed up."

"We should call someone."

They had only been living in what Annie called "the White House" for a little over a month when she started to go stir crazy. So, they invited her dad over for the weekend, made up the guestroom for him with a traditional patchwork quilt they bought at a boutique in town our first week there. Tim thought the quilt "looked like home."

Annie was surprised at first that Tim had invited him, seeing as they never really saw eye to eye on politics, God, or anything else. That night while they were making dinner, Tim told her

it would be good to have family in the house. “You’re family,” she said, setting three plates on the table. Her father would be there any minute.

Tim was in the kitchen finishing up the pasta. “No, like blood family,” he said.

“Hey, we should invite your Uncle Parker sometime.”

He paused. “I don’t know.”

“I thought you liked him.”

“I do. He’s just not an upstate kind of guy.”

“What kind of guy is he?”

“A literary snob, wine snob. Just a snob. It’s Manhattan or nowhere for him.”

“Lots of writers go to the country for inspiration,” she said, laying out the silverware as neatly as she could.

“Not Uncle Parker. He said I was, quote, *selling out* when he found out I was moving up here.”

“Thoreau did it, didn’t he?” entering the kitchen, leaning against the doorway.

“Did what?”

“Move to the country for, you know, creative inspiration.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“You should call him.”

“Thoreau? Can’t, honey.”

She laughed. “I mean your uncle.”

“Maybe.”

The doorbell.

Her dad was always early. Annie took his coat, kissed his scratchy cheek. He was in a suit. Of course. Slapping Tim's face already. Tim never wore suits.

Tim just called, "Hello, George!" from the kitchen.

"Can't even greet his father-in-law?" her dad asked.

Annie scolded him, laid his overcoat on the banister. She looked at the coat for a second. It reminded her of the coat Tim wore on their first date. She smiled.

Annie gave her dad a tour while Tim finished up dinner, showed him the new living room and bedroom furniture. He liked it. Showed him the guestroom with the patchwork quilt Tim had picked out. He didn't care for that. "Too old fashioned," he said. He liked modern things. Annie wondered if her dad and Tim's Uncle Parker might get along.

Then she showed him the sunroom that Tim had turned into his writing studio. Her dad was angry that Tim got the sunroom as his office while Annie was secluded to a small room upstairs. He tried to convince her to come back to the city.

"You don't like the house?" she said.

"I don't like you out here all alone," he explained.

"I'm not alone. I've got Tim."

"Tim," he sneered.

They were at an impasse. So they had dinner. Fettuccini carbonara with fresh crab from a local market and Annie's dad's favorite wine. Tim was cordial. Annie's dad was sarcastic. Little comments here and there. Finally, a comment about Tim's writing. Tim grew quiet, started clearing the table. Annie scolded her dad yet again. He apologized. Tim came back.

"Sorry, Timbo," he grandstanded. "Too much wine, yeah?"

Tim nodded grimly and continued clearing. Annie could tell Tim was hurt. It was his idea to invite her dad up anyway. He was just trying to be nice.

Her dad offered to leave rather than stay the rest of the weekend. Annie convinced him to at least spend the night, so he did. Tim barely spoke to her the rest of the night. They went to sleep without so much as a goodnight.

When Annie got up the next morning, her dad had already left. The bed was made, his car was gone. Tim was in the sunroom at his laptop writing. He smiled at her. No longer mad, she thought.

He offered to make her some coffee. “You want me to make you some coffee?”

“He left early,” she said.

“Guess so.”

“Sorry about—well, everything.”

“It’s fine,” he said without looking up. “You want me to make you some coffee?”

Annie settled more into the house after that. She felt like she had to settle in, make it a home because Tim wanted it to be the home he never had. She continued calling her dad on the weekends, but they rarely texted throughout the week. Even when they did talk, it was all surface niceties.

At the local grocery one afternoon in the produce section, Annie noticed a woman staring at her from across the apples and oranges.

Annie stared back. “Can I help you?” she said, a little irritated. She was irritated because she knew what the woman would say. She would tell Annie she’d seen her somewhere before. Then the woman would snap her fingers and say something like, “Aren’t you the Fisher girl?”

“I know you,” the woman said.

Here it comes, Annie thought.

She snapped her fingers. “You just moved in,” she realized. “The old colonial on Orchard Road. We’re right next to you.”

Surprise, surprise. “The blue house with the barn, right?”

“That’s us,” she grinned. “Well, welcome, neighbor,” the woman drug her shopping cart over beside the tomatoes where Annie was parked. She hugged Annie emphatically. Like an old friend. Like a mother. Annie was uncomfortable but also a little flattered by the hospitality.

The woman introduced herself as Sandra Wilks. A retired art professor at Newman College and, as Annie deduced from her dress and personality, clearly an eccentric. She and her husband Terry lived in the house beside Annie and Tim. It was the closest house to them of any others on the road.

“How do you like it so far?” Sandra gushed. “It’s nice, isn’t it? Great place for young couples like you two. I’m assuming the man I always see tinkering around the garden is your husband. Then again, I’m always assuming,” she laughed at herself. “The last people? They left the place a mess, I hear. You two fixing it up?”

“Trying to,” Annie said. “We had the floors refinished and we’re in the middle of painting still, but it still needs a lot of love and attention. We fix one thing and another thing breaks. You know how it goes.”

“Oh, do I,” she said. “You know, Terry worked on airplanes most his life before retiring last year. He’s a great handyman. If you need anything done—”

A man approached with a bag of chips and put them in Sandra's cart. It was Terry. Sandra introduced them. Terry seemed happy to meet Annie. Then he cocked his head at her. "You look familiar," he said.

Oh no. Annie thought. *Now, here it comes.*

"Aren't you that Fisher woman?"

"Yes," Annie said, trying to stay calm.

Sandra looked confused, asked Terry what he meant.

Annie's hands began to shake. The memories from the night of the fire flooded her mind. The sheet had fallen off her mother's charred body as it was being wheeled out on the gurney. She had seen the body. Since then, Annie hadn't been herself.

Her ears started ringing. Terry realized what he'd said had upset her. He apologized. Sandra tried to help her. Tim appeared and put his arm around Annie, tried to get her to breathe. "In for four, out for four," he said. She could barely hear him.

Annie began hyperventilating and, before she could stop it from happening, everything went dark.

When Annie woke up, she was in the White House on the couch covered up under Tim's patchwork quilt. She sat up and heard Tim in the kitchen on the phone. He was talking low. She called for him and he hung up the phone and came in the living room.

"She's awake," he said, sitting at the other end of the couch.

"I'm so sorry," she said. Her head wilted.

"Stop apologizing, babe," he chuckled, quietly. "I'm just glad you're okay."

"Me too." She felt the knot on the back of her head. She must have gotten it when she fell.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"Who was what?"

"On the phone."

"Oh, right," he chuckled, a little evasive. "My uncle."

Annie looked at Tim's pants and noticed streaks of black soot smeared on them. "Were you working on the damper again?"

Tim looked at his pants then at Annie again. "Thought it would've been nice to surprise you with a fire when you woke up," he said with a half-smile. "No luck, though."

"We should call someone," Annie said."

Annie and Tim went to bed around midnight like usual that night. Around five a.m., Annie jolted awake in a cold sweat. She'd had the dream again. The one where she almost saves her mother from the fire. The flames, spiraling higher than heaven, never seemed to touch her in the dream. In fact, they felt cold on her skin, and she'd walk through them valorously, pick her mother up off the bed, and carry her out of the room. Right at the threshold of the front door, safety just beyond, the dream would end. Every time. This time was no different.

Almost, she thought.

She looked over at Tim. Fast asleep. Snoring. She was too alert to lie back down so she rose and went to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. While waiting for the coffee to brew, she decided to go into Tim's studio. She never went in there. Tim liked his privacy.

She entered the early darkness of the room and headed toward Tim's desk but tripped over something. She looked down and at her feet was a large stack of now scattered paper. A

manuscript. *The* manuscript, she guessed. The one Tim had been working on for the last year. He'd started it soon after they met and he'd been working tirelessly on it for nearly two years. Annie didn't know Tim had finished the novel, but there it sat pristinely scattered in the middle of the floor. Annie realigned the stack and when she retrieved the title cover, her heart pounded in her chest.

The cover title read, *My Chickadee.*

She swallowed. Chickadee was Annie's childhood nickname, a nickname her mother had given Annie for her incessant singing, but she never told Tim that. She told Tim a lot of things, but not that.

She lifted the title page and read the first line.

The murder of Elizabeth Fisher shook New York City like an untimely nor'easter.

It was about her mother. About her murder.

Suddenly, Tim was there in the doorway. Annie wasn't startled. She was glad he was there. She stood up, shook the manuscript angrily at him. "What is this?" she said.

"You went through my things?" he said, snatching the manuscript out of her hand.

"You had no right, Tim."

"I'm sorry," he defended.

"How did you know?" Annie asked.

"Know what?" Tim said.

"How did you know she called me 'chickadee'?"

"You mentioned it once."

"No, I didn't. I've never told you that. I would remember if I told you."

"Well, you must have. It's in there, isn't it?"

"You can't do this, Tim. That's my life," she gestured toward the manuscript Tim was now cradling. "Not a New York Times bestseller."

"I'm not doing this with you right now," he started back through the kitchen.

Annie followed. "Did you marry me for me, or because I was the Fisher girl?"

Tim stopped dead by the refrigerator and turned around. He was angry. Visibly. "Are you kidding me?"

"No, I'm not. Tell me the truth. Did you just want to make money off me, make a name for yourself?"

"Fine. You caught me," he said, moving toward her. "I saw you around campus all those years ago. I knew who you were. Marrying you was all a part of my diabolical plan to write a novel about you and your dead mother and make millions off you. That's why I'm a deadbeat, unpublished author ripping up tiles and going to farmer's markets with you every weekend instead of accepting a Pulitzer. I'm tired of this, Annie. I'm sick and tired of you using your tragedy to rail me every chance you get. Yeah, I'm writing about your life. So what? Maybe your life's more interesting than mine. You ever think of that?"

Annie realized she might have judged to harshly, but it was too late. Tim was wounded, she was wounded. What was said had been said and there was no taking anything back.

After a few moments of silence, Tim said, "I have to get dressed."

"Why?"

"The meeting with my agent." He started to leave the kitchen but faced Annie once again. "You know, I was planning on us going to the city together today and going out to dinner afterwards so I could tell you about the book. It was going to be a surprise. I thought—" he huffed in frustration, unable to find the right words. "I thought you'd be happy."

He stood for a moment, then marched over to the trash bin and tossed it in, leaving the plastic turnstile spinning violently. On his way out, Annie tried to apologize but he waved her off. He'd just stay the weekend at his Uncle Parker's place in the city, he told her on his way to the bedroom. Give them some space from each other. Annie didn't object. She was never the kind of girl who chased someone.

Less than an hour later, the front door slammed. Annie was still in the kitchen. She stood there leaned up against the counter with a hot cup of coffee, listened to the engine start up then fade away into the distance.

Annie tried to take her mind off things. She was almost finished painting the master bedroom when there was a loud bang downstairs. She stopped and listened, fearing Tim had decided to come home anyway. She headed downstairs calling Tim's name but no one answered. Then another loud noise echoed from the front of the house. Annie gasped at the sound and followed it to the front door. Someone was knocking, she realized, and she opened the door. It was Sandra standing there looking apologetic. Annie greeted her in a paint-stained tee-shirt and sweats. Sandra was holding a saran-wrapped pie. It looked like cherry.

"This is a 'my husband's an idiot' pie."

Annie laughed. "Thank you," she said, taking the pie. "You didn't have to."

"We didn't have a proper neighbor introduction, so this is it," Sandra laughed nervously, then paused for a moment. They both felt the awkwardness sink in. "Seriously, Annie," Sandra finally said, "I'm so sorry. I had no idea. Terry feels awful. I feel awful."

"It's fine," she waved a hand.

Annie had planned on spending the night drinking a bottle of Pinot for dinner and was considering setting Tim's writing studio on fire, but seeing Sandra there now made her not want

to be alone anymore. So, she asked Sandra if she and Terry would like to come back later for dinner so they could get to know each other better. Sandra was excited at the prospect and agreed to return at seven.

Annie tried to recreate Tim's fettuccini carbonara with crab. It turned out better than she expected but it wasn't as good as Tim's, which bothered her.

When Sandra and Terry arrived, they were cordial and didn't mention the grocery story incident. Annie figured Terry might feel a little embarrassed so she didn't bring it either.

Annie gave them a tour, which she felt was an appropriate thing to do. She showed them the upstairs first. The same route she'd taken her dad on. She showed them the guestroom with Tim's quilt. Annie could tell they didn't like the quilt. She was starting to think she didn't like it either.

Lastly, she took them through the kitchen and showed them the writing studio. Sandra seemed thoroughly intrigued by the room. She gasped at the beauty of the room when they entered, and moments later she stopped and stood perfectly still as if she were trying to hear a sound that was barely audible.

"Sandra?" Annie said.

Sandra didn't answer. Her hand raised and swept slowly around the room.

"What's going on?" Annie asked Terry.

"She's—sensitive," Terry said, almost whispered. A pursed nod.

"To what?" Annie whispered back, but Terry didn't answer.

"It's cold in here," Sandra faced Annie. "Aren't you cold?"

"A little, I guess," Annie said.

Sandra moved closer. "Are you a believer?"

"In?"

"In anything."

"My family is Catholic. I don't really practice anymore."

Sandra came even closer to Annie. "You don't have to believe, honey, but you have to know, I have to tell you, that there is some kind of dark presence here. Something otherworldly."

Annie chuckled skeptically but played along. "Like a ghost or demon or something?"

"Not all darknesses are that simply defined. You know, I have a group of friends that meet up bi-monthly. We're at my house this week. Why don't you come check it out?"

"Sandy, don't put any pressures on the poor girl," Terry moaned. "Those card reading shows aren't for everyone."

Dinner was nice for Annie. Sandra and Terry were funny, easygoing kind of people. Terry was smart and attractive for a 50-something guy. Every time he'd tell a joke, which he was good at, he would always look at Sandra to make sure she was laughing. It was a small thing, but Annie knew that it meant Terry loved Sandra a lot. She tried to think of times when Tim looked at her when she laughed. She couldn't remember.

Sandra didn't bring up the invitation again during dinner, but the uneasiness she had felt in Tim's writing studio stayed in the back of Annie's mind.

A silence lulled. Terry drummed his fingers on the table and smiled at Sandra to fill the void.

"I was in college when it happened," Annie said out of nowhere.

Sandra and Terry both looked at her simultaneously. They knew immediately what she was talking about.

"I came home for the weekend from Syracuse. I wasn't even supposed to be home that weekend. I don't know why I came home. 'Light My Fire' was playing on the radio on the drive there. I sang to it. I like The Doors. I was happy. Then, I wasn't. There were cops and lights and people and cameras everywhere. I saw her body. I don't remember how I saw it. I just remember seeing it somehow. It looked inhuman, just melted flesh. It wasn't" —she shook her head, fighting back tears— "my mom. Maybe I imagined it, you know? Made it up in my head that I saw her just to get to see her. It was like some terrible dream that started way back then and just keeps going." Annie paused to collect herself.

Sandra reached across the table and held Annie's hand, squeezed it. "They never found out who did it?"

"No," Annie said, knowing Sandra and Terry both probably knew she'd been the prime suspect.

They didn't seem scared of her, though. That made Annie feel safe.

"I know what you're thinking," Annie said. "I loved my mother. The media—well, they conflate things."

Terry made a joke about how if anyone was crazy, it was his mother-in-law. Sandra rolled her eyes and laughed at that. Then everyone was laughing and the sorrow rolled away like an old rug. Annie mentioned how cold it was in the house all of a sudden. Terry offered to start a fire in the fireplace, but Annie reminded them of the broken damper.

"Let me take a look at it," Terry said, sliding his chair out.

"He's trying to impress me," Sandra smirked. "Be the *big man.*"

He went into the living room, knelt in front of the fireplace, and bravely stuck a hand up the chimney. He complained that he couldn't see, so Annie brought him a flashlight from the

kitchen. He shone the light up the chimney and contorted his body until he was almost lying flat on his back on the hearth. Sandra came over with her glass of wine and stood and watched. Terry rattled around for a few minutes then stopped.

"What is that?" he said, tugging on something.

He finally loosened whatever was wedged inside, but the force tossed the object behind his head. He shimmied out and located the object behind a charred piece of wood. He wiped the charcoal off and examined it.

"Here's your problem," he chuckled. "This book of matches was stuck up there."

He handed the matchbox to Annie. She shook it once. Its contents rattled.

"It should purr like a kitten now," he said, wiping his hands on his slacks.

"Oh, don't do that," Annie realized.

Terry's pants looked expensive. She tossed the matchbox on the mantel and ran to the kitchen to get him a towel. She couldn't find a clean one at first. One had fallen into the sink and was wet. The extra towel that was usually hung on the stove handle was also missing. She finally found it sunk onto the floor sticking halfway out from under the edge of a cabinet. She straightened and that's when she heard Sandra call for her.

"Annie?" Sandra called.

Annie came back into the main room where she saw Sandra and Terry standing and gawking at the dining table. Annie looked at the table too but couldn't understand why Sandra had called her. Then she looked, really looked, at the table. In between the empty wine glasses and dirty plates and silverware was a stack of white paper. When Annie got closer, she looked at the words written on the top of the stack.

My Chickadee.

It was Tim's manuscript, she realized. The one Tim had thrown away in the kitchen trash. Annie hurried into the kitchen and checked the bin. There was nothing there but used coffee grounds. When she came back into the dining room, she simply stood and looked at the manuscript and looked at Sandra and Terry. Back and forth several times trying to understand.

"Did you do this?" Annie asked.

"No," Sandra said.

"We thought you did," Terry said afterward.

"Is this some kind of joke?" She stopped suddenly when thought she had things pieced together in her mind. "You knew who I was in the grocery store, didn't you?" she said to Sandra.

A look of confusion crossed Sandra face. "What? Annie, no."

"Yeah. You knew who I was. What, did you and your little psychic group think I was an easy target?"

Annie grabbed the manuscript off the table and began ripping pages out of its stapled spine. She chucked handfuls of white at Sandra and Terry. Handful after handful. Annie couldn't stop the rage. She eventually looked down at her hands and saw blood. A papercut, she thought. Then she looked back toward Sandra and Terry. They weren't standing there anymore. They were both lying on the floor motionless, covered in blood as well. Annie looked back at her hands. There was more blood now, and instead of a severed manuscript, Annie was holding a bloody steak knife.

Back to the table again. There was the manuscript lying there where it had been before she picked it up. Before when she *thought* she picked it up.

How did I confuse paper with a knife? she thought.

In the wake of things, in the revelation of what she'd done, Annie did only what she thought was appropriate in the moment. Night still hanging on, she dug two deep holes in the back garden under the lilies she'd planted months earlier. She used the quilt, Tim's quilt, to drag each body through the kitchen, through the studio, out into the back garden, and into the holes. She covered Sandra and Terry with dirt and planted the lilies back on top of the putrid mounds.

Inside, she used the quilt to soak up a portion of the blood and hid it in the closet by the stairs. Then she scrubbed the dining room floor with soap and water and then bleach. As she stood at the sink and watched the final bucket of soapy, bloody water descend down the drain, she felt nothing. She was blank, empty.

And, so, Annie went into the living room and laid down on the couch with red stains still on her hands and arms and clothes and face. She thought of her mother then. She thought about her body. The carnage. She stared at the ceiling feeling the weight of the lock necklace pressing against her throat.

She didn't remember closing her eyes, but suddenly they were closed and then they were open again and it was daylight. She sat up on the couch in a panic because she thought of Sandra and Terry whom she'd killed the night before. She glanced at her hand. No blood. Her clothes, she realized, were also clean. She didn't change clothes in the middle of the night or something because they were the same clothes she was wearing the night before.

Annie ran to the closet by the stairs and flung open the door. The bloody quilt was missing. The empty bucket she'd left by the sink wasn't there anymore either. Neither were any of the brushes she'd used.

In the bathroom mirror, she examined her face and figure. Clean.

She ran to the garden where she'd buried Sandra and Terry. The soil looked undisturbed, but she took the shovel and dug up one of the burial spots anyway, paying no mind to the lilies. Annie dug and dug but there was only earth, earth, and more earth.

She looked over at Sandra and Terry's house that sat on the other side of a little, grassy field that ran between the two houses. She'd never really looked at the house before. It was much more upkept than the White House. Its siding was light blue, a pale, tasteful blue. A Neptune, a lapis lazuli, on the green-painted horizon.

She felt calm only for a moment. Then she was on the phone inside, calling Sandra's number, checking everywhere for a sign of death while the phone trilled away.

Then Annie stopped because Sandra answered the phone. She was rather upbeat too. "Hey, girlfriend," Sandra said. "How you feeling?"

Annie couldn't speak for a moment. It had all been some kind of freak dream or hallucination, she realized. That's why there was no quilt. No bucket. No brushes. No bloody clothes. No undisturbed lilies.

None of it had been real.

"Sandra…" Annie trailed, wanting to explain the terrible experience. She was afraid to, though. She thought Sandra might be scared of her. She didn't want that. She wanted to be accepted for once. "What exactly—did I do—what I mean is, I'm sorry if I said anything or did anything—"

"—Oh, nothing at all," Sandra insisted in her thick, New York accent. "Terry and I, we were worried sick about you."

"You were? That's nice. It's just that I'm having trouble remembering things lately, lots of things, and I don't exactly—I don't really remember a lot about last night. Maybe the wine—"

"Sure, sure. That's understandable. You've been through so much. I mean, that story last night? Oy vey, sweetheart."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"Well, yeah. We had dinner, you talked about your mother, God rest her soul, Terry had just fixed the fireplace and you came out of the kitchen—looked like you'd seen a ghost."

"What about the manuscript?"

"Manuscript?"

"On the table."

"Honey, all I know it you just stood there like a robot—just stood there. We tried to talk to you but it was like you were in another universe. Terry and I helped you to the sofa. I wanted to stay but Terry thought it would be better if we left. Should I have stayed?"

"No," Annie assured her. "No, I was fine after you left. Too much wine, like I said.

"Look," Sandra's voice lowered, "I know it's none of my business. What do I know, I'm a high-school dropout from the Bronx. Got lucky and found me a rich, handsome engineer, sure, but things were hard before that. I grew up without a father, druggie mother, you know the story. I tried all kinds of things—therapy, crystals, church, all kind of things. The Lenormand readings was the only thing that got me out of my hole. Taught me things about myself I didn't never know. Saved my marriage. So, look, me and my group of girls meet up twice a month. Tonight, we're meeting at my place, and I get you probably think it's all hogwash but—"

"What time?" Annie asked.

It had already started raining when Annie was about to leave for Sandra's house. The Blue House, she had dubbed it in her mind. There was a bad storm moving in from the coast. Seventy-mile-an-hour winds, the local news had predicted.

Before Annie left, she remembered to close the damper on the fireplace. "It's an old, old house," Tim had told her once. "It has to be closed when it rains otherwise the rain will come in."

It was a short walk to Sandra's house from hers. She decided to cut through the grassy field in between their houses rather than to take the road around. She held the edges of her rain jacket's hood close around her face to protect herself from the windswept rain. When she reached the house, she knocked on the door and was greeted by a beaming Sandra.

There were about eight other women at the gathering, more than Annie had anticipated. Sandra was elated that Annie was there. She doted on her, made sure she got some of the fried shrimp and other finger foods from the spread in the kitchen.

Then Sandra introduced Annie to the leader of the reading, Madam Nelson. "Sophia, to my friends, Madam during readings," she said with a broad smile. She was older than the other women in attendance. She didn't look at all like what Annie imagined a psychic would look like. She looked like a wealthy trophy wife, like most of the women in town.

Annie tried to shake Madam Nelson's hand, but she rejected the offer saying she didn't make physical contact with a new participant until a reading commenced.

Sandra suggested they go ahead and start and Madam Nelson agreed. All the women gathered around the long table in the dining room, which was a closed off space separate from the kitchen and other rooms.

Sandra sat beside Annie. She seemed excited.

"Well, good to see you all here again. We've got a new face here tonight," Madam Nelson said, smiling at Annie, "so a little history before we get started. The practice of Lenormand readings dates all the way back to the 1800s. The practice is named after French fortune-teller Marie Anne Lenormand, said to be the greatest cartomancer to have ever lived. There are 36 cards. Each one contains symbols that create humanistic patterns like pearls on a string. With these patterns, I will be able to access the participant's cosmic status. Newcomer," she said to Annie, "would you like to go first?"

Annie nodded and they joined hands. Once Madam Nelson was seemingly satisfied with the length of contact, she began shuffling the cards.

"For you, Annie, we'll start with a three-card spread," Madam Nelson said, "and possibly a grand tableau later if you feel it."

Annie didn't know what that meant, but she went along with it. A few more moments of shuffling, and Madam Nelson paused. She selected one card and laid it on the tablecloth. Then, she laid down a second card, then a third in stringed line.

"We read the second card first," Madam Nelson explained. "The second card is the center, the theme of the spread. Your main problem in your life at this moment, Annie."

She turned the middle card over.

Madam Nelson turned over the middle card. The scythe. Annie thought of the knife she used to murder Sandra and Terry in her hallucination.

Then the first card. The garden. Like the place Annie buried their bodies.

The third card. The Lily. Like the lilies she planted on top.

Annie screamed and jumped up. She stared at the cards in terror. The others wondered at her behavior.

"Don't let the scythe scare you, dear," Madam Nelson said, trying to reassure her. "These cards aren't bad."

"Excuse me," Annie said, her voice shaking. "Sandra, bathroom?"

"Back down the hall, across from the stairs," Sandra directed. "Do you need me to go with you?"

Annie shook her head and quickly left the table. When she found the bathroom, she closed the door and locked it. She tried to calm herself. Her hands were shaking. They were cold too. She looked in the mirror. Her face was pale. Almost blue. Like the Blue House. She clutched the ceramic sink basin and tried to breathe. In for four, out for four.

While washing her hands, Annie thought about the strangeness of the reading and the dream from the night before. It was just a wild dream, of course. She was sure that the cards read the way they did only by coincidence, and so she rationalized it all and decided there was nothing to worry about.

Once she was calm, Annie opened the bathroom door preparing what she would say to Sandra and the others when she went back into the dining room. But she didn't go back into the dining room. She didn't go back in because of what she saw. Sitting there on the floor just over the threshold of the bathroom door was the manuscript. *My Chickadee.* The one Tim had written. The one that kept showing up over and over again in places it should not have been.

Annie was sure she remembered finding the ripped, muddy pages buried in the garden earlier that day. She was sure that it was the same manuscript. She was sure there was only one copy, and that even if there were multiple copies, that no one, not even Annie herself, would put on such an elaborate hoax for any reason under the sun.

Sandra began to worry so she excused herself from the reading to go and check on Annie. But Sandra found only an empty bathroom with the light still on and the backdoor standing wide open and a doormat that was soaked from the rain that had been pouring in from the open door.

Annie had left. She had torn through the dark field between the Blue House and the White House and finally made it to her porch.

Annie locked the front door, the back door. She even checked all the windows. She decided she needed to burn the manuscript in the fireplace. It was the only way to stop it from showing up again. She didn't care about the rain. She would keep the damper closed until there was too much smoke and she was forced to open it, but by then the cursed book would already be consumed.

She threw the manuscript into the blackened hole angrily. She then retrieved a bottle of gin from the kitchen and doused the body of paper until it was soaked enough for her liking. Next, she needed a light. She searched the room for a moment then remembered the book of matches Terry had removed from the damper. She grabbed them off the mantle. She didn't know if they were usable, but she was going to try them anyway.

She slid open the book, but to her dismay there were no matches inside. She almost tossed the matchbox aside to go look for a lighter, but she grew curious about what was inside. There was some shining collection of gold peeking out. Annie took a pinch of the object and dragged it out of the box.

There, dangling, was a silver necklace, one with a key pendant.

She felt at her throat, the lock still hanging there like it always was. She never took it off. Her mother never took hers off either. Annie knew then.

Tim had taken off her mother's necklace.

The front doorhandle rattled. Annie turned around. The lock clicked. The door opened.

Tim was home.

"Flask"

"What really happened, Stana?" is what they ask me.

"I don't know," I say, looking down at my white tennis shoes. Well, they were white at least. Before.

The doctor relents and leaves me on the floor by the waiting room. Vacant and inert. The automatic doors at the emergency entrance swish open. I hear someone say, "Where is she?"

It's Emma.

In a moment she's there beside me. "Stana," she says first, looking me over. I realize I must be a sight. I'm so dazed I can't even turn my head. Then she throws her arms around my shoulders and releases this guttural, animalistic kind of sob.

The blood splatter on my face isn't completely dry. It smears onto her white smock. "Where's Louis? What happened? Where is he?" she spews. She straightens and looks at me. Waits for an answer. I don't have one.

"I don't know." I still can't look at her.

"Why would he—was it on purpose?"

I nod telegraphically. "Where's Mom and Dad?"

"I called them. They're still in St. Croix. They didn't really—"

"Care." It's not a question. I know they don't care. They've been expecting something like this. Anticipating it.

Emma's head falls. "They care. They're coming. They're just—you know."

The doctor comes back again. There's a police officer with him. The doctor is bidding me to come and speak with the officer.

Emma takes my elbow and helps me up off the floor. The officer leads me into a private exam room and starts to close the curtain. Emma protests but I tell her it's fine and climb onto the exam table.

I look at Emma finally. For the first time since she got here. I look her right in the eyes. Her freckles dance in the harsh fluorescents. I look away.

The officer sits on a flimsy rolling stool and pulls out a pen and a notebook. "Can you tell me what really happened, Ms. Sullivan?"

There he goes. *What really happened, Stana?*

It takes a moment for me to find the strength to open my mouth. "My brother killed himself."

I can't believe I just said that.

"I need a, uh, few more details. Events leading up to the accident."

"It wasn't an accident," I release. I realize how bitter I sound and correct myself. "We went out to dinner. We don't really talk much but I was in the neighborhood. We were catching the train home. Different stops. Same direction. I turned away for some reason. I don't remember why. I turned back and he wasn't there. I guess he jumped."

"You guess?"

I nod.

"Why do you think your brother would want to kill himself?"

"A million reasons. Don't you have any?"

He ignores that. I would too.

"Did you and your brother possibly get into an argument tonight?"

I pause. Cock my head. "No. Did someone say we did?"

"We have witnesses who stated the two of you exchanged some choice words."

"You think I killed him?" I decide.

"I'm just trying to get all the facts straight, ma'am."

I laugh. More like a huff through my nose. I don't know where the laugh comes from. It just seems appropriate to do it. After all, I am being accused of murder. "Here's the facts," I lean forward. The tissue paper rustles. I'm monotone. "If anyone pushed him, it sure wasn't me. If I were you, I would check with Aunt June first."

It's my turn to pay respects. I take a few steps forward, latch my hands onto the mahogany rim, and gaze at the bodiless box afront the cerise velvet curtains. I'm a curious child peering over a rotted bridge ready to collapse.

No, wait. It's already collapsed.

Louis wanted to be cremated. I only know because he talked a lot about death before death talked about him. My parents, the stern Catholics that they are, were adamant he would be buried. I didn't let that happen. Despite everything, Mom and Dad bought a casket anyway to pretend his body hadn't been burned.

And now here sits the empty well with Louis' ashes displayed on a rack above in a decorative, porcelain urn. My sister Emma picked out the urn. It's white with blue accents. She says it reminds her of Grandma Violet's china. It doesn't remind me of anything. It isn't really an urn to any of us. It's the shell of a bomb that exploded its shrapnel into all our flesh. Or maybe I'm the bomb—the murderer they all think I am. I don't really know what I am at this point. I'm just trying to survive the day.

I'm about to do something I shouldn't do. Louis would be so proud. I check behind me. Paranoid. I wait until all the shrapnel-filled heads are turned, then I take the urn down carefully. I unlatch the porcelain lid and dig my fingers down into the grey ash. It's soft. Softer than I imagined it would be, and, yes, I'd imagined the feeling many times before today. This act is premeditated. I couldn't get away with it if it wasn't.

I return the urn back to the wooden stand. From my coat pocket, I remove a gold flask that I washed out four times that morning in my parents' upstairs bathroom. I pour the handful of Louis into the flask. Shakily. I spill some on my black overcoat, brush off the death.

"From one box to another, Lou," I say as I trap him inside. Louis is more beside me now than he ever was. Captured and hidden in my sacred place. A genie. A prisoner. An Emily Dickinson—

I screw the lid back on, a silly fear that the essence of Louis' spirit might escape into the air if left open too long. I reel the flask up to my mouth and kiss the side of it humanely, tucking my tongue near my throat to prevent anything vulgar. The sting of the brass against my lips makes the bones in my jaw feel metallic. My neck is suddenly a drainpipe and my eyes faucets. A few tears but nothing substantial.

I stuff the makeshift urn into the gut of my coat pocket and anchor myself in a slope over the empty casket, wrists stretched out like a cross along the front edge. The cushion inside presses back against my fingertips that loop over the wood. "You're not the one being crucified, although you should be," I hear the casket say.

"Louis," I whisper to the void in the crate. Guilt penetrates me. A hot iron on plastic. "I'm sorry."

Suddenly, Dad's there behind me with his hand on my shoulder, his gold West Point ring glistening in the dim light. "Give your sister a turn," he says, as if the room were a carousel. "You need to give her a turn. She's been waiting. Everyone's been waiting, but we gave you longer."

"I don't care." I hope he hasn't seen me with my flask, seen the kiss or the theft. I can't risk the embarrassment.

No, maybe I can.

If this is all just about taking a ride on a painted, basswood horse, then reputation means nothing. I could just quit my job at the firm and live in Louis' old room, learn to play the guitar and start a band. Mom would like that I think. Dad wouldn't.

"I care," he grits, an irritated dog. "You know what people already think about the whole thing, Stan."

"Let them think. And don't call me that."

"Enough of this." He pulls me.

I rip my arm away, turn. "There's no one in here," I yell. I'm referring to the casket, not the room.

Family outside hear me. They stop and leer. The moment's gone anyway so I give up and storm past him.

Emma is there in the back of the room in a long-sleeve black dress. When I'm close enough to her, she wraps her skinny arms around me. It reminds me of being on the hospital floor. Two sides of the same, absurd coin. I'm suddenly conscious of how low her arms are, afraid she might feel the outline of the flask in my coat pocket. She lets go without any discovery and raises her eyes to mine, a tower crane lifting a steel beam. She wants to say something. I

know Emma. I know she wants to speak but won't. So, she goes to take her turn with Louis. What's left of him.

I watch from the back wall, angled against it. Emma doesn't touch the casket like I did. She cowers a few inches away, cries into her hands, snatches a tissue out of box on the table by the foot of the death crate.

Death crate. That's what we should call them instead.

I feel lightheaded. When stand upright, my face and hands sting of coldness and my legs wobble. I locked my knees. I wasn't supposed to lock my knees. Too late now. I stumble out into the foyer of the funeral home, bump into Aunt June who squeals. Mom rushes over and helps me sit down on the dusty Persian rug. It's the hospital all over again. Floors are starting to grow on me. Who needs chairs, or feet?

I can't make it to the red chaise by the front doors. Aunt June flocks to me. "Is she alright?" she asks.

No, I'm not alright.

"No, I'm not alright."

I reach into my pocket, press my palm against the flask. Grab at Louis' soul, sort of. Begging.

Flashes in my mind blind me. Flashes of the train. Louis' body, or lack thereof. I close my eyes and see him there sitting across from me in that uncomfortable booth at that old sports bar we always used to meet at downtown. What is it called? The Ticket Lounge. A man cave. I like that place a lot. He's unshaven, sipping a Coors Light with his skinny hands, skinny like Emma's hands. My fingers have always been thicker. I see the Mets game on the large-screen television parked above the mirrors behind the bar, tilted a little too far down over the taps and

ornate bottled rows. A state of prostration. I hear Louis over the roar of the game asking me about the pact, the one all three of us had made as children in the makeshift quilt tent in the basement. I see us leaving the bar. I hear the squeak of the turnstiles underground. I see us arguing about the pact again on the platform. People loom. Ogle. He won't stop talking about it—asking me about it.

"I'm sorry," I hear Louis say.

I see him trip and plunge backwards into the path of the train. An accident.

No. I don't see that.

I see anger, stoked fire in my eyes and my own hands force him.

No. Not that either.

I see him intentionally dive off the platform. Geronimo.

No. I don't see that at all.

I do hear myself ignoring him. Then I hear screams and see blood splattered on the platform, spewed from under the train like a shook soda. I feel a wetness on my face. I touch my chin thinking it's rainwater. Red fingertips. Blood, I realize. Louis' blood.

I come to from the memory on the floor of the funeral home. My favorite place to be. I feel my face now, a wetness present again. I'm expecting red fingertips but it's just saline. I'm crying. When I open my eyes to see my salty hand, I see Emma on one side and Mom on the other. Emma makes me drink some water out of a paper cup. Dad's pacing somewhere behind complaining that I'm not standing up. I like it down here. I stand up anyway.

Mom helps me into the tiny, white-tiled bathroom, closes the door in Emma's face. I collapse on the toilet seat lid, arm drapes over the tank. She wets a paper towel and presses it

against my forehead. I start to close my eyes again but change my mind. I'm afraid of the memories.

I glance up at Mom. She's slouched against the pixeled wall still patting my forehead with the towel. Her gold bracelet drags across my cheek with each stroke. I think of the gold flask hidden still. Sacred, Dickinsonian secrets.

I hear her sniff and notice she's crying. I don't move. I want to ask if she's okay, but it feels like I've already asked. She lets her hand fall away so she can pinch the bridge of her reddened nose.

"How did I miss it?" she breathes.

I straighten, swivel around. "Miss what, Mom?"

"That," she points to the door. "How did I miss that?" Angry now. At herself. At Louis. At Dad. At Me.

"We all missed it," I say. "I was there and I missed it."

It's four o'clock. The afternoon has supplied a generated coldness, colder than it had been before I stole Louis into the flask earlier that morning.

I near the plot. Black everything. Black dress. Black shoes. Black eyes. Black everyone. They're all wearing the same exact face. Mom. Dad. Aunt June. Grandma Violet. Uncle R.J. They look just like suits. Same color, same cut, all hanging on an assembly conveyor in a dry cleaner's. Pressed with chemicals. Fouled. Crisp. Heads hanging like the ends of sleeves and back vents.

I sit in one the iron chairs beside Mom and Dad, the chair on the other side empty for Emma.

"Where's Emma?" I ask.

"She rode with Uncle Carl," Mom assumes. "She rode with Carl, didn't she, Sam?"

"No, he's over there," I point.

"She's here then," Dad assures.

"Where?" I rotate around and back like a loose screw. I finally spot her behind the succession of cars parked on the street. She snubs the pavement with the toe of one of her black heels and windmills the air around her face.

"Smoking without me?" I whisper when she's finally sits in her saved seat.

"Sorry," palms sweeping her lap. "I'm stressed."

Eyes forward. "Wonder why."

Aunt June and Uncle R.J. sit in front of us. Aunt June grabs the back of her chair and ogles sympathetically at me. "You feeling better, honey?" she swishes.

I nod. "Fine."

"Good, good," she pats my shoulder, turns back around.

The priest starts. He tries to be optimistic, but he's lying. Everyone is. They're not there to mourn, just to gawk. Everyone's eyes close. Mine don't. The priest says some kind of whispered prayer. I catch Emma staring. She's awake like me.

The prayer ends. Sign of the cross. Eyes open. The priest says a mimicking *amen* and closes the Book. Thank God for that.

We all stand as some kind of hymnal poison drips from a boombox. I didn't know priests were even allowed to have boomboxes. I didn't even know they made boomboxes anymore. Priest by day, break dancer by night.

The casket lowers. Roses are thrown. Uncle R.J. and Aunt June tower in front of me. I can barely see the empty box descend. What a shame. Over the recorded pipe organs, I hear Aunt June whisper to Uncle R.J., "It was bound to happen."

It was bound to happen.

If this was bound to happen, fated, someone should have been *bound* to intervene. The Sullivan's can't do something like that though. They were always too embarrassed of Louis to ever love him. It was assumed that I was just as embarrassed as everyone else was to call Louis mine. To claim him. Maybe I was. No, I definitely was. Still am. It makes me feel better to pretend I'm different, but I'm just as stiff a suit as the rest of them.

It was just that Louis didn't fit the mold. He was a deviation, an example of how not to be a Sullivan. A drug addict. An alcoholic. An anything besides perfect. He wasn't man enough for Dad's liking. Mom tried to mother him, but Dad prevented that. He was too much of a man to be a father to Louis, and I was too much of a woman to be a sister.

It wasn't just Dad, though. It was everyone, including me, who killed Louis. Everyone thought I was the murderer when, in fact, all our hands were bloody. I know, deep down, that it's only because of blood, not concern or brotherhood, that they're here. They're all here simply to ogle at that beloved boy sinking under them where they always suspected he would go.

"…probably better now for Grayson and Naomi—Stana and Emma too," Aunt June continues. "Least they have the girls left."

Least they have the girls left.

Uncle R.J.: "You think she did it?"

Aunt June: "Wouldn't blame her."

Wouldn't blame her.

I hate Aunt June.

Thunder rolls. Of course, it does. It rained earlier. I bet most everyone has rain on their minds now instead of Louis. I know I do. Uncle R.J.'s hand tests for raindrops. I hope he and Aunt June both get soaked. I hope her black Chanel dress gets ruined. I hope Louis comes back to life and pulls a Frankenstein.

My heels sink into the muddy earth as I watch the empty box disappear into the dirt. I think how ridiculous this whole thing is. Funerals. I wish I were somewhere else, maybe on a mountain top letting the wind sift Louis' ashes out of hand. Freeing him.

The roses are released, a cascading scale of thumps murmur. I start to feel closed in. I feel like I'm in the box. Maybe that's why it was empty in the first place. Ready for me. I don't want to throw my rose in the hole anymore. I don't want to trap it in there too.

I throw it in anyway. Just following suit, you know.

At six o' clock, I find myself upstairs in Louis's old room sitting on his dusty bed staring out the rain-streaked window. I'm thumbing the smooth surface of the flask, trying to remember him. The only things I can remember now, watching the grey light reflect off its gold body, are the things I missed and the dislikes. I think of the missed opportunities to tell him things, to call him just to call him, to come visit his cramped flat downtown with that uncomfortable futon. I hated his flat. I hated calling and not having anything to say because we'd grown apart. I hated that he was a musician. I hated that he never cut his hair, or washed it really. I hated the clothes he wore, the childish, five-dollar tee-shirts with cartoon characters and cult bands on them. In comparison, though, in retrospect really, I hate not having him here more than any of the aforementioned enmities.

Louis' belongings haunt me now like a snappish ghost, staring at me from the lone cardboard box parked at the end of the bed. I set the flask aside and drag the box in front of my feet. Inside are items I'd made sure were salvaged when Dad had Louis' apartment cleaned out last week. I pick through the remnants delicately, pawing through notebooks filled with his songs and a teddy bear named Joshua he'd had since he was five.

Under a pile of coffee-stained spiral notebooks I yank out an old, black tee-shirt. I unfurl it and hold it up to the lamplight. Darth Vader. Front and center. A light saber or two. And then there's Luke Skywalker off to the side looking dapper and serious. This was one of Louis' favorite shirts. He slept in it, played shows in it, met me for dinner in it. I used to hate it. Now, it's simply mine. Mine because it's not his anymore. Mine by default.

I slip the shirt over my head and stick my arms through the sleeves. It looks lumpy on top of my funeral dress, but I don't care. I've got two handfuls of black cotton and I start to cry. For the first time I let the responsibility sink in. The guilt's there too, it's just waiting on the sidelines until I'm more vulnerable.

Maybe later tonight it'll find me.

I start to wonder why I didn't see it coming. But I did. I saw it the night he jumped in front of the train. I saw it in the tent fort made of quilts when me, Louis, and Emma made a suicide pact. I saw it everywhere, all the time, in every look, every sentence, everything. They were all pleas and I was always busy.

The pact went as follows: *If things aren't better by the time we're thirty, we'll kill ourselves. Together. We'll jump off a bridge or shoot ourselves. No matter what. Promise?*

It was game to me and Emma. It seems now in the light of day, or the dark of day, that death to Louis was regrettably tangible. If I had known, if I had shed some kind of dirty light on

it for him, maybe I would have made death a fear instead of an aspiration for him. If I had stopped it right there at thirteen in the quilt fort, maybe Louis would have sidestepped the final sleep like a dirty puddle. But he had stayed a child, and his only childlike desire was to get his feet wet and discover the depth of the little water.

Dad appears in doorway telling me, faintly, to come downstairs for dinner. I quickly shove the flask under the pillow. I don't know how long he's been standing there. I hope he thinks I've just been drinking. He's probably been drinking too.

I stand up wearily. He notices the tee-shirt. "Take that off," he sways in his loafers just beyond the threshold. An uninvited vampire.

I glance down at the dark cotton above and the dark lace below. "It smells like him."

Dad doesn't argue. He just huffs and leaves the room, waits for me at the top of the stairs. I follow him downstairs to the fury below. I enter into a collection of faces, all blood, all familiar, all disgraced by Louis and even a little by me because I spent so long pining at the wake. Mostly by Louis, though, because I matter more, they tell me. Because I'm normal, they tell me.

Because I didn't kill myself, they say.

I move to the couch by the front window and sit close to the arm of it, smiling casually when greeted in passing, but mostly keeping my eyes down.

"Stana." Eyes up. Emma is standing like a curved monument over me holding her drink so perfectly firm that I can tell she's trying not to tremble.

"Hey," I let out.

She sits beside me. Our thighs latch together, feeling like one body. I used to envy Emma's slender legs, but now there's no difference between them.

"Nice shirt," she muses.

"Thanks. I thrifted it," I joke.

Neither of us smile.

"Where you been?"

"Upstairs."

"I slept in there."

"Where? Louis' room?"

Her silence answers yes. "It feels wrong to go in there."

"Yeah," I say.

"You know I don't believe what they're saying, right?"

"What, you don't think I pulled a Cain and Abel? Killed my own brother?" His sacrifice was bigger than mine.

"No," she chuckles.

"Did you think so at the hospital?"

"I wasn't thinking at the hospital."

Dad waves us over to the dinner table. I don't feel like eating. I go anyway. Everyone's looking at me because I'm wearing Louis' shirt. They know it's his. I teeter numbly on my heels at the front of the long table, looking it over again and again but not seeing anything but Aunt June in her black Chanel dress sitting arrogantly in Louis' old place.

"Sit by me," Mom whispers. I obey.

A long stream of light with a living color that reminds me of Louis' flask touches in the center of the dining room. Droplets of persimmon spill over the furniture tips and illuminate the

decorative table and all the wandering faces. I never felt a sunset so sad in all my thirty-two years.

I think I will quit my job.

Louis' last words at the subway run around the room like a crude projection. They flash all over our faces because we all know them, even though I was the only one who heard them.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

His words are everywhere. I want turn the table over and spill it all for Louis, but I hold in like a powerful dam. I clench the hanging tablecloth. Two handfuls of white cotton collected with secret, angry fists.

"Where'd you run off to?" a voice behind.

I release the cloth and smoothed the wrinkles. "Nowhere, Uncle R.J.," I smile.

"Eat something, young padawan," he squeezes my shoulder with a gentle turn of his wrist then plants himself over by Aunt June.

I smile, but it's not enough to steady me. I don't think I can handle this. I thought I could. I should've stayed upstairs with Louis.

Dad grabs my plate with his bulky hands and serves me a breast and some potatoes. I see Emma across the table with the same full plate staring at me.

"Dad, I'm okay. I'm not hungry."

He insists and set the plate down in front of me.

I don't want this. I can't do this. I should go back upstairs.

Aunt June leers at me. The shirt, then me. She leans across and whispers something intently to Uncle R.J.

I almost stay quiet. I almost dam it up again and go upstairs to stare at the gold flask. But then I catch myself saying something.

"What?" Dad asks. The room is dead. Waiting for me.

"I said, I didn't kill him."

"Stan, stop it," Dad says.

"Don't call me that."

"You're overreacting. You're always doing that," Aunt June reasons.

I bang my fists. The table shudders. Crystal glasses shiver and metal forks jump against the ceramic, hand-painted plates. "Go ahead," I stand and round the table toward Aunt June. I'm screaming now and I'm enjoying it. "Say it. Say you're glad he's dead and it's wonderful that I killed him."

Silence. Aunt June grimaces at me.

"You're the murderers." I'm at it again. "You treated him like a disease."

Dad's standing now. I cut my eyes at him, picture his vampire form in Louis' doorway. "Your brother tore this family apart with that habit of his."

I rounded back. "No, Dad," I choke, fighting back tears. "Louis is the only one torn apart."

I close my eyes and think about Louis' final words again.

I'm sorry.

I see it now. I see him standing there on the subway platform, begging me to help him, to tell Mom and Dad that he isn't bad. He's good. It's fear, I guess. Little secrets like the flask that I can't bear to expose. Sacred, Dickinsonian secrets.

The secret: he was 30 and he didn't want to live anymore.

Then, I see nothing.

I open my eyes and see the heads hanging—suits wilted. I've made them feel ashamed. Good. That's the intent.

"I'm sorry," I say. "That's the last thing he ever said to anyone. To me. *I'm sorry*."

I run into the kitchen. I can't breathe. I think about going outside but I can't manage that.

Yes, I can.

I'm kneeling in the grass when I feel a hand on my shoulder. I think it's Mom at first, but it's Emma.

"You're going to freeze to death," she says, laying a coat around my shoulders.

I double over my knees. Crying. Weeping loudly. Spit drips from my gaped mouth. Emma holds me and cries too. She hasn't seen me cry yet. Now, she's seeing me.

"I need to tell you something," she reveals, wiping her nose with her sleeve. She reaches into the shoulder of her dress and pulls out something plastic looking. She unfurls it. It's a clear, small baggie.

I wipe my eyes so I can see. "What is that?"

"It's morbid, I know," she says, opening the seal. She pours something grey and familiar into her hand.

Ashes.

The wind picks up suddenly, sifting some of the ashes into the air. They settle on the grass.

It's no mountaintop, but it'll do.

Bibliography

Agbasiere, Joseph. “Portraits of Women in Aminata Sow Fall’s Works.” Francophone African Literature. Nigeria: Enugu, Jee Communication. 1999.

This article outlines the portrayal of different female characters in Aminata Sow Fall’s works of fiction. As a French author, Fall paints unique images of African women, heritage, and their struggle to be seen as equals. The article explores their rights as well as their creative pursuits. I use this article in my paper to support my argument that women have struggled to be seen as equals in society.

Alcott, Louisa M. *Little Women*. New York: Signet Classic, 2004. Print.

The novel *Little Women* follows the lives of the March family, primarily the four sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. Told from Jo’s perspective, the novel details the sisters’ journey from childhood to womanhood during the Civil War. The novel is semi-autobiographical and loosely based Alcott’s childhood with her three sisters. I use this novel in my paper to support my argument that women often had to use male pseudonyms in order to get published. This book is important because it demonstrates the struggle women went through to have their voices heard.

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1979.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is an autobiography about American writer and poet Maya Angelou. The book is a coming-of-age story that discusses issues of literature, race, and moral strength of character. I use this novel in my paper to reference works of literature written by women that have received recognition in society.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Everyday Library, 2006.

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel set in a futuristic New England. The novel follows Offred in a society that is very religious, patriarchal, and contains a totalitarian government. In my paper, I use this book as a reference for one of my primary literary influences in my own fiction writing. I detail how this novel's themes have impacted my writing style and state of mind.

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. New York: Modern Library, 1995.

Pride and Prejudice is an 1813 novel that follows Elizabeth Bennet as she weaves her way through social judgments and expectations. The novel contains themes of love, family, and of female expectations in society. I use this novel in my paper to demonstrate how female writers were forced to write under the constraints of social norms.

Barker, Juliet. *The Brontës: A Life in Letters.* Harry N. Adams. 1998.

This biography by Juliet Barker examines the lives of the Brontë sisters who defied social custom and rose to literary prominence during the 19th century. The book details information through letters shared by Charlotte, Emily, and Ann, revealing personal information and showing a more private side of the famous Brontë sisters. I use this book to provide information about the Brontë sisters.

Bloom, Amy. "The Scribner anthology of contemporary short fiction: 50 North American short stories since 1970." New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007.

This anthology contains fifty short stories from a large array of contemporary fiction authors including Amy Tan, Jamaica Kincaid, and Jhumpa Lahiri. These stories were chosen specifically from a national survey of over five hundred academics and fiction writers. I use this anthology to provide a source for a short story I reference that influenced my own creative work.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyr*e. New York: Harper Collins, 2010. Print.

Jane Eyre follows the protagonist of the same name throughout her life as a child and into adulthood where she encounters abuse, mystery, and love. I use this novel in my paper as an example of a work written by a women that broke through stereotypes during the time it was written.

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights.* London; New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

Wuthering Heights is an 1847 novel that follows two families living on the West Yorkshire moors, the Earnshaws and the Lintons. The novel focuses on Earnshaw's foster son, Heathcliff, and contains man romantic and gothic themes. This novel is important to my paper as it supports my argument of how women's "controversial" literary works were received, as *Wuthering Heights* received negative reviews after publication.

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening.* Penguin Classics, 2018.

This novel by Kate Chopin follows protagonist Edna Pontellier as she breaks away from her family life and goes on a journey of self-awareness and searches for her own identity. I use this novel in my paper to reference a piece of literature that reflects the response women writers received when writing works that were deemed too controversial at the time of their inception.

Christler, Joan C. & Johnston-Robledo, Ingrid. *Woman's Embodied Self: Feminist Perspectives on Identity and Image.* Washington DC: American Psychological Association. 2018.

This article examines women's identity from a psychological perspective, discussing problems in female identity and self-image. The article suggests that women's full "embodied self" cannot be realized without the recognition of their true identity. I use this article to explain the connection between women's identity and their sense of self.

This article supports my argument that women's ability to have a voice is heavily rooted in their ability to freely express who they are.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa": London: Brighton. 1981. pp. 245-264.

In this 1981 article, Helene Cixous argues that women should become writers regardless of the world's attempt to discredit them in the past. Cixous states that women were denied a position in literature in the past and that their writings were often deemed "nonsense" by their male counterparts. The result, Cixous claims, is a collection of works about women that do not do women justice. The article encourages women to "write women," that is, to write "about" women from a female perspective. I use this article in my paper to further the argument of the importance of women's words. This article is important as it supports the idea that it is vital that women write about women in order to provide the truth about women from their own perspective.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex.* New York: Vintage Classics. 2015.

French existentialist philosopher Simone De Beauvoir's 1949 book discusses women's treatment throughout time. In the book, Beauvoir asks the question, "What is woman?" Beauvoir continues by discussing the idea of the "other," how women are often viewed as the "other" less significant sex in comparison to men. The book also discusses the physiological and psychological arguments that men use to claim their superiority to women. I use this article in my paper to explain how viewing women as the "other" or lesser sex leads to women losing an equal place in society among men. This book is important as is explains how women lose their individuality when they are viewed as an "other" in society.

De Gaulle, Charles. *The Edge of the Sword.* New York: Criterion, 1960.

In “The Edge of Sword,” French writer Charles De Gaulle discusses the topic of military leadership. In the essay, De Gaulle expresses his thoughts on leadership, war, and historical problems in war. I use this book in my paper to explain how damaging the silencing of women can be in the long run. This book is important for my paper as it examines how the authority of men only encourages women to keep their mouths and their minds shut.

Dickens, Charles. *Oliver Twist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Oliver Twist is an 1837 novel that follows orphan Oliver Twist after he is sold into apprenticeship with an undertaker. Oliver later makes his way to London and meets the "Artful Dodger" who is a gang member of pickpockets. This novel is important in my paper as it is used as a reference to explain how the theme of “the search for identity” is present in many classic novels throughout time.

Dickinson, Emily. *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems.* Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1961.

This is a collection of certain selected poems by Emily Dickinson. There are approximately 500 poems selected for this collection, showcasing the very best of Dickinson’s work. I use this collection in my paper to reference Emily Dickinson’s poetry and the lack of acceptance of women writing on certain themes.

Dobrow, Julie. *After Emily: Two Remarkable Women and the Legacy of America's Greatest Poet.* New York: W. W. Norton Company Inc. 2018.

Julie Dobrow’s biography looks at Emily Dickinson’s life from the perspective of family friend Mabel Loomis Todd. The book details Todd’s journey to getting Dickinson’s poem’s published and the struggles she encountered that led to a highly edited version of Dickinson’s poems. I use this book in my paper to support the argument that men were

responsible for preventing women from publishing certain kinds of literature. I use this article to support the argument that women's literary works were changed in order to prevent them from writing about things that were "unladylike."

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Man-Made World: Our Androcentric Culture." Humanity Books. 2001.

In this book, Charlotte Perkins Gilman details women's treatment during the 20th century and how women were seen as controlled objected by men. Gilman argues that men put restrictions on women because of their jealous nature. I use this book to support my argument that women were seen as objects and subject to treatment that saw them as men's property.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper.* Virago Press, 1981.

This short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a collection of journal entries written by a protagonist who is said to be suffering from mental illness. The protagonist begins to see a women trapped behind the yellow wallpaper in her room and sinks into rapid "insanity." I use this short story in my paper to support the idea that writers often use houses as a means to connect women and their identities, making the women completely dependent on the house in order to know herself, much like women do with their husbands.

Heilbrun, Carolyn G., 1926-2003. "Reinventing Womanhood." New York: Norton, 1979.

This 1979 book is an exploration of women's identity and autonomy in society. Heilbrun discusses everything from personal beliefs on women's identity to literary analyses of certain works that support her findings. In addition, the book examines identity from a psychological perspective and looks at familial patterns in female development. I use this

book in my paper to support the idea that women need to claim their own autonomy separate from men in order to find their own identities.

Jackson, Shirley. *The Haunting of Hill House.* New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

The Haunting of Hill House is a 1959 gothic horror novel that follows the story of four main characters as they stay in a said to be haunted mansion overnight. The novel explores complex relationships between the mysterious events in the house and the characters' psyches and emotional states. I use this novel in my paper to discuss the concept of identity forming with objects, in this case, a house. I explore the concept that women are seen as "guardians of the house," and how because they are forced to stay at home, they eventually begin to morph together with the house's identity.

Jarowski, Adam. "*The Power of Silence. SAGE. 1993.*

This book discusses different aspects of communication and explores new ways of examining language. The book provides research that outlines certain works within gender studies, politics, and literature. I use this book in my paper to explain how silence affects women on a sociological level. This book lays out important ideologies that support my arguments about silence is oppressive toward women.

Kaysen, Susanna. *Girl, Interrupted.* New York: Turtle Bay Books, 1993.

Girl, Interrupted is a semi-autobiographical account of author Susanna Kaysen's experiences in an American psychiatric hospital in the 1960s. Kaysen details in the novel how she was sent to a psychiatric hospital after being diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. The novel explores many themes of freedom, trauma, and feminism. I use this novel in my paper to explain how women's identities are lost when they are deemed "insane." This novel is important to my paper because it details how women are

often shutdown by men as being “crazy” and, therefore, unable to contribute to the literary world.

Longo, Matthew R., and Patrick Haggard. *“What Is It Like to Have a Body?” Current Directions in Psychological Science,* vol. 21, no. 2, Sage Publications, Inc., 2012, pp. 140–45.

This article outlines psychological aspects of the importance of having a sense of one’s own body. The article reinforces the reality that there is a deep connection between the body and the self, and that psychology is only just beginning to develop methods to measure bodily awareness. The article later reviews evidence that humans view their bodies as “highly plastic,” and that mental progression is highly influential in human cognitive development. I use this article in my paper to explain how closely connected women’s identities are to their own bodies. This article is important because it proves the closeness of that connection between mind and body from a psychological and physiological perspective.

Lorde, Audre. 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action (A Panel Discussion)', Sinister Wisdom. 1984.

This 1984 panel discussion includes a speech by poet Audre Lorde. In the speech, Lorde discusses how destructive silencing women can be, and the results of silencing them. Lorde calls women to action in this speech, encouraging them to find their voices at the risk of complete erasure. I use this speech in my paper to support the argument that there has been a negative effect of silencing women in literature. This speech is important to my argument as it provides ways in which women’s silencing has affected them in the world.

McMillen, Sally. “Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women’s Rights Movement.” New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 112-113.

This book follows the Seneca Falls women’s rights movement that occurred in Seneca Falls, New York over the course of two days in July 1848. The book explains that this movement was led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott and details the changes produced by the convention. I use this book in my paper to explain how women have limited roles in the tradition Western Christian church. This book provides important information that helps shape the religion section of my paper.

Meyers, Carol L. *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament.* Houghton Mifflin. 2000.

This book by Carol L. Meyers explores all women mentioned in the Bible, named and unnamed. The book references hundreds of scholarly articles that support Meyers’ arguments and that, due to translation errors and the androcentric nature of biblical record, women’s role in biblical text has been left obscured and ambiguous. This book is vital to my paper as it supports my argument that the whittling away of women’s voices has been going on for centuries. This book provides religious and cultural evidence that supports my argument.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Penguin Classics, 2003.

Paradise Lost is a work by John Milton that is a retelling of the fall of mankind, from pre-existence to the after the garden. I use this book in my paper to explain how women are viewed in a religious sense as being the cause of man’s sin and, therefore, they are to

blame for all evil. This is important as it supports my argument of why women were treated as less than men earlier in time.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved.* New York, N.Y: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Beloved is set sometime after the Civil War and follows a family of former slaves who are haunted by a ghost. I use this novel in my paper to explain how works written by women are considered, but they are not considered the best. This novel is important in supporting my argument of biased male literary critics.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Plume Book, 1994.

The novel follows a young African-American girl named Pecola in 1940s Ohio. Pecola is thought to be "ugly" by other white individuals in town because of her dark skin and personality. This leads Pecola to long for blue eyes as she believes it will make her beautiful. I use this novel in my paper briefly to explain how certain novels discussed the issue of forming identity.

Ohmann, Carol. "Emily Brontë in the Hands of Male Critics." National Council of Teachers of English. Vol. 32, No. 8. 1971.

This article examines the sexist response by male critics to Emily Brontë's literary works. The article outlines certain responses and why Emily's works were so heavily judged during the time they were written. I use this article in my paper to explain why the Brontë sisters took on male pseudonyms. This article is very influential to my paper as it supports my argument that men heavily criticism female writers to the point that they were forced to masquerade as men in order to get their stories published without criticism.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

The Bell Jar is a 1963 semi-autobiographical novel that follows the protagonist's descent into mental illness. I use the novel in my paper to explain how women's identities have often been misinterpreted by men. This novel is important to my paper as it outlines how women were often stereotyped and committed to insane asylums if they caused any kind of rift in the male-dominated society.

Roupenian, Kristen. "Cat Person." The New York Times, December 4, 2017.

This short story by Kristen Roupenian follows a protagonist through a short relationship with an older man. The story explores themes of feminism, sexism, and fear, leading the antagonist to view the protagonist as a stereotype because she will not comply with his demands. I use this story in my paper in my personal influences section, explaining how this story resonated with me and influenced my writing.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*, or, *The Modern Prometheus*. Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 1818.

Frankenstein, or, *The Modern Prometheus,* is an 1818 novel that follows the story of scientist Victor Frankenstein who creates an undead creature in a scientific experiment. I use this novel in my paper to explain how Mary Shelley was the first science fiction writer. This information helps support my argument that women made great leaps in literature without depending on men.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Philadelphia, H. Altemus company, 1900.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is an 1852 novel that follows protagonist Uncle Tom, a slave who spends the novel trying to gain his freedom. I use this novel in my paper as a reference to novels written by women that are recognized as classics. This reference is important

because it shows that there are very few novels that are regarded as “classics” that were written by women.

Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*. Wordsworth Editions, 1994.

The Age of Innocence is set in 1870s New York and follows protagonist Newland Archer who, while engaged to his cousin, falls in love with another women named Ellen. Archer spends the novel navigating the complex rules of society that prevent him from marrying the women he loves. I use this novel in my paper to explain how Wharton compares two different kinds of women: the quiet woman and the open woman. This novel is important in my paper as it proves that women during the 19th century wrote works that explored the constraints of a sexist society.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* Penguin Books, 2004

This book was written in the 18th century by feminist activist Mary Wollstonecraft and is one of the earliest pieces of feminist writing. In the book, Wollstonecraft argues that women's education have a right to education and that women should have the same rights as men because women raise men, they are human beings, and that they are not purposed simply to be male property. I use this book in my paper to argue that women should have the right to freely express their own opinions and feelings without consequence as it always leads to further oppression. This book is important as it supports my argument that women deserve equal rights among men.