Between the Blood Orange and Kumquat Trees

by

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He manages like somebody carrying a box that is too heavy, first with his arms underneath. When their strength gives out, he moves the hands forward, hooking them on the corners, pulling the weight against his chest. He moves his thumbs slightly when the fingers begin to tire, and it makes different muscles take over. Afterward, he carries it on his shoulder, until the blood drains out of the arm that is stretched up to steady the box and the arm goes numb. But now the man can hold underneath again, so that he can go on without ever putting the box down.

—Jack Gilbert, “Michiko Dead”
Author’s original woodblock print—March, 2017
carved and hand-printed in traditional Ukiyo-e technique
A Little Verklempt

Marie and I were having breakfast at Mel’s and the whole time I was thinking about other things. Olly, my godmother, all the errands for Thanksgiving which was in two days, and between these thoughts, elbowing its way to center stage, was some memory from my old therapist’s office a decade ago. We all saw her for a year or so, a few times as a family, and the part I remember is that it was a schlep to get to her South Robertson office in rush hour traffic and almost impossible to find a spot within reasonable walking distance.

“Can’t we find someone closer to the house?” I groaned as we sat inching towards her office, which was only six miles from the house. Once she asked me to draw a picture of my family. “I thought that’s what shrinks tell people to do in movies, not real life,” I quipped. I was fifteen, and didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of taking seriously what I thought was a load of bullshit, even though she knew I was an artist and spent most of my free time crafting. I drew the typical triangle-top house, a tree, our dog, and my family members. Me, mom, and dad were in the back and standing in front of us were Chloe and Iggy. Iggy was only two but I drew him as if he was six, standing tall at Chloe’s waist. I drew quickly and in the process messed up one of my arms, so I decided to fix it by shading it in, clothing myself in a long sleeve shirt. I finished in a few minutes and Dr. Schneider bunched up her face, sat back in her armchair, and asked me what I was trying to hide by drawing myself in long sleeves, covering myself up. “Nothing, I messed up my arm so I covered it up. Oh my god—you don’t actually think it means something, do
you?” She jotted a quick thought in her notepad while hmm-ing, cocked her head, sucked in her cheeks, and nodded, like she was thinking “Interesting… very interesting.”

“Hello, Dahlia?” Marie snapped her fingers in my face. “I was just saying something. Are you even listening?” She leaned forward. “Isn’t that Carol, from elementary school, over there?” She pointed to her left, and I turned to look. “Carol? You mean the sixth grade teacher?”

She was pointing towards a table where two women sat, and they were splitting a sundae and the younger woman was moving her spoon around, making fluid swirls with the melted strawberry and chocolate ice cream. The older woman looked to be about twenty years or so her senior. “What an age difference,” I scoffed. The older woman plunged her soup spoon into the sundae, consuming it without looking up, or even, it seemed, stopping to breathe.

The whipped cream had long since deflated into the soupy ice cream when the older woman ate the crowning maraschino cherry, and the younger woman looked exasperated and cheated, as if she had only left it to test whether her date would offer it to her or eat it herself. “Well,” Marie began, “do you think it’s her?”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. Wonder if she still teaches there.” Mel’s was walking distance from the elementary school we attended, hence my familiarity with it. Many an afternoon pick-me-up shake was had by me and my younger sister there. Carol had gained weight, and her hair, which had gone from tawny-with-some-salt to pure salt, was cropped shorter.

Marie leaned forward and stage whispered, “Should we say hi?”
I eyed the sundae. “What kind of person has an ice cream sundae at ten o’clock on a Tuesday?” Marie laughed, but I was genuinely curious. Is this a regular thing? Special craving? How many people had sundaes for breakfast?

It occurred to me that I hadn’t had a maraschino cherry in years, so I decided to order a Shirley Temple. Marie pulled a face and I said, “If they can have sundaes for breakfast, a Shirley Temple’s reasonable enough to me.” The drink didn’t have enough syrup and tasted like sweetened seltzer, but it brought back memories of my high school graduation dinner six years ago, as that was the last time I had had one, I think. My mom had chuckled when I ordered it and said it seemed kinda childish for someone who was soon off to college, and dad said that was good because that way he knew I was still his little girl. I rolled my eyes at him.

The couple sat facing each other and avoided eye contact for seven or so minutes before going to the front to pay. The older woman pulled out her wallet and put her arm around the younger woman’s shoulders, undoing the embrace to fit through the door on their way out. A little bell chimed as the door closed behind them, and I saw Old Goat, the cashier (his name tag actually read “Old Goat” and in my family’s twenty-odd years coming here, we haven’t learned his God-given name) turn to Judy, the rotund, wrinkly, and reserved matron that ruled Mel’s from behind the red counter. I couldn’t quite make out what he’d said (Was his name Billy? Maybe because he had a goatee? Because he got one’s goat?). He gestured towards the door, and from the look on Judy’s face, it was probably something tawdry about lesbian lovemaking.
Marie left for work but I stayed and made mental to-do lists, fiddled with the jam packets, and made origami swans out of the paper menu, anything to stop twirling my hair, a habit my mom told me would ensure an odd bald patch if I persisted. I realized how much time I had wasted and that I had to get home and put the wash in before going to the market. I slumped back in the booth and looked at the necklace I always wore. My dad had given it to my mom a few years into their relationship, before I was born. The pendant was on a long silver chain, and it was sort of like a locket, because it opened, but it looked like a book—two inch-long tablets linked at their spine by little rings. There was a lamb on one tablet and a carnation on the other, and inside flowing from one side to the next was a poem by Rilke. The text was scribbled and the silver dirty, so it was hard to make out anything but the last lines: “You have not grown cold; it is not too late/ to dive into your deepening deeps, / where life gives itself up to peace.” I dipped a napkin into my water and tried to rub the tarnished inside so I could read the rest of the poem, but it didn’t make a difference. I never remembered to look up the poem or buy that silver polish stuff.

I realized the younger woman with Carol must be my age—twenty-four, almost twenty-five. She could be an old classmate of mine. Her back had been facing me and I had only seen her profile twice. Chloe, my sister, would have known if the girl had gone to our school. She was one of those kids who spent months poring over the yearbook, marking each picture according to a complex key denoting if you were popular, or cute, or smart, or athletic, or none of the above.
I left Mel’s but couldn’t focus on anything but the identity of the girl with Carol. After a few minutes in traffic on the way home, I decided to indulge myself—the errands and chores could wait—and head to our storage unit in South Pasadena, an hour from Iggy’s school in light morning traffic. I stopped by the house to make sure the door was locked and that Bear’s bowl had enough water. Today it took almost two hours to get to Ortiz Bros. Moving and Storage, but I didn’t mind since I listened to a podcast and sang along to my “DISCO!!!!/ ‘70s” playlist. My throat ached from channeling Barry Gibb’s falsetto by the time I pulled into the lot at noon. One of the Bros helped me find our units in the concrete bowels of what seemed like the type of labyrinthine, anonymous place you go to hide a body.

Once at our corner of the storage facility, I decided to start with Unit 3056. This screamed “DAD” the moment I saw the contents. Boxes piled taller than my 5’9” stature were filled with vinyl and cassette tapes, signed punk and rock memorabilia, and thousands of t-shirts from concerts—2,834 to be exact—towered and filled the space. I quickly brought down the metal sliding door and ran a few units to the left, away from 3056. I opened 3053, and the tufts of ribbons from Chloe’s equestrian days, along with a box full of dolls whose limbs pointed every which way, told me that this was the right place, the right era, to start looking.

It was an obstacle course in there. I climbed over boxes with old clothing and toys, old VHS, and some random pieces of furniture that hadn’t been in the house since my mom and dad passed away five and a half years ago. With the pocket flashlight I kept in my tote, I searched for a box with a label like “Year Books,” or “1997-2006,” roughly the period I went to the school where Carol taught. It was
nearing dark when I finally emerged from the building with yearbooks, cookbooks, and some pictures of me and Chloe.

Luckily, I wasn’t picking up Iggy, my eleven year old brother, from school that day. Chloe was in town visiting, and she and one of her friends (or boyfriends, it wasn’t really clear to me or Ig) were back from college on Thanksgiving break. Chloe offered to pick him up all week so I had some more free time for myself, which I decided to use to get the Thanksgiving feast organized. We were having three people over, in addition to our four.

Dinner was in full swing as I teetered into the house with a stack of books. Chloe had made plain penne and steamed green beans. She and Victor, the ‘friend,’ added to their dishes some fancy cheese they bought at the farmer’s market. Victor was from Berkeley and visiting us Southern Californians before heading upstate. He studied Environmental Science, and this, along with the fact he was from the Bay Area, was a lethal combination, making him doubly self-righteous and obnoxious, especially about L.A.

As I walked into the kitchen, he was bemoaning all the smog in our city.

“Oy, Victor! At least all that pollution gives us pretty sunsets! Who knows if there’s any smog with all that fog you have up north– could be worse than here!”

Chloe stared daggers at me. She had asked me to stop teasing him, but I told her that he’d have to make himself less of an easy target.

Victor turned around. “You won’t think it’s that funny when the pollution really starts to be a problem. In a few years, it’s going to be completely crazy and borderline unsafe living here. I would never—”
“We’ll be ok, we’re in the mountains. And I think ‘a few years’ is an insane estimation.”

“That’s idiotic—”

“Chloe, if you don’t shut this tree-hugging Northerner up I’m going to go crazy.” I said this in a teasing fashion, but I was relieved he was leaving tomorrow morning. I pinched a few penne pieces in my fingers and dropped them into my mouth while going over to Iggy. He was sitting on the couch.

“How was school, lil’ man?”

“It was good.” His response was staccato, as always when he was watching cartoons.

I tried initiating conversation again, asking specifics about what he did that day. I got no response—the tv had stolen my brother. So, as big sisters are wont to do, I ruined everything by grabbing the remote and turning off the tv.

“Ugh. Fine.” Iggy gave in, and walked me through his day in the monotonous tone he always reverted to when doing this daily chore. Math, Social Studies, Recess, Art, Language Arts, Lunch, Spanish, P.E.

“Well,” I began, “What was your favorite part? And how’d you do on that math quiz—did you get it back yet?”

He walked over and got his folder from the kitchen island, pulling out the quiz. In the top right corner there was a “9/10!”

“Oh my god! Chlo! Victor! Look at this! We have a genius mathematician in our midst! Iggy got a 90% on his math quiz!”

“It was easy, baby math,” Iggy said.
Simultaneously, Chloe gushed, “You didn’t tell me about this, Ig! That’s incredible! I’m so proud of you!” and Victor said, “Good job, lil’ man! STEM is important.”

I put my arm around Iggy’s shoulders. “This is amazing! In our conferences, Betsy always goes on about how you’re so good at math! Maybe we’ll see if you should do the sixth grade level stuff now?”

“Sure,” Iggy shrugged, using the same tone as when he recounted his day.

“Ok, Ig, you can finish this episode, then you have to practice guitar for twenty. Good job again on the math, I’m so proud of you!”

“Me too, Ig,” Chloe said, picking at some of her fancy cheese.

I retreated to my bedroom— the same I’d had since I was twelve— and called Oliver. Olly and I have been together for almost six years, and he had met my parents before they died. My mom approved of him, and her pitch went up an octave when she found out he had an offer to work at Block, Cohen, and Brittenham after he graduated. She told me he won her over with his scruffy beard and unabashed love for Madonna, but part of me thinks she was just relieved I finally had a boyfriend. Dad said he could tell he was a good guy, but thought he could “contribute more to dinner conversation.” They didn’t get to know him enough to realize that he’s just quiet around new people, especially ones that are protective over me.

He’s also originally from Los Angeles. Well, he’s actually from Santa Monica, which is technically its own city, but everyone apart from the Santa Monicans considers it part of L.A. We met, though, while at school in Rhode Island. I was a freshman at RISD and he was a junior at Brown studying Public Policy. Some
time early in the year, I was at a crowded party, planning on leaving soon, when I heard a voice teasing someone for saying things like “fromage” and “croissant” in a French accent. I laughed and saw the voice belonged to a guy wearing a t-shirt with an image on it of a beloved hot dog spot in L.A. that’s famous for being shaped like a hot dog. I went over and started talking to him, but the party was too loud so we stepped outside, and ended up on a bench talking for hours and going home together. We started spending most of our time together.

When my parents were in the hospital the summer after my freshman year, he was there every day, unless he was babysitting Iggy and Chloe. When they died, my mom on June 19th and my dad two days later, Olly decided to take a semester off and ultimately transfer to UCLA. I hadn’t asked him to do this, I instantly thought we would break up (tragically) because I couldn’t juggle a long distance relationship while raising my younger brother, sister, and our dog, Bear, all while figuring out what to do with myself and all my parents’ stuff.

When they were in the hospital—she for an aneurysm and he from getting in a car accident rushing to see her at the hospital—I developed (or maybe it was dormant and just triggered) a pragmatic sensibility. The only way to go on, it seemed—seems—was to do one thing at a time, make sure everyone is fed and clean and importantly not dying, and five years later these basics make up most of my day. It is this simplicity and pragmatism that came in handy once Jane, my godmother, returned to England after helping while they were in the hospital and a few weeks after they died, preparing me for my responsibilities as guardian of the family. Cleaving myself into two, separating emotion from responsibility, I was able to make
decisions after they died, from selling their bed and getting a lot of their things into storage to trying to break up with Oliver for the sake of simplifying my own life, and even more so, for my family’s, but then he stayed in L.A. I knew without even thinking that I’d never finish school and that I would become a stay-at-home mom, taking care of the house and kids while repressing, repressing, repressing.

Chloe was fourteen at the time, and Iggy was six. I repeatedly thanked fate for at least having it happen while I was home for summer break. I didn’t have to have my friends help me pack up my dorm room, I didn’t have to explain anything to my professors or any administrators, I didn’t have to be that person shifting from one foot to the other with their bulky, overflowing, last-minute-packed carry on, clearly on the verge of combustion, waiting to board the flight that would transport them across America, somehow bearing the grief of the deaths and the annoyance of airport procedures and the lack of privacy for hours on a bullet flying through the sky. I was home when all the shit hit the fan. At least there was that.

The phone was wedged between my cheek and shoulder as I wiped chipped iridescent lilac polish off my toes. Olly sounded tired on the phone, and since I was thinking about it I told him for the hundredth time about how at least I didn’t have to fly, on the brink of orphanhood, across the country. His throat got all thick, emotion almost closing it up, and he talked about how strong I am, how lucky he felt to be with me, to know me, etc. Had my parents lived to get to know Olly better, dad would’ve tease him for what he’d call his “pansy sentimentality.” Mom would’ve done a *Coffee Talk* impression— “I’m a little verklempt!” To me, his sensitivity was not only endearing, it was the indispensable crutch that buoyed me.
I laughed. “What’d I do to deserve such a mensch?” I had some pansy sentimentality of my own. Because I’ve been thrust into this horrific, sappy sob story of a situation, I get and deserve this one fucking thing, this one good thing, I thought.

We ended our call with him saying he’d be home in a few hour. He was still at the law firm he worked at and promised to bring home a slice of chocolate coconut cake from the bakery I loved.

I walked down the hallway towards Iggy’s room and peeked in as he and Chloe were finishing a game of Uno.

“Goodnight, Ig,” I called from the hallway. “Sweet dreams! Love you.”

“G’night, Dahl. Love you too.” Chloe and Ig said without looking up from the game.

Victor had— thankfully— vacated the kitchen by the time I went back. I ate the scraps of cheese left on Chloe’s plate and loaded everyone’s things into the dishwasher, then dropped a few pieces of pasta on the floor for Bear, who ate them within seconds. On the counter sat the old *Bon Appétit* and *Food + Wine* issues and the cookbooks I had found in storage. I still needed to finalize the menu for Thursday, we had five people total (six if Olly’s work friend came) and I still needed to finish the shopping and get the turkey. I leafed through the dog-eared pages and flavors flew to my mouth and mind, becoming clearer as I matched the dish to the year me and mom made it. I found the stuffing she always made— cornbread with sausage and pecan, and the banana cream pie my dad’s grandmother had written down in narrow scrawl on a yellowed sheet of paper that was tucked into *The New Basics* (theirs wasn’t as good, dad just thought it would be a good place to store Nanna’s recipe so
we could always find it). I saw in these pages Thanksgivings when we were all
together, arguing, half of us exhausted from cooking all day, the other half somewhat
excited but not as excited as the other half’s labor warranted, eating, my dad getting
drunk, all of us except Chloe—who eats nothing flavorful, sticking to white foods
and beef—sampling all nine dishes, then sampling again, my mother badgering us
for this, that, and the other—there not being enough gravy, for instance. We’d sit at
the table—sometimes joined by cousins and grandparents, once even the Bennetts
flew all the way from London—moments of familial tenderness and joy punctuating
the squabbling. My mom and I would be exhausted and try to suppress our irascibility
from a day of scurrying around (forgetting to actually eat anything, too tired to really
enjoy ourselves), and dad’s banana cream pie would be the only dish eaten clean. I
always hated the smell of garlic on my fingers as I tried to sleep.

Since my parents died, we’ve done something different each Thanksgiving.
The first year, we went to my mom’s cousin’s house in Long Island. Iggy had met
three of the eighteen people before; we were surrounded by relatives I hadn’t seen
since the boring bar or bat mitzvah ceremonies a decade earlier, everyone looking at
us with unmasked pity and discomfort. The last time we saw most of these people
was at cousin Eli’s bar mitzvah. Mom, dad, and Chloe snuck out mid-Torah portion
to go to McDonald’s because Eli was second in a b’nai mitzvah that had started late
and by the second hour they were starving and furious. They nudged from the middle
of the row, making a big scene, and I covered my face with my hands and slumped
low in the bench. Eli’s branch of my mom’s family didn’t speak to her again, and
they were guilty when her death foreclosed any possibility of reconciliation.
I stubbed my foot at the party, even though I had been respectful and stayed
the whole time while everyone else was eating fries and chicken nuggets. Great Aunt
Lillian, who loudly bad-mouthed my family at the after-party (“Well I never!”) came
up to me at the Long Island Thanksgiving. “So, dear, well, your parents, I’m sure they
would be very proud of you.” Her head tilted to the side and her desire to get this
interaction over with was tangible. We were the freaks, the orphans, and no one knew
how to treat or talk to us. They just stared, caught themselves staring, or caught
another person staring and would jab their leg subtly while plying us with food. The
next years, we ordered Chinese, went to Olly’s family’s, did a grocery store rotisserie
chicken, but this year, I wanted to do it right. I’ve become at ease around the kitchen,
having to cook every day, but I wanted to have a Thanksgiving like we used to, one
with really good food and high expectations for bonding that were not always met but
would be this time. A dinner bounty like our Christmases at the Bennetts’, where all
the guests are high on the merry festivities and carefreeness for days. We’d have
mom’s stuffing and yams, dad’s pie, my cranberry sauce with citrus from the trees in
our yard, green beans, mashed potatoes, a turkey with a glaze from one of the
magazines, and the secret dish Olly and Chlo were whipping up. I flipped through the
magazines and books and double checked the market list, finding I’d forgotten heavy
whipping cream for the pie and almonds for the beans. I was organized, the recipes
were all photocopied. I had even made a timetable of what should be made when, had
already made the pie crust and cranberry sauce and peeled the yams and potatoes.
Chloe said she’d do the mashed potatoes and Oliver would do the yams and green
beans. The stuffing, pie, and turkey were up to me.
After checking the list again, I went over to the pantry and got a bottle of wine and two glasses. I opened it, turned on the tv, and settled on a rerun of *Friends*.

I hardly drink or smoked weed. Whenever I have more than one drink, even when I indulge and get a sitter (neither I nor the sitter Jessica was yet comfortable, after five years, with the fact she was older than I am), I freeze with trepidation. Of course we would have to flee the house or there would be some sort of emergency the one night I drank, and so I never did unless Chloe and/ or Oliver— preferably “and” – was home and sober.

Chloe walked in as the next episode started— there was some sort of *Friends* marathon. There was always, it seemed, a *Friends* marathon on tv.

“Oo la la, lookee here!” She eyed the two glasses and calculated quickly that Victor wasn’t really invited to join in, and, to my surprise, she didn’t protest.

“So,” I said, pouring the glasses, “Are you and Mr. Inconvenient Truth over there schtupping, or what?”

“Ugh. You sound just like Nanna! No, I mean, we have a few times, but it isn’t really serious.”

“Kids these days! In my day, you had to wait until marriage!”

“To be honest,” she whispered, scanning the perimeter of our kitchen, “I’m kind of getting sick of him. I mean, he’s really pretentious, don’t you think?”

“Of course, I think,” I said, splitting with laughter. “Every day I’m shocked that he has yet another art house movie t-shirt on.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. We sat drinking the wine and talked about school, what requirements she had to do, what her friends were doing. She asked about Marie and I
said she’s got an assistant job for a talent agent and said she hated it, but I could tell she was enjoying it, her dog was old and dying, she was annoyed with me because I was spacey at breakfast, oh—Carol, the old teacher, was there on a date with someone my age, can you believe it! They had ice cream for breakfast! We laughed, and Chloe told me some of the gross medical stuff she’d seen at the hospital. We cringed and laughed about the people who stick strange objects in orifices and come in with bulbous volcanoes of pus that need to be popped, and how when there was a lot of pus the room started to stink. I decided not to find out more about the stench, the smell from the fancy cheese wafting over, turning my stomach. As the credits came on, she turned to me, muting the tv.

“Dahlia, how do you do it? How are you holding up? What do you do all day? I never really know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, really not that much. House and Ig stuff, mostly. Some knitting and drawing.” She gave me the Go on, be honest look.

“Well, it isn’t that bad,” I said, eyeing the remote. Chloe stared at me as if to say, No, really. How the hell are you? Look at your sacrificed, stagnant life. I would kill myself if I were you.

“I mean,” I furiously twirled that pesky lock and Chloe smacked my hand away, “It would be nicer if I didn’t have to do all this, if I could be a normal twenty-four year old who got to go to school and everything, but it’s not like I have an option. You’re at school, so I have to be here. That’s it.” My fingers found their way back to the lock and commenced twirling.
“You’ve been sort of taking care of Iggy, you see how much time and energy he can take. That’s what I do all day, all year. One day it’s Saturday, I blink and it’s Thursday.”

“I thought you wanted to leave, to move back home,” Chloe said. “If it was going to be this hard… we— we could’ve gone to live with the Bennetts, —”

“Please—” I interrupted. “Of course I had to come home. I couldn’t just stay in Providence and have you and Iggy move to fucking England. What was I gonna do on the breaks? How would we all get visas? What would we have done with the house? All our shit? Or Bear?” I gestured to our beloved, plump dachshund mutt, who was sitting in my lap, head resting on my lower abdomen, turning occasionally to lick my wrist. He looked up when I said his name and the old bell on his collar tinkled.

She sat silent and glassy-eyed, clearly not absorbing or really paying attention to what I was saying. I mean, she was young, immature in many ways, she wasn’t the one to meet with the lawyers, the people at the bank, the business manager, all the doctors, she hadn’t thought of the difficulty of immigrating, getting visas and everything that would’ve had to happen if they had gone to London and lived with our godparents. The Bennetts were fun, rambunctious, generous people, but moving to another country, no, that was too much.

“To tell you the truth, Chlo, I just didn’t have the strength to leave the house. I didn’t have it in me. We’ve lived here our whole lives, it’s a piece of them, in a way, this is the place…England? That would’ve been too much.”

“Well, it could’ve been cool for me and Iggy, that’s all—”
“I’m sorry, but you are not the parent. That’s my goddamn job, and moving away would not have solved anything. I sacrifice my fucking life for you, I keep this family together, and you want to move to England? You think ‘that would’ve been cool?’ Well, go to fucking England then. Tell me if it’s better than here. Tell me if you think Jane or Cosmo would’ve taken you on a college tour or helped with your applications, if they would’ve let you spend so much on your prom dress or let you go on a Eurotrip after graduation? Would slave away planning a nice Thanksgiving? And what the fuck do I get? I get to wither the fuck away stuck in traffic all day, ferrying Iggy to and from school, packing lunches, making sure he stays afloat and has some semblance of a nice childhood. While you’re off pissing away your time and our money with a fucking pathetic, pretentious idiot.”

I stopped, took a sip of wine. “Look at me,” I demanded. She withdrew to the other end of the couch, leaning as far from me as gravity would allow.

“I don’t get a life, a soul-enriching career— likely no career— because I decided to put you and Iggy, and our family— first. Do you understand? Do you?”

Chloe’s eyes were coated in tears.

“I’m so sorry.”

I got up and took a long bath. I debated whether or not to get out and go apologize to Chlo, or if it was good that I spoke out. My face grew very hot and the reality of my words to her seeped in, threatening to overpower and possess me. Tears fell for myself, for my life, my wasted potential, my dead parents, my poor little brother growing up with this horrific, daily, lived grief, for the abnormal wannabee family I was creating, they fell with anger that my sister opened this door I daily
wedged shut, that she likely still wouldn’t get it, still wouldn’t understand how lucky she is not to be me, to have a few weeks a year of actual responsibility instead of being on-call every moment.

I need to get over this, I thought. I have a Thanksgiving to make, I can’t wallow like this, I have to confirm with Marie, see if Olly’s friend is coming, buy all the ingredients. Shit. Above all, I have to make sure Ig doesn’t see me like this.

No matter how much I tried to jolt myself into responsibility, I just couldn’t. The tub water had turned murky and salty, my eyes swelled from the sodium in my tears, hot to the touch, my throat thick with memories of Cedar Sinai, of the elevator buttons for their different floors—Trauma (3) and Neurology (12)—of beeping vitals and paling skin, bloated, scarred bodies, her bandaged head, stitched like a baseball, his encased limbs held up by strings like a marionette, the colors of the walls—hers, pistachio, his, peach—the nurses coming in every so often to check their ever-worsening conditions, replacing the water in the small pink pitchers when I had drained it. Sitting there every day was like living in one of those time-lapse videos of rotting vegetation. Uncle Isaac, mom’s brother, had come out and stuck around for a bit, unhelpful and uncomfortable, thrilled to realize that he wasn’t actually obligated to be there once Janie, Vita, and Cosmo arrived. He could leave and go back home to his family where his kid and wife were alive and healthy.

Bear barked, announcing Olly’s arrival. I could hear very faint sounds of a conversation in the living room and Olly walked into the bathroom a few moments later. He crouched beside the tub, rubbed my head, kissed my cheek. I can’t
remember exactly what he said, but apparently Chloe was almost catatonic in the kitchen and told him to go to me, handing him my glass of wine.

“Can you get in?,” I whimpered.

He got in the tub, filling it with more hot water as it was lukewarm, and sat behind me, massaging my head and shoulders until he was as pruned as me. After an hour, we got out, brushed our teeth, and Oliver big spooned me as I wept a little more, I don’t know what about this time, even, probably everything and nothing in particular. He whispered funny things that he had seen driving that day like an old man with a bean can glued to a Yankee cap, and he imitated Duncan, Vita’s boyfriend, whose Scottish accent endlessly amuses me.

“So, Dahlia, wuht kan I dew to mayke yer problehms wee ones? To make yew hapee? I see the dram didn’t work, how ‘bout a nice trip to Ehdenburragh?” I giggled and grew tired. I was exhausted from the torrential onslaught of feelings and anxieties and frustrations and unresolvable miseries and from the mere act of crying, which always dehydrated me, leaving me dazed and unwell, but the memory of being with the Bennetts (everyone trying not to laugh at Duncan’s silly voice) was an easy respite from my problems and I was grateful Olly was so good at impersonating him.

I slept in the next morning, meaning I slept until half past nine, late for someone who usually gets up at six to make breakfast. On the kitchen table, Chloe had left a note on top of the stack of cookbooks.

I found Emma Taylor’s Instagram and she totally is seeing Carol. They have all these selfies together—insane! It seems like they’ve been dating for a few months? Didn’t you and mom run into her at that bakery on Ventura and she was with Dr. Schneider and they acted really weird ‘cuz you realized they were dating and we had to switch therapists? Haha.
Dropping Vincent at LAX. He says thanks for letting him stay. I’ll get Ig and take him to basketball this afternoon.

XO

The note was written on a piece of mom’s stationary. Her name— Lydia — imprinted in lilac gothic lettering at the top. Walking back to my room, I noticed a piece of paper in front of my doorway. It was a receipt for two months’ membership to The Bitter Root, the pottery studio I used to go to in high school during breaks. It was open 24/7, so I could go early after dropping Iggy. Every so often, I had thought about signing up. Chloe had scratched out the total, and wrote “Make us something nice!” I flipped the receipt over and saw it was $240 for two months; the prices had gone up since I had last gone.

I smiled and tacked the receipt onto the corkboard in the kitchen. I grabbed the grocery list and went to the market, deciding to splurge and get fancy wine and ice cream and butter. “Yes, this European-style slow-churned butter will make all the difference,” I thought. Anything and everything that would make our dinner better, show the guests that we can make and share something nice, that I still remember how to have fun, that our parents and godparents showed us by demonstration how to entertain, I would do.

The next day Olly and I rose at eight in the morning to start cooking and didn’t finish until around four o’clock, which was when we told the guests to come. Chloe and Olly were acting strange and wouldn’t let me near the corner of the countertop near the landline. It turns out they were making mincemeat pies to include our English celebrations, using kumquats from our garden as a garnish. They were very good— I was especially impressed with the pastry, which Chloe made by hand.
the day I was at the storage facility. It was non-stop running around all day cooking, but we had some science podcasts Iggy wanted to listen to and tv shows and music on at various points and it was fun having everyone and Bear in the kitchen, who sat with a thumping tail or weaved between our feet, hoping one of us would drop him a few scraps. Chloe made sure that Olly and I could unwind and have some of the cider cranberry cocktails she had made, and as I played head chef she walked Bear and entertained Iggy. Olly’s friend Alex arrived first with a nice bottle of wine and some small festive gourds, and Marie showed up half an hour later and was tasked with setting the table. We put the little gourds in the center, surrounded by various mismatched candles.

I was not even hungry, my exhaustion eclipsing any hunger that would’ve grown during the day, and yet I heaped my plate with enormous portions of everything, especially the stuffing and mashed potatoes. I consumed the food at first without really tasting it, my body on autopilot. Music was playing softly from the kitchen. Chloe and I sat at opposite ends of the table. The group decided the cranberry sauce, stuffing, and dad’s banana cream pie were the highlights. Throughout the dinner, I spent long moments overlooking the table and felt my mom and dad would’ve been impressed with the spread and my ability to bring everyone together, to entertain as they did, as they learned from Jane and Cosmo. I smiled when Marie and Alex realized they’d gone to sleepaway camp together and joked about the annual talent show rivalries. It was partially the cider cocktails, but when Iggy and Olly were palling around and one-upping each other over who could eat more pie or sing more Zeppelin lyrics, tears coated my eyes and threatened to flow out of me. I excused
myself to the kitchen, saying we needed more butter for the rolls. Olly came through
the door, one of those kinds that swing when pushed, letting in between swings
cheerful sounds of conversation.

“Baby, everything’s delicious. We’ll have food left over for days—weeks!”

I leaned back into him and craned around to kiss his neck.

“Thanks, hun. Best part might be that we don’t have to clean up! Smart of Ig
to suggest paper plates!”

“Not just the food, bubs,” he said, wrapping his arm around my back. The
door swung open and Iggy and Chloe walked into the kitchen.

“Dahl, great dinner party,” Chloe said.

Iggy chimed in, “Yeah, best Thanksgiving ever.” He came over and hugged
me tight. I nuggied his hair.

“What a bunch of saps!” I said, tears beading in the corners of my eyes.

“Now, let’s find some tupperware so everyone can take some food home.”
It was dusk and all the fireflies were out. The air was thick and humid, the purr of insects filling the space, and tomorrow would surely be spent indoors as I sensed rain approaching. I close my eyes and it feels like it could be any point in time. I’ve lived here all my life and have been in this garden sensing a rain coming too many times to count. The kids were running around playing tag in the “orchard,” what we jokingly called our garden when trying to sound grand. There was a small herb garden, a pear tree, three apple trees, two orange trees, some broad beans and carrots growing, and delicious bushes of blackcurrants and elderberries.

“Be careful around the bushes, darlings!” I yelled from my perch atop the picnic table. “Your dear mamas and papas don’t want to spend all night scrubbing those stains out!”

“Yes, listen to your Aunt Janie. She means business!” Benj hollered.

My husband, Cosmo, and Lydia, Ben’s wife, were making drinks and finishing up dinner while we watched the kids. Iggy wasn’t born yet, but the three girls were joined that night by Duncan, the local fishmonger’s nephew visiting all the way from Skye, which was a great deal more fun because tag with three people can get dull, and we adults didn’t have the stamina to play as long as the kids were wont to demand. Slowly, as it grew darker and the light of the fireflies’ behinds grew stronger, the game of tag changed, signaled by the kids’ darting about and cupping of hands, to one where they hoped to catch one of those magical little bugs.
My daughter, Vita, and Dahlia were twelve and a half and eleven respectively, and Chloe had just turned seven. Lydia would find out she was pregnant with Iggy a few weeks later with a test she’d bought at the Boots in town. I fetched a jar inside in case anyone caught a bug.

Benjamin—whom we all called Ben, Benji, Benj, and Squire, a name Cos gave him years ago when we were at the Renaissance Faire in Irvine—went to help in the kitchen.

This was a regular night in the country, with the addition of Duncan, and we spent many more in similar fashion until Benj and Lydia passed away.

Lydia was one of those people who, when singing in her car, usually Fleetwood Mac or Prince, with the windows open, wouldn’t stop when at a light. She’d go on belting her tune.

I loved that about her. When Ben first brought her over, I knew at once she wasn’t like the others, the “actresses” with bleached hair and cocaine proclivities that traipse around L.A., the type he usually saw off and on for weeks. After a dinner I cooked of roast chicken and potatoes and after the dessert Benj and Lydia brought of cheap supermarket vanilla ice cream, while she was in the bathroom, Cosmo and I at once urged him to keep her, whatever the cost.

She was unlike anyone any of us had met.

“I mean, who forgets that they’ve left a plant in their convertible for months, only realizing when it grew to such a height it blocked the rearview mirror? That’s absolutely brilliant!” Cos gushed, eyes shining.
We all laughed, and when Lydia returned and asked what all the fuss was about, we told her it was her in all her indelible glory, and if she’d please get the ice cream from the freezer.

“I’m a lucky man,” Benji proclaimed.

Cosmo and I met him while we were living in L.A., in 1982. Cos is half-American, though he lived in England all his life ‘til we moved to L.A. for a spell in our mid-twenties. His mum’s from Arkansas but somehow ended up at eighteen in London and stayed. (“Arkansas? I don’t even know where the hell that is! No, seriously, I couldn’t point it out on a map!” Ben said). Mitch, a friend of ours who was working with Cos on a screenplay, had brought his college roommate over one night, and Cos and I promptly stopped calling Mitch and spent all our spare time with Ben, until finally, after a year, we convinced him to rent the flat above our garage, which we decided to call the Nest during a night of drinks and dancing. After a year in the Nest, he met Lydia; we returned to England a year later, and Lydia and Ben took the main house, visiting us every year. Their kids still live there.

I gave birth to Vita in America, about six months before we moved back to London. How glad I am she and their daughter, my goddaughter Dahlia, are sisterly close. Vita even did a year abroad at University of Southern California to spend time with her beloved godsister, and ended up living in the Nest Benji rented from us all those years ago. Each year the Adlers would come to Fairgreen, the house I grew up in and where I now sit— twenty-one miles from Oxford and 80 miles from London—and they would come for about six weeks, starting in mid-June. The children would
chase each other and the local sheep, ride horses, swim, explore the woods, make tent
fortresses on rainy days in the parlor. We would spend nights by the fire, sitting
around the table my great grandpapa made by hand with beech lumber from our
woods, and sometimes take day trips to Blenheim Palace (the birthplace of Sir
Winston Churchill and the home of the Duke of Marlborough) and walk the
cobblestone streets of Oxford so Chloe and Lydia could go to their favorite ice cream
shop and so our kids could pretend they attended Hogwarts.

What would have been the sixteenth anniversary of their visits to Fairgreen
was cut short by their accidents, which happened two days before they were meant to
come, and they died while they were meant to be here. To be exact, he died when we
were meant to be at the Summer Pantomime in town, and she died on a Sunday, a
listless day when we probably would have gone for a stroll and swim, and picked
oranges and blackcurrants in our grand orchard. It was very hot in L.A. but you could
hardly tell since the hospital was as cold as a December day.

Al, the dog Ben bought us, is now nine. I’ve always loved dogs, and Fairgreen
has always had them around. He bought him as a gift to celebrate our twenty-seven
years of friendship, and picked him out at the shelter in Oxford because he was a runt,
and because “He looked like he had a sense of humor about him.” This is true; Al is
very proud one moment, and the next on his back, supine, paws in the air, tongue out,
tail flapping about, lying there desperately waiting for someone to scratch his plump,
furry belly.
I was in the kitchen with a cuppa watching Vita color in an outline of a beehive and Cos was napping in the parlor when the front door opened and we heard the Adlers taking off their rain gear. Dahlia ran into the kitchen, bursting and glowing with jealousy and excitement; Ben practically skipped in. Lydia was off chasing Iggy.

Ben gushed, “I’ve got a present for you all, but I have one condition.”

“Well, come on then. Out with it!” I was getting as excited as the children were. Cos lumbered in, rubbing his eyes.

“You have to pick from a name on this list.” Ben withdrew a receipt and handed it to Vita. I saw it was from Sainsbury, and was reminded that we needed to make a trip to town to get food for the next few days.

On the list were the following words:

Garage
Aluminum
Basil
Oregano
Tomato
Schedule
Mobile

“You have to pick one of these because the way you pronounce them still cracks me up, after all these years.” He was beaming; Cos and I were laughing.

“Come see!” Dahlia, growing impatient, was urging us. “Vita, come!”

Vita was up in a flash, running to tear open the front door. She got to the car a good minute before the rest of us, and then we all crowded ‘round and peered at the sleeping ball of fluff in the backseat.

“What breed is it?” Cos asked. “Is there some collie in ‘im?”
Vita scooped him up, and Al, then unnamed, blinked open his hazel eyes, which widened at the six sets on him.

Training him was wonderfully easy; he loved being outdoors, and jumped with glee through the dog door Benj and Cos built. His chestnut curls were soft, and his white-tipped paws were adorable. He looks like a dandy with fine silk gloves on, ready for Ascot, and he carries himself like a dressage horse. I always felt he was missing a pince-nez or monocle. Now he’s got a white snout and I imagine him by a fireplace puffing an old pipe.

A few years later we got another dog and I felt we had to pick a name from the legendary list. It sits on my desk in a frame made from the same wood as our dining room and picnic tables, beech from the woods past the orchard. I just glanced to look at it. The contents of that day’s marketing appear ghostly and in reverse type, just visible through the list of names. It is a receipt after all, so has that dual dullness and shininess inherent to that kind of paper. Tom (Tomato) our bearded sheepdog mutt, flops around like a rag doll with big glistening button black eyes, which are seldom visible through his wild mane. Tom follows Al around, nuzzles him, the curmudgeonly elder, and frustratingly, at age six, still won’t respond to his name most of the time. Chloe, Cosmo, and Duncan (the Scottish nephew of the local fishmonger’s son, now Vita’s boyfriend in a sweet turn of events) think Tom’s a bit stupid, but I know he’s just a shy thing with a big heart, and far smarter than he seems. He’ll stare into your eyes until you break away, and in those big marbles I see suffering. Another rescue, we have no idea of his life before we got him. He could’ve been abused for all we know. In any case, it is an undeniable pain in the arse he
doesn’t come when called. A few years ago, Iggy had the wise idea when I asked him to get Tom and check the usual hiding spots (behind the couch in the sitting room or in my bedroom closet). He asked why we didn’t get a bell.

A bell! I thought. “Brilliant, Ig.”

I got Tom as kind of a coping mechanism after returning from one of my trips to L.A. I went every so often to help Dahlia get things in order. Cos and Vita had to stop me from adopting the whole lot at the shelter. A puppy would, surely, bring some light into our lives. I felt undone. Dahlia wouldn’t leave their house, said it was too impossible, and I had to admit that getting visas for three people wouldn’t be simple. I lay awake at night, grew clingy to Vita, made Cos and I go in for full physicals, body scans, colonoscopies, forced Dr. Burns on Harley Street to order blood tests so particular and unlikely he said he’d never ordered them in his forty years practicing medicine. I refuse to fly on the same plane as Cos anymore, and try not to take the train or car together into London.

I still think: how could it be? My healthy, beautiful, young, hilarious, brilliant best friends had died? They were so young, and they had three kids!

I sit in a gargoyle perch in the middle of the sofa with this set of questions before me and direct my thoughts back whenever they stray. I’ve assigned myself the task of cracking this problem. Cos has dredged up his Protestant upbringing and apparently found some solace in faith, but I don’t believe he really buys into it, and I feel if anything this should prove God isn’t real or interested in karma. Cos drinks more now, and when the godkids aren’t here to celebrate, we sit on holidays, their birthdays, after phoning them, in an aimless trance. We don’t entertain as much as we
used to, I am never in the mood to host or even attend events, even though seeing
people and being in a crowd does take me out of myself, make me forget and enjoy
myself. I’m trying to start going into London more, mixing with people instead of the
plants in my orchard. But I’m often not in the mood to be distracted.

The kids still come every summer, and every other Christmas, and that is one
of the great joys of my life. Their perseverance encourages me; they are moving
forward. Oliver has been a true blessing, and it is a joy to report that after eight years
of being together, he and Dahlia are engaged to be married and decided they would
like their ceremony in our orchard here at Fairgreen. Over the years their parents
made scores of friends here in England, and all our kids get on and spend time
together. For Christmas and New Year’s, Fairgreen holds thirty to thirty-five people,
the same families each year. Most years the Adlers came, and the years they didn’t,
everyone agreed that something was lacking, a certain vibrancy and humor. Everyone
missed Lydia and Ben’s gift for whipping up delicious meals for the dozens of us,
their knack for the games we play in the parlor, and their willingness to always go on
a local expedition. At Christmas Dinner one year, one of the last Christmases she got
to have, Lydia gripped my arm, her eyes fixed on mine.

“Thank you for having us each year, Janie. It’s really so generous and means
the world to us. L.A. is the least festive place on the entire planet. No snow, half-
asassed decorations, everyone out of town. Fairgreen’s so spirited and warm. You’re
the magnet that brings us together.” She turned to the table, “Cheers to our darling
Jane!”
Too flattered and touched to speak, I shook myself and could only muster to say, through the heavy fog of wine, without letting the tears that had welled get their way and let loose, that it was my pleasure and honor, and that I didn’t know what my life would be like, other than worse, without them in it. “Here, here!” Ben cheered, holding a glass so near a candelabra, his sleeve caught fire. Someone managed to put it out, and everyone laughed.

That night, I had a dream, and I couldn't remember much because my dreams— which are often lucid and peculiar— rapidly lose detail within moments of my waking up. But I had a feeling that in the dream Lydia’s eyes were boring into mine, or that she somehow haunted the dream. My hangover left me nauseated and waking in the middle of the dream disoriented me, so a few moments passed before I realized I wasn’t in the master bedroom. Ben lumbered as he made his way to the door, and I turned away, towards the side table. It was five o’clock in the morning.

When the kids do come to Christmas, I can see their individual anxieties and tensions dissolve within hours. The give themselves over to a merry stupor, snacking on sticky toffee pudding and mincemeat pies that signal Christmastime. With all the proverbial extended family around, Dahlia can relax, let loose, since she doesn’t have to be on duty. At Christmas and the days following ‘til New Year’s, we sit around, people come and go, take walks, play various games like Murder in the Dark and The Hat Game, watch films, go to town, drink wine, pick at leftovers, nap. Last Boxing Day, Olly proposed to Dahlia walking along the nearby quarry, and we had a grand celebration that ended in Dahlia crying to me and Duncan (of all people!) about how
she wished her parents could be there. At dawn, when everyone else was sleeping, I found Cos standing at the memorials we put in the back yard. I held myself and he held me, and we stood there until our noses grew red. The next afternoon, Dahlia came into the office I am at present sitting in while I was doing editing work and asked if she and Olly could have the wedding here. Tears coated my eyes like a heavy rain seems to melt over windows, and I said yes. They decided they’d have a party in L.A., but want a big bash in the orchard, of the old New Year’s variety, the infamous kinds I used to throw where everyone dances until six in the morning, the kind Ben and Lydia loved so much.

That was last year—the wedding is in three weeks. I am so far away, almost six thousand miles away. We send a monthly allowance to help them out, and always pay their airfare when they come to visit, and thank god we can spare the money.

In the countryside, where I spend most of my time now, I imagine fewer catastrophes and fatal accidents. I rarely drive. Cos spends half the week in London. Work for him is a refuge, a way to get on with life. After all, it’s been eight years. He is faring better than I am; I often wallow. It is good for Vita—who lives out here—that one of us is generally sturdy. She works at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, trying to decided what she wants to do with her life, if she wants to pursue a degree in History of Art, if she wants to go into teaching. She spends weekends in London at Duncan’s flat.

I spend the days with the dogs, the horses, reading, sleeping, writing letters to Ben and Lydia—they pile up or end up in the bin, visiting mum in her cottage down the dirt road, and sitting on a bench next to the memorials, which are between the
blackcurrant bushes and the small citrus grove in the orchard, replaying memories in my head. I edit a bit for friends writing articles or books, and when the fireflies come out I try to take a picture and text it to Chloe and Dahlia, but their bright lights never translate well; they can never be captured by anything but firsthand experience.

I have the memorials for myself, for Lydia and Ben, and hoped the children would find it nice to have them here during their visits to Fairgreen, and to know there is a place in the world dedicated to them. The Americans never had a taste for blackcurrants and elderberries before they came to Fairgreen. My mum had our great-great grandmother’s recipe for blackcurrant jam, and one morning I won them over with this century-old recipe. Whenever they came, they asked about the jam, and I learned to make surpluses before their visits. I gave them the recipe, a sacrilegious act, but then again, they were— are— family. So, I have the ochre Cotswolds stone memorials near the blackcurrant bush, near the tree, which bore delectable treats this past season, even though citrus isn’t native to our climate.

When she first saw them, Dahlia was upset, but not at the monuments. She was upset because of course it’s mind-boggling they exist, that her parents are dead. Iggy and Vita find it painful and try to avoid the corner of the garden where they are, while I go every day like a devotee of the Church.

Dahlia and Iggy will go a few days after arriving, and Chloe, bless her, I have spotted her at dawn sitting with them, talking to them cross-legged in the grass. That one, she focuses on the brighter aspects and is quite self-centered, not as jaded as Dahlia and me, but she does mourn, in her own way. They’ve grown so much, and I can hear Ben’s chuckle and see his sparkling olive eyes when Iggy runs after a toad,
Lydia’s guttural chortle when Chloe climbs to the top of a pear tree and can’t figure out how to get back down, and when Dahlia is cooking and playfully bickering with Oliver.

It’s almost dark, and I can feel Tom and Al sitting behind me, waiting for me to get their dinner. Laughing to myself, I’m up and walking to their food bowls. Headlights flash through the glass window in the door and blinking, I see it’s a boxy red truck, The Royal Mail. I’ve known Simon the postman for thirty years. He’s a very jolly, cheerful man, the kind of man that gets red in the face after one drink.

“Heavy package, all the way from the states!”

“That’s strange. Oh, it’s heavy. Want to come in for a cuppa?”

He tells me he’s got to get home to Alice or she’ll have his head. Inside, the dogs are on their beds and I use a steak knife to carve through the layers of packing tape. It’s from The Adlers and the box says “THIS SIDE UP” and “FRAGILE.” Images of a broken wine glass and an umbrella are next to “FRAGILE.”

There are packing peanuts galore and two bubble-wrapped lumps inside. A note reads, in Dahlia’s penmanship on Lydia’s stationary:

Dear Janie and Cos,

Here are my parents’ cremains, along with drawings Iggy did for you. The facility couldn’t hold them anymore, and to be honest, I thought it was weird they were just sitting there for years. I hope you can understand that it’s too hard to have them here. Chloe and I wanted them to be at Fairgreen. It’s where they had wonderful memories and where we come each year and remember them.

I’m sorry I didn’t ask before sending them. I didn’t know what to do and nowhere else suits them. Since we’ll be coming in a few weeks for the wedding maybe we could have a small memorial ceremony? I thought they could be buried somewhere in the grand orchard. Haha. I know they would have loved that, especially mom.

Love,

Dahlia
I freeze. I’ve never had cremains in my kitchen— have you? Would I be able to look at them? Does it look like dust? Ash? Rocks? Should I disinfect the kitchen table? I pushed aside all the packing materials and there were two identical vessels, with scraps of paper saying “L. Adler” and “B. Adler.”

Did I want to open them up and take a look? Could I? I resolved to wait for Cos, who was coming home from London in a few hours. I quickly brought the box to my office, as I didn’t want Vita being traumatized by two jars of cremains in the kitchen. Do we open the vessels and save some of them? Do we sprinkle some, and bury the rest? What part of their bodies and organs and personalities would be thrown to the wind if we scattered some of their ashes? Is that legal? No, I think? How many ashes worth of people have I unwittingly inhaled in my life?

I sit at the desk for some minutes before pacing over to the couch, before getting up again to make some tea, before deciding to start dinner two hours before usual, deciding to watch an hour of *Thelma and Louise* because it’s on the telly, some middle chunk. Finally, Cos gets home and I yank him towards my office before he has a chance to kiss me hello, thrust Dahlia’s note into his hand, tell him to read it, and lean against the desk shifting from foot to foot. He reads and his eyes widen. I cross and uncross my arms.

“So, that’s… that’s them?” He points a trembling, knobby finger at the box.

“Yes, now where should we put them ‘til the kids come to visit?”

“Wait just a minute— what the bloody hell does she think, sending us, in the Royal Mail, cremated bodies without even a bloody notice?”

“Obviously, you idiot, she panicked and couldn’t bear to have them around.”
“With no warning? Who’s to say we want them here?”

I withheld a slap. “You absolute shit! She’s twenty-seven years old and you’re sixty! For fuck’s sake, it doesn’t matter if she told us because they’re here and we can’t very well do anything about it now!” I stopped for a moment to breathe and began speaking as soon as I saw he was about to start up again.

“We will have a memorial service, and it will be touching and lovely, and that’s the end of it! Now, I think we shouldn’t tell Vita. I don’t need her hovering around the office or falling to pieces when she’s got to help with the wedding and everything. I won’t hear one more word about it; what do you propose to do, anyway, you bloody idiot? Send them back from whence they came?”

Half of me understands his reaction, though, as the cremains were deeply unnerving. After a few days, instead of becoming more haunted by them, they became a sort of stand in for the people they contained. I moved them from the front closet to my office, and when I’m puttering around or working or reading or watching telly, I started talking to an amalgamated form that was part Lydia and part Ben.

“Isn’t that funny?” “Why doesn’t she just tell him she was framed, that it wasn’t her kerchief?” “You’d get on with him, Benj.” “Look at Al, someone’s wounded his pride. Better get him a biscuit, the old fart.” A week before the kids arrived I almost lost Lydia. I moved her to make room for a wedding package that arrived and forgot she was there, almost tripping over her but instead just stubbing my foot, but badly enough that it bled. It was as if she had set herself in my path.

I had the plans for the memorial all set by the time the kids came from L.A. Some of the people we spend Christmas with came from London, and Duncan’s uncle
walked across the field and played some bagpipes, anyone who wanted to could say a few words, and we buried the urns by the memorials. Dahlia, Iggy, and Chloe picked some wild roses and placed them on top of the urns, and then on top of the dirt once Cos finished filling up the tiny plots. It was quite humid, and he had to stop a few times to mop his brow and wipe his eyes. Tom and Al came out and started circling the memorials, aware something out of the ordinary was occurring. “Why are so many people gathered around here at once, usually it’s just one or two of them, no big fuss,” they might think. Al seemed notably somber. He lay down next to my right foot, staring at the memorials, and began shaking and yelping. Tom, at a loss of what to do and clearly unnerved that his leader was hysterical, resolved to do as he often does, and imitated Al’s cries. Iggy played an abridged version of “Wild Horses” he’d been learning on guitar, and some of us sang along.

“Look,” Dahlia croaked, her voice altered by a constricted throat and thick mucus she was about to blow from her nose. “The fireflies are coming out.”

Scores of little dancing lights sparkled in the air, dancing around the orchard, flickering and fleeting and lending their beauty and brightness to this June night.
When I come to think of it, I do remember playing with Enzo—in the garden when it was nice out, and in the game room when it was raining or wet. Most of these memories, which isn’t saying much since I only have blurry glimpses, are of us playing with remote-controlled helicopters. I remember mom scolding us because the helicopters were flying too close to the Christmas tree and threatened to knock off the crowning ornament, which wasn’t a typical glimmering silver star, but an angel’s body with the porcelain head of a chocolate labrador. This belonged to Aunt Janie’s father, who was now dead. He thought it was funny and more spirited than a boring star, and I’m told he would laugh himself to tears with the memory and anticipation of it while rummaging around in the Christmas decorations box. Then he’d discover it and guffaw, clutching it to his chest.

I never met him, but Dahlia and Chloe say he was a lot like Dumbledore when he was having fun eating Harry’s candy in the first book.

His widow, Jane’s mom, lived down the dirt road from Fairgreen in a stone cottage. She was the kind of old lady who seems out of it most of the time but clues in to make a witty remark, so you never really knew if she was in her own world, chiming in to make the few comments, or always alert. She had three dogs and they were just as checked-out as she was, and the four of them sat around for most of the day like pieces of taxidermy.
At seven every day Aunt Janie (who isn’t my real aunt, she’s my godmum) says to me, “Ig, why don’t you go down the road and see if mum would like to join us for dinner?”

I used to grumble on my way out, “You know this is why the telephone was invented, right?” She would respond, “You know mum’s too old for that,” but I knew this wasn’t true because while she sat at home she’d play online poker and scour the internet for first editions of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce books. “How does she know it’s dinner time when I’m not here?” I’d respond.

Now, though, I had to stop myself from running into Aunt Janie’s office at five. “I’m going to get Gran now!” The first time I did this she was dumbstruck, and I dashed out of the room before she could respond.

I think she figured out I was really going over there to see Enzo. We’d been spending almost all of the day together, and in the last week, some nights. He was staying with Gran, and so was the rest of his family while they were in town for the wedding. His mother Eliza was Uncle Cos’s stepsister, and she’s married to an Italian who wore round lime green eyeglasses and knew eight languages. They lived in Glasgow for a few years while she tried to finish her degree before moving to Rome, his hometown. Enzo was born while they were in Scotland, and my Christmas memories of us playing must take place during that time, before he moved to Italy, and before my parents died.

Making my way to the front door, I passed cardboard boxes someone had poorly attempted to repack with wedding decorations. Dahlia, an undiagnosed hoarder, wanted to keep the wedding mementoes and ship them home. Their wedding
was about three weeks ago and they’d be back from their honeymoon in a few days.

Chloe, Vita, and I decided to surprise them at baggage claim—“à la Love, Actually,”

Chloe squealed. “It’ll be so cute. We’ll have a sign and everything.”

I had been itching to go into London, so agreed to this plan under two
conditions: that we stop at the meat pie shop for breakfast a few towns over and that
the three of us go up early to do a few things before going to Heathrow, where me,
Dahlia, Chloe, and Olly would have to schlep back in two weeks, anyway, to go
home.

We got here a few weeks before the wedding. I like the countryside, but
weeks of ping pong, swimming, walks, and tv can get really fucking boring. I’m
fourteen, not fifty—I don’t wanna sit around all day with a cup of oversteeped tea
watching another BBC miniseries—although I have to admit—they were growing
on me. London, though, was more exciting than all the Jane Austen interpretations
combined. I really wanted to go to the flea market on Portobello Road to check out
the stalls selling art supplies and old records, and to ogle the stacks of gorgeous rugs
and flapping lines of ribbons, but somehow knew Vita would make up some reason or
another to “make a wee stop” at Kew Gardens or The National Gallery, and we’d end
up there for ages and get to the market as the vendors were packing up.

Now, I didn’t want to go into London at all, even though I really did miss
Dahlia, and knew it’d mean a lot to her if we all picked her up. Enzo would be going
back to Rome in a few days, and I didn’t want to waste any of our dwindling time
together. We don’t know when we would get to see each other again.
I didn’t see him at the wedding until it was almost one in the morning. Most of the night I was sitting down while a ceaseless parade of increasingly drunk adults came over to talk to me. I texted Pablo, my best friend at home, how I had already gotten six numbers at the wedding.

“No way dude. Whos are they?”

“Hot chicks, of course. Lol. Also, it’s whose*.”

The numbers were, of course, from friends of my parents. One drunk, sentimental adult after the other corned me at various points during the party.

“Darling, you’re so dear, so handsome. You won’t remember me, but I was a friend of your parents.”

That’s how everyone started their sentences: “You won’t remember me, but I was a friend of your parents.” Usually, this was followed up with a remark about how I look like them.

“Your very tall! Get that from your father.” Or, “Golden hair, like your mother’s…[hiccup] was.” Whoever was talking would tilt his or her head to the side, eyes glassed over from the Tom Collins or champagne being too liberally doled out by the bartenders.

These people were better than the people in my peripheral vision who looked at me with a nervous clench in their jaw, a discomfort in their eyes and an uncertainty about whether they should come over or not.

Chloe and I were chatting and she joked, “You’d think they’d have gotten over this insane awkwardness when they decided to attend an orphan’s fucking
wedding, don’t you think? I mean, Jesus Christ! We better ask Vita who all these freaks are ‘cause they’re not coming to my wedding!”

“Oh, your wedding! And when’s that gonna be? In your dreams, at this rate!”

I laughed, and she rolled her eyes.

The usual suspects from Christmas were around, but Aunt Jane and Uncle Cosmo decided to invite, or asked Dahlia to invite, some other people, some of whom were allegedly friends with our parents. I guess they were worried the party would be lamely sparse, or that people would get offended who felt they should be invited, no matter how little they’d given a shit about us after mom and dad died. Some of these people I’d remembered from parties The Bennetts had when they were still alive, or I would remember my mom mentioning Rosamund or Ella or Harry or Charlie. With all these randos, the party had over one hundred and fifty guests and at least half of these people stayed at Fairgreen for two days. People camped under the wedding tent (even some of the ones who had a room at the local inn), slept on Janie’s and her mum’s couches, some even slept three to a full-sized bed at Fairgreen. The strangers finally left when it was time for Dahlia and Olly to leave for Italy, where they’d always wanted to go and where my parents had wanted to go for their honeymoon but couldn’t afford it, going instead for their tenth anniversary trip. Lucky for me, Enzo and his family stayed on weeks after the rest of the guests left since they seldom came to England.

It must have been two o’clock in the morning when one of these red-faced grown-ups came over to me and Chloe. “Come on Eileen” was playing and all the
“knackered” Brits were bellowing away. This was nothing compared to the impromptu performance of “Night Fever” that happened at five a.m., though.

The man crouched beside me and poked my arm.

“Play football? What you call soccer?”

I know it’s football, I only spend six weeks a year here, I thought.

“Not if I can help it.”

The man grunted. “Well, that’s my boy, over there. Name’s Enzo. Why don’t you two go play?” His accent wasn’t British, wasn’t American, definitely something weird—a smattering of Portuguese, Italian, and British? Danish? Is that what this would sound like?

I had spotted this guy and his son Enzo earlier in the night. Enzo looked familiar, but the kind of familiar where someone looks uncannily like an acquaintance but you’re sure it isn’t that person. We were two of a handful of teenagers, but since I didn’t know him, and since it was my sister’s wedding, I felt he should be the one to introduce himself to me and not the other way around. Now that his dad, whose strange lime eyeglasses seemed familiar, went and pointed directly at him, and now that we had made eye contact, I had to go over.

“Chlo, wanna come play?”

“In these heels? You’ve gotta be kidding me. Have fun!”

I glared at her, but my desperation for her to come along shone through my eyes, which only made her laugh louder. Payback for my marriage jab, I suppose.

By that point, the man was bringing his son over.

“Who’s that old guy, anyway?” I asked Chloe.
“You don’t remember? That’s Giacomo, he’s somehow related to Janie. No—
wait. His wife is Cos’s half-sister. Stepsister? I think stepsister. They’re Italian and
live in Rome or Naples or something. I think you and that little boy used to play,
maybe? Here they come. Shh. Too da loo! Have fun, boys!”

She got up to get what was probably her seventh drink. Cos would later joke,
“Chloe, you were drinking like a fish, like your father used to!” only for her to retort
“Please— who wasn’t!” A lot of the adults at the breakfast table laughed heartily, in
on the joke, muffled asides and facial expressions showing that they were
remembering something about my dad.

I learned bits about my parents during the wedding and the days after. I knew
dad drank, but was it party-boy, social drinking, or more frequent, alarming drinking?
People’s tones confused me, and since he was dead, no one saw the point in rehashing
the bad. “Besides, it was decades ago and he’s dead now” was the unspoken motto.
Sometimes when I’d try to slyly mine Dahlia about the seedier parts of our parents’
they’d say this aloud. She and Chloe were both old enough to have understood what
was going on, but I never knew him as an adult— well, not that I’m technically an
adult now, but as someone older who understands more. Someone who now knows
how drinking and drugs make someone behave. He and my mom died when I was six.
But I remember times when he seemed funny, but not in a good way, lumbering
around, off, like he was in dazed or in a fever dream, just woken from a nap, except
he hadn’t been sleeping, so I never could figure out what it was. He talked thickly and
mumbly-like. He wore sunglasses to my t-ball games, even though he was the coach,
and mom would scold him in strained whispers.
Someone the afternoon after the wedding told me about the period where my dad and Aunt Jane were inseparable, before he was dating my mom, how she wanted to leave Cos for him and Cos was still angry at my dad even though he wasn’t interested. Jane was too English Rose for him, he liked women that looked like my mom—tan, warm skin, hair to match, a general golden glow. It seemed incestuous, the thought of them together—could it have been? Then again, I had seen Vita and Dahlia sneaking in and out of each other’s rooms when I was younger, but I felt too uncomfortable asking Dahlia what was going on or accidentally ratting them out by asking Chloe. Sometimes it’s surprising to remember we weren’t actually related.

I had so much to talk to Dahlia about, I actually thought about making a list because my brain couldn’t contain everything, but I knew it wasn’t fair or right to burden her with all this on a day when their absence was acutely obvious and painful. Besides, there was too much noise and I figured she maybe knew all these things that to me were revelations. Or were they more like pieces to a puzzle, a picture of my parents, and I never knew where to place the new information, the picture changing and always a quarter of the way done. How to sort through new information when I’d never have the full story? My sisters didn’t need to scrounge around for memories and information about who our parents were. They were there, or old enough for people to tell them things right after they died. As I got older, I learned how to snoop, how to be quiet when eavesdropping on Dahlia’s conversations with the Bennetts, and in the last few years people have forgotten that I’m just fourteen and talk to me about things that they wouldn’t otherwise, if they remembered my age. Thanks, dad,
for the tall genes that fool people into thinking I’m older. I’m actually a smidge—just
a smidge—taller than Enzo, who’s older than me by a year and a few months.

Dahlia’s been my guardian for eight years now, and after Chloe and I
convinced her, wore her anxieties down, she’s learned to be less overbearing. She’s
stopped acting like she thinks a parent would and has grown into her own type of
caretaker. She stopped texting me eleven times when I was at a sleepover, she gave in
and said that next time we went to London she’d let me go on the tube alone, she let
me watch most R-rated movies, which only one of my friends back home was
allowed to do. She stopped trying to hide things from me as much, too.

A few months ago as she and Oliver were in the kitchen going over the guest
list for the wedding, while I was pouring myself a glass of chocolate milk, she heaved
and starting bawling. Thick tears chased each other down her face, which was
reddening, as it does when she cries. We poke fun at her that she is an ugly-crier since
her face turns an alien beet pink. Her eyes were swollen all the next day. Between
heaves she was blubbing about how worried she was that she would get upset about
them at the wedding, with all their friends around, and not be able to enjoy herself on
what was supposed to be their special day. I’ve only seen her cry to Oliver like this
two or three times before, but had overheard dozens of other times when I was
supposed to be asleep, and every time my body tenses and I’m shocked with
nervousness like you feel before the moment roller coaster plunges down. I’ve grown
up with our family configuration as the norm, but she and Chloe had actual people to
remember, more fleshed out losses than mine, my memories being flimsy and few,
cobbled together by photographs, some home videos, and what people tell me.
She turned to me and choked out, “It’s better to learn sooner rather than later, Ig— just because people are parents or guardians, just because someone is an adult, doesn’t mean they’re mature, that they have their shit figured out, or are what we think adults should be like. I try my best, but I am just a human, just a regular twenty seven year old who doesn't have it all together.”

“It’s okay, D. We’re doing fine.” I rushed to her side and felt nauseated and scared. I hate when she gets down on herself, and I needed her to say she would be okay. So I knew we would be okay.

She’s too much of a feminist, but I know she would’ve liked the option of having our dad walk her down the aisle.

I forgot about my mission to gather information and watched Eliza, Giacomo’s wife, walk over with her son Enzo.

“Enzo, this is the bride’s little brother. Iggy. Remember him?”

“Hello.”

“Hi. I think I may remember you.”

“Yes, you two played as boys— must have been near a decade ago, around when we moved to Rome.”

“Oh, Dahlia and Olly are going to Rome for a little over their honeymoon,” I said, thankful for the conversation topic.

Eliza’s bleary eyes drifted above my head over to Chloe, and then to her husband, who was eyeing my sister in the same lime green glasses he wore when his
son and I played with helicopters. How could someone not have talked him out of such garish glasses in the last decade, especially his handsome, well-dressed son?

I tried to discreetly look Enzo up and down. He had shoulder-length dirty blonde hair that was flopped over on one side, like he had just run his hands through it, and wore glasses, like his dad. Luckily they weren’t lime green— he picked out a pair— thick and sort of roundish— that reminded me of Atticus Finch (I had read that book in school last year). He was a little taller than me, but we have a similar build— not muscly, but not weak looking, either. I thought he was hot.

“Well, I’ll leave you boys to it!”

We stared at each other for a moment and then I looked at my feet. His mom made her way over to the bar, stopping to wave at some people, gesturing to us. I bet she was saying “How cute! My boy is going to play with Ben and Lydia’s boy! Just like the good old times.”

“Is it weird if we just went off and started playing? I think people will be looking for me if I’m gone too long.”

“They all seem too drunk to really notice, if you want the truth.” We laughed.

“Okay, okay— you’re right. Well, I don’t know where a ball would be,” I said.

“I’ve got one— it’s in the cottage. We’re staying with Jane’s mom.” His accent was also confusing, but less so than his dad’s. Probably because he only knows Italian and English, not the whole kaboodle his dad, a translator and publisher, knows.
“Ok, let’s go.” As we left the tented wedding area I found myself very relieved to escape the minefield of prying adults. The grass outside the tent was very damp, though, so I decided to quickly run inside and get my sneakers, or a pair of the many wellies from the boot room near the front hall.

“Do you need a pair?” I looked at his shoes. They were pretty scuffed up.

“No, they’re gortex waterproof.”

I said I’d be right back. Christmas lights twinkled all around the grounds, even though it was early July.

“So, you live in Los Angeles, right?”

“Uh-huh,” I sputtered out. “We come here pretty often, though. Your mom said you live in Rome, right.”

“Yeah, Rome, but lived in Glasgow ‘til I was five. I’m actually moving back to the UK, maybe, for university.”

“Oh, that would be nice.” He agreed, and I asked, “How old are you again?”

“I’m fifteen, almost sixteen. You?”

“I’m fourteen, but I’ll be fifteen in November.” I added, “You speak English really well.”

“I go to a British school in Rome. And mum’s English, of course. Your parents were both American, right?”

“Yeah, they were just really close with Cosmo and Janie. That’s why we come every year.”

“I remember your mom. She had glossy, curly hair and made people laugh.”
I stopped walking, startled that he remembered her. “Yeah, she did.” He remembered my mom? Her hair?

“I am sorry for your loss—my mom told me a few years ago.”

“Thank you.” What else had his mom told him about us? By that point we had reached the cottage and found the soccer ball. Instead of going out to kick it around we sat in chairs by the fireplace, which had a fresh bundle of firewood arranged and ready to be lit. The chairs were upholstered with an endearingly lurid wool tartan that I remember someone telling me was the plaid of Gran’s ancestral Scottish clan—the MacKinnons of Iona and North Mull. It was a finely checked tartan with bright red and green, and some blue and white. It’s always given me a headache trying to mentally trace the pattern, but I’ve always been impressed by how bright the colors still are, since the fabric is at least half a century old.

I got up to get a glass of water. “Want water?”

“Yes, please.”

I brought the tray with the pitcher and glasses on it that Gran kept ready in case anyone decided to drop by for a visit. He ran his hands through his hair—that is how it stays flopped over to the side, I thought, and sat back in the armchair.

“So, do you like speaking in English or Italian more?” I set a glass of water in front of him.

“Italian, I think, has a more musical sound, it’s more sexy.”

“Ooh la la.” My voice sounded croaky. I forced myself to say, “Do you have a girlfriend to speak sexy Italian with? I wouldn't want it to be wasted.”

“No, I’m not interested in girls. I’m gay.”
“Oh.” I took a sip of my water. “That’s cool.”

“Is it?” He laughed.

“Well,” I hesitated, “What about a boyfriend? Do you… do you have a boyfriend?”

“No, I have never had a boyfriend. None of my classmates are openly gay—yet. I suspect some of them are, but there is still a lot of discrimination in Italy, and in general. People made fun of me at school for a while; I was called ‘finocchio,’ which basically means faggot. I was sick of pretending to have crushes on girls, but they stopped when they saw I wouldn’t let teasing get to me. I expect when I have my first boyfriend we’ll be harassed on the street, but what can you do? My parents and their friends are mostly liberal and not very religious, but it’s still taking some time for my dad to accept it. My dream would be if they just didn’t care at all. They just ask that I don’t tell my dad’s relatives who are very religious and conservative. They say it will be better for me if they don’t know.”

“That’s a lot to deal with, and really brave of you to stand up to bullies.”

“Not really,” he answered. “My mum told me that I’ll fit right in at the boarding schools here, as a joke. Maybe she’s right, though.” He laughed. “What about you— do you have a girlfriend?”

“No. I had one for like a week in first grade, but that doesn’t count.”

“A boyfriend?”

“No.” I hesitated to go on but felt emboldened, even invigorated, by his honesty. “But I don’t think I’m straight, either. I’m still trying to figure it out. Or not figure it out and just leave it at that, I guess.”
We sat and finished all the water in pitcher, so I got up and refilled it. I thought about how matter of factly he said “I’m gay.” He was so mature. Could I say the same? But I sometimes had crushes on girls, so wouldn’t that mean I wasn’t gay? I still haven’t found the label that fits, though it would be easier if I had one— gay, bisexual, whatever. I have a few friends with two moms or two dads, and didn’t really think about that until I was older, and I heard another parent say something with a sneer about Jeff and Greg, my friend Pablo’s dads. I figured people were always talking about how I didn’t have any parents, but didn’t think they’d talk about how some people had two moms or two dads, as if it was a bad thing. At school if a kid was heard making the same remark about a gay couple, they’d be suspended for three days.

Enzo interrupted my thinking: “So, what do you think? Should we go play some soccer?” He said this last word in a valley girl accent.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

We got outside and walked over to a field next to the cottage. Since there was only two of us, we just ended up kicking the ball to each other, or kicking it really far or high in the air and chasing it. The wellies were protecting my suit from the muddy ground. I craned my head high trying to spot the ball kicked high in the air. The fog was dense, and I was trotting backwards. I didn’t see the tree stump, and fell backwards, and got covered with mud, mud I could feel seeping through my clothing, mud so viscous I could feel myself sinking into its stickiness. We’d only been playing for ten minutes.
“Shit! One sec.” He hurried over, thrusting his hand out for me to take hold of. The mud was like quicksand, and as I was pulled up there was a comically loud squishing popping sound. We decided to call it a game. I had to change before going back to the tent—shower, even, since my hair was all dirty now.

We walked back to the house and I took the wellies off, he took his shoes off, and we both rolled the cuffs of our pants. We scampered upstairs and I gave him a pair of black slacks to borrow since his were muddy, too. It was, after all, his mom’s idea to play in the foggy, muddy, weather, not ours! I looked at my phone—it was three thirty, and I had two texts from Chloe:

“Wher are u?” An hour and a half ago and “IGGGG come bak im so bored” from twenty minutes ago.

I hopped in the shower and the hot water felt really good—I hadn’t realized how tired I was. I felt withered and the hot water revived me. I didn’t want to take long so made it quick, and decided my navy slacks would have to do. I looked like one of the waiters in my new outfit of white shirt and blue pants—luckily I remembered Olly wasn’t wearing the jacket he wore to the rehearsal dinner last night so I went downstairs and grabbed it. Makeup was all over the bathroom, and Dahlia’s wedding dress was hanging on the dresser.

It was exquisite. The veil, which looked like most veils I’d seen in movies, was draped over a separate hanger, the kind for pants. I stopped rushing and stared at the dress for what seemed like an hour. I just stood there, and after a few minutes sat down and looked up. It was an unusual color—a slightly beige, rose-tinged white. The fabric was very lush, silk, I think, and expensive looking. Dahlia had
embroidered the thin straps with beads. I had helped her with the sketches and ideas, and with laying the beads out. The waist was cinched by a wide, beautiful cream ribbon that tied into a large bow at the back. The long parts that you tug to release a bow flowed down the back of the skirt, which was full and draped like a toga, leading into a train that had dragged behind her like a small river of fabric as she took measured steps down the aisle, the cinching ribbon being the gathering point for the luscious drapery of the skirt. It looked sort of like the Regency dresses in the BBC Austen shows and a greek toga combined. It was magnificent. We found it walking around Beverly Hills and what’s funny is that it matched almost exactly the dream dress she drew a few years before she and Olly even got engaged. The embroidery on the straps, though, which took fifteen hours total, gave it her own special flair.

I was running my fingers over the beading when I remembered myself, and found Olly’s jacket draped over the chair in the corner. I dashed out and went back upstairs where I found Enzo looking through the book I was slowly reading.

“Do you recommend this?” It was true that he was really very handsome. I felt nauseated again and snuck two gaviscons, chewing quickly. They were much grosser than tums but much more common in England, but they always got stuck in my molars. My heart was still thumping from all the rushing and I drank some water to cool down and wash away some of the antacid stuck in my teeth, but neither worked and I realized it was his beauty that made my face red— hopefully not as red as Dahlia’s when she cried, though it felt like it could be.

I was so taken aback I forgot for a minute what book I was reading. “Oh, it’s sort of slow, and I sometimes feel like I’m only reading it because there’s a murder at
the beginning and I want to know why it happened, but it’s really well-written. Sorry I’m so late, by the way. I got caught up. Was looking at my sister’s dress.”

“I noticed she changed for the party. She looked very beautiful. Quite a dress.” He was talking slowly, sexy, like in movies.

“Come here.” He stuck his hand out to me like he did earlier when I was stuck in the mud.

I took his hand and sat next to him, our hips smushing together.

When we got back to the tent an hour or so later, the party was still in full swing. The only people who had gone to bed were Gran and a couple other people her age. Apparently everyone thought Enzo and I had gone to bed, slipping away, too. I lied and said I had taken a nap to rest up for the remainder of the party. I did feel rejuvenated, alert, and excited, probably due to the adrenaline rush. I had never been with anyone before, had only had a few mild kisses, and I was a heap of nerves and glee.

Are we going to start dating? Will this be my first boyfriend? Does he think I’m hot? A good kisser? I wondered what would happen tomorrow—would we act like nothing happened? Would the adults catch on? What would they say? How much should I care? Does he even like me?

He stuck around the party for another hour, and on his way out I had my answer. He whispered in my ear as he walked past me. “Meet me after breakfast at the cottage gate.” I nodded. When he left the spell broke, the rush stopped, and the exhaustion of being up at six in the morning having scrambled all day entertaining
guests and doing last minute decorating tasks blindsided me. Unlike the rest of them, I wasn’t buoyed by alcohol or drugs. I wanted to make Dahlia happy, though, so danced with her for a while to her favorite disco jams. She looked weary, but jolly. We were not very good dancers in the sense that we were either really into a song and let our bodies respond to the music or we felt awkward and jutted out hips this way and that—“hither and tither,” Cos would joke tomorrow. She had her dress (which was not as showstopping as the wedding dress but still very beautiful) hiked up and tucked into her body shaping shorts, and her updo had mostly come undone after hours of dancing. She loved all the songs that were on. Duncan and Vita triple-checked the DJ playlist to make sure she’d have the best time possible, never feeling awkward. Luckily, that meant me, too, since we have the same music taste. It’s a combination of music our parents liked with a whole lot of disco, Madonna, and Fleetwood Mac thrown in. Little white and yellow flowers were tucked into small braids, and she looked like a beautiful pixie that lived in the nearby woods. A little after Enzo left I realized that there was no point going up to bed since even in my exhaustion I was far too agitated to sleep.

“Where’ve you been, little guy? Cos and Janie were doing a hilarious rehearsed number to ‘Dancing Queen.’ You would’ve loved it, maybe they’ll do it again sometime.”

“Oh,” I froze. I didn’t want to lie to her, but wasn’t ready to talk to someone else about Enzo yet. First I had to think about it myself. I was so tired it seemed like a dream—moments flashed up intensely. It wasn’t even that we did anything past second base, (which I had never done before), it was more that I felt like I’ve never
felt before, so much like I was about to burst or faint, so infatuated and drawn to him physically and emotionally. All my crushes in the past were simply that—crushes, but he actually liked me back. Or at least wanted to kiss me.

Drinking water at Gran’s house, which was at this point four and a half hours ago, seemed simultaneously like it happened five minutes ago, seven years ago, and never at all. Maybe that’s just how time works sometimes, especially when you’ve been up for almost twenty-four hours.

The rest of the party was pretty ordinary, and I dragged myself up the flights of stairs to bed at seven thirty in the morning. I looked at the ruffled bedspread and couldn’t believe I had been on it with him mere hours ago. I’d say around thirty people were still going at it, but everyone I was close with, minus Chloe, who was always the last to bed, turned in around the same time I did.

I slept for a few hours, woke up at ten. I was enamored, but knew I shouldn’t come off too interested. I didn’t want to freak him out. I’d had no epiphanies or anything sleeping, and still didn’t know if I should talk to someone about what had happened last night. The shower was hot, which was lucky in a house of fifty people. They were mostly sleeping, so the pressure was good, too. I dawdled while walking to the cottage, nervous and scared to see him again. I was worried he would be off me by now, deciding it’s a bad idea to get involved with someone who has so much baggage, or that he only liked me because I was the only option in the middle-of-nowhere countryside where cell service only worked in the kitchen. Or was he interested in me because of my novelty, an American orphan to have a fling with. I
wanted it to be real and for him to like me for me. I wanted him to be sad that we had
a time stamp, but I was getting ahead of myself.

Near the cottage door I could hear the news was on the telly inside. I decided
to knock and go talk to Gran about the wedding, so it didn’t seem weird I came all the
way down here in case anyone was watching from a window.

Gran and Eliza were having tea and sitting in the same tartan armchairs I sat
in yesterday— technically today, I suppose— with Enzo.

“Oh, Iggy! It’s nice to see you— you’re up early. Enzo told me he had a
lovely time with you last night. Thank you, darling, for lending him a pair of pants.
Didn’t occur to me it’d be very muddy— my fault entirely! Everything’s in the wash
now. We don’t have that kind of mud and damp in Italy!” She laughed and massaged
her temples. “Lovely?” I thought.

Gran turned from the tv. “Iggy, my dear, want a cuppa?”

I was halfway through my cup of tea when my anxiety started to settle. I was
in the rhythm of gossiping, recapping various moments from yesterday, when Enzo
walked in. When he moved it seemed to me like he was an actor casually strutting
into the frame. A teen heartthrob in a new franchise.

He grinned and his eyes looked happy. “Iggy! Good to see you, man.” Little
wrinkles creased the skin around his eyes.

“Why don’t you boys go swimming or something today?” Eliza suggested. “It
looks absolutely divine out there.”

Gran scoffed. “Been away from England too long. Look at the sky— it’s sure
to rain today.”
She was right, and we both were glad it was raining to have an excuse to stay inside and continue the activities from the night before. At some point in the afternoon people started emerging from their rooms and until Vita and Chloe woke up I had to help Dahlia and Aunt Jane entertain all the guests. In the days immediately after the wedding we had the most freedom to be together since everyone else was alternately too busy, tired, gossipy, hung over, or drunk to pay us much attention.

Or so I figured. I guess we weren’t being as covert as I thought, and it seems Vita and Chloe had picked up on it. They had overheard us the first night I snuck Enzo in after I thought everyone had gone to bed.

“Just make sure you’re being careful,” Vita said one day at breakfast. Dahlia and Olly were already in Italy— they’d sent some pictures of delicious plates of pasta and cured meats, snaps of some beautiful Botticelli paintings and old buildings and piazzas— “My, Dahlia would’ve fit right into that one the way she looked the other night” someone said, and we all exclaimed in agreement. It was “La Primavera,” and she did look like a brunette Venus.

“What are you talking about?” I asked Vita. Duncan and Chloe were sitting at the other end of the table crouched over one one of their phones.

“I’m talking about Enzo. Always beware of pretty boys, Ig. They’re absolute shithheads half the time, especially when they’re young and Italian.” She glanced over at Duncan, I think unconsciously.

“He’s only half Italian, you know. And he isn’t like that. Plus,” I stammered. “It’s not like that— we’re only friends.”
I wondered why Vita had been getting up so early, and if it had to do with me and Enzo, Duncan annoying her, or feeling weird Dahlia got married before her.

“Whatever you say, but you must be pretty close friends since he’s been sneaking over here most nights and scurrying away early in the morning.”

She returned to her coffee and eggs, and I fidgeted with the edge of my toast slice. It had gone cold, but I ate it anyway to have something to do. I didn’t want to leave and seem disturbed, giving her the satisfaction of being right.

That day, Enzo and I went on a walk. His parents had gone to Glasgow to visit a friend. They’d be back in a few days and then all go back to Rome. I couldn’t stop myself and blurted out that he looked really beautiful, and that I liked him. He told me he really liked me, too, and squeezed my hand, which he had been holding for most of the walk. The rest of the day nervous joy spread throughout my body and I finally confessed our relationship to Chloe, Vita, and Duncan.

“I knew it!” Chloe squealed and Vita seemed unnerved. “Iggy’s first boyfriend! Italian! Well done, little bro. He’s hot.”

Duncan gave me a high five and Vita looked suspicious.

I felt like I was living one of those campy horror movies that always start out as innocent romcoms. But Enzo didn’t seem to mind our time-stamped relationship, he didn’t seem anxious and in the state of dread and denial I was experiencing. It was like I was in the stages of grief, trying to think of ways for us to work out, planning out when we could see each other again, talking about the wonders of technology and how video chatting wouldn’t be so bad—bargaining, essentially. Most of this was in
my head since we hadn’t officially labeled ourselves as anything, or really talked about being “boyfriends” (or would it be “boyfriend-boyfriend” like how people said “girlfriend-boyfriend”?) and I felt like I would come off as clingy or pushy if we talked about it. Being in the countryside without any other teens, there didn’t need to be a label (except to prying adults like Chloe and Vita). What would the point be anyway? He lives in Rome! I looked it up one morning after he left, going down to the kitchen to get internet. It’s 6,327 miles from L.A. to Rome, not to mention hundreds of dollars in airfare.

He was able to enjoy our last days, while I felt the dread of our departure acutely and almost constantly. Heavy numbness and spitting flames overcame me. Facing each other in bed, his hands would be in my hair or caressing my cheeks, and it would hit me. I could see my changed mood in the reaction that overcame his face. My eyes gave me away, he said. I know, I said.
“As if we don’t know how long it’s been! It’s ridiculous!” I touched the inside of my wrist to the cool pint glass.

Jane looked at me said, “Of course we do. But just because we know the fact that it’s been ten years doesn’t mean we can’t have some sort of organized gathering.”

I opened and closed my jaw a few times because it was clenching.

“It’s just a little party, that’s all. Maybe some people say a few words, make a few toasts.” Cos’s head was tilting as he looked at me.

“No one would be grandstanding,” Dahlia cut in. “Just people sharing some memories.”

I fiddled with the enamel and gold pendant that I never took off. It was a dangling single flower, a carnation, and it hung upside down from its stem. My fingerpads moved across its surface—around the textured stem to the smooth, frilly petals—and I let it drop back to its resting place in the groove of my cleavage. My mom gave it to me twelve years ago and some of the mauve enamel was chipping off the petal edges.

“Aren’t we doing something for your birthday around the same time? What if we just did a wee thing during the dinner party.”

“Cos, are you a fucking imbecile? The whole point is that I don’t want another birthday of mine ruined by being depressed all day. Jesus— is that too much to ask? Just wait ‘til I leave, it’s only a few days, anyway.”
As I raised my voice the people dining at tables next to ours hushed and looked at us. I forked a large chunk of steak, shoved it into my mouth, and followed it up with a gulp of beer.

My phone was in my lap and I draped my sweater in a way so Dahlia wouldn’t see what I was doing. I put the roaming on my phone for a moment. A text from Marie popped up and the ping gave me away. In the preview I could see it was a picture of Bear in our backyard. I must have been smiling because Vita asked me what changed my mood and Dahlia, who was sitting next to me, scolded me about using data. “It’s like, ten dollars per gigabyte.” “Big deal. Ten buck’s no skin off our back! Look how cute Bear is— the little bubula— worth the ten bucks!”

I showed the picture to the table, and Cos, who sees Bear the least, said, “Innit a different dog? That can’t be the same dog, he’d be older than I am!”

Of course we all knew Bear was getting up there, but I guess it takes an outsider to really show just how much a thing’s changed.

“Aw, he’s still a little darling,” Vita crooned while cradling my phone. “Getting a bit paunchy in his old age!”

“Oi, don’t say that! He’s perfect,” Duncan interrupted.

I took the phone back. His tail was blurry since he was thumping it. He had to get two teeth removed last year that were rotting (even though we brush them weekly!) and so his lip flap sags over the hollowed area. I was a little tipsy and stared at the screen longer than considerate when one’s in the company of others. He did look paunchy, more so than he was even a few days ago, when I left. Marie must’ve been caving into his demands for food.
She was house and dog sitting for the few days I went to England. Our return tickets were all staggered—I was going home first, then a week later Olly, then a few days later Dahlia and Iggy. I was busy with work so was only meant to stay eight days, four in London and four in the country. Marie’s known Bear for ages and has two elderly dogs of her own, so she’s always our first choice for pet-sitting. She called me on day four, the day after the pub, as I had just sat down—having finished packing for London tomorrow—to a drink with Cos and Dahlia (Dahlia was drinking elderflower soda due to being six months pregnant and kept doing that shtick pregnant ladies do, trying to balance stuff on their bellies. She giggled and her hands were always hovering near the bottle like an atmospheric layer). Marie said he was acting odd and not eating, was just laying on the cool fireplace tiles (Dahlia had finished laying down a few weeks ago), but she seemed to think he was fine. Definitely fine enough for me to come home at my intended date. But I knew that Bear not eating was a sign of the apocalypse, and I saw dismay flash in Dahlia’s eyes, who couldn’t leave because of important work meetings that week in Edinburgh and London, so I flew home the next day to take him to the vet.

At least I wouldn’t have to partake in any of the tenth deathversary festivities, I thought, looking through books at the Heathrow W.H. Smith. I bought a book and a croissant and took a pill to sleep on the plane. Instead of sleeping I got distracted by a movie about two girls switched at birth (a fear of mine—I had promised Dahlia and Olly I’d follow their baby and make sure she was tagged properly). One girl became an aristocrat waited on hand and food, whose loving mother dies when she’s nine. That girl is simple and nice, the kind who ends up with a Prince Charming. The other
grows up poor, but I liked her more. She was resourceful and scrappy, but what annoyed me was that the daughters looked nothing like their parents. How did no one figure it out, raise any questions about paternity or maternity? Sometime before the ending I fell asleep and was in and out for a few hours before resigning myself to the uncomfortable seat and impossibility of any real sleep. I randomly selected which shows to watch and was amazed by how easily I could pick up on the plots having not seen the first four or six seasons. We landed in L.A. at 8 a.m. and after I was through customs and baggage claim and in a cab, I realized I’d forgotten my book in the seatback pocket, the one I’d bought at Heathrow, which shouldn’t have been a shock since this has happened half a dozen times.

I don’t spend as much time in the main house, but I’m there enough to know that the cracks bursting around various doorframes and ceiling corners were cause for alarm, and I was annoyed Marie hadn’t mentioned them. I was greeted by Marie’s two dogs and heard Bear’s tail thumping on the fireplace, and he barked a little, but didn’t come to greet me. He’s the kind of dog that comes to greet you if you’ve just gone out for a moment to your car to get a sweater. I let the handle of my luggage drop and it toppled onto its face, and since I was so tired and the little mental awareness I had available was occupied by Bear, and by guilt over not worrying about him more, I didn’t panic about my computer breaking, which was at the very top of my suitcase and took the brunt of the fall. Marie’s dogs were small pug-mixes named Pepper and Leonard, and I knelt to pet them but was focused on Bear. It was mid-morning and Sunday, and Marie came out of Iggy’s bedroom in a cotton rose-colored night dress with a bird’s nest of hair, wiping her eyes and assuring me that I
really could’ve stayed, he was fine. I said it was better that I didn’t have to get back on our time zone since I hadn’t adjusted to England’s yet. I scooped Bear up and Marie made some coffee. He licked my hand rhythmically for forever and I frequently reminded myself to loosen my grip, or I might hurt him. I drank two cups of black coffee and went to sleep in my old room since I only got two hours on the plane and was too tired to schlep the ten feet to the Nest.

I woke up around three o’clock and walked the halls of the first floor. Marie had left for a few hours. Pepper and Leonard were flanking Bear and kept trying to rouse him into a game, but he wouldn’t budge. Something was squeezing my chest like a tourniquet whenever I looked at him. I texted Olly pictures of the fissures and he responded in all caps “NOT NORMAL— WTF. Send more pix ASAP, plz.” He decided to come home Tuesday instead of next Saturday, and within twenty-four hours of his return home the contractor was doing an inspection. It turned out the foundation was rotted and there were leaks under the kitchen and the floor of my old room, and we’d have to move out for a while— weeks— to have everything all fixed. Olly got another opinion and estimate before calling Dahlia to tell her. Since I knew she wouldn’t, I said it: the work had to be done before the baby was born, meaning as soon as possible since she was due in three months. I could hear her muffled cries through the phone and Olly’s attempts to calm her down. “Hun, it’s just a few weeks. It’s obviously not ideal, but Mark says insurance is going to cover it. Yes. Yes— the rental’s included.” It was late June, and they would start next week and be done in a month. My niece was due early September— would her house be done by then?
I took Bear to the vet the day after I arrived from London. He’s adopted, so we can’t really know how old he is, but he’s probably around fifteen and in the last year and a half he’s ripped both ACLs. He was overweight because he was so charming, and none of us stood a chance against those doleful eyes and squeals of sadness as he eyed our dinner plates.

I never know if it’s better to have dogs in the front or back seat, and since he shouldn’t be jumping up and down from the seat to the foot space, I decided to make a little nest for him where my backpack usually goes—behind my seat for easy access—out of beach towels, placing him in the center. Before, if you went near the drawer where we kept his leash, doggy bag, and treats, he would go berserk barking for fifteen minutes, running around and chasing you to your room until you caved and put on some sneakers to take him for a walk.

Every few minutes, I reached my hand in the back while driving and waited until I felt a lick. “Who’s a sweet boy,” I said in the low, saccharine voice we spoke to him in. I tensed up remembering the first time I drove him, which was to my friend’s house for a doggy play-date. At a red light I looked back to see him pressing the window down and craning out, licking at the air and squinting his eyes in the wind. I almost crashed into the van in front of me because my reaction was to turn around and snatch him before he fell out and in doing this I took my foot off the break and I didn’t realize I was about to crash until I had turned back around and was a centimeter from the van.

I took measured breaths to compose myself as I carried him into the vet. Everyone there loves him—he’s like the Mick Jagger of dogs. Even the other
animals in the waiting room seem to know they’re in the presence of an unordinary dog (though that may just be me and my siblings projecting). They took some of his blood after I told the vet about his symptoms—appetite loss, lethargy. As I was talking to a nurse, Dr. Erikson came out from behind the double doors. He’s our weathered, tough love vet who says things every visit like “If Bear doesn’t lose six pounds he’s going to die much sooner than later, and no one wants to see that,” or “It isn’t fair for his quality of life, Chloe, if you all really love him— which I’m sure you do— you’d stop feeding him that frou-frou caloric brand of dog food, and especially stop with all the leftover scraps!” We’d protest “But he loves food!” and he’d say “I’m sure he loves life more!” We’d look over to see him thumping his tail and quietly yelping for a stroke.

Dr. Erikson looked somber and my stomach dropped. I held Bear close, who was sitting on my lap making eye contact with a caged rat terrier across the room.

“Come in for a minute, won’t you? Hello, Bear.” Dr. Erikson’s eyes glistened as Bear wiggled his head toward the vet and licked his fingers. “We need to do an x-ray, there were some off numbers in his blood work. Nothing to worry about yet.”

“Then why are you looking at us like that?”

Bear was shivering, he could tell something was wrong, too. He was probably wondering why Dr. Erikson was acting so sensitive and talking in such a weird voice, the voice that adults use when there’s a problem. Dr. Erikson repeated in an automated, controlled voice that we can’t worry before having all the facts, and he felt around to check on Bear’s fatty deposits. He lingered on one on Bear’s stomach and said it felt different from the other ones.
A few days later they biopsied it. The office called to say that they detected a
tumor, and that it has metastasized, and that because he is so old and since the
treatment is so extreme, it may be better to not go forward with it. Olly had taken him
in and called me when I was at work. Luckily my shift was just ending and I rushed
home crying and had to park down the block because three construction cars were
blocking our driveway. He had called Dahlia and told her to move her flight up. She
and Iggy were back the next day. Bear was a drugged, lolloring, sleepy little pup on a
big velvet couch. We told the vet that we’d talk about what to do.

I’m at hospitals a lot, so I’m used to sick people, but I’m not quite used to
dead, to seeing medicine not working, not doing its job. The nonprofit I started takes
the flowers fancy hotels and restaurants toss after a day or two and gives them to
people at the hospital, sort of like therapy dogs, because the flowers don’t cure them,
they just brighten their day. Midway through college I switched from pre-med to
public health, and now I run this program while volunteering twice a week at a nearby
hospital. Dahlia and I sat on the couch with Bear between us. She got home from the
airport and twenty minutes later she emerged from her room of almost thirty years
with wet and tendrily hair. We carried him to my place, the Nest, the garage
apartment I moved into a year ago. We wanted to talk without Iggy hearing just yet,
so Olly took him out to a movie. Bear looked ashamed in his cone. “Good thing he
can’t see his tummy,” I said, trying to lighten the mood, trying to imitate Nicole, a
weathered nurse loved and admired by everyone at the hospital for her knack at quips
that make people feel better even when the worst’s occurred or coming soon without
lying to them. Bear’s belly was shaved, and the abrupt clearing away of his beautiful
curly fur was jarring. He was whimpering and crying in reaction to our tangible fear, staring at and nuzzling us, as if trying to pry us for information or reassurance that everything would be okay. For the next few nights he climbed on Dahlia’s head and wouldn’t get off. Dr. Erikson said his making his way up there was a mini Everest and was a great sign: he still had some life in him, some fire. He’d fall asleep after a few hours of shaking and mewling.

Dahlia told Iggy a few days later while I was at work. We had decided not to tell him immediately because she pointed out that we didn’t want to get him in a fuss so soon after we told him we’d have to move, and while he was still depressed that Enzo picked University of Edinburgh instead of USC. When they got back from the movie, we told Ig they didn’t have the test results back, and he rubbed Bear’s con- ensconced head and half-shaved belly, being careful to avoid the raw stitched area. Meanwhile, we wanted to put the house construction on hold while we figured out what to do for Bear, but the cracks were getting more and more sprawling and veiny. They started to mirror the tendrils of ivy on the exterior of the house. The house was collapsing, Bear’s illness was advancing, a baby was on her way: nothing would stop. I would only have to move out for a week while they did work at the main house that would be especially loud— something with jack hammers, I supposed— so Iggy was going to stay with me on the days he worked while Olly and Dahlia lived in a rental. From our house, he could bike to work (or school, depending when they finished construction) in twenty minutes, as opposed to the rental they found that was higher up in the hills and thus more dangerous for bikers. Or walkers. Anyone not in a car, really, and Iggy, who was sixteen, refused to learn how to drive.
We decided to try keeping Bear alive with another surgery and some chemo, which went on for a few months, and tried changing his diet to all-organic everything, and finally the pain became persistent, and Dr. Erikson told us we had to put him down because it would only get worse. Dahlia and I couldn’t even think about doing it because we felt like we would be killers, but Iggy, who overheard one of our late-night conversations, finding out how fatal the situation was, came in and said it wasn’t fair for him to be in pain. Olly agreed, though he felt it was gruesome to decide when to end a life, and Dahlia and I just kept saying he looked happy and pointed to his ever-thumping tail as proof. He and Dahlia’s silhouettes were both tumescent and they waddled around thanks to their respective tumors or fetus.

Dr. Erikson said to me a few weeks before he died, “Chloe, you must know the pain he’s in. Try to talk some sense into them.” “Them” meaning Olly and Dahlia. The vet said people should have the respect and compassion they have for animals for their own kind instead of keeping people hooked up to machines with feeding tubes for months, an evil I must see at the hospital. I felt hot and must have looked off because he immediately apologized, saying he had totally forgotten about our parents, then puttered on about how that was different. But we had kept mom on life support for a few days and dad a few days longer, even though it was unlikely either would be capable, able bodied and minded adults ever again, so how was it different? I knew what he meant, though, as my job entailed witnessing people trying to defy death, trying to believe in a miracle, and yet I couldn’t get myself to even philosophically entertain the idea of putting our sweet boy down, of deciding the day and time he’d die, of bringing him there (and back? What does one do with their dog’s carcass post-
euthanization? What’s the protocol?). Bear seemed happy, I argued, he didn’t want the belly rubs and rotisserie chicken scraps to end, and for the first time in fifteen years Erikson didn’t tell me to stop giving him human food.

They were back in the house by late July, and Baby Ruby was born the first week of September. Dahlia worked from home and a lot of the time played with my niece on the living room floor. I went outside to get some air and space from her baby voice, which had become grating after a few weeks. I was walking around the yard and found him between the blood orange and kumquat trees. Mom loved the look of citrus trees and planted them in the yard when she and dad got married. When Dahlia and I were kids we’d try to feed Bear kumquats and our parents would scoop them out of his mouth with hooked fingers, and he’d open and close his jaw, confused, looking like he was yawning or had some peanut butter in his mouth. Mom would say “You poor sweetie,” and “Dogs don’t like sour things!” and then she’d feed him a treat and pick him up, holding him like a swaddled baby with his head over her shoulder, and carry him into the garden.

After shaking our sweet boy, I shrieked and ran, trembling, wailing, towards the house with him in my arms and called Dahlia, who was already halfway out the house with a swaddled baby of her own to see why I was making so much noise. We almost collided.

“I’ll drive,” she declared, cutting through my blubbering and hysteria.

I sat in the back next to my niece with Bear on my lap. He had already died, they said, before I found him.
Olly came to pick up my niece and I stayed with Dahlia at the vet. We got home a few hours later after sitting with him in a room. I wondered if this room was reserved for such purposes, and Dahlia found scissors and cut a lock of his hair and asked for a baggie. We cried and stroked him. The metal table was too cold and I winced whenever my arm grazed it, and kept saying it was cruel for him to have to lie on it. The receptionist looked at me like I didn’t know how death worked—He can’t feel anything, sweetie.

When we got home I went to the trees and lay down, positioning myself a few inches from where I found him so our faces would have been touching. I marveled at how cool the dirt felt on such a hot day and thought he was smart for finding this spot in the citrus-scented cool.

Whether or not dogs like sour things, our Sweet Boy developed a taste for kumquats, and maybe in that last hour of life he was going for one last treat.

He lived much longer than anyone anticipated, and we tried to make his days as happy and love-filled as possible, but his death broke us. I used a few of my sick days after he died. I spent a lot of time in one position before moving to a slight variation on my bed or in my old room in the main house (still in the process of becoming a nursery for my niece-to-be). Before I never really went in my old room since I had everything I needed at the Nest, but I wanted to see if a picture I took of Bear for my Intro Photo class in high school was still perched on my bookshelf. I felt numb looking at the familiar sage paisley wallpaper and lavender ceiling molding, unable to forget the sound of his collar jingling, his panting, his sweetness and
funniness, and the tail that thumped vigorously for such a small, old dog. I felt nothing, and I felt guilty— why didn’t I feel this intensely depressed each time I knew someone at the hospital was going to die, after finding out a patient had died when I came back the next day?

He died in October, a week before Vita, our godsister, came to meet Dahlia for a work pitch. We were all flying back to England together at the end of the month for a wedding and I had the idea of asking her if she thought her family would be okay with burying Bear’s ashes with our parents. Cos and Janie buried Al awhile back and she told me that Tom’s still sniffing around and looking for him. Tom puts Al’s favorite toy at the foot of their bed, as if that will help the humans locate him, or remember him. “Hey guys— let’s go look for Al.” She finally threw the toy out because she had no other way of communicating Al’s death to Tom. Or maybe, Dahlia said, Tom didn’t want to believe it. Or couldn’t, I muttered. “What?” she said, new reading glasses askew (poor vision: a parting gift from her 20’s), looking up from her parenting book.

Mom adopted Bear when she was six months pregnant with Iggy and dad thought she was insane, but Dahlia and I were thrilled. She was walking near the medical center in the park after an OBGYN appointment and there was a dog adoption fair and I don’t know if it was the hormones but when she saw him with his lemon yellow “Adopt Me” bandana around his neck there was no possibility of her going home without getting the shelter’s number. She made an appointment to see him the next day. He was in our home, sniffing around the kitchen and chewing the fringe off decorative pillows, within thirty-six hours.
I thought it would be nice to have the three dearly departed together in one place. Plus, we always wanted Bear to see England. I told this to Olly and he chuckled but said I had better not say that to Dahlia because it’s a pretty sick joke, if you think about it. Instead we got him cremated and buried the box between the trees where I found him, so he could be home. For a gravestone, Dahl painted our house on one of the funky large tiles she’s been making in the pottery studio (the garage below my house repurposed as her workshop), using special metallic glazes to paint our home like a fairy palace.

I waited until Dahlia took the baby to a checkup before stealing away up to the attic. I brought Sweet Boy Bear’s doggie bed up there to squelch the Tom in me. We’d buried him a few days before. There’s always either a draft or a blazing heat in the attic, which is accessible through a hatch in my old bedroom. We downsized the storage units a few years back because they were costing a lot of money, which thankfully we’re all finally making. I took some of the furniture for my apartment, we gave some baby stuff to friends starting families and moving into bigger places, put a lot of boxes of books and records up in the attic, bought some benches with hidden storage compartments, got some artwork re-framed. Now the house has a more bohemian, mishmash eclectic vibe. It’s probably sixty percent their stuff, instead of one-hundred percent. I hadn’t been up here since I moved a year ago and someone had clearly undertaken the often discussed and always ignored sisyphean task of rearranging the boxes, probably because we had to move out. They seemed to be organized in some sort of elaborate Dewey Decimal system, with each person in our family getting a section of the attic, and each section loosely organized by realm of
life: work, childhood, college, milestones, in a circle, so adjacent people could share Venn-diagram-like overlapping memories, like my mom and dad’s life before kids, like my and Dahlia’s childhoods. It seemed to be arranged by age: Dad, Mom, Dahlia, Me, Iggy. Olly had a smaller section that seemed like a subset of Dahlia’s. I guess his parents have most of his stuff, or it might be in storage. Dahlia’s wedding dress was behind some boxes, the creamy silk glowing out of the plastic window of a garment bag, and I thought “She’s got it all.” The movie on the plane about switched kids flashed to mind and I made a mental note to watch the ending. For half an hour I tried to figure out who had arranged all this stuff and when they did it, since we’d moved back to the house only two months before.

The hatch from my bedroom opened into the center of this circle and you had to reach from the ladder to flip on the light switch. I didn’t see a section specifically for Bear, so decided to start it by pushing aside some of dad’s things, wedging Bear between Iggy and myself. Bear was, after all, the second youngest of the family, and so far as I could tell this was arranged by age. As I cobbled together what was essentially a shrine to Sweet Boy, I knocked over a plastic box and hundreds of photos cascaded to the floor, some even out the hatch. I thought some were pictures of me, then realized no one prints photos anymore, and that I wouldn’t be caught dead in such light-washed, high-rising jeans. I turned the photo over and it just said the name of the photo paper manufacturer. The woman stood in front of a domed building that I thought looked like a hotel. Giant unlit neon lettering spelled “Necre” and the rest was cut off.
I googled “hotel necre” and a place in Nice, France showed up. I realized the woman was my mother as I slowly recognized the large black sunglasses, which I remember Dahlia borrowed for an “80’s” themed school dance. Mom looked like I looked when I was a sophomore in college, three years ago. I dropped to my knees and sifted through the other photos that had fallen down, collecting them into a pile as I looked through them. I didn’t know how they had been organized and tried to group them into piles by how old the people in the photos looked and by background. Piles formed in front of me and my sweaty hands shook and I dropped the stack I had been holding. Something in the corner moved and I swear I heard a bell, I swear it was Bear, but I knew it wasn’t and I ignored my brain’s warning of growing insanity and need for social contact. When I swiveled to see Bear, I accidentally shuffled the piles I’d made and set out to rearrange them.

Some of the characters I had never seen before, and some were very familiar. There was Aunt Janie with feathered hair and Cos looking like Ronnie Wood and some of the other family and college friends sitting on a couch or kitchen table. They looked youthful, more so than me and my friends, even the women who were wearing lurid makeup and had too often gone to the tanning parlor. I looked at the beer bottles people were drinking and the cigarette packs littering tables and noticed packaging changes. It was like a game in a kid’s book or magazine of spotting differences between the past and the present, between what people did then and what they do now. One photo showed my mom with her arm around my dad’s shoulders, a cigarette in her hand. He was holding a hand of cards and looked at my mom with a cheeky grin— maybe he had a royal flush— and she was looking at the camera. Some
arms and torsos were in the frame, and some faces were visible in the hazy background. It must have been night, as the flash was on, shrouding the people in the back in a dusty dimness. The window to the left of them was familiar because it was so unusual. It is the window in my apartment, in the living room, and this photo must’ve been from when my dad was renting it from Cos and Jane. The window is rotated forty-five degrees and no one we knew had seen one like it, but someone from college told me it’s like that because of a Vermont superstition that witches can’t fly through crooked windows. My parents didn’t know that, or never told us if they did. The curtains and wall color were now different, but I’m sure this was sometime in the early ‘80s before my parents were married. I looked at the pictures taken in my apartment and realized it could fit a lot more people in it than I thought it could.

Some boxes were filled with clothes like those in the pictures, and it reminded me of when the fancy movie theaters here have costumes in display cases with facts about the movie. These were the props, the costumes out of the pictures in my hands—– a time capsule of an era. I tried on a musty embellished jacket and laughed when I felt how padded the shoulders were. I didn’t realize I hadn’t taken it off until Olly commented on it later that night. The piles were making no sense, and the slipperiness of the photos was making it impossible to even make a pile of more than ten photos without them sliding all over, so I abandoned my pointless organization project and stuffed the photos back into the box, slinging a few of my dad’s old concert t-shirts over my shoulder. I brought a few boxes downstairs and put them all on the dining room table, setting out to make sense of them. As I was switching the light off and climbing down the hatch, my eyes became level with a small chest that had been on
dad’s bureau. It was wooden with a thick shiny black lacquer and had inlaid bone or shell, or even ivory, depicting little gnomey troll figures. The chest had nine little compartments and I remembered being scared of the menacing little faces. Now I saw that I wasn’t wrong: they looked sinister. I carefully brought the box down and jogged it over to my apartment, averting my eyes to avoid eye contact with the figures.

Olly and Iggy got home before Dahlia and Vita, and they found me with a half-eaten sandwich and a glass of watered-down lemonade (the ice had melted hours before). The photos were all over. I was sitting on the table cross-legged and hadn’t left a clearing for myself, marooning myself on the table.

Iggy said I looked like a stalker on a crime tv-show. He crouched beside me and asked “Who’s that?” while pointing to a picture that must’ve been three decades old.

“Look harder— guess.” I bit my lower lip. I had put this picture aside in its own corner to show everyone when they got home.

Olly came over and burst into laughter. “Is that Cosmo?”

“Oh my god, is that Lydia holding V?”

I cringed at this new habit of Iggy’s. Well, maybe not new, he’s been doing it for almost a year now— referring to mom and dad as Lydia and Ben.

“Yeah, that’s mom with Vita on her lap, must be when the Bennetts still lived in this house because I’m pretty sure they’re on the old wicker swing bench that was at the end of the back patio. See— that’s the tree right out there.” I pointed through the window.
“Wow, cool. Lydia looks so young.”

“Can you please just call them mom and dad?” I begged.

He stood up and walked out of the room saying “What’s the difference?”

Dahlia came home a bit later and when she walked by me perched on the table like a gargoyle, she stopped and wobbled a bit like a dashboard bobble-head after a car stops short. She recovered herself and resumed eating a giant chocolate-chocolate chunk muffin. She gave me a furtive look— I was still on top of the table— and asked where I’d found the photos.

“In the attic,” I said. “But you know that. How long have you been up there organizing all that shit? Were you doing this when you were pregnant? With no one knowing?”

“It’s not a very big house, Chloe. It wouldn’t take very long to find me, god forbid something happen. I leave the hatch down anyway so someone could easily figure it out. Also, it’s not like I’m an infant who can’t fend for myself or move some boxes around.”

“Creative analogy.”

She smiled one of those menacing smiles where the person screws up their face and tilts their head and looks as if they were going to say *Aw, thank you so much* in the most sarcastic voice.

“You’re getting crumbs everywhere,” I teased.

“I know. Bear’ll get ‘em, though,” and as soon as she said this we both froze.

Yes, normally Bear *would* get them, clearing the floor as thoroughly as a vacuum would.
She pulled up a chair, sunk into it and started crying, then leaned back in an odd reverse-collapse. She was folding out of herself, almost. While blubberyng she kept pinching together crumbs of the muffin and dropping them into her mouth. It was wonderfully ridiculous and gross to watch, but I was too angry at her for making such an avoidable, thoughtless slip-up to think of a good insult. Had she somehow forgotten Bear had died? Was she that busy with the rest of the shit going on in her life she couldn’t even keep up with whether our dog was dead or alive?

I left the room and went to start dinner. There was nothing in the pantry. I mean, there was, it was pretty full, but it was stuff that had been there forever that was never used and just sat there, gathering status as unappetizing and useless, while somehow essential.

“Chlo!” she hollered and I trudged back to the dining room. “Can you get me a glass of water or something? Actually,” she said, looking at my glass and the puddle of condensation around it, “I’ll have a lemonade, too.”

“Ugh, fine.” I brought back a glass and said, “Well?”

“I started going up there in March, when I was three months pregnant, I think to see what baby stuff we had. You know how we’ve always been talking about fixing it up up there, and I knew it wasn’t going to happen after the baby since her room’s right below, and I just got really into it.”

This logic made sense with the sleep schedule of a newborn— it was now or never—but I glowered because that had no bearing on whether or not I could help out. It was clear she had also brought some things out of storage, and this drove me
crazy since I’ve been telling her for months that I wanted to go down, but she always said it was inconvenient and too far away.

She began to apologize and I interrupted. “Why didn’t you tell me you were doing this? Or ask for some help?” She paused and took some sips of her drink and gazed over the table of photos.

“Honestly, it was therapeutic to see my gradual progress up there. You know I always like having a side project, and it was sort of for selfish reasons. I wanted the alone time with them. With their memories.”

I burst out, “It wasn’t them. You can’t know their memories, what they felt, you just have their stuff and projections and conjectures.”

“We both know stuff is important—can be very telling.” She gestured towards my neck. “For Christ’s sake, you haven’t taken that necklace off in a decade! And I haven’t taken mine off either.” She brandished her little silver book then let it drop. “And even if it’s just narratives I’m making up, so what? It’s something to make a fuller picture of them, to have things to remember them so we don’t forget. It’s not like I’m a biographer. I’m their child.”

“Stop romanticizing it! You didn’t see know the shit that happened before they died because you were at school. It wasn’t some fairytale romance and it drives me crazy that you fool yourself thinking it was. He was out of control. Do you even remember the last time we all were at Fairgreen? You had to share a room with mom because she wouldn’t sleep with dad.”

She winced. I thought of the black lacquer box with its nine little drawers and its tiny knobs, a few of which were broken off, meaning I’d have to coax the drawer
open with a knife or bobby pin. The last time I looked in the drawers was a week before they died and I wondered if anyone had been through them since.

“It’s been long enough that you should stop playing make believe and get a grip. If not for yourself, then for mom. She was ready to leave him, stop putting him on a fucking pedestal.”

“What’s the point in focusing on that stuff? What about all the years before?” she trilled.

“Those weren’t only roses and sunshine, either. Jesus! He was belligerently drunk and coked half the time and yelled at her every night, and fucked a bunch of other people, not just Jane!” I froze. I had never told her I’d seen them sneaking into a guest room together.

“What the hell are you talking about? He would never have done that, he wasn’t even interested in her. And she— she wouldn’t do that to mom!”

“Why would I lie about this? Stop giving people so much credit. I saw his emails— he had conversations with a dozen people going on. Anyway, I don’t give a damn, but stop pretending like he was an amazing husband when he treated her like shit. The week before her aneurysm she threw a fucking blow dryer at him and it shattered into a million pieces.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Dahlia screamed. “I have enough shit on my plate— a five week old baby, Olly’s paternity leave just fucking ended, right as Bear just died, someone just canceled a huge order I already started working on, I’m exhausted all the time, Iggy’s getting all depressed and loner-y and I don’t know what to do, I’m perpetually covered in spit-up, fat as a house, I can never see my friends or
do anything because I’m so tired and ugly, and… Chloe! Jesus. I can’t deal with this right now.”

“So you’d rather just willfully deny the truth? Rewrite him to fit your neat, sad little orphan underdog story?”

“Well, you tell me! What am I supposed to do with this information?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been trying to figure that out for a decade!” My throat stung from yelling. I felt like I’d been overtaken by some demon, and half expected the cup in front of me to shatter. I had started crying while Dahlia catalogued her responsibilities. I’m not sure if it was because I was angry at her, or dad, or confused about how to get out of this loop (or was it a tangle?). Tormented that it had been ten years and I still felt suffocated and like I wasn’t grieving right, and when would I figure it out if I hadn’t yet? I felt like it had happened when I was not quite young, but not old enough, and since I was straddling childhood and adulthood I couldn’t reconcile their deaths and lives or get some goddamn closure.

I grabbed a pile of photos from the table and walked home. Sitting criss-cross on my bed, I sifted through the photos, looked out the crooked window towards the back yard, and it occurred to me that I might just have a shot if I moved away from here, that living in a house haunted by memories was encumbering, holding me back from working towards some kind of acceptance. The light outside was bright cobalt-y violet and rapidly darkening and I couldn’t see well. I propped up the photo of mom in front of Hotel Necre against my bedside lamp and opened my laptop. At twenty-four, I started my first apartment-hunt.
The next morning I checked some of the links I’d opened and realized most were horrible, but there were two really cute options and I felt excited for the first time in a long while. Iggy and I had plans to try a new brunch place, and once we’d ordered I broached the topic of moving out. He was quiet for a few moments.

“Have you told Dahlia?”

I fiddled with the paper I’d taken off my straw. “No. She won’t care anyway, she’s too busy with Ruby and work, and she’ll probably like having the extra space. I thought she could move some stuff out of storage into the Nest to downsize— cut back on some of those fees. Or I thought you could use it as a studio, or something.”

“I think you should talk to her. Is this because you got in a fight? Just because you got in a fight doesn’t mean you have to leave us. And where would you go?”

“How do you always know when we get into a fight?” I laughed. “And besides, it wasn’t really a fight— it’s more a permanent misunderstanding, different ways of seeing things.” I sat upright and spoke decisively, like I knew what I wanted, what would be best. “I’m twenty-four, and should…” I grinned, “You know, leave the nest.”

“That’s the corniest pun I’ve ever heard.” We laughed so hard soda spewed out my nose.
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**Bibliography of Influences**


